



ENHANCING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

A short assessment on education pathways to the UK for refugees and individuals from forced displacement backgrounds

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

Kenya. South Sudanese refugee defies odds to study law degree.

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CONTENTS

Executive summary and contextError! Bookmark not defined.

Key Findings	7
Before arrival to the UK	8
After arrival in the UK	12
Background on Complementary Pathways	17
Methodology	19
General impressions from informants	21
Considerations and safeguards	29
Conclusion	32
Our Work	33



Scotland. A focus-group discussion during the Higher Education and Refugee Forum: How can UK universities respond in a time of crisis? © University of Edinburgh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND CONTEXT

This report presents the findings of a short study on the opportunities and challenges encountered by refugees and individuals from a forced displacement background in accessing education pathways to the UK and seeks to provide recommendations on improving these complementary pathways. The research for this report was carried out by UNHCR UK between March and August 2023. UNHCR UK interviewed nineteen students, nine universities and organisations in refugee education.

Through its 2018 Global Compact for Refugees (GCR),¹ UNHCR emphasised the importance of responsibility-sharing at the heart of the international refugee protection agenda, to the benefit of refugees and host communities alike. When governments and host communities welcome refugees into their schools and universities, other actors must step in with predictable financing, resources and support to build the resilient, sustainable education pathways that will bring benefits to both refugees and universities. In addition, the creation of a Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways² has supported in recent years the expansion of tertiary education as a complementary pathway for refugee students. Increasing the number of higher education pathways will not only help meet the goals of the GCR and the Roadmap 2030³ but will also make progress towards the goal of 15% refugee enrolment in higher education by 2030, as set forth in Refugee Education 2030: A strategy for Refugee Inclusion.⁴

What are complementary pathways for admission?

Complementary pathways for admission are safe and regulated avenues for refugees that complement resettlement by providing a lawful stay in a third country where their international protection needs are met. They are additional to resettlement and do not substitute the protection afforded to refugees under the international protection regime. Complementary pathways include existing admission avenues that refugees may be eligible to apply to, but which may require operational adjustments to facilitate refugee access.

These pathways may include but are not limited to education and labour mobility avenues.

The data from recent years shows that millions of refugees have received some level of education and thousands have made it all the way to the highest levels such as Masters degrees and PhD. To accelerate this momentum, education systems should be fully

¹ United Nations, *Global Compact on Refugees – Booklet*, 2018, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>

² The Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways was launched in May 2020 to promote and support the expansion of higher education as a complementary pathway for refugee students. UNHCR is one of the 17 members of the Task Force along with representatives of states, regional and international bodies, the private sector, NGOs, refugee representatives, other UN agencies and donors engaged in or support youth refugees in their path towards higher education. More information can be found here: <https://edpathways.org/>

³ UNHCR, *Third Country Solutions for Refugees – Roadmap 2030*, June 2022, available at: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/media/third-country-solutions-refugees-roadmap-2030>

⁴ UNHCR, *Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education*, 2019, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education>

inclusive, giving refugees the same access and rights as host-country learners, both in countries of asylum and in third countries.⁵ This would require removing barriers, such as documentation and language requirements, and ensuring that policies and programmes consider refugees' experiences, to guarantee that refugees receive equitable access to education opportunities.

The UK has a long history of issuing student visas to individuals from a forced displacement background to come to the UK solely for the purpose of receiving a higher education. As highlighted in a recent OECD-UNHCR report on Safe Pathways for Refugees,⁶ the UK is one of the top countries that issues student visas to nationals from the Syrian Arab Republic, Eritrea, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iran, amongst others. This is indicative of the opportunities offered to individuals from many refugees-producing countries. Nonetheless, accessing these opportunities can be difficult due to barriers such as securing proper documentation, evidence of funding and stringent language requirements. In addition, for those that are able to access these safe and regular routes, protection safeguards are not always embedded in their legal status in the UK. Challenges such as uncertainty surrounding their continued stay in the UK, as a result of their graduation, their inability to complete the course or expiry of their national passports, take a toll on the students.

Thus, in line with UNHCR's mandate to ensure that people who are forced to flee are protected and able to secure solutions, UNHCR has conducted this assessment with the aim of generating insights on how to improve these pathways for students and to equip organisations, universities and the UK Government to make these opportunities safer and reliable.

⁶ OECD-UNHCR, *Safe Pathways for Refugees III*, June 2023, available at: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/media/safe-pathways-refugees-iii>

KEY FINDINGS

As complementary pathways are often existing entry or migration avenues, they need to be carefully adjusted and implemented through operational approaches that safeguard the rights of refugees and their international protection needs. UNHCR and its partners continue to advocate for an expansion of these pathways and urge Governments to ensure that protection considerations and safeguards are in place.

A large number of students from forced displacement backgrounds have been able to avail themselves of education opportunities in the UK which has had a positive impact on their lives and the wider communities. However, our findings highlight that there are certain areas which require comprehensive planning to ensure that the specific needs of this cohort are addressed effectively. In essence, these programmes should consider factors such as their forced displacement background, cultural context and the overall experiences of this cohort. These needs may include adjusting timeframes for the extension of the student visa, flexibility around language requirements and further support for financial assistance, as well as the ability for students to bring their dependents. These points will be analysed in this part of the study.

Facilitating refugee access to complementary pathways and removing the obstacles that they face is a primary objective of UNHCR and its partners. Another key objective for UNHCR is ensuring that protection against refoulement is safeguarded at all stages of these education pathways. This may be ensured through various means, such as:

- directing students to the appropriate institutions or legal counsel to receive guidance on asylum procedures, return or travel to countries of asylum, and reuniting with family members;
- planning for continuity of legal stay in the event of illness, injury, academic failure, or withdrawal from the programme of the student, or other unforeseen circumstances faced by the student or their accompanying dependants.

“There is an obstacle in gaining access to information in the first place, what is required from students to access these programmes and what are some of the key concerns for refugees.”

Participant of the study

Before arrival to the UK

It has been highlighted that different levels of support are provided to individuals once in country, but during the interviews that UNHCR UK carried out, it became clear that some of the challenges and need of support arise from the moment an application is submitted, to when an individual needs to travel, and finally post-arrival in the UK.

Application Requirements

To embark on their journey towards pursuing educational opportunities in the UK, students are required to navigate through a series of essential steps. These steps typically encompass fulfilling pre-requisites as part of the application, such as providing references, official transcripts and information on qualification and experience, as well as demonstrating language ability and funding.

One noteworthy challenge, as highlighted by some interviewees, revolves around providing proof of language proficiency, particularly where travel to a test centre is involved. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some refugees currently in the UK appreciated the increased flexibility that emerged, as they were able to utilise online English language tests such as Duolingo, circumventing the need for in-person test centre visits. Additionally, interviewees highlighted the support provided by the scholarship providers that were able to cover expenses related to language proficiency tests, amongst others costs, as these add

to the financial burden and could otherwise pose significant barriers.

During the interviews, universities and organisations also underscored the challenges arising from inadequate communication channels between universities, scholarship providers, and applicants during the application process. This communication gap added an extra layer of stress and uncertainty for prospective students.

Support with the application process

For forcibly displaced students, completing the application process can prove to be a remarkable challenge, not only due to the factors discussed in the above section but also due to issues related to limited internet connectivity, a shortage of IT resources in their location and hurdles encountered at each stage of the application process. Refugees come from various background, from camp settings to urban centres and a variety of socio-economic circumstances. For many, accessing basic services such as a reliable internet connection or the time and private space to complete an

application can be a real challenge. Statistics indicate that merely 17 percent of rural refugees reside in areas with 3G coverage, in stark contrast to 29 percent of the global rural population. Furthermore, a significant 20 percent of rural refugees lack any mobile coverage, which is double the proportion seen in the global rural population. Compared to the global average, refugee households are approximately 50 percent less likely to possess internet-enabled phones and about two and a half times more likely to lack access to any phone.⁷ Financial constraints often pose a formidable obstacle for refugees, making it difficult for them to afford devices or data plans.⁸

In addition to this IT hurdle, travelling often arises as a barrier to application, whether for a visa appointment or to attend a language proficiency exam. Even where these are available in the country of asylum, they may be inaccessible due to the movement restrictions imposed in some countries on refugees and asylum-seekers.

Many refugees participating in the study emphasized the valuable support they received from universities and scholarship providers during this time. They pointed out that in times of difficulty, they could rely on designated contacts at universities and scholarship providers

who helped navigating various aspects, such as embassy appointments, visa waiting times, scheduling English tests, and booking flights to the UK.

“I joined the Chevening community when I started applying, and the formed Chevening scholars were very supportive when I had questions. I was supported by the Chevening programme at every step of the process when I had questions.”

**A Yemeni male former
Chevening scholar**

Nonetheless, some participants also highlighted that they found themselves in a position where they had to proactively seek assistance from designated contacts. This need was especially pronounced when it came to securing academic references as a component of their application, a matter of particular concern for numerous students aspiring to apply for scholarships in the UK.

⁷ This was the most recent data found on refugee connectivity through it was outdated.

⁸ UNHCR, *Connecting Refugees*, 2016, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5770d43c4/connecting-refugees.html>

Travel Requirements

To provide some context, individuals seeking to apply for a student visa to enter the UK are typically required to provide a current passport or other valid travel documentation. If an individual lacks a valid national passport, they may need to apply for a travel document, such as a 1951 Convention Travel Document (CTD), if recognised as refugees in the country in which they are located and if the hosting Government issues CTDs.

During the interviews, it became evident that organising travel from the host country to the UK was a major concern, not only for the refugees themselves but also for the institutions and organisations supporting them mainly due to passport/travel document issues. It is crucial to recognize that refugees may not possess a national passport or any other official travel document suitable for visa issuance before departure. Moreover, refugees may be unable to approach their country of origin's authorities to obtain or authenticate a passport, as doing so could expose them to persecution and potential *refoulement*. Additionally, certain countries, exclusively grant visas, including education or work visas, on national passports. These complexities were underscored by refugees and the organisations supporting them, who

reported significant hurdles in the process of travel.

Many, in fact, recalled their journeys to embassies in their countries of asylum to renew passports, and some noted that even when they travelled with their national passport, they faced questioning and detention at various points of their journey.

“In September 2021, I was detained at the airport and missed my flight to come to the UK via Ethiopia. I was interrogated, and then thanks to the Mastercard Foundation support I was able to book another flight and finally arrived in Edinburgh.”

**A South Sudanese male refugee,
previously a refugee in Kenya,
currently in Edinburgh**

“I was singled out at the airport, both in France and when I arrived in Wales. My passport was checked multiple times and my visa was looked at. In Wales I was released from the airport after 45 minutes of interview.”

**A Syrian male asylum-seeker,
currently in Wales**

Other barriers

While this study has highlighted certain obstacles that students encounter prior to their arrival in the UK, it is important to acknowledge that the list of barriers presented is not exhaustive, given the limitations of this study as detailed in the section “*Limitations*”.

In fact, each forcibly displaced individual undergoes unique experiences, and hence it is crucial to recognize that those forced to flee are a diverse group with varying needs. Therefore, appropriate steps should be taken to ensure that the needs of these individuals are prioritised accordingly.

During the interviews, particularly as reported by organisations supporting refugee students once they are in the UK, it becomes evident that refugees need comprehensive information from scholarship providers and universities regarding their legal status in the UK. In addition, it is important that they are aware of the potential consequences of their departure from their country of asylum and problems arising when trying to re-enter.

Whilst these challenges are a reality, steps should be taken by UNHCR and other stakeholders involved in complementary pathways to ensure that potential students are not discouraged from exploring education pathways. It is, therefore, imperative that people forced to flee should retain the ability to make independent decisions. It remains essential that the actors involved in these pathways ensure that individuals are equipped with all the necessary information to make well-informed choices.

After arrival to the UK

Legal status and options for regularising stay in the UK

Individuals holding student visas are bound by specific requirements governing their stay duration, which depends on factors like the length of their course and prior study completed in the UK. However, as many forcibly displaced students often pursue Master's courses, the typical visa duration tends to be approximately one year. This means that, should they wish to extend their stay in the UK, they need to explore other forms of leave to remain. To note that in certain cases, the rules surrounding their scholarships/bursaries may oblige them to return to their country of origin or habitual residence which can often be an issue for many forcibly displaced students.

For these reasons, refugees accessing education pathways need to have access to legal status and documentation in the UK. All the refugees interviewed who had arrived in the UK on student visas expressed concerns about the tenuous nature of their visa status. While they were informed about the limited visa

duration, they felt more information on this matter should have been provided prior to acceptance into the scholarship and program. Some individuals found themselves compelled to seek asylum when their student visas expired, as returning to their country of origin was unsafe, and they lacked the right to re-enter their first country of asylum.

Furthermore, even though there is an option for students after their study visa expires, both refugees and institutions pointed out that the cost of the graduate visa⁹ is prohibitive for many, especially those coming from displacement contexts.

“I had to apply for asylum at the beginning of this year as I only had 20 days left in my student visa. I couldn't return to my home country as the peace process has still not brought peace, and I couldn't return to the country in which I was before as my status expired there too.”

**A Yemeni asylum-seeker,
previously in Malaysia**

⁹ The Graduate visa lasts 2 years, or 3 if the individual has a PhD or other doctoral qualifications. The Graduate visa has an application fee of £715 and the individual must pay the healthcare surcharge – usually £624 for each year

they will be in the UK. More information can be found: <https://www.gov.uk/graduate-visa>.

CASE STUDY ON LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS: KING'S COLLEGE LONDON – EDUCATION COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

Community sponsorship in the UK refers to programmes where individuals or groups come together to provide financial, emotional and practical support toward reception and integration of refugees that have already been admitted in their country through resettlement after a referral by UNHCR. From October 2021, refugees resettled to the UK are granted indefinite leave to remain which means that they have a long-term status in the UK.

King's College London (KCL) used the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme as an education pathway. With the support of Citizens UK, it set up a community sponsoring group and sponsored a six-person family that arrived in December 2021. The eldest daughter of the family enrolled in a four-year Bachelor's degree program and started her studies at KCL in September 2022.

Although this process presented challenges, including combining the requirements related to resettlement through the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme with university acceptance requirements, through this process the student and the family were provided with a long-term solution which includes refugee status and Indefinite Leave to Remain upon arrival for the student and the family.

During the interview conducted for this study, the student noted that there are still opportunities for enhancing this type of programmes. However, she also highlighted that due to her long-standing status in the UK and the fact that her family was resettled with her, she could dedicate herself to her studies and integration within the UK in a way that would have been unattainable with a short-term student visa.

UNHCR encourages the UK Government to expand this pathway by working with other universities to promote this avenue for refugee students and their families.

Legal support

Legal support available to students arriving to the UK, particularly from a displacement background, is not always accessible and may be limited in terms of scope, both at the university level and from external stakeholders including law firms. As a result, students may face situations where they are not well-aware

of the legalities surrounding their legal status in the UK and the options at expiry of the visa.

Throughout the interviews, students emphasised that they frequently experienced lack of specialised legal assistance from the immigration support team at the universities they attended

who seemed to have limited understanding of the refugee and forced displacement context. While interviewees acknowledged the presence of immigration support team at most universities, they expressed concerns that these individuals were not fully informed about the unique challenges that refugees might encounter, such as the precariousness of their visa status or the inability to return to their country of origin or initial country of asylum.

Furthermore, many students noted that the support, including legal assistance, from scholarship providers ceased once their courses concluded. As a result, they often felt isolated and unsupported during this transitional phase. Nonetheless, this has been highlighted as a key time for students as they are often in need of guidance in regard to potential next steps to remain in the UK.

“I had to educate the Scholarship provider a bit, as I told them that us students from a forced displacement background had to speak with an immigration lawyer to understand what our options at the end of the course were.”

**An Afghan female student,
previously at Oxford**

Family separation

Practice has demonstrated that ensuring family unity supports refugees to maximize the opportunities provided to them through complementary pathways such as education and labour opportunities. As such, it is important to ensure that refugees arriving through complementary pathways, including those with temporary residence in third countries, are able to maintain family unity wherever possible.¹⁰

At present, a student has the option to apply for their dependents, which may include a partner and children, to join them in the UK. However, meeting the UK Government's criteria for this process can be challenging, especially for individuals with a background of forced displacement.

¹⁰ UNHCR, *Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries, Key Considerations*, April

2019, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5cebf3fc4.html>

“I struggled a lot in my first year. Now there is a better acknowledgement about the needs of refugees but initially it was difficult to get mental support. My family was in a very bad situation, and this impacted me a lot. Other refugees face similar issues.”

An Afghan female student, previously at Oxford University

The majority of participants, as well as organisations supporting them, highlighted the difficulties for students to be separated from their families. Participants further noted the new government restrictions that will limit the ability for international students to bring family members on all but the post-graduate research route.¹¹ Whilst these restrictions are not yet in place, many highlighted that the financial requirements are not feasible for individuals that are on a scholarship and may have to send money to family members who are in the country of origin or the country of asylum.

¹¹ In May 2023, the UK Government announced new restrictions to cut net migration by restricting the ability for international students to bring family members on all routes aside from the post-graduate research visa. The new reforms will come into effect for students starting in January next year. The government will however work with the higher education sector to explore alternative

Financial situation

Students observed that due to the ongoing cost-of-living challenges, they perceived the financial assistance provided by scholarship providers as insufficient. Consequently, many found it necessary to seek part-time employment to supplement their income. Additionally, since students holding student visas are ineligible for recourse to public funds, participants mentioned encountering difficulties in securing alternative financial support. As a result, they occasionally had to depend on relatives and friends for financial assistance.

“I always financially struggled. I did not work much, and my family couldn’t support me. I felt degrading to be in this situation.”

A Yemeni male refugee in London

“I am facing some financial difficulties. I am spending some of my savings as I have not managed to find work yet given the commitment with university, but I am optimistic.”

A Yemeni male refugee in Manchester

options to ensure the brightest and best students can continue to bring dependents when they study at the UK’s world-leading universities. More information can be found: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-student-visa-route-will-reduce-net-migration>

University and community experience

Nearly every student expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiments about their university experience in the UK, emphasising the strong support they received from both the university itself

and the broader community. Despite differences in their previous educational experiences, such as variations in lecture and exam structures, many participants highlighted the helpfulness of professors and university communities in guiding them on how to effectively navigate and adapt to these differences.

“My experience at the University has been great – everyone has been extremely supportive. My professor was very helpful in explaining to me how to adapt to the new ways of learning.”

A South Sudanese male student in Edinburgh

However, students pointed out that on several occasions, professors, tutors, and the larger student community lacked awareness of the additional challenges that refugees might encounter. Overall, however, most students have been able to integrate into the wider community where they live and many said that they have felt very welcomed, also thanks to the support of many organisations, including Student Action for Refugees (STAR) and Refugee Education UK (REUK), amongst others.

“It was very challenging for me to adapt because my university is for very privileged people. I was the only refugee in the department, and they were talking about refugees as “poor people”, so it has been extremely difficult for me to integrate, make friends and actually enjoying what I am doing.”

A Syrian female refugee, resettled to the UK from Egypt, currently attending a university in Scotland

“Sussex has become my second home. Everyone has shown me kindness.”

An Afghan male student who was evacuated from Afghanistan through one of the UK schemes



Discussing the importance of higher education for refugee students. © GERE/Refugee Education UK 2022

BACKGROUND ON COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS

Complementary pathways can help refugees access protection and solutions when durable solutions are not achievable for all members of a refugee population, particularly in large scale and protracted situations.

Complementary pathways for admission, such as family reunification, education and labour opportunities, are avenues for entry or migration that should increasingly be made accessible to individuals in need of international protection. Besides promoting shared responsibility, these pathways enable refugees to exercise their right to family unity, leverage their existing professional and educational qualifications, and enhance their

capacities and skills. Consequently, these pathways are typically suitable for refugees who possess specific skills, knowledge, or family ties in a third country.

These programs should generally offer refugees essential safeguards, including proper travel documents, legal entry, accommodation arrangements for the duration of their studies or traineeships, and clear post-graduation options, which may encompass permanent residency, further graduate studies, or employment. Academic scholarships and study opportunities enable refugee students and academics to pursue education, continue their studies, and conduct research in a third country. Crucial components of such programs include financial support for travel, accommodation, living expenses, tuition, language training, cultural orientation, and psychosocial assistance for successful refugee applicants. During or upon completion of their studies, students may have the right to seek asylum or request an extension of their educational pursuits in line with national laws and policies. In certain countries, students may also be eligible for part-time employment or may have the opportunity to change their legal status. Their skills and training may make them suitable candidates for temporary or permanent employment opportunities after finishing their studies. Apprenticeships and traineeships in a third country provide refugees with opportunities to retrain or upgrade their skills through workplace-based training in their respective fields of expertise, tertiary studies, or occupation.

An important feature of many complementary pathways is that refugees are able to exercise control over their own solutions by independently accessing these avenues using publicly available information and established processes. However, it's crucial to consider that while these pathways already exist, additional protective measures should be integrated to ensure the safe access of refugees to these opportunities.

AIM OF THE REPORT

This report seeks to explore some of the key barriers in accessing education pathways to the UK for refugees, as well as concerns and successes from refugees' experiences and other key informants once in the UK.

Methodology

The study is grounded in UNHCR's participatory assessment (PA) methodology, and the standards contained within the UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations.¹² This field-tested methodology entails holding separate discussions with different stakeholders to gather accurate information on specific protection and integration concerns and the underlying causes of these, to understand the capacities of those involved and to listen to proposed solutions.

The study was designed as a snapshot assessment, rather than a longer-term PA, as a response to the numerous queries and anecdotal stories received by UNHCR which highlight potential ongoing protection needs for scholarship holders from a refugee background. The study has been designed to provide a clearer picture of the successes and challenges experienced by scholars to enable UNHCR and the wider sector to better understand the situation of students in this demographic. Data has been collected primarily through individual interviews with participants and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to enable a more comprehensive understanding.

Key informants

Students from a refugee background that have arrived in the UK through student visas and scholarships.

Three **resettled refugees**, one of which arrived through King's College London (KCL) Community Sponsorship Group.

Two **students who claimed asylum** in the UK.

Organisations working to support refugees into education, that commented both on barriers to access education in the UK as well as provided information on the difficulties that asylum seekers face in studying in the UK.

Universities and scholarship providers, given their key role in the acceptance, reception and assistance of refugees to access opportunities to the UK.

¹² UNHCR, *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations*, 2006, available at: https://www.unhcr.org/ro/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2016/12/Participatory_assessment_in_operations_ENG-evaluarea-participativ%c4%83-%c3%aen-cadrul-opera%c5%a3iunilor.pdf

Limitations

This report was put together swiftly with the purpose of providing an overview of the challenges and opportunities of education pathways to the UK for people from a forced displacement background, as well as being complemented by UNHCR's 2023 Education Report: Unlocking Potential¹³.

While the assessment is based on the views of a small sample size, the nature of the interviews, and the questions asked tried to ensure a comprehensive picture which could be reflective of the wider refugee student communities and commonalities of experiences.

Furthermore, efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants, including gender, age and nationality. To encompass a wide range of experiences, the assessment aimed to include individuals from various nationalities and scholarship programs across the UK. Additionally, the geographical scope of this assessment was confined to England, Wales, and Scotland. Therefore, given the limited nature of this assessment, it is important to recognize that the findings may not fully represent the entirety of education pathways in the UK. However, the study attempts to collate information in an objective manner with clear recommendations.

Moreover, participation in this report was based on individuals either expressing their interest by reaching out to UNHCR directly or UNHCR initiating contact with key informants. Consequently, this study reflects the views of those who were willing to share their experiences. As a result, the findings should be viewed as indicative rather than comprehensive and representative of the broader situation.

¹³ UNHCR, *Education Report 2023: Unlocking Potential*, 2023, available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/education-report-2023-unlocking-potential-right-education-and-opportunity>

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS FROM THE INFORMANTS

The report found that, overall, there are key successes and positive attitudes towards refugees accessing these pathways. Nonetheless, concerns were highlighted amongst the report's key informants in regard to their precarious legal status, options at the expiry of the visa, fear of re foulment, and concerns associated to the cost-of-living crisis.

Refugees and individuals from a forced displacement background

In general, the participants have emphasised the immense value of being able to access educational opportunities in the UK. They have pointed out that the assistance provided by universities, scholarship providers, and the broader sector has been genuinely supportive at every stage of their journey, from pre-departure preparations to post-arrival integration. Additionally, while the sentiment was not universally shared among all interviewed students, some who received support from scholarship providers mentioned feeling exceptionally well-supported when they encountered personal challenges.

“Both my university and the Mastercard Foundation offered me counselling and supported me in difficult personal times.”

A South Sudanese male student, supported through the Mastercard Foundation

Moreover, students reported that despite the advanced nature of their studies — given that nearly all participants were pursuing Master's degrees — they received substantial support in adapting to the requirements of UK universities. Almost all individuals noted the warm reception from the broader community, and through external student and educational organisations, they had the opportunity to connect with peers from similar backgrounds. This sense of camaraderie mitigated feelings of

loneliness and fostered a sense of belonging to a broader community. Refugees concurred that, on the whole, they were well-informed about the precarious nature of their student visas and the post-course requirements associated with certain scholarships. However, there was a consensus that the support offered by universities and scholarship providers fell short, prompting many to seek independent legal advice or rely on the community of refugee students.

Furthermore, many refugees pointed out that due to the demands of academic performance and the challenges of adapting to a new environment, they had insufficient time to consider their options as their visa expiration approached.

“As a student, you have to always be aware of what you are allowed to do. Knowing how to achieve your long-term goals within your visa time is challenging.”

A Syrian male student

Additionally, the students brought attention to the significant challenges associated with family separations. Due to the financial prerequisites for bringing dependents on student visas, many found it financially impossible to have their immediate family members accompany them to the UK. Likewise,

they faced difficulties in traveling to visit their families, partly due to their heavy academic as well as concerns related to travel with their current documentation.

Lastly, the students remarked that they were all grappling with financial strains, exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis. Many explained that, as they had left their families behind, they felt a responsibility to financially support their relatives. Consequently, when feasible, students sought part-time job opportunities to meet these obligations. However, given the typically short duration of their studies—most were pursuing post-graduate degrees—they expressed concerns about having insufficient time to fully focus on their education while also engaging in part-time employment.

Organisations

Throughout the study, it became evident that education-related organisations, particularly those with a specific mandate on refugee issues, play a crucial role in offering supplementary assistance to refugees who are currently pursuing educational opportunities in the UK. Due to their unique position, these organisations were able to offer a comprehensive perspective based on the feedback they have received from students. In the interviews, these organisations underscored various challenges, including those related to

financial support, eligibility criteria, post-visa-expiration options, and comprehending the available opportunities, among other factors.

"Many students reach out to us when they need support because the situation in their home country has changed – for example they may need to claim asylum, or it has impacted on their financial situation, and they need support with that."

STAR

Campaigns Manager

The organisations emphasised that a widespread issue among students is the lack of effective communication and designated points of contact within universities and scholarship programs. While some students mentioned this concern in interviews, the insights from these organisations, which support a larger student population, provided valuable additional feedback, especially considering the study's limitations.

Furthermore, these organisations observed that students who avail themselves of these opportunities are eager to support their peers and ensure that future cohorts do not encounter the same obstacles. Indeed, many of these students actively seek opportunities within other organisations, similar to those we interviewed.

"A lot of students that are awarded with these scholarships, and that come from a forced displacement background, are very passionate personally about supporting other students and refugees like themselves into education."

STAR

Campaigns Manager

Given their substantial experience in education pathways, these organizations are also eager to explore new initiatives with a stronger emphasis on protection, ensuring that these pathways serve as more than just short-term solutions.

CASE STUDY: PILOTING NEW PATHWAYS FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is piloting a programme enabling Afghan female refugee students to continue their university education through student visas but with a progressively durable solution built in.

The pilot will provide students with full scholarships to take up undergraduate studies and will include work placements every summer holiday.

This will allow students to network and build partnerships with employers in relevant sectors, as well as potentially converting the job experience into a longer-term employment opportunity with visa sponsorship. In addition to this, REUK will provide wrap-around support for the participating students, with pastoral and academic support, regular in-person visits on campus, online follow-up, and referrals to other groups and organisations if of interest.

“The most important thing is ensuring that the principle of agency is in the hands of refugees who are taking up these opportunities. Whilst we cannot make the decisions for them, we need to ensure that there is absolute transparency of information regarding the programme, their status, and the options after that.”

REUK
CEO

Universities

During the interviews, universities pointed out the absence of data regarding the number of individuals from a forced displacement background within the university. This data deficiency poses challenges in terms of the kind of support universities can offer to individuals in this category, particularly with regard to integration assistance. Nevertheless, many universities in the UK are now taking steps to establish new humanitarian scholarships directed to

people forced to flee, such as the University of Liverpool Humanitarian

Scholarship and the University of Manchester Humanitarian Scholarship. Thus, data on these scholarships specifically could be widely accessed.

Another noteworthy hurdle identified by universities is the limited access to legal support for individuals from a forced displacement background. Universities acknowledge that these students may encounter unique challenges distinct from the broader international student population. In this context, universities

have emphasized that matters related to travel documents, national passports, and visa applications represent significant impediments for many refugees, necessitating substantial support from universities.

They also observed that students accepted through scholarships for individuals from a forced displacement background often have different expectations regarding the student visa, sometimes misconstruing it as a resettlement program.

Furthermore, universities expressed concern about the absence of pre-existing groups and networks within their institutions that could provide support to individuals from a forced displacement background. These individuals may confront unique problems and anxieties distinct from other international students, particularly related to family reunification when family members are located in their countries of origin or asylum. Universities may not be fully equipped to effectively welcome refugees and others with a background of forced displacement.

“When students arrive, we are not aware of what kind of experiences or traumas they may have experienced, compared to the general students’ cohort, and this is an element that universities should consider.”

University of Liverpool

Senior Lecturer

Universities further expressed that in their view, UNHCR could play a more proactive role in ensuring that refugees are aware of the scholarship opportunities but also the limitations that these routes have – with the criteria, the visa length and the potential loss of status in the country of asylum.

In the university space, as outlined above, there is a keen interest in building new scholarships and pathways for refugees and other individuals that have been forcibly displaced. Particularly, it is necessary to highlight the work of Kings College London (KLC) in Community Sponsorship and the important feedback that they are now able to provide on the Community Sponsorship model for universities.

The University of Liverpool Humanitarian Scholarship

The University of Liverpool offers tuition fee and maintenance support for up to three postgraduate taught students who have sought international protection outside of the UK so they can proceed with their education.

The University of Manchester Humanitarian Scholarship

Set up in 2022, the Humanitarian Scholarship programme supports individuals at immediate risk who have been forced to flee their homes as a direct result of armed conflict, at the undergraduate and postgraduate-taught level. The awards cover tuition fees, living expenses and visas.

Academic programmes and scholarship providers

The programmes and providers that participated in the studies served as valuable sources of information regarding both the accomplishments of these programmes and the challenges faced by a larger number of students compared to the small cohort able to interview in this study.

Having worked closely with refugees and individuals with a background of forced displacement for many years, these informants possess an understanding of the unique situations that students from these backgrounds may encounter. They recognize the need for these programmes and scholarship opportunities to adapt and evolve to address the individuals' unique needs.

For example, they have noted that it is not uncommon for some applicants to have educational gaps, often due to disruptions caused by conflicts in their countries of origin. These disruptions can also affect their proficiency in English, among other areas.

It is important to note that some of the challenges reported are similar to those faced by other international students, such as adjusting to the UK's educational system, language barriers, and cultural differences. However, programme and scholarship providers are enthusiastic about establishing pre-departure sessions to prepare students before their arrival and follow-up sessions once they are in the UK. These proactive measures are designed to ensure that refugees and individuals from a forced displacement background do not feel overwhelmed during their initial weeks of study and are

better equipped to engage in university life.

“We organise orientation sessions around well-being, resilience and support, as well as counselling services and introductory services, notably during the first week of their academic year.”

Participant of the study

In this way, academic programmes and scholarship providers are facilitating the chance for refugees and forcibly displaced individuals to establish new communities and enhance their integration within the university environment, should they desire to do so. It is essential to recognise that while these opportunities are accessible to students, they should not be imposed upon them. Refugees and forcibly displaced individuals may opt to engage with other groups and move beyond the categorisation of being a *refugee* or a *person forced to flee*.

“Ensuring that students are integrated, build long lasting relationship and create a sense of belonging to a cohort and community, it is essential for all students and particularly those with an international background.”

**Mastercard Foundation Scholars
Program at the University of
Edinburgh
Program Director**

In addition, academic programmes such as the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH), which has a Refugee Scholarship, are aware of the need for further advocacy on involving more universities in the education complementary pathways and community sponsorship programme. Advocacy efforts are also essential to promote flexibility in the criteria for graduate visas, including provisions for bringing dependents, especially for individuals with a refugee background. Academic programs, scholarship providers, and universities have also underscored the significance of increased financial support and resources to facilitate the further development of these programs.

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) provides support to scholars who have been affected by forced displacement to advance an agenda for refugee-authored scholarship and research in the field of Forced Migration Studies. It achieves this by (1) supporting displaced scholars and researchers to participate meaningfully in research; (2) enabling refugees to develop research and research-related careers; and (3) developing a participatory and co-designed approach to the social sciences and humanities. More information can be found here: <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/refugee-led-research-hub>.

The Saïd Foundation Scholarship

The Saïd Foundation has offered educational scholarships and training opportunities since 1984. The programme aims to empower people through educational opportunities and to encourage the development of the Middle East. It is targeted towards individuals with leadership potential within the target countries of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. More information can be found here: <https://saidfoundation.org/scholarships/>.

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program is a growing initiative with a vision of supporting 100,000 scholarships across its partner institutions by 2030. Bringing together young people, universities, NGOs and other higher education stakeholders, the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program will enable young people to attain inclusive and relevant education, transition into dignified and fulfilling work, and lead transformative lives.

Through the Scholars Program at the University of Edinburgh, it will offer talented young people an exciting array of high-quality, sustainability-focused postgraduate learning opportunities, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and networks to promote sustainable transitions. More information can be found here: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/global/mastercard-foundation/about-us>.

Africa Oxford (AfOx) Initiative

AfOx is a cross-university platform based at the University of Oxford with the aim of facilitating equitable and sustainable collaborations between researchers based at the University of Oxford and African universities, as well as increasing the number of African students pursuing postgraduate degrees in Oxford. More information can be found here: <https://www.afox.ox.ac.uk/africa-oxford-initiative>.

CONSIDERATIONS AND SAFEGUARDS

LEGAL STATUS IN THE UK

- Based on the recommendations and experiences provided by the students, universities, academic programmes and scholarship providers, UNHCR recommends that systems and procedures should be in place to guarantee protection against *refoulement* for refugees benefiting from education complementary pathways. If refugees cannot return to their first country of asylum or to their country of origin, they should be able to have access to the asylum system or to attain another secure legal status allowing them to remain in the UK after completion of the programme.¹⁴
- Accordingly, whilst everyone should have a right to seek asylum, the UK Government should consider a flexible approach on the requirements for the graduate visa, particularly for those that can show they hold refugee status in another country but are unable to return to their country of origin or asylum. This would allow more refugees and forcibly displaced individuals that may wish to take up education complementary pathways to continue their stay in the UK and contribute to society, without having to claim asylum and increase the asylum backlog.
- Furthermore, to take up such opportunities, refugees need easy, ready access to renewable travel documents. It is recommended that the UK Government provides their legal and policy expertise, technological assistance, and other relevant support to States already issuing travel documents to ensure that refugees may be able to travel more easily.¹⁵

¹⁴ UNHCR, *Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries, Key Considerations*, April 2019, p.12, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5cebf3fc4.html>

¹⁵ UNHCR has worked on a multi stakeholder pledge on refugee travel document ahead of the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023. Commitments which form part of this multi-stakeholder pledge will contribute towards improved access to family

REFUGEES AND FORCIBLY DISPLACED INDIVIDUALS AT THE CENTRE

- Through the study and the interviews with students, it was felt that refugees and forcibly displaced individuals do not wish for their situations to be considered as unique and for all the requirements to be removed simply because of their status. The students did not request all the application requirements to be waived, but thought it is important that universities and the UK Government are aware of some challenges that may be unique to their particular experiences. Thus, it is important that these pathways are based on objective criteria, taking into consideration the specific situation of the refugees concerned, such as educational and learning needs, which may have been affected by displacement, and/or medical or psychological needs resulting from forced displacement.¹⁶
- Therefore, it is recommended that refugees and their communities should be included as active participants in the creation, evaluation and feedback mechanisms of these pathways to ensure that key improvements are included for these pathways to be safe, accessible and scalable.¹⁷

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

- It may be necessary to institute more flexible legal and administrative procedures, such as simplified processes for refugee applicants to address the specific difficulties and risks they encounter. Difficulties can include producing certain identification documentation such as birth certificates; providing certain proof of language proficiency, particularly where travel to a test centre is involved; and providing recognition of previously taken credits or complete transcripts.

reunification for refugees and additional complementary pathways, as well as increased economic inclusion, access to livelihoods, and expanded access to higher education. More information can be found here: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/pledges-contributions/multistakeholder-pledges-2023/multistakeholder-pledge-refugee-travel>

¹⁶ UNHCR, *Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries, Key Considerations*, April 2019, p. 12, see foot note 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 14.

- Therefore, it is helpful to maintain flexible admissions criteria and procedures concerning acceptable proof of language proficiency, recognition of previously taken credits and incomplete transcripts etc. Flexibility may also involve the modification of financial requirements or flexibility with respect to requirements for refugees to return to the country of nationality or asylum.

TRAVEL REQUIREMENTS

- It is important to consider the facilitation of student travel from the host country to the UK, particularly with regards to travel documents. Refugees may not be in possession of a national passport or an alternative official travel document for the purpose of affixing a visa and departure. In addition, they are often not able to approach the authorities of their country of origin to authenticate or obtain personal documents, as this may place them at risk of persecution or refoulement. Therefore, assistance for students without official travel documents should be considered. For example, where applicable, the issuance of Refugee Convention Travel Documents by the country of asylum or a one-way travel issued by the UK for purposes of entry.
- It should also be noted that some countries, such as the UK, only issue visas such as education or work visas on a national passport. This should be taken into account in programme design.

RIGHT TO FAMILY UNITY

- From the experiences shared during the interviews, UNHCR encourages the UK Government to consider a more flexible approach towards the criteria of bringing dependants to the UK. Students, as well as the academic programmes and scholarship providers, have highlighted that the current requirements make it almost impossible for refugees to bring their family members with them. Nonetheless, practice has demonstrated that ensuring family unity supports refugees to complete their studies successfully and thus it is important to ensure that refugees arriving through complementary pathways are able to maintain family unity where possible.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13

CONCLUSION

This report finds that the study visas and scholarship opportunities are overall regarded positively by students, organisations, universities and scholarship providers. In particular, students have highlighted the support they have received overall from universities and the wider communities. Most of the interviewees have felt welcomed and integrated, although some highlighted that they had to independently try to find university teams that would support them once in the UK. In addition, all students that came to the UK through student visas noted that they faced difficulties with travelling to the UK and that often they were stopped by Border controls, questioned and had to provide information about their staying in the UK.

However, challenges concerning the limited length of the student visas, financial constraints, lack of family reunion and issues with submitting applications due to lack of evidence regarding previous education, English knowledge and national passports, make these pathways still not fully accessible for individuals who are forced to flee. While it is recognised that the UK already provides an option for students to remain in the country after completing their studies, this route is frequently impractical for many individuals. Various factors contribute to this, including the associated costs and any limitations imposed by their initial scholarship agreements.

Therefore, UNHCR has provided recommendations that hope can support organisations, universities and the UK Government in ensuring that these pathways are accessible and safe for people who are forced to flee.

UNHCR is very grateful to all stakeholders for their positive and constructive engagement with this study. While they should not replace other protection-led pathways for refugees in need of international protection, such as resettlement programmes, these education complementary pathways are a great opportunity for students to be able to access education in a third country. UNHCR hopes that more universities and scholarship providers will continue to get involved, with robust active support of the UK Government, to ensure that more refugees and individuals from forced displacement backgrounds can access these opportunities in a safe and long-term manner.

Our Work

WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE

A world where every person forced to flee can build a better future.

OUR FUNDAMENTAL FOCUS

Everything we do helps protect people forced to flee their homes.

WHO WE ARE

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organisation dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

WHAT WE DO

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, leads international action to protect people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, food and water, help safeguard fundamental human rights, and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future. We also work to ensure that stateless people are granted a nationality.

WHY WE MATTER

Every year, millions of men, women and children are forced to flee their homes to escape conflict and persecution. We are the world's leading organisation dedicated to supporting people forced to flee and those deprived of a nationality. We are in the field in over 125 countries, using our expertise to protect and care for nearly 64 million people.

ENHANCING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

A short assessment on the experiences of refugees and individuals from forced displacement backgrounds in accessing education in the UK.

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