



Voices of Refugee Youth

Rwanda Education Advocacy Report

About this document

This advocacy report is based both on the findings of the Voices of Refugee Youth research study and the personal experiences of the refugee Youth Researchers in Rwanda. It is a declaration of the change which the Youth Researchers want to see, providing evidence of the barriers to post-primary education and proposed solutions for refugee education stakeholders in Rwanda.

Other outputs from the initiative can be found on the Voices of Refugee Youth [website](#). These include: an equivalent advocacy report from Pakistan; the research report; a participatory research toolkit; and a policy brief.

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VOICES OF REFUGEE YOUTH

“Voices of refugee youth: impact of post-primary refugee education” is a research initiative conducted in partnership between Jigsaw, Refugee Education UK and UNHCR. Read more [here](#).

JIGSAW

Jigsaw is a social enterprise that exists to build evidence for education in low-income countries. Read more [here](#).

Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a charity which equips young refugees to build positive futures by thriving in education. Read more [here](#).



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. Read more [here](#).



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Initiative overview

The Voices of Refugee Youth initiative was led by Jigsaw and Refugee Education UK, in partnership with UNHCR, and funded by Dubai Cares. It ran from September 2018 to December 2022.

The initiative had two core aims: to build the evidence base for post-primary refugee education; and to increase young refugees' access to and representation within education research.

The first aim was achieved through a longitudinal panel study of 1126 refugee students in secondary and higher education. This consisted of three data collection points (known as DP1, DP2, and DP3). The second aim was achieved through the involvement of 31 Youth Researchers (15 in Pakistan and 16 in Rwanda) who worked as core contributors to the research study and, at the same time, received training in applied research methods, gaining a graduate-level accreditation. The study itself explored the educational experiences and aspirations of secondary school and higher education refugee students living in Pakistan and Rwanda.

Voices of Refugee Youth Glossary

The Voices of Refugee Youth initiative

A participatory, youth-centred research initiative, which took place from 2018-2022. The initiative included a longitudinal panel study and a training programme for the team of Youth Researchers.

The Voices of Refugee Youth research study

A longitudinal panel study on the impact of post-primary education for refugees in Pakistan and Rwanda. The research study delivers the primary objective of the Voices of Refugee Youth initiative.

The training programme

An accredited graduate-level programme in applied research. The training programme equips the Youth Researchers to participate in the research study and develop skills for future work in the research sector.

The full research team

The combined team of researchers from Jigsaw and REUK and the Youth Researchers.

The Jigsaw and REUK research team

Researchers from Jigsaw and REUK, based in the UK, who delivered the training programme and conducted the research study.

The Youth Researchers

The team of 31 young refugees in Pakistan and Rwanda, who participated in the training programme and all aspects of the research study.

Post-primary education

All education levels and pathways after primary education, encompassing secondary education, higher education and technical and vocational training pathways.

Secondary education

The second formal stage of education, following primary education. It encompasses both lower and upper secondary education. Secondary school participants in the Voices of Refugee Youth research study were all in the final year of secondary education, Grade 12, at the start of data collection.

Higher education¹

A form of tertiary education—the optional, final stage of formal education—which leads to the award of a degree. It occurs after the completion of secondary education, and includes undergraduate and postgraduate level study.² Higher education participants in the Voices of Refugee Youth study were all in the final year of their undergraduate degree at the start of data collection.

¹ It is worth noting that UNHCR would classify this stage of education as tertiary education (UNHCR 2019a).

² In this study, higher education is understood to include levels 6-8 of the 2011 International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO UIS, 2012).

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)

All forms of education and training which provide skills and knowledge related to a range of occupational fields and aim to enable employment. This can be delivered in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings, both at the post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary levels.³

³ In this study, TVET is understood to include levels 4-5 of the 2011 International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO UIS, 2012).

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DP1, et al.	Data point 1, data point 2, etc.
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Introduction

We are sixteen refugees living in Rwanda. Over the past three years, we have been Youth Researchers on the Voices of Refugee Youth initiative: a participatory youth-centred research initiative which aims to build the evidence base for post-primary education for refugees.

During this time we have been talking to our refugee peers to gather evidence about their experiences of secondary and higher education as well as access to employment in Rwanda. We have conducted three rounds of data collection called 'data points' (or DPs for short) with secondary and higher education refugee students in Rwanda. DP1 took place in January-February 2020, DP2 in September-November 2021 and DP3 in May-June 2022. Overall, we conducted surveys with more than 600 refugee students from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We supplemented these surveys with interviews and focus groups with over 80 refugee students during DP2 and DP3. The experiences we have uncovered are experiences we, as refugee youth researchers, share. The following report is based on the findings from the study as well as our own personal experiences as refugee students.

The content of the report was compiled as part of the Voices of Refugee Youth training programme: a four-module course in social sciences research, accredited by John Carroll University. The hands-on course, combining

theory and practice, enabled us to grow as researchers and gather high-quality data. We learned about designing research, carrying out research, writing up research and using research to influence change in the world around us.

As part of our final module of the training programme, we worked in groups to write about the barriers to secondary school, higher education and employment that refugee students face, as well as our proposed solutions to these barriers. Building on this, a number of us participated in additional workshops and reviewing sessions, to compile the collective vision statement and recommendations.

This report is a declaration of the change we and our refugee peers want to see.

We hope it will convince stakeholders in refugee education in Rwanda to make quality post-primary education and employment opportunities accessible to all refugee students.

Our vision

We, the refugee students in Rwanda, believe education is our right and the pathway to a bright and successful future. Therefore, we desire the opportunity to complete secondary education, attain higher education and be gainfully employed so that we can fulfil our ambitions.

This vision statement is the product of a group workshop in which a number of us—the Youth Researchers in Rwanda who authored this advocacy report—were asked by the Jigsaw and REUK research team to reflect on the purpose of education, our hopes for the

future and what success means to us. During the course of the workshop, certain key phrases were repeated and highlighted, which have formed the basis of this collective statement.

We advocate for all refugee students to have access to a good quality education

so that we can dream big about our futures, develop the necessary skills to attain employment, and contribute to our communities.

We dream of a future where...

we enjoy equal human rights and freedoms.
 we are leaders.
 we are able to compete in the labour market.
 we actively participate in the development of our families and communities.

We desire to be heard and included

in decisions that affect us and our futures. We want to be successful and pave the way for those coming after us by having a positive influence on society, achieving our goals and being role models in our communities.

The problem we are addressing

Accessing education is our right.

However, according to the UNHCR (2022), 48% of all school-age refugee children remain out of school, and the barriers faced by refugee students become harder to overcome as we grow older. A 2020 review by the UNHCR in Rwanda revealed that the gross enrollment rate of refugee students in the national education system in Rwanda is 127% at primary school level, and drops to 62% at the secondary level (UNHCR, 2020). This number further drops to 4% at the higher education level.

As refugee students, we are motivated to attend secondary school in order to increase our knowledge and skills, have access to better employment opportunities, and gain

independence and self-reliance. The barriers we face matter because they have a negative impact on our success in the classroom and hinder our ability to achieve our goals.

Through this report, we highlight the barriers that our research has shown refugee students in Rwanda experience, and propose solutions for each of them. We express the change we want to see by addressing key stakeholders, who we believe have the ability and responsibility to make necessary changes which will enable countless refugee students to access the education they deserve, and reach their ambitions.

Barriers and Solutions

In this next section we discuss the three main barriers that come in the way of refugee students having a better chance at quality education and future employment opportunities, and propose solutions that will make a difference.

Unless stated otherwise, the statistics included in the section below come from the findings of our research. The full set of findings can be found in the Voices of Refugee Youth research report.

Barrier 1: Finance

The UNHCR 2022 report sheds light on the influence inequality has on access to education for refugee students. According to the report, at the higher education level, financial inequalities become more apparent, with enrollment rates dropping from 37% to 6% from secondary to tertiary levels of education among refugee students (UNHCR,

2022). Our research also points to high costs of education and financial restrictions as a significant barrier in access to education for refugee students in Rwanda. Most refugee students would like to continue studying after secondary education. At the start of our research, 83% of respondents said they would like to continue their education post

secondary school. However, an overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) said that they are not doing what they had initially planned to do post secondary education because of multiple constraints, with finance being the most significant one.

Aspirations of refugee students in secondary school	
Expressed desire to study further post secondary education DP1	83%
Expressed desire to study further post secondary education DP2	78%
Not doing what they had planned post secondary school DP3	86%

Table 1: Aspirations of refugee students in secondary school

Towards the end of our research, when schools reopened after Covid-19-imposed lockdowns, financial challenges such as a requirement to work or lack of funds were the most commonly selected challenges faced in completing secondary school by 33% (DP3) of participants. Our research shows that for participants who were able to access higher education, this barrier increased over time, with 28% (in DP1) and 44% (in DP3) stating that financial issues are the biggest challenge in continuing in higher education. It is likely that this was further exacerbated over the last two years because of Covid-19 and the effect it had on access to education. While there are some options for scholarships, they are not nearly enough to support the academic ambitions of refugee students, and the absence of clear sources of information on accessing financial aid further contribute to this barrier.

According to the UNHCR (2019), financial demands have an impact not just on

education ministries and local authorities, who must find the necessary funding, but on refugee families as well. As they grow up, refugee adolescents come under greater pressure to support their households. Unemployment adds to the financial constraints faced by refugee families, and when parents are unable to find work it can lead to pressure on the older children to work and contribute to the family. Our research in Rwanda shows that poverty and unemployment were significant barriers in access to education.

“The biggest challenge I faced was getting a scholarship after completing my secondary studies. This transition from secondary to university is very difficult because there is no clear support from the UNHCR. Getting many marks in national examinations seems to have no meaning for secondary refugee students while it means much for nationals.”

> Research participant in Rwanda

“The challenge of any refugee student is most of the time related to the lack of resources. It was also a big challenge for me because I did not have any other support except the allowance from DAFI which was not sufficient if we consider how life has become expensive.”

> Research participant in Rwanda

The solution we propose

Financial assistance through scholarships from government and international organisations will help ease the burden on our families and enable us to pursue our dreams. We recommend that the government of Rwanda allocate scholarship money specifically for refugee students seeking to access higher education, to address this barrier.

Organisations like DAFI that provide student finance should increase the number of seats available for undergraduate refugee students. These organisations should also make information about scholarships being offered more accessible and provide coaching to refugee students who are applying for scholarships through their programs in order to increase their chances of accessing student finance.

Barrier 2: Refugee status

Our research and lived experience has shown that our status as refugees acts as a barrier to opportunities in education and employment. The discrimination we face on a daily basis has led many of us to lose confidence in our abilities, and because of the continuous barriers faced along the journey, we feel refugee students often lack the self-confidence to seize opportunities for growth when they do come our way. Interruptions in education compound these challenges, and young students with big dreams are having to readjust their goals to fit in with their changing reality. In addition, the trauma of being uprooted from all that is familiar, facing an uncertain future, and having no way to deal with all that we have experienced in the past negatively affects our mental health and wellbeing.

We have also found that our opportunities at higher education and beyond are limited by our status as refugees. Many of us rely on scholarships to access university; however, these scholarships often specify which subjects we are able to study, limiting our options both at university and beyond. Further, the scholarship process can take so

long that there are very few subjects left to choose from by the time we are awarded our funding. The inability to pick subjects of our choice and having to choose from “leftover subjects” leaves us with few options after graduating and limited opportunities for employment.

“The lack of occupation after secondary school studies is...having a negative impact on our future. We have in our refugee community cases of depression and mental health issues and substance abuse among the youth... Due to the barriers of accessing higher education, we observe...poverty and absence of future vision in the refugee communities.”

> Research participant in Rwanda

“One day, I had a meeting with young university students. Few of them see light in their future because of the conditions they live in as refugees from refugee camps. And discussions with some partners have led them to believe that having refugee status will limit their potential and opportunities in Rwanda. That makes them have less self-esteem and lose confidence in what they do and think about their future.”

> Youth Researcher in Rwanda

Barriers to refugee students post higher education

Finding employment a challenge to future plans DP1	40%
Finding employment a challenge to future plans DP2	36%

Table 2: Barriers to refugee students post higher education

The various barriers experienced by refugees and asylum seekers are closely linked, and one of the biggest barriers we face is in access to employment. Our research throws light on experiences of discrimination in the labour market in Rwanda as a result of people’s refugee status. Research conducted in Europe shows that discrimination against refugee and asylum seekers is one of the most common barriers to their labour market inclusion (European Commission, 2016). Based on our findings from refugee students in higher education at DP1, when responding to “what would be the biggest challenge they would face in the future”, 40% of them reported that finding a job is hard because of their status as refugees and this experience persisted at DP2, where 36% reported that

finding employment would be the most significant barrier they face. From our experience, some employers do not trust refugees to perform well as employees and so we are more likely to be denied job opportunities than Rwandan citizens.

It is also interesting to note the difference in responses within our research between refugees from Burundi and those from DRC; because Congolese refugees have been in Rwanda for much longer than refugees from Burundi, the experiences of both these communities is different, and Congolese refugees are more likely to recognise their refugee status as a barrier to opportunities. For instance, respondents from DRC were significantly more likely to choose barriers due to refugee status as being a challenge to their future plans compared to respondents from Burundi (42% vs 10%) whereas, respondents from Burundi were more likely to pick difficulty in finding employment as the biggest challenge to their future plans compared to those from DRC (47% vs 19%).

“Discrimination from employers has been reported in Rwanda by two of my friends who are living in different refugee camps in Rwanda due to their applications being rejected because of being refugees. One lives in Mugombwa Refugee Camp and another one lives in Kigeme Refugee Camp. They all applied for different jobs, but they all got rejected before even being given a chance to do exams like other nationals after [...]

[...] employers observed their identity cards that proved that they were refugees. The employers told them to leave because they were not allowed to take an exam for a job because they are refugees. Yet, the applicants knew that they were allowed

to apply and work in Rwanda. Lack of awareness by employers led to those two of my friends being discriminated against, despite the fact that they were qualified for the job.”
> Youth Researcher in Rwanda

The solution we propose

Often the lack of awareness among employers leads to qualified refugee candidates not being offered jobs. We recommend that employers in Rwanda are trained on labour laws and the rights of refugees to employment.

We recommend more job opportunities be created for refugees. When our families are gainfully employed, it eases the burden on us to have to financially contribute to the home and gives us the freedom to pursue higher education. Providing job opportunities for graduates of secondary school will enable us to be self reliant and give us the confidence and financial stability to pursue higher education.

We recommend that Universities offer a broader range of subjects that refugee students can choose from and make scholarships available for many/all of these subjects, so that we have greater opportunities for employment on completing our education.

There should be counselling services provided to refugee students to give them positive tools to cope with the trauma they have experienced, to ensure a reduction in dropout rates owing to alcoholism and teenage pregnancies.

Barrier 3: Educational resources

The quality of education we have access to, as refugee students, is another significant barrier we face. At the beginning of our study, 37% of participants expressed that the lack of resources is a significant challenge in completing secondary school. We feel that this is a crucial barrier in completing secondary school as well as qualifying for

higher education. The quality of education we receive determines our future opportunities and outcomes, and therefore, this is an area that requires important attention. Limited school budgets lead to a scarcity in teaching resources and infrastructure in the classroom. Respondents spoke of the absence of libraries, computer labs and other practical

resources in their schools being a significant challenge. From our personal experience, and through our interactions with teachers during this study, we understand that refugee teachers are regularly paid less than their Rwandan colleagues. This discrimination pushes them to take on a second job to make ends meet, and this stretches their capacity and affects their ability to deliver their lessons. At the beginning of our research, 56% of the refugee students either strongly agreed or agreed that they didn't have enough resources in their secondary school, and at the end of the three year research 73% respondents felt that better educational resources would help improve their secondary school experience.

Challenges to completing secondary school	
Lack of resources a significant challenge in completing secondary school DP1	37%
More qualified teachers as a positive change in education DP3	13%

Table 3: Challenges to completing secondary school

Another key challenge is underqualified teachers. In Rwanda, experiences from

refugees, including teachers themselves, reveal that many of the teachers in refugee schools do not have qualifications required to teach the level or subjects they are assigned. In addition to this, there is a lack of regular training sessions to improve the skill and capacity of teachers, and this limits the quality of teaching. This concern was also raised by UNESCO in 2019: "Refugee contexts are characterised by a lack of adequate resources and qualified teachers and overcrowded classrooms. Although competent teachers are indispensable to the quality of education, especially in contexts where there may be a shortage of textbooks and other learning resources, the lack of qualified and available teachers [...] and low levels of remuneration, all lead to the recruitment of those with little or no experience." (UNESCO, 2019)

"The challenge that I have faced is the financial ability of my school. There are no more books to read, there is no computer lab... Now I use my own phone to navigate to different books."

> Research participant in Rwanda

The solution we propose

We recommend increasing the salaries of refugee teachers to the same level as their peers from Rwanda. This will motivate the teachers to stay, and ensure an improvement in the quality of education we receive. We also recommend frequent technical and capacity building training for refugee teachers so they are better equipped to give us the education we deserve. As we have witnessed, there is a need for refugee school budgets to be increased so they can provide us with necessary resources like books, access to computer labs and libraries, as well as practical training to make the most of our education.

The change we want to see

In this section we lay out our priority recommendations to the specific stakeholders we believe have the ability and the authority to effect positive change for refugee students in Rwanda.

This is the change we want to see that will enable us to build the futures we dream of.

The UNHCR should:

1. create systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of education being delivered in refugee schools.
2. mobilise funds by engaging with donors to ensure refugee schools are better equipped and have necessary resources such as computers and books.
3. provide trauma informed counselling services to refugee students, so they have positive tools to improve their wellbeing.

The Government of Rwanda should:

4. legislate policy that will allocate additional budgets to improve the infrastructure available in refugee schools, ensuring students have access to necessary resources like textbooks, libraries and computer labs.
5. provide scholarships to refugee students at secondary and higher education levels.
6. ensure the hiring of qualified teachers to refugee schools at the secondary and higher education levels, and provide opportunities for capacity building and skilled training. These teachers should be paid competitive salaries that are on par with their local counterparts with the same qualifications.
7. organise conferences to raise awareness on the rights of refugees to employment.

INGOs and NGOs should:

8. be involved in implementation and evaluation of the policies laid out by the government to support the access of education for refugee students.
9. work with their networks to support refugee students through scholarships that cover their tuition as well as living costs.

Business/Private/Religious Institutions should:

10. reserve a certain number of seats in the organisation for refugee graduates.
11. advocate for better quality education being made accessible to refugee students by raising funds, providing scholarships, and providing admission to refugee students in boarding schools run by religious institutions.

We believe change is possible, and are hopeful of the impact of our recommendations on decision-makers. We are engaged in a wide range of ongoing activities to share the message of this report, and continue to champion inclusive and accessible education for all refugee students in our communities and across Rwanda.

If you would like to help us make these recommendations a reality or would like to discuss this research in more detail, please get in touch with us at info@gere-research.org.

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