



# Power2UAMs: Local report Liège



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This report has been prepared with the support of the European Union as part of the EU funded project: Power to UAMs: Ensuring Equal Access, Participation, and Voice at the Local Level (Power2UUAMs, grant agreement number 101190452, CERV-2024-CHILD).

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## **PREPARED BASED ON THE LOCAL REPORTS BY:**

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## **WITH THE SUPPORT OF:**

Tarki & Bridge EU

## **DATE**

December 2025

## **IMAGES**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This local report, prepared by Caritas International and NADOE within the framework of the Power2UAMs project, explores the situation of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Liège. It focuses on their integration and wellbeing through identifying unmet needs, assessing public services, and highlighting good practices at the local level.

The research, conducted between May and November 2025, combined desk and literature review, stakeholder mapping, and qualitative interviews with 10 UAMs and 10 stakeholders from key organizations, including reception centres, an organization offering mental support, a school, a general practitioners office and NGOs.

Findings reveal that Belgium's system for UAMs continues to operate in the tension between immigration control and child protection, often meaning that access to essential local level services — including housing, healthcare, education, and social welfare — frequently depends on administrative status rather than the universal principle of child protection.

As a result, UAMs outside the asylum procedure face exclusion from basic support and opportunities for integration. At the governance level, the system remains fragmented across federal, regional, and municipal structures. This multi-layered landscape produces inconsistent practices, bureaucratic delays, and gaps in service continuity. The guardianship system functions as a key protective mechanism and is often the most reliable entry point to basic rights. However, access to services can be restricted in the absence of a guardian.

While the guardianship system and education programs such as DASPA constitute important pillars of support, UAMs face ongoing barriers in accessing adequate housing, healthcare, mental health support, and inclusive pathways into mainstream secondary and tertiary education. In education, capacity shortages, long waiting lists, and rigid language-first approaches delay or limit entry into mainstream schooling, while UAMs are often steered toward low-skilled vocational tracks regardless of their potential. In housing, limited availability of small-scale, individualized solutions and widespread discrimination in the private rental market undermine stability, particularly for young people transitioning out of reception facilities.

The transition to autonomy after turning 18 emerges as a particularly fragile phase. Many young people struggle to secure stable housing or to remain in education due to insufficient aftercare, a lack of supported independent living options, and weak bridging mechanisms between education, training, and employment.

Civil society organizations—including Caritas International, Tabane, Interra, Savoir-Être and Live in Color—play a crucial role in bridging service gaps by providing personalized legal, psychosocial, reception and integration support. However, their work remains heavily dependent on unstable project funding, potentially limiting long-term impact. Despite these systemic shortcomings, professionals across sectors demonstrate strong commitment, collaboration, and growing expertise in supporting UAMs.

Encouragingly, UAMs interviewed expressed motivation, resilience, and a strong desire to pursue education, work, and community engagement in Belgium.

Based on these findings, the report recommends:

- Prioritization of integration, continuity of support and accessibility
- Greater coordination across governance levels and transversality across service systems
- Expanding small-scale, non-segregated housing solutions that meet the same quality standards as those within the youth care system, and supported independent living for UAMs over 15 years of age to transition to independence.
- Strengthening inclusive education pathways by embedding language support in mainstream schooling, and preventing premature tracking into low-skilled vocational routes.
- Expanding the availability of trauma-informed psychological services
- Strengthening of social inclusion and community engagement

Based on this research, we identified a strong need for more structural and long-term support. Stakeholders consistently called for stable funding, specialized training on UAM-specific issues for professionals, and simplified administrative procedures—particularly in healthcare, the social welfare system and the municipality. More bridging programmes are also needed between education and employment, especially for youth with limited literacy or language skills.

## 1. INTRODUCTION OF THE LOCAL REPORT

The Power2UAMs project aims to ensure equal access, participation, and voice for unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in the asylum system and in transit, in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The project begins with local-level research to identify the unmet needs of UAMs and to assess local social policies and services in Athens, Piraeus, Brussels, Gent, Liège, and Calais, through the work of partners in Greece (GCR), Belgium (NADOE and Caritas International), and France (ECPAT).

The research methodology includes desk research, literature review, stakeholder mapping, and interviews with UAMs and stakeholders (at least 20 interviews per city). The research is coordinated by TARKI Social Research Institute across the six localities.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

For the basic quantitative information on the locality and the country, Caritas International and NADOE consulted various websites, including Statbel (the Belgian statistics agency), Citypopulation.de, OECD (Organisation for economic co-operation and development) and the official statistics provided by the Immigration Office, CGRA, Fedasil (the federal reception agency), and the Guardianship Service. An updated overview of reception facilities in the three cities was obtained from Fedasil.

The stakeholder mapping drew on internal Caritas and NADOE networks (e.g., legal guardians and youth programmes in Liège) and was complemented by an online search to identify additional organizations supporting UAMs in Liège. As interviews progressed, new contacts were added based on recommendations from interviewees. Support from the Power2UAMs advisory board further contributed to identifying key actors. The literature review covered reports and publications from institutions such as IBZ, Fedasil, the Guardianship Service, AIDA, and ECRE, as well as academic sources and national media outlets.

The literature review included reports and publications from institutions such as IBZ (Federal government service for interior affairs), Fedasil, the Guardianship Service, AIDA, and ECRE, as well as academic sources and national media outlets. While national-level data were relatively accessible, research on UAMs at the local level remained limited.

In total, 10 UAMs and 10 stakeholders were interviewed in Liège, including representatives of reception centres, a lawyer, a psychologist, a general practitioner, an educator, and a legal guardian. The UAMs interviewed (10 boys aged 15–20) represented diverse nationalities and residence statuses. Engaging minors required additional sensitivity and flexibility, as some found abstract or administrative questions difficult to understand. Trusted intermediaries, such as legal guardians, often played a key role in facilitating their participation.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW, DESK RESEARCH

### 3.1. UAMs in Belgium and Liège

#### Belgium

Belgium's population is diverse in terms of nationalities and ethnic background, and this diversity is increasing. The share of Belgians with a Belgian background has decreased from 79.3% in 2005 to 71.4% in 2015, and 64.0% in 2025. The share of Belgian citizens with a foreign background has increased by 4.7 percentage points in the last decade and the proportion of non-Belgian citizens has increased from 11.2% in 2015 to 13.8% in 2025<sup>1</sup>.

The number of people applying for international protection in Belgium reached a peak in 2015 with 39,064 applicants making a first request. In 2016 numbers dropped drastically after which they started to increase again every year. Even though there is a big reception crisis in 2024, the numbers are still lower than those in 2015 with 33,146 applicants making a first request<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [Belgian population structure](#)

<sup>2</sup> [National statistics](#) - Belgian Immigration Office

The number of UAMs arriving in Belgium has been decreasing since 2022. The peak of arrivals was experienced in the year 2022 with 6,434 UAMs being registered for the first time by the Guardianship Service. In the subsequent years this decreased to 4,366 in 2023, 4,068 in 2024, and 2,320 in the first 8 months of 2025. Seasonal fluctuations occur each year, namely an increase in arrivals during the summertime and a decrease in arrivals during the winter. However, there is a less consistent pattern over the years in terms of the nationalities of people arriving. In 2022, a high number of Afghan UAMs arrived in Belgium which dropped drastically since 2024. In contrast, the number of Eritrean and Somalian UAMs has been quite steady, while the arrival of Syrian UAMs is increasing, since at least 2020<sup>3</sup>.

Even though the overall number of UAMs arriving in Belgium is decreasing, the occupancy levels in Fedasil's first and third phase reception facilities remain exceptionally high. Despite this, the government decided to reallocate some places initially intended for UAMs to accommodate families and adults. As a result, approximately 40% of the capacity of second-phase facilities was converted into places for families, which puts further pressure on the availability of adapted care for UAMs<sup>4</sup>. A list of the main languages spoken by refugees and UAMs at the local level is not available in Belgium. However, based on the top five nationalities of UAMs in the country, the most commonly spoken languages among UAMs in 2024 are Tigrinya, Dari, Pashto, Arabic, and Ukrainian<sup>5</sup>.

An article by De Graeve, Vervliet, and Derluyn (2017)<sup>6</sup> provides a highly relevant analysis of how Belgium's system for UAMs operates between immigration control and child protection. While grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, its structures are shaped by the idea of 'migration management' that distinguishes between *categories* of minors rather than their individual needs. For example, upon arrival, most UAMs are placed in the federal reception system instead of centres organized by the regional youth welfare system (there are a few exceptions based on vulnerability criteria). The support given in the federal reception system does not adhere to the same quality criteria as in the youth welfare system, resulting in standardized procedures, limited attention to developmental needs, and unequal access to high-quality care and services compared with those offered by the regional youth welfare system. This reflects an institutional tension between humanitarian concern for child welfare on the one hand, and restrictive migration control on the other, where protection is contingent on vulnerability categories rather than universal children's rights.

## Liège

Liège is a multicultural city located in the eastern part of Belgium, within the Walloon Region. Following a citizen initiative, the City of Liège joined the campaign launched by the National Centre for Development Cooperation in 2017, becoming the first city in Wallonia to declare itself a hospitable, responsible, welcoming, and open city—a "*Ville Hospitalière*."<sup>7</sup> Among other commitments, the city has pledged to:

- maintain a welcoming and open attitude toward migrants, encouraging all departments of the City of Liège to continue constructive collaboration with actors in the sector who work to defend migrants' rights.
- continue efforts to provide quality and affordable housing for citizens with low incomes, ensuring the absence of discrimination against migrants. Among the identified needs are large housing units suitable for families, specific housing for UAMs, and sufficient emergency accommodation for people in need.
- support associations active in finding housing for migrants.
- raise public awareness about migration and the importance of welcoming others.

The City of Liège is also part of the Urbact WELDI network (Building Welcoming Communities for Migrants), funded by the European Union. Through this network, local authorities aim to develop reception and support policies that help migrants overcome obstacles in accessing their rights<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>500-additional-places-are-made-available-asylum-seekers-homeless-shelter-network-brussels

<sup>4</sup>[www.caritasinternational.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Dashboard\\_2025Janv-Juin\\_FR.pdf](https://www.caritasinternational.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Dashboard_2025Janv-Juin_FR.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>[https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg\\_wetgeving\\_fundamentele\\_rechten\\_en\\_vrijheden#6](https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden#6)

<sup>6</sup>Between immigration control and child protection: Unaccompanied minors in Belgium. *Social Work & Society*.

<sup>7</sup>Liège, *Ville Hospitalière*

<sup>8</sup><https://urbact.eu/networks/weldi>

### 3.2. Reception centers and shelters

In July 2025, Belgium had a reception capacity of 35,322 places. With 33,160 people in the reception system, the occupancy rate was 94%. 1,836 people were on the waiting list for a place in the reception system<sup>9</sup>.

UAMs in Belgium are, in principle, first accommodated in specialized reception facilities known as Orientation and Observation Centres (OOCs). During this so-called first phase, an assessment is conducted to determine the specific needs of each child. Following this evaluation, the UAM is transferred to a second-phase reception centre, where they reside until a decision is made regarding their residence status. Once a UAM receives a positive decision, a transfer may take place to individual accommodation—the third phase—where the minor prepares for independent living until reaching the age of 18. According to a mapping of shelters with available places for UAMs in Liège, a total of 205 places were identified within the official reception system. These correspond to second- and third-phase facilities, as first-phase reception is primarily organized in the Brussels region. Only one reception facility in the Liège area falls under the Plan MENA and offers specialized care for more vulnerable and younger UAMs.

### 3.3 Relevant national, regional and local policies for UAMs

Various national, regional, and local policies are in place to address different needs of UAMs in Liège.

#### 3.3.1. Guardianship service (Federal level)

Every UAM arriving in Belgium has the immediate right to a guardian, whose role is to assist with legal and administrative procedures, monitor the minor's reception and education, and ensure their overall wellbeing. The system is managed at the federal level by the Guardianship Service, while guardians themselves are responsible for ensuring that minors can access public services at the local level. However, a key limitation of this system is that, without a guardian, UAMs cannot access certain essential services—for instance, opening a bank account is not possible without one.

#### 3.3.2. Housing (Regional level)

Shortages of private housing in Liège (and in Belgium in general) and limited capacity in local reception initiatives in the third phase hinder the transition of UAMs over 15 and with residence status to independent housing. Due to housing shortages, UAMs must sometimes remain longer in reception centres or accept moving to another city or region, which disrupts their support networks, wellbeing, and schooling. There seems to be a lack of organizations in Liège offering support to UAMs in searching for adequate housing options.

#### 3.3.3. Public Centre for Social Welfare (CPAS) (Federal/Local level)

Every UAM that arrives in Belgium is immediately entitled to a guardian, whose role is to assist with legal and administrative procedures, follow up on reception, education and to monitor the wellbeing of the minor. The guardianship is being managed at the federal level by the Guardianship Service, but it is the guardian that ensures minors have access to public services at the local level. However, a key limitation of this system is that, without a guardian, UAMs cannot access certain essential services – for instance, opening a bank account is not possible without one.

#### 3.3.4. Family allowance system (Regional level)

After leaving the reception system, recognized refugees who are not yet employed are entitled to social welfare. This includes a monthly income, an installation bonus (a one-time financial contribution to help purchase furniture upon leaving a situation of homelessness (leaving the reception system is considered equivalent to a situation of homelessness by the state), assistance from a social worker, and financial support for medical expenses, if necessary. UAMs are also entitled to access the social welfare system, provided that a state of need can be demonstrated and that they are not applicants for international protection. (UAMs still in the asylum procedure receive material assistance from Fedasil.)

<sup>9</sup> [Fedasil statistics](#)

### 3.3.5. DASPA (Regional level)

Dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des élèves Primo-Arrivants et Assimilés (DASPA) is a form of education offered to all newly arrived, non-French-speaking minors aged 12 to 18. The equivalent program in Flanders is known as OKAN. Its main goal is to focus, for approximately one year, on acquiring the French language and integration, after which students can transition into mainstream secondary education. Although this structure provides students with a safe and supportive environment in which to develop linguistic competencies, it frequently results in de facto segregation. OKAN classes are often organised in separate classrooms, and in some cases even distinct wings or buildings, thereby limiting interaction with the wider school population<sup>10</sup>. In primary education, no such system exists; children of newcomers are typically integrated directly into regular classes alongside Belgian pupils.

Local capacity in DASPA classes in Liège is not always sufficient, leading to UAMs sometimes waiting for several months before being able to start school. Several schools in Liège offer DASPA, although no specific data on their capacity was available.

Existing research indicates that UAMs consistently place a high value on educational attainment; however, structural characteristics of the educational system often constrain their opportunities and outcomes. Following their initial year in DASPA or OKAN, UAMs are disproportionately represented in vocational and part-time vocational tracks, as well as in programmes designed for learners with special educational needs.

Conversely, they remain underrepresented in general and technical educational pathways that typically serve as preparatory routes for higher education. Moreover, UAMs who reach the age of 18 or who lose residence status before completing their DASPA or OKAN year are at heightened risk of exiting the school system without obtaining a formal qualification<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.3.6. Plan MENA (Regional level)

In 2015, an agreement was concluded between Fedasil and the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation to create specialized reception places for vulnerable UAMs (often under the age of 15), managed by the general administration for Youth Welfare (*Administration générale de l'Aide à la jeunesse* - AGAJ). A total of 130 places were established under this plan, which falls within second-phase reception.

### 3.3.7. Health care (Federal level)

UAMs in Belgium are entitled to basic health insurance (*mutualité*) after attending school for three months. For those who do not yet have such insurance, Fedasil provides medical care for UAMs who are in the asylum procedure, while the CPAS/OCMW covers urgent medical needs for UAMs who are not applicants for international protection. Empirical studies indicate that UAMs in Belgium exhibit significantly higher rates of severe anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (worsened by traumatic experiences, daily stressors, and uncertainties in asylum procedures)—not only when compared to peers born in the host country, but also relative to refugee adolescents who came to Belgium with their parents.

Despite these elevated levels of psychological distress, the availability and accessibility of psychological and psychiatric services for UAMs remain insufficient, falling markedly short of addressing their substantial mental health needs<sup>12</sup>.

### 3.3.8 Age assessment (Federal level)

Upon arrival in Belgium (or later on in their residence procedure), the Guardianship Service, Immigration Office or other state actors can raise doubts on the declared age of the minor. At the moment, the age is being assessed with the so-called triple test: an X-ray of the collarbone, wrist, and teeth. This practice has been highly criticized in the medical world and by NGOs.

<sup>10</sup><https://refufam.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PB6-Education.-ENG.pdf>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319542310>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319542310>

In 2024, 1,713 **age assessment procedures** were conducted in Belgium and the Guardianship Service made 1,654 determinations, with just over 30% declared minors. Belgian rulings<sup>13</sup> clarified that official documents take priority over medical age assessments, which, in theory, are only supportive – although in practice we see this doesn't change much. In the cases where documents are present, they are often seen as falsified. The European Pact on Migration and Asylum prescribes a thorough reform of the age assessment procedure, including a multidisciplinary phase and the medical test as a last resort. These reforms are due in June 2026<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.3.9. Family reunification

**Family reunification** is a complex procedure for which many refugees, and UAMs specifically, need help from professional organizations<sup>15</sup>. There is a strong need for organizations that offer assistance in this procedure. On top of that there is a lack of organizations that offer help with the administration and search for housing once the family arrives. The lack of assistance puts a lot of pressure on the minor who is already in Belgium. Recent legal changes (2024–2025) have restricted family reunification for UAMs, including a ban for those with subsidiary protection and a reduction of the application window for young adults from 12 to 3 months; civil society argues this timeframe is unworkable, and an appeal is pending<sup>16</sup>.

## 3.4. Conclusions on services, programs, projects

Many of the services affecting the lives of UAMs in Belgium are organised at the federal level, with a limited impact from the local level. Only once UAMs leave the official reception system—typically after receiving residence status and reaching the age of 18—do they access more public services on the local level. Key elements such as guardianship, age assessment, and reception policy are coordinated federally, while access to housing, education, and social services is shaped by regional and municipal implementation.

This results into dispersed policies for UAMs across federal, regional and local levels, leading to a fragmented governance landscape. While federal agencies (e.g. Guardianship Service, Immigration Office and Fedasil) ensure legal protection and basic services, regional and local initiatives provide educational, housing and integration support. This multi-tiered system can create inconsistencies in access and quality of services.

Structural gaps in service provision are highly prevalent, many of which mirror broader national dynamics, such as shortages of private housing and limited capacity in reception facilities that hinder the transition of UAMs to independent living. Also, language-focused integration programmes (DASPA) provide a supportive learning environment, but often also result in segregation and delayed access to mainstream education. Structural constraints within the educational system disproportionately channel UAMs into vocational or special-needs pathways, limiting their opportunities for higher education. Finally, Despite entitlement to basic health insurance and medical care, the availability of psychological and psychiatric services remains insufficient to meet UAMs extensive needs.

<sup>13</sup> Tribunal de première instance, Namur, division Namur, 2<sup>e</sup> chambre — Famille. (2024, April 17). Jugement, Rôle n° 24/147/B [Judgment, case no. 24/147/B].

<sup>14</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en)

<sup>15</sup> Family reunification with unaccompanied minors in Belgium and Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(5), 1–19.

<sup>16</sup> Caritas International Belgique. (2025, June 4). Vivre en famille est un droit et non un luxe. <https://www.caritasinternational.be/fr/asile-et-migration/vivre-en-famille-est-un-droit-et-non-un-luxe/> and European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (2025, June). AIDA country report: Belgium – 2024 update. Asylum Information Database. [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-BE\\_2024-Update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AIDA-BE_2024-Update.pdf)

## 4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF UAM INTERVIEWS

### 4.1. Methodological notes

The interviews with UAMs were a combined quantitative and qualitative interview in order to explore the complexity of their social situation and unmet needs in depth. Recruiting UAMs in Liège proved more challenging than engaging with stakeholders. Although the target number of 10 participants was ultimately reached, doing so required considerable time and persistence. Many UAMs were preoccupied with ongoing asylum procedures, housing searches, or family reunification processes.

Several organizations contacted either did not respond to requests to connect with UAMs or explained that they were already overwhelmed with similar inquiries from researchers and journalists. Others reported being in “crisis mode”—for example, due to the loss of subsidies, the start of the school year, or staff shortages—which limited their capacity to support recruitment efforts. Ultimately, the most effective strategy involved collaborating with legal guardians, colleagues, and existing contacts.

Interviews were conducted in settings chosen for the minors’ comfort, such as accommodation centres, offices, or public spaces. Only 1 UAM declined to have the interview recorded. Some questions required simplification or translation, which occasionally carried the risk of inadvertently guiding participants’ responses.

### 4.2 Summary of interviews with UAMs

#### 4.2.1 Basic information of UAMs interviewed

A total of 10 UAMs (all boys) were interviewed for this research, with declared ages ranging from 15 to 20 years. They represented a diverse range of nationalities, including Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Yemen, DR Congo, and Somalia. Syrian minors were the most represented in this study (4 out of 10), which reflects their high prevalence in reception centres.

The reasons provided by UAMs for leaving their country were primarily security-related (9 UAMs), often in combination with political reasons, and other factors such as economic challenges or family reunification. 1 UAM chose not to answer this question. These accounts illustrate the overlapping drivers of migration, which frequently extend beyond a single push factor and are shaped by both structural and personal dimensions.

Regarding education, 7 UAMs had completed primary education, while 3 had never attended school in their country of origin. At the time of the interviews, 7 were enrolled in DASPA classes, 2 in upper secondary education, and 1 had temporarily stopped attending school due to stress caused by the asylum procedure, although he expressed a desire to resume.

In terms of future plans, 7 UAMs indicated a desire to remain in the city of Liège, while 2 were unsure about their intentions. 1 UAM was scheduled to move to a social housing unit just outside Liège the day after the interview.

Regarding housing, 9 UAMs lived in reception centres, and 1 lived independently in private accommodation. Most UAMs assessed their overall health as good to very good, while 2 rated their health as moderate. Several participants reported experiencing significant stress related to family separation and the lengthy residence procedure.

#### 4.2.2 UAMs' refugee and guardianship status

Among the 10 UAMs interviewed, 2 had completed the application for international protection and had already obtained refugee status. 6 others were still undergoing the procedure for international protection. 1 UAM had received residence status through the durable solution procedure for UAMs, and 1 was appealing a negative decision regarding his application for international protection. No minors in transit were identified in Liège, as most transit UAMs are located in Brussels.

Regarding legal guardianship, 9 out of 10 UAMs currently had a legal guardian. 1 former UAM had a guardian while he was a minor, but this ended when he turned 18. All UAMs reported very positive experiences with the support provided by their legal guardian.

#### 4.2.3 UAMs' needs and their assessment on legal and social services

Different needs of UAMs were identified throughout the interviews. For clarity, these have been categorized into six areas: **financial support, education, legal and social support, housing, social connections, and medical needs.**

##### Financial Support

Financial difficulties can occur both during the period that UAMs stay in reception facilities and after transitioning to private accommodation. 1 UAM reported that the weekly allowance he received was insufficient to cover basic needs, and he had to rely on his child allowance to pay for meals, clothing, and transportation. Another UAM expressed frustration over long waiting times, which created financial challenges when he moved into his first independent apartment. He specifically encountered difficulties applying for social welfare, as the process took a very long time, and he faced similar delays when applying for unemployment benefits.

**"It's the first time you've rented the apartment; they don't pay quickly, they take their time. (...) But there's an assistant who comes. They looked at the apartment and everything, you see. Then they wrote, they typed. They took their time, that's it. When you don't have the money, that's the problem."**

##### Education

UAMs emphasized the importance of learning the local language as quickly as possible, as language skills were seen as essential for continuing their studies. Many UAMs expressed high educational ambitions, with some aspiring to attend university and others interested in pursuing technical or vocational education. 1 UAM had previously left school due to emotional difficulties but expressed regret and a strong desire to resume his education in the future.

Schools were generally evaluated positively, with several UAMs highlighting teachers who provided encouragement and support. However, some reported negative experiences, including encounters with teachers perceived as racist. Additionally, 1 UAM expressed concern about teacher absenteeism at his school, noting that it affected the consistency of his education.

**"The school is very good, but you have to do many things yourself, sometimes we spend more time playing around than actually learning. (...) Most of the time the teachers don't come and we spend most of the day, from 8 o'clock until 2 in the afternoon doing sports and playing around and because of that there is no consistency. Even if we do learn something, the next day the teacher will not be there, so we cannot keep practicing the same things. By the time they come back, it has been weeks. So it is hard to keep up."**

## Legal and social support

Many UAMs expressed concern about the long waiting times for decisions in their residence procedures, which caused significant stress in their daily lives. Most UAMs reported having strong, supportive relationships with their legal guardians or social assistants at reception centres, but noted limited contact with their lawyers, often seeing them only once or twice. Positive qualities attributed to legal guardians included kindness, prompt responses, fostering autonomy in financial matters, and providing emotional support.

***“My guardian was the best ever. She really supported me. When I received a negative [decision in my application for asylum], I thought my life was over, but she got me through it. She said I was not alone; we would tackle this together and get a paper somehow, she gave me a lot of courage.”***

Several UAMs reported difficulties with administrative procedures, such as opening a bank account, applying for social welfare, or registering for unemployment benefits. These processes were often complicated to navigate without the assistance of a guardian or social assistant. Even with support, some administrative procedures could take months to complete. For example, 1 UAM, scheduled to move to a social housing unit the day after the interview, appeared to have limited knowledge about his new accommodation.

## Housing

9 out of 10 UAMs were accommodated within the official reception system and therefore did not have an immediate need for independent housing. However, several UAMs were aware that they would require access to housing in the future, particularly after their family arrived through family reunification procedures. They expressed a need for support in finding apartments or houses that were sufficiently spacious. 1 former UAM had already left the official reception system and was living in private accommodation. He reported that finding affordable housing was very difficult. Although he currently lived in a decent apartment, the rent was high, and he hoped to find a less expensive place in the near future.

Within the reception system, some UAMs reported challenges such as overcrowding, lack of privacy, theft, loud noises at night that disrupted sleep, and the absence of air-conditioning during the summer. In contrast, UAMs staying in specialized, small-scale reception facilities expressed more positive experiences, highlighting the sense of community and describing the environment as feeling like “family” within the centre.

***“But here, we're like brothers. All the workers here, we're like brothers and sisters. We work together. And when they helped us, we helped them too. But honestly, it's really great here. Plus, we have a chef who cooks for us. he's like the best chef ever.”***

## Social connections

For almost all UAMs interviewed, reuniting with their family was the highest priority, as separation caused significant stress.

***“You continue to feel like an orphan. You may think that I am happy and smiling, but deep down it hurts.”***

Sports served as an important outlet for many UAMs, helping them make friends and maintain positive social interactions. Some were even enrolled in local football clubs, which provided regular exercise and opportunities to interact with peers. Additionally, some UAMs participated in collective activities organized by non-profit organizations during the summer. While these activities were generally evaluated positively, 1 UAM reported that the language barrier made participation difficult when he first arrived in Belgium. 1 UAM described feeling very lonely, despite being surrounded by people in both the reception system and his school. To address this, he had applied to a buddy program the day before the interview to meet more Belgian peers and expand his social network.

## Medical needs

The medical needs of the UAMs interviewed were diverse but generally well addressed. When UAMs fall ill, they have access to a doctor, a psychologist, and, if necessary, hospital care. However, non-urgent dental care appears to be more challenging to access. For example, 1 UAM had braces prior to arriving in Belgium. Since orthodontic treatment is not covered by basic medical insurance or Fedasil, he was unable to continue this care. Furthermore, the braces already in place could not be removed due to the high cost, leaving him with non-functional braces.

### 4.2.4 UAMs' experiences with law enforcement, border police

UAMs reported limited interactions with law enforcement in Belgium. 7 out of 10 stated that they had not had any contact with police authorities. 1 UAM described his first interaction with the Belgian police after someone broke into his car. He had to visit the police station to file a report and reported that the officers treated him appropriately. 2 other UAMs came into contact with the police due to minor incidents, including involvement in a fight, smoking marijuana in public, and being found on public transport without a ticket. Both reported that the police treated them in a kind and calm manner.

### 4.2.5 UAMs' experiences with discrimination, violence

8 out of 10 UAMs reported that they had not encountered situations of discrimination in Belgium. 1 UAM described difficulties with "some people who were racist" at the first reception centre where he stayed. Another UAM recounted a school activity in which DASPA students were excluded from participation and had to watch a cartoon until the activity concluded, limiting their contacts with Belgian peers. None of the UAMs reported incidents of violence directed at them. However, 1 minor described feeling intruded upon when he was required to receive vaccinations at school and have blood drawn at the reception centre without a clear explanation. He found the procedures distressing and lacking transparency:

**"There was something that I found bizarre: without my permission I had to take 6 shots (vaccinations) in the school. I don't understand why they didn't ask for my consent to do these vaccinations. When I said I didn't want to take the vaccinations they said it was obligated and they don't really explain why, or what vaccination it is, or what the reason is. They also took my blood in the reception centre and didn't explain to me why"**

### 4.2.6 UAMs' experiences with the age assessment procedure

5 out of 10 UAMs underwent an age assessment upon arrival. For 4 of them, the result accurately reflected their age. 1 UAM was assessed as being between 23 and 26 years old. With the assistance of a lawyer, he requested a review from the Guardianship Service and was still awaiting a final decision. The remaining 5 UAMs did not undergo the age assessment, as they were very young at the time of arrival. Among the 5 UAMs who underwent the procedure, 3 stated that they considered it normal for the government to conduct the age assessment and did not perceive it as discriminatory. 2 UAMs, however, reported feeling that the procedure was unfair and that the results were not always accurate:

**"I don't think it is correct. They give you the age that you don't believe. They give you the age the machine gives you and most of the time it is not correct." ... "The biggest problem is they don't give you the opportunity to explain yourself. They say you have an appointment, but they do not say what the appointment is for. They don't explain the procedure really well and you feel like you can't really ask any questions there. The whole process is not really that transparent"**

1 UAM also noted that he did not receive information about the age assessment in a language he could understand. All information was provided in English, and he only nodded and smiled without fully understanding what he was consenting to.

## 5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

### 5.1. Methodological notes

Recruiting stakeholders was relatively straightforward. Most were contacted via email, with an explanation of the project and a request to participate in an interview. In total, ten interviews were conducted with representatives from a broad spectrum of actors, including:

- Professionals working with UAMs in reception centres (Fedasil and other reception actors)
- A legal guardian
- A general practitioner
- A teacher in a school offering DASPA
- Non-profit associations providing legal and psychological support
- A non-profit organization offering workshops and information to professionals working with UAMs

Efforts were made to include a representative from the Social Welfare Office in Liège; however, due to lack of response, their participation in the interview process was not possible. The main challenge encountered was timing. Many interviews took place during the summer period, when availability was reduced due to holidays. In late August and September, additional scheduling difficulties arose, as stakeholders were busy with the start of the new school year—a particularly demanding period for services working with UAMs.

Interviews were conducted either in the offices of the stakeholders or online via Teams. Once scheduled, the interviews proceeded smoothly, with stakeholders generally open and willing to share information. It was apparent that professionals working with UAMs are highly passionate about the topic and eager to contribute their expertise.

### 5.2. Summary of the interviews with stakeholders

#### 5.2.1 organization types, positions, years of experience, qualifications of interviewees

A total of 10 stakeholders were interviewed. Their organizational affiliations included:

- 4 representatives from non-profit organizations
- 1 state actor
- 1 municipal-level school
- 1 independent legal guardian
- 1 private general practitioner
- 2 employees of NGOs

The interviewees held a variety of positions within their organizations, including (project) coordinator, psychologist, doctor, social worker, educator, team coordinator, and guardian. Their roles spanned social work, guardianship, legal support, medical care, teaching, and providing workshops.

In terms of years of experience, most interviewees had between 1 and 5 years in their current roles. Some had longer cumulative experience, considering previous positions within the sector. For example, one lawyer reported 19 years of experience.

Interviewees' educational backgrounds were diverse, including:

- Master's degrees in development cooperation, psychology, medicine, anthropology, law, criminology, and social sciences and development
- Bachelor's degrees in specialized education and social work

### 5.2.2. Number of UAMs they work with, their general challenges

Most interviewees reported working with 15–30 UAMs. 1 stakeholder does not work directly with UAMs but provides support to professionals who do. Another stakeholder works as a psychologist with 5 UAMs and also serves as a voluntary legal guardian for 1 UAM. Stakeholders identified a wide range of challenges faced by the UAMs they work with, including:

- **Psychological vulnerabilities**, such as sleep problems, PTSD, trauma, and stress related to family separation
- **Difficulties with integration**, including understanding Belgian cultural codes
- **Loyalty conflicts and loss of trust in the system**
- **Challenges in adjusting to the school system**, particularly for non-literate or un-alphabetized UAMs

***“DASPA is a model that should suit everyone, but there are those who don't fit into it, who perhaps need more practice, who can't sit still all day and attend classes all day long. So yes, we need to rethink DASPA a little, in fact.”***

Stakeholders also noted that UAMs are often “in a bubble”, staying in segregated reception facilities and attending DASPA classes separate from Belgian peers, which makes it difficult for them to integrate socially.

In addition to these challenges, stakeholders highlighted difficulties in service provision, either for themselves or for other organizations. These include:

- Building trust with UAMs, overcoming language barriers, and navigating cultural differences
- UAMs' reluctance to express feelings or disappearing before adequate support can be provided
- Housing shortages in Liège (and Belgium in general), which make finding adequate and affordable housing a major challenge. Although housing searches often fall outside the mandate of social assistants, they frequently provide support due to the lack of other resources.
- In reception centres, whether collective or small-scale, balancing individual support with group cohesion is challenging:

***“Working individually in the collective. With all the individual backgrounds, different cultures, without forgetting they are adolescents/children on the one hand and their atypical backgrounds on the other hand and still creating a secure framework.”***

Stakeholders also reported difficulties in accessing public services, which operate in two ways: UAMs may not be aware of certain services or may be afraid to approach them, and public service professionals may lack experience working with this target group. Geographical factors exacerbate these challenges, as many reception centres are located outside city centres, making transportation to services in central areas difficult.

### 5.2.3 Assessment of services provided

The services offered by the stakeholders interviewed were diverse, including reception, social assistance, psychological support, medical care, education, legal representation, legal support, and the provision of workshops for professionals working with UAMs.

Many stakeholders highlighted that collective reception centres are insufficiently tailored to the specific needs of UAMs and advocated for the expansion of specialized, small-scale reception facilities that adhere to the quality standards established by the youth welfare system. The general perception is that staff in these centres do not have sufficient time to invest emotionally or to build meaningful bonds with the minors. One stakeholder explained:

**"It is important to make yourself available and have leniency; show you are there for them, listening; working on creating a bond of confidence before all else. Here at [small-scale reception centre] we put [working on] the emotional before all things practical. But we have the possibility to give this focus because we only have a few UAMs. Clearly in centres with hundreds of people this isn't possible."**

One stakeholder highlighted that medical professionals do not always take the time to explain procedures to UAMs or use translators consistently. On the other hand, good practices were noted, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and doctors adopting a proactive approach by visiting reception centres to see their patients. Going the extra mile was repeatedly identified as a positive quality, whether by guardians, social assistants, or even buddies.

**"What works for UAMs? It's when someone goes above and beyond their job description and gives them something extra. I think it's because what already exists isn't enough. You have to go the extra mile. But it's also about giving them extra importance compared to others and making them understand that they are important. Do you see what I mean?"**

Stakeholders also pointed to notable service gaps. These included limited networking between organizations working with UAMs, a lack of support for finding affordable housing, insufficient interpretation services, a strong need for services targeting street youth with substance abuse issues and long waiting lists for psychological care. One medical professional stated there is a big gap in durable psychiatric care:

**It's not that there isn't any space, it's that there isn't any long-term space, so to speak. So they keep them for five days, let's say, in a crisis cell, and then they send them away without really following up on them. So this has already happened several times, at least two or three times since I've been here.**

One stakeholder mentioned it is not possible in the municipality of Liège to make an appointment for the UAMs they assist, for example in order to renew their residence permit. Therefore, UAMs are forced to skip school, arrive very early and wait for hours before their case is treated. Another stakeholder mentioned complete chaos at the social welfare office.

**"There are a lot of requests. And so, in fact, everyone is there at the same time. There isn't any... In terms of infrastructure, the premises aren't very nice, but that's just my opinion. But even when you go inside, I mean, there are several lines. There are papers everywhere. You can't understand what's going on. Even I, a social worker, found myself there and thought, "OK, what do we do?" And in fact, only people who were accompanied by a social worker managed to get anything done."**

At the same time, several good practices were highlighted. These included outreach projects, such as psychiatrists visiting reception centres, buddy programmes, schools providing flexibility in education (with Saint Laurent School cited as particularly successful in transitioning DASPA students into technical and vocational programmes), and collective activities that promote interaction between UAMs, other newcomers, and Belgian citizens. In relation to collective activities, the organization Interra was frequently mentioned as a positive example, although funding cuts have significantly reduced their activities.

The housing situation was repeatedly described as a major challenge, both for UAMs transitioning from reception centres to private accommodation and for those awaiting the arrival of family through reunification. While many stakeholders have not personally managed housing for UAMs, they acknowledged it as a pressing issue frequently raised by the minors themselves:

**"Housing is a catastrophe, but there is a general housing crisis, UAMs are the opposite of what a landlord wants in a renter (minor, no income, language issues, ...)"**

**Direct contacts with police or border police** were rather limited. Interviewees did report a few situations they heard of from the minors they are assisting. Most of the examples given are contacts with police when a minor has disappeared, when there have been fights, theft or aggression in the centre and contacts with the community police officer. Collaboration with police could definitely be better, according to some stakeholders. Some police officers are said to lack knowledge of the situation of UAMs, are sometimes overly harsh or use inadequate physical restraint and show no psychological adaptation, especially in psychiatric situations. According to the interviewees, police officers responding to an urgent call are often not well prepared and show up too late to the call. Two stakeholders gave concrete examples of these harsh treatments:

***“They were arrested by the police. The police, according to what the young man told me. They searched them, they had to undress. I don't know if it was because they were minors, because they were rowdy in the train carriage, or because they were migrants and there was racial profiling. But it was very traumatic for the young person who was with them, it wasn't easy.”***

***“They intervened very harshly... We asked them... just to restrain him and take him away, not to pin him to the ground, put a knee on his back, etc.”***

#### **7.2.4 Experiences with age assessment procedure of UAMs**

None of the stakeholders interviewed expressed a positive view of the age assessment procedure. Some had direct experience accompanying UAMs who had undergone the assessment, while others had not.

In cases where professionals supported self-declared minors who were assessed as adults, they often felt the results were incorrect. However, stakeholders noted that it was typically not within their role to appeal the decisions. One stakeholder explained:

***“There was one who was declared an adult with a significant age difference. As a result, we didn't know where to place him. We saw him in his daily life. We don't know how to define his age, but for us, he's not an adult. We're not the authorities, we don't have a medical opinion, so we didn't have to react to it, that is, make a claim about it, because that's not our role. In any case, here at [name of organization], it's not our role to object to that decision. What we did was to support the young person in understanding that decision, even if it wasn't easy.”***

All stakeholders described the procedure as discriminatory, unreliable, and unethical. They raised concerns that the assessment relies on European/Caucasian morphological standards, the margin of error is too large, and the procedure is applied almost systematically rather than as a last resort. Additionally, stakeholders expressed concerns about the potential health-related consequences of the scans used in the assessment.

***“I can't really say because haven't dealt with it myself, but I heard it is not always correct, not very precise. I have difficulty believing it is reliable. I heard it depends on where you come from, genes, morphology aren't the same everywhere; on top of that deciding who has to go through it is also arbitrary (Afghans almost always, Syrians less, ...)”***

***“Yes, it's based on Caucasians, so it's not at all suited to the people it's applied to. So we already know there's a margin of error of, I think, a year and a half. Or two years, which is obviously huge. When we're talking about young people who are 16 or 17 years old, with obviously huge consequences for their lives and their futures, but also for their mental health and their trust in the system.”***

***“These are young people who are seeking protection. And then, in any case, there is the test. And then there is the fact that it is used almost systematically, when it should normally be a last resort, once there is doubt. Now, doubt is almost systematic. Once they have papers, it should not be implemented. Especially since it takes time and money. I mean, it's completely unjustified on every level. And then, on top of that, it's radiation, which isn't good. Anything involving pregnant girls is out of the question. Yes, nothing about it is right.”***

### **5.2.5. Experiences with discrimination and violence**

Even though most stakeholders did not witness any kind of clear discrimination towards UAMs themselves, some had heard from UAMs or colleagues of some concrete examples such as property owners refusing rental to UAMs based on their profile, school staff dissuading enrolment, Universities “locking out” foreign students, and racism by employers. One stakeholder told us about a situation where a minor was refused to open a bank account:

***“My colleague who is also a legal guardian told me she was thrown out of a bank office. They refused to open a bank account for her pupil even though they were legally obligated to”***

Other stakeholders stated that the UAMs they worked with sometimes told them about situations of discrimination by police or at the social welfare office.

Some stakeholders mentioned that certain policy decisions could be seen as discriminatory, such as the decision to put some UAMs in reception centres in the middle of nowhere and others in bigger cities might also be seen as discriminatory. Also, one stakeholder felt the appointment of a specific guardian could also sometimes be discriminatory because some guardians do great work, but others have too many pupils to support, which hinders the quality of their work.

In terms of violence, as mentioned above, some stakeholders had witnessed harsh interventions of police officers. One stakeholder felt that some rules applied to minors can also be considered as violent in a way.

***“No, but sometimes the rules in the reception centre can be violent in a way towards the minors, for example if you are not back by 19h you will not eat”***

## 6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of UAMs' experiences and stakeholders' perspectives suggests that policy interventions should prioritize **integration, continuity of support, and accessibility**. A key concern is that services are often fragmented and insufficiently adapted to the specific needs of UAMs. Addressing these gaps requires a multi-dimensional approach.

First, **accessibility and communication** are critical. Simplifying administrative procedures enhance access to services that should improve the welfare of UAMs. Services should be provided in multiple languages, and the systematic use of interpreters should be expanded to ensure that UAMs fully understand their rights, obligations, and the procedures affecting them.

**Coordination across governance levels should be enhanced.** Federal, regional and local services need more alignment, reducing fragmentation and ensuring consistent access to education, housing, and social services. Policies should promote **greater transversality across service systems**, bridging UAM-specific interventions with broader youth welfare, education, and social services. UAMs should not be treated as isolated from other support structures, but rather integrated into existing frameworks to ensure continuity and holistic care.

**Housing remains a key challenge** in Liège. Public authorities should invest in individual, permanent housing solutions tailored to the needs of unaccompanied minors (and their families following reunification) and young people transitioning out of reception centers. This could include supported independent living, small-scale dispersed housing units, and targeted rental assistance. Housing and care arrangements should be based on an individual best-interest assessment and provide a continuum of child-protection options comparable in quality to those available to other minors: foster care or small-scale group housing with close support for those who need it, and supported independent living or small-scale dispersed housing for those ready for greater autonomy. Small-scale group housing should be located within cities (or safely accessible by public transport) to ensure access to schooling, services, and support networks, and should follow a non-segregation approach by integrating UAMs with local minors within the same services. These arrangements should be complemented by targeted rental assistance, strengthened housing access support, and continued aftercare beyond 18 to prevent homelessness and exploitation and support a gradual, smoother transition into adulthood.

**Educational integration** of UAMs should be strengthened through a time-limited, transitional approach into mainstream education, rather than through separate or rigid educational tracks. This requires a more flexible and responsive system that addresses both access and quality. OKAN/DASPA exists as a protected entry phase for intensive language learning and orientation, while expanding capacity, better enrolment coordination, and providing more tailor-made transition guidance could ensure timely integration into the regular school system. Language support should be embedded in regular classes wherever possible, through hybrid models that allow early participation in mainstream academic, technical, and vocational education, rather than delaying entry to mainstream schooling through strict "language-first" requirements.

At the same time, efforts must focus on reducing de facto segregation by ensuring that all schools share responsibility for enrolling newcomer students and by strengthening guidance to prevent the automatic steering of UAMs into low-skilled vocational pathways, particularly when they have the potential to pursue academic or technical tracks leading to higher education. Teachers also require improved preparation for multilingual and multicultural classrooms, enabling them to recognize students' abilities beyond their level of Dutch or French proficiency.

Finally, educational support should not end abruptly at the age of 18: continued guidance, counselling, administrative assistance, and culturally sensitive mental health support are essential to help young people remain in education and avoid premature transitions into low-skilled work.

The availability of **trauma-informed psychological services**, including long-term psychiatric care and consistent follow-up after crisis interventions should be expanded. More proactive outreach, such as mobile mental health teams visiting reception centres are needed to ensure UAMs receive timely support despite administrative and logistical barriers.

Finally, **social inclusion and community engagement** should be strengthened. Providing activities in public spaces where UAMs can interact with peers and local residents fosters social integration and helps reduce the isolation often experienced in segregated reception facilities.

Collectively, these recommendations highlight the need for a **coordinated, multi-level approach** that combines accessible services, educational flexibility, continuity of support, secure housing, and opportunities for social integration.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This local-level research focused on the city of Liège and aimed to identify the unmet needs of UAMs and their access to public services. Based on the desk research and 20 interviews conducted, we can draw the following conclusions:

A profound finding is that Belgium's system to support UAMs continues to reflect a **persistent tension between immigration control and child welfare**. In practice, access to protection, housing, and social support—whether from the state or a non-profit organization—often depends on a minor's legal status rather than their needs. This contradicts the principle of universal child protection.

**The system remains fragmented across federal, regional, and local levels.** This fragmentation, combined with administrative complexity, often results in inconsistent access to essential services, including education, housing, healthcare, and psychosocial support. Stakeholders highlighted that while many organizations demonstrate dedication, flexibility, and innovative approaches in service delivery, the overarching structural constraints—such as shortages of specialized accommodation, limited access to mental health services, and prolonged bureaucratic procedures—persistently hinder the wellbeing and integration of UAMs.

**Access to housing and accommodation** remain major barriers for UAMs. Small-scale reception facilities, with a focus on individualized care, seem to offer more appropriate care for minors, advancing their social inclusion, especially those facing extra vulnerabilities. Finding private accommodation after reaching adulthood or after a successful family reunification is a big challenge, especially given the limited financial resources of UAMs and the discrimination they face from property owners.

Overall, the **education system**, with its specific DASPA classes for newcomers in the secondary level is evaluated rather positively, although access to education is hindered by capacity shortages, language barriers, and age- or status-related exclusions. The language-integration program (DASPA) provides a supportive environment for newly arrived minors, yet their segregated structure, limited capacity, and insufficient follow-up pathways constrain opportunities for secondary and tertiary education. It also has to be noted that this system might work well for many UAMs, but are always some UAMs for whom this system does not work. More flexibility is needed for these minors, for example in the form of trajectories combining studies and work.

**Mental health care** is seen as largely inadequate. Many organizations provide this kind of assistance and do great work, but many more are needed to answer to the needs of UAMs in the city of Liège. There seem to be long waiting times and limited specialized care facilities offering durable assistance and culturally appropriate, multilingual support.

The **transition to autonomy** remains particularly challenging, with many young people struggling to secure stable housing or employment once they turn 18. The social support (by guardians or social assistants) that these former minors were entitled to until their 18th birthday is suddenly no longer available. Policies should provide extend transitional support, aligned with youth welfare program standards, into early adulthood—ideally up to ages 21-25—to facilitate a more gradual and effective transition toward autonomy.

Based on this research, we identified a strong need for more structural and long-term support. Stakeholders consistently called for stable funding, specialized training on UAM-specific issues for professionals, and simplified administrative procedures—particularly in healthcare, the social welfare system and the municipality. More bridging programmes are also needed between education and employment, especially for youth with limited literacy or language skills.

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