



# Global 15by30 Refugee Higher Education Conference

*Maximizing the potential of refugee youth |  
Amplifying the role of higher education institutions*

Convened by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the Tertiary Refugee Student Network (TRSN), in conjunction with the Times Higher Education Global Sustainable Development Congress 2025.

## Setting the scene

The 15by30 Global Refugee Higher Education Conference, convened in Istanbul on 16 June 2025, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including refugee students and alumni, academics, private sector actors, civil society and university leadership, to take stock of challenges, opportunities and progress made toward achieving 15by30 goal to see 15 per cent of refugee youth having access to higher education by 2030 (the 15by30 Roadmap). The event was co-convened by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and TRSN, the Tertiary Refugee Student Network, with contributions from partners around the world. Sessions reflected on good practices and opportunities, elevated refugee voices, explored innovative pathways from learning to earning, and laid the groundwork for further momentum building toward the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review in December 2025, and beyond.

## Key themes and reflections

Over 200 participants engaged in sessions and discussions, facilitated by representatives from 20 partner organizations. Rich interaction across panels reflected several overarching themes that shape the path forward:

- Imperative to bolster refugee youth and student leadership in more influential ways, including by strengthening investment in capacity development to ensure student ownership.
- Alignment of actions on higher education in emergencies and protracted situations with sustainable responses.
- Prioritize *pathways* approaches that recognize the need to link learning with earning trajectories from the start, and which reflect an intensified focus on retention and success in secondary education as a pipeline for tertiary education, skills and vocations.
- Commit to diversifying higher education financing options and expanding mechanisms for innovative, sustainable finance through new partnerships and models.

## Refugee Leadership: From Inclusion to Co-Creation

A common thread across sessions was the affirmation that refugee students are not merely recipients of opportunities — they must be and are partners, leaders and co-creators in shaping the higher education ecosystem. Participants emphasized that:



- Student leadership encompasses power-sharing, institutional disruption and embedding lived experience at every level — from curricula to governance and funding models.
- Refugee-led organizations and networks such as TRSN are already driving impact through peer-to-peer outreach, grassroots advocacy, programme co-design and equal representation in fora ranging from campus governance to the Global Refugee Forum and beyond.

As stated by youth leaders:

*“Give us space to try and fail. Invest in us, not for us.”*

*“People with lived experience must claim spaces rather than be ‘granted’ or ‘gifted’ them.”*




-  **Key message:** This call to reimagine traditional power dynamics is not symbolic. It reflects a maturing movement that understands inclusion not as an ethical gesture, but a strategy for durable, effective, and context-sensitive change.
-  **Action:** Submit a pledge of concrete support to the TRSN or other student/youth commitment made under the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) umbrella. Link to the [TRSN pledge is here](#).

## Pathways to Solutions: From Scholarship Access to Lifelong Trajectories

A recurring call to action was that access to higher education must be understood as an essential element in a whole-of-pathway journey, connecting basic education to long-term career prospects, economic inclusion and civic leadership:

- As one of the participants underscored, this means embedding "learning to earning" in all education actions by linking guidance and curricula to employment ecosystems, building soft skills for career readiness and equipping students for digital, green and entrepreneurial economies.
- Bridging programmes, particularly for women, those living with disability or in protracted crises, were emphasized as essential to address educational gaps and psychosocial barriers to university entry.
- Models such as the Open Society University Network Hubs for Connected Learning (OSUN Hubs) and Education for Employment (EFE) showcased how market-relevant programming and employer partnerships can scaffold the journey beyond graduation.

-  **Key message:** Scholarships alone are not enough. Stakeholders should invest in holistic, strategic models that integrate quality educational components, internships, mentoring and alumni engagement. This requires proactive steps and new partnerships between institutions, employers,, communities and learners themselves, underpinned by vision that extends beyond graduation.

## Reframing the Financing Debate: Toward Sustainable and Shared Investment

A consistent concern was the inadequacy of current funding approaches and the urgent need to diversify and innovate:

- Participants explored blended public-private financing, results-based models, micro-loans, and VC-style investments. Speakers emphasized the need to move from philanthropic charity alone to outcomes-based shared accountability.
- Many partners called for responsibility-sharing frameworks where both host and resettlement or donor countries contribute to sustainable funding for higher education.
- There was broad consensus that better evidence is needed to demonstrate the return on investment for refugee inclusive higher education, not just for individuals, but for communities, economies and peacebuilding efforts.
- Crucially, financing discussions must always anticipate and include costs beyond tuition, including housing, psychosocial services, language acquisition, essential documentation and pathways to work through internships or work-based learning.

## Data, Evidence, and Accountability

Robust evidence on higher education in humanitarian-development contexts was recognized as both a strategic lever and an essential accountability mechanism:

- Attendees underscored the chronic data gaps in the refugee higher education space. There is a pressing need for harmonized global metrics, longitudinal tracking and improved evidence-to-policy pipelines.
- Refugee-led research projects and institutions (like the Refugee Led Research Hub) and collaborative platforms between universities and international agencies were lauded as models for co-generating knowledge and amplifying lived expertise.
- Participants urged universities to embed inclusive data practices and leverage their analytic capacity not only for institutional learning but to advocate for systemic change.
- As one participant put it, "We need better data on higher education in humanitarian and development situations to inform and match our ambition."



**Key message:** Across all stakeholders, the call for collective investment in robust, consistent and impact-focused data and evidence has never been stronger, particularly to substantiate the return on investing in higher education and skills development for refugees.

## University Ecosystems and Institutional Transformation

Beyond individual access, the conference reflected a growing recognition that inclusion must be institutionalized:

- Several universities, from Oxford to the University of Pretoria, shared models for transforming campuses into spaces of belonging and progression for displaced learners. Achieving this includes building stronger relationships between higher education institutions, students and policymakers; the role of host governments is essential.
- A number of higher education institutions emphasized the need for even more strategic, cross-institutional collaboration – multiple institutions coming together to tackle persistent procedural, policy or delivery challenges.
- Inclusive student services, flexible admissions, credit recognition and psychological safety were consistently elevated as challenges in need of continuous innovation and progress.
- As one speaker said: "Access is not enough. We must move from welcoming students to preparing institutions."

## Solidarity and Partnership Across Regions

From opening plenaries to closing commitments, the ethos of global solidarity was palpable:

- Participants stressed that universities in the Global South, whose contributions are often overlooked, are already leading on inclusion and innovation in inclusive higher education. Their actions and achievements should inform efforts to scale sustainable higher education programmes, financing options and humanitarian-development linkages.

- The Each One Take One (EOTO) campaign was highlighted as a mechanism to support new kinds of partnerships—North-South, local-global, university-private sector—that scaffold the entire higher education pipeline.
- Several interventions reminded the audience that while political and funding directions challenge both humanitarian and academic sectors, their shared values e.g., inquiry, inclusion and transformation, service, integrity and more, offer a unique foundation for deep partnership and are a key point of convergence to adapt a true ecosystem approach rather than working in isolated silos.
- As one participant framed it, “It’s not about charity. It’s about shared futures.”

The commitments, ideas and progress shared through sessions, informal discussions, presentations and calls to action at the 15by30 Conference allowed all participants to take stock of their role in advancing refugee higher education in a time of increased volatility and mounting challenges for many.

The Conference was also as a crucial milestone for reaffirming orientation and promoting coalition-building ahead of the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review, which will be held in December 2025. Key reflections, commitments, and lessons from the 15by30 Conference will inform efforts to ensure that inclusive higher education in humanitarian and development contexts remains high on the agenda and critically, that the role of States is further emphasized.

UNHCR and partners to the global 15by30 Roadmap will focus on:

- Generating robust data and evidence to support engagement and investment in refugee higher education.
- Innovating to realize and scale education to employment pipelines that capitalize the potential of all refugee and host community students.
- Embedding refugee student leadership throughout education interventions to improve secondary to tertiary transitions, inclusion on campus and whole-of-society benefits in the long term.

The message from Istanbul was clear: the pathway to 15 per cent is not just about numbers. It’s about transforming systems. That transformation has already begun, and it must be sustained through trust, shared responsibility and bold leadership.



## Agenda – overview of sessions

### Responding to global humanitarian and development challenges: What do we know?

As global humanitarian and development challenges evolve, higher education institutions (HEIs) are stepping into expanded roles, supporting both crisis response and long-term resilience. This session will explore how HEIs, particularly in refugee-hosting regions, are adapting through innovation, partnerships and new models of engagement. Featuring catalytic initiatives from Africa, the Mediterranean and beyond, this session will challenge assumptions and propose scalable solutions for refugee inclusion in higher education.

- How can universities navigate rising populism and funding cuts to maintain inclusive access?
- How are strategic partnerships and ecosystem approaches enabling modular, scalable education models?
- What are transformative higher education initiatives telling us about the future of refugee higher education?

### Refugee student leadership: An accelerator for the 15by30 Initiative

Refugee student leadership is reshaping higher education by advancing access, influencing policy and fostering inclusive academic spaces. This session explores how peer-led advocacy, when meaningfully supported, can catalyze systemic transformation and accelerate progress towards the 15by30 target. Bringing together refugee student leaders, institutional allies and global partners, the session will spotlight scalable models such as the United Nations' Each One Take One (EOTO) and confront structural barriers to student participation.

- How are refugee students leading change, from campus to policy, and what support do they need to sustain it?
- What institutional strategies are serving to move beyond symbolic representation towards embedded student leadership?
- What is the role of universities, donors and youth-led networks in resourcing, scaling and institutionalizing student-driven initiatives?

### Learning to earning: Developing well-structured education pathways

This session examines how higher education institutions, employers and governments can co-design inclusive and sustainable education-to-employment pathways. With examples from Africa, the Middle East and global partnerships, speakers will explore how skills alignment, labour market engagement and institutional commitment can unlock opportunity at scale, including:

- Best practices in institutional models and private sector collaboration that connect education with real employment outcomes
- Aligning higher education curricula with global labour market needs – which skills, systems and support structures matter most?
- How refugee student voices and regional leadership can reshape transitions from classrooms to careers



## Data and evidence: Actioning a Refugee Higher Education Research Agenda

Robust data and evidence are essential to reaching the 15by30 goal. This session explores how the refugee higher education community can co-create a shared research agenda, close persistent evidence gaps and build capacity for sustainable monitoring and evaluation. Drawing on insights from a pre-congress webinar, breakout groups will surface innovations and identify ways forward for research, data systems and impact measurement in refugee higher education.

- What evidence is missing to scale access and influence policy?
- How can institutions and refugee researchers co-lead new models of data collection and knowledge generation?
- What does a collective research agenda for 15by30 look like – and who must commit to delivering it?

## Financing the future: Models that work for refugee higher education

Financing is a linchpin for expanding refugee access to higher education. This session brings together public, private and philanthropic actors to assess what models – scholarships, public funding, development finance and innovative mechanisms – are most effective and adaptable for displacement contexts. Together, we'll examine how these approaches can be scaled, sustained and aligned with national systems while ensuring refugee youth lead in shaping the next generation of financing solution, through:

- Critical review of current education financing models through a refugee-inclusion lens.
- Exploration of scalable, equitable approaches that strengthen national systems while responding to displacement realities.
- Revisiting the central role of refugee youth leadership in reimagining education funding for the future.

## Resources

- [15by30 Roadmap Report](#)
- [Global Multistakeholder Pledge – 15by30: Refugee Higher Education and Skills for Self-Reliance](#)
- [Global Compact on Refugees Pledges & Contributions](#)
- [Tertiary Refugee Student Network](#) webpage and [GRF pledge](#)