



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



FROM ACCESS TO TRANSFORMATION

Global Refugee Forum Progress Review 2025
Linked Event on Higher Education

“Refugee students should be treated no differently from other students.

This includes equal access to opportunities such as internships, exchange programmes, scholarships and career pathways. **Education without opportunities is incomplete.**”

SUHAILA MOHAMMAD REZA,
TERTIARY REFUGEE STUDENT NETWORK

The convening ‘From Access to Transformation’¹ was held at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) 2025 Progress Review, serving as a critical platform to consolidate outcomes from GRF 2023 and inform future action.

This summary highlights key insights from these discussions, captures illustrative quotes and case studies to inform advocacy, and outlines priority actions UNHCR will advance in 2026.

“**Higher education is one of the few areas where progress is visible, and we should recognise that.** But we must also complete the marathon and ensure that many more people are able to complete their dream. Education is the road to employment, rebuilding, reconstruction and a new life.”

JAN EGELAND,
NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL



Jan Egeland, Norwegian Refugee Council, at the GRF Linked Event. ©UNHCR/Antoine Tardy



Left to right: Ochan Leomoi (Dadaab Response Association), Maria Guevara (Latin America Lead for Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table), and Myriam Cherti (Research Chair, International Development Research Centre in Morocco) at the GRF Linked Event. ©UNHCR/Antoine Tardy

¹In support of the [15by30 Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Refugee Higher Education](#) and [Skills for Self-Reliance and Shifting Power: Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally](#).

Higher education in a changing humanitarian response landscape

Higher education is a critical component of an evolving humanitarian system. The scale, as well as the protracted nature of displacement is leading to a systemic shift towards sustainable approaches which facilitate the self-reliance of refugees and expansion of human potential. Progressing from access to transformation necessitates ensuring that higher education for refugees is connected to legal status, employment pathways, and long-term opportunities for self-reliance.

"Cooperation between universities and states is essential – not only to provide access to higher education, but to make it sustainable and connected to legal status and work rights."

SUHAILA MOHAMMAD REZA,
Tertiary Refugee Student Network

University mission statements often underscore equity and accessibility, social mobility and global citizenship. Explicitly including refugees among the population they serve is a way of demonstrating universities' commitment to their core values and missions. Meaningful higher education impact with refugees requires leadership-level, institution-wide commitment.

When crises emerge, universities are often willing to contribute, yet it can take years to establish the systems required to deliver education at scale. Models are needed to enable higher education provision to be mobilised rapidly in response to emergencies. At the Linked Event, emphasis was on low- and middle-income hosting countries, capacity building for faculty and staff, partnership with contextual experts and predictable long-term funding and higher education approaches that bring education closer to where refugees live, including in camps and host communities.

SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) shows that inclusion of refugees in higher education is academically rigorous, sustainable and scalable. Their monitoring shows that refugees consistently exceed key performance indicators in persistence, retention and employment outcomes.

"We don't think about refugee education as charity; we think about it as mission alignment. Higher education is at its best when we increase access and expand the number of people who imagine different futures."

RACHAEL SEARS,
Southern New Hampshire University



2026 Priority #1

Providing Technical Support

In 2026, UNHCR, through Each One Take One, will collaborate with universities to provide technical guidance and support to create new opportunities in low- and middle-income countries hosting most of the world's refugees.

Universities acting in solidarity with society

Achieving 15 by 30 requires collective action from universities. Collaborative models such as the Global University Academy (GUA), the Jordan Higher Education Alliance, and the Sergio Viera De Mello Chairs operate at both global and national levels to support the inclusion of refugees in higher education.



Left to right: Panelists Svein Stølen (GUA) and Malek Alsharairi (Yarmouk University) at the GRF Linked Event.
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“Universities in refugee-hosting countries cannot manage this grand challenge on their own. We need to work together. We need international solidarity more than ever.”

PROFESSOR SVEIN STØLEN,
University of Oslo / Global University Academy

THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY ACADEMY

The GUA is a growing alliance of universities that brings education closer to where refugees are, and which allows education to be provided faster when crises emerge. Members mentioned in this report include SNHU and the University of Geneva. This model delivers stackable, accredited courses via online and offline learning combined with local connected learning support.

“No institution can do everything, but every institution can do something.”

PROFESSOR SVEIN STØLEN,
University of Oslo / Global University Academy

THE JORDAN HIGHER EDUCATION ALLIANCE

The Jordan Higher Education Alliance, the outcome of a collaboration between universities and UNHCR, has influenced policy, including tuition regulations, data systems, and admissions frameworks. For example, the board of trustees at Yarmouk University took the lead following multi-stakeholder consultations and approved a reduction in tuition fees for refugees, shifting from international to local rates (a 30-40% decrease).

“It was not hard to convince universities to join (the Alliance). Every university is seeking to magnify its impact, what we often call the third mission of universities: serving society.”

PROFESSOR MALEK ALSHARAIRI,
Yarmouk University / Jordan Higher Education Alliance



Left to right: Panelists Malek Alsharairi (Yarmouk University) and Rachael Sears (SHNU) at the GRF Linked Event.
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“Supporting forcibly displaced and stateless higher education students together with marginalised communities to achieve their study dreams for sustainable self-reliance will construct the positive future we are aspiring for.”

OCHAN LEOMOI,
Dadaab Response Association



Ambassador Francisca E. Méndez Escobar (Permanent Mission of Mexico to the UN) speaks at the GRF Linked Event.
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THE GOVERNMENT OF MEXICO

The government of Mexico has worked with international organisations, civil society, refugee-led organisations, the private sector, and academia to create an environment where refugees can thrive. For example, national regulations allow refugees to enter university under the same conditions as nationals. Most universities provide facilities for refugees to enrol with the possibility of revalidating their previous studies during their first year, which helps to mitigate barriers associated with validating prior learning. The educational guidelines for the revalidation of studies in Mexico are also flexible for people with international protection needs.

THE INZONE PROGRAMME

The InZone programme of the University of Geneva pioneers innovative approaches to higher education in communities affected by conflict and humanitarian crises, allowing refugees to develop academic and life skills and earn accredited certificates from the University of Geneva. The programme involves designing, developing and validating models of higher education with equitable and reliable access for learners in fragile contexts; forming and reinforcing partnerships with local universities, as well as further developing partnerships with other with other higher education stakeholders; and building higher education spaces managed by refugees in fragile contexts, e.g., open Fab Labs.



Universities need to focus on the areas where they can act most effectively, leaving space for NGOs, refugee-led organisations, UNHCR and UNESCO to play a complementary role.

2026 Priority #2 Each One Take One

In 2026, UNHCR will collaborate more closely with universities through the Each One Take One global solidarity movement to partner with universities through digital learning and build advocacy with both students and university leaders.



Suhaila Mohammad Reza from TRSN speaks at the GRF Linked Event. ©UNHCR/Antoine Tardy

TERTIARY REFUGEE STUDENT NETWORK

The Tertiary Refugee Student Network (TRSN), with support from the World University Service Canada and the Mastercard Foundation, brought together representatives from universities in Ghana to discuss refugee realities, barriers to access and to clarify admissions requirements and processes. As a result, TRSN secured allocation of 10 admission places for refugees at universities in Ghana.

“What motivates me for doing what I do at TRSN is the fact that I am a refugee myself, and being there for other refugees is the only way I can ensure I contribute to the 15 by 30 goal. **For me, I think it is something we all must do as displaced persons, not just being beneficiaries, but also being actors.**”

FELIX SESAY,
Tertiary Refugee Student Network



Felix Sesay from TRSN speaks at the GRF Linked Event. ©UNHCR/Antoine Tardy

“When I learned about the network, I instantly connected, because **what the network does is what many refugee students are already doing on the ground: connecting opportunities with one another and helping their peers overcome barriers they themselves once had to overcome.**”

SUHAILA MOHAMMAD REZA,
Tertiary Refugee Student Network



Isadora Branco from the Student Engagement Task Force (SETF) speaks at the GRF Linked Event. ©UNHCR/Antoine Tardy

2026 Priority #3 Student Leadership

In 2026, student leadership will play an expanded role in advancing refugee inclusion in higher education. The TRSN will lead youth engagement under the Each One Take One movement, building grassroots, student-led advocacy campaigns. This will be complemented by targeted courses and initiatives designed to strengthen refugee leadership and refugee-led action within universities, alongside the expansion of a UNHCR-led peer network of refugee youth advisors.

Shifting Power: Data and evidence to amplify refugee voices, influence investment and policy

Critical knowledge and local expertise exist on the policy issues that need to be addressed to deliver on the Global Compact on Refugees, yet such voices are often excluded from research and policy dialogue. The Shifting Power pledge calls for investment in research and training in contexts most affected by displacement, connecting institutions and research communities that benefit from such investment and amplifying the knowledge generated to influence policy.

To influence policy and increase investment in tertiary education, data and evidence are critical. Although this must begin with standardized foundational elements, such as institutions counting how many refugees they enrol, this alone is not sufficient.

Knowledge production must be scientific, rigorous, outcomes focused and reflect lived realities to demonstrate returns to refugee higher education.

“We must measure outcomes, not just access.

Education must lead to employment and rebuilding societies. Qualifications, documentation and relevance to labour markets are essential.”

JAN EGELAND, NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

To reflect lived realities, data and evidence must be non-extractive and research must be co-produced with forcibly displaced communities and experts.

“We saw many challenges within the refugee context, but the people most affected often lacked access to information or a voice. We realised that to influence policy, we needed evidence—scientific, rigorous research that reflected lived realities.”

OCHAN LEOMOI, DADAAB RESPONSE ASSOCIATION

THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE (IDRC)

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Research Chairs on Forced Displacement present an innovative model for localising knowledge production, in three ways:

- 1 Integrate forcibly displaced people into research / learning as partners, researchers, assistants and students, creating pathways to tertiary education and research careers.
- 2 Strengthening agenda setting and research leadership in the Global South by embedding research capacity within local universities and institutions, mentoring early career scholars in displacement-affected contexts and supporting South-South collaboration.
- 3 Connecting universities to policy and practice ecosystems, with the Chairs bridging lived experience and policy spaces.

2026 Priority #4

Expanding Research Capacity

In 2026, UNHCR will convene a data and evidence working group via an open call for interest among the Tertiary Task Team and partners. The purpose of this group will be to exchange best practices and research initiatives under refugee tertiary education as well as to identify and refine research priorities.

Pledge Intervention and Updates

GLOBAL UNIVERSITY ACADEMY

- Expand access to quality higher education for refugees and displaced learners by implementing our multi-stakeholder, flexible pedagogical model that brings higher education offers to where refugees are. Because talent is universal, but opportunity is not, we commit to changing how higher education is delivered and where it is available, to support the 15by30 goal.

REALLY ENGLISH

- Pledge to provide self-study English to refugees by working with delivery institutions for free. This will include customising provision as needed, co-branding with the delivery institution as possible, and providing the entire system for free where appropriate.

NORWAY

- Pledged NOK 9 million to support the Global University Academy to test and document their model via three pilots in Jordan, Bangladesh and Uganda.
- Reaffirmed support for the UNESCO Global Convention on Qualifications and the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

PATHWAYS JAPAN

- 65 refugees admitted to Japan via partner Japanese language school pathways, achieving 67% of the pledge made at the 2023 GRF to admit 96 refugees from abroad to Japan.
- 28 refugees recruited for higher education, exceeding the planned target of 20, with a goal to double this by 2027. From among 65 admitted before 2023, 24 have graduated and 10 are employed with international banks, gaming companies and in IT.
- Community of Practice meetings on skills-based pathways held in Manila and Tokyo in 2024 and in Chiang Mai in 2025.

BARD COLLEGE / BARD NETWORK

- Since the 2023 GRF, 3,000 learners completed foundational skills training in the Languages, Images and Critical Thinking Programme (LIT).
- Over 300 learners are currently enrolled in Bard's university-level bridging programme (Realizing Higher Education Access Programme, RhEAP), with over 400 graduates since the 2023 GRF.
- Launched the Bard Global Degree (synchronous online programme), which supported 200 learners with 75 fully funded in the inaugural cohort.
- Over 200 enrolled in Bard on-campus and network programmes (Germany, New York, Kyrgyzstan and affiliate campuses).
- Over 100 facilitators trained.

UNIVERSITY OF THE PEOPLE

- To date, approximately 35,000 refugees and IDPs enrolled.
- Increase of pledge to enrol 25,000 refugees by 2030 to 35,000 enrolled by 2030.
- New partnership with UNHCR to support 5,000 refugees to pursue IBM certificates in cybersecurity and data analytics, with options to apply academic credit to degrees.

EDUCATION ABOVE ALL

- Over 15 years, supported over 11,000 higher education scholarships, including 6,035 for refugees.
- Launched second phase of scholarship initiatives supporting 149 Afghan refugees in the USA, Canada, Germany and Albania.
- Launched second phase of Oxford sanctuary scholarships, including a Palestinian Crisis Scholarship team supporting 16 students.
- Launched second phase of Birzeit University scholarship programme that has reached 295 refugees to date.