



# **Voices of Refugee Youth**

Pakistan 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 Pakistan. 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 Pakistan.

Other outputs from the initiative can be found on the Voices of Refugee Youth [website](#). These include: an equivalent advocacy report from Rwanda; 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 education<sup>1</sup>**

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

# Table of contents

<b>Abbreviations and acronyms</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Tables</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Our vision</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The problem we are addressing</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Barriers and Solutions</b>	<b>7</b>
Barrier 1: Finance	7
The solution we propose	9
Barrier 2: Lack of prospects after higher education	9
The solution we propose	10
Barrier 3: Educational resources	10
The solution we propose	11
<b>The change we want to see</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>14</b>

# Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>DP1, et al.</b>	Data point 1, data point 2, etc.
<b>DAFI</b>	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## Tables

<a href="#"><u>Table 1</u></a>	Biggest challenge in accessing secondary education
<a href="#"><u>Table 2</u></a>	Aspirations of secondary school refugee students
<a href="#"><u>Table 3</u></a>	Availability of education resources in secondary school

# Introduction

We are fifteen Youth Researchers living in Pakistan who have been part of Voices of Refugee Youth: 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 Pakistan. We have conducted three rounds of surveys called 'data points' (or DPs for short). DP1 took place in August-September 2019, DP2 in November-December 2020 and DP3 in June-August 2021. Overall, we conducted surveys with more than 500 refugee students. We supplemented these surveys with interviews and focus groups with 47 refugee students. The experiences we have uncovered are experiences we, as refugee youth researchers, share. The following report is based on the findings from the research study as well 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 help convince stakeholders in refugee education in Pakistan to make quality post-primary education and employment opportunities accessible to all refugee students.

# Our vision

We, the refugee students in Pakistan, 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 dreams.

This vision statement is the product of a group workshop in which a number of us—the Youth Researchers in Pakistan 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 build and transform not just our lives, but the lives of our communities.

## We dream of a future where...

we have equal access to basic rights and freedoms.  
we are treated with kindness and compassion.  
we are free to make our own choices.  
we can serve the world with our passions.

## We desire to be heard and included

in decisions that affect us and our futures. We want to be successful and contribute to peace and the development of humanity.



# The problem we are addressing

Accessing education is our right; however, as refugees living in Pakistan we face many challenges in realising this right.

UNICEF highlights that 44% of all school-age children in Pakistan remain out of school (UNICEF, 2019). The challenges clearly faced by Pakistan's students are further complicated when seeking to access education as a school-age refugee. As refugee students, we are motivated to attend secondary school in order to increase our knowledge and skills, access better employment opportunities, and have a positive impact on our community. The barriers we face matter because they have an unfavourable impact on our success in the classroom and hinder our ability to achieve our goals.

According to UNHCR (2020), 36% of the population of refugees in Pakistan are school-age children. Through this report, we highlight the three main barriers that our research has shown refugee students in Pakistan 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 attain their goals.

## Barriers and Solutions

In this next section we discuss the three main barriers that inhibit refugee students' access to 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

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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 Pakistan. 54% of the respondents cited finance as the most significant challenge in completing secondary education at the start of the research study (DP1), and this number rose to 61% at the conclusion of the study (DP3).

### Biggest challenge in accessing secondary education

Finance is the most significant challenge in accessing education DP1	54%
Finance is the most significant challenge in accessing education DP3	61%

Table 1: Biggest challenge in accessing secondary education

At the start of our study (DP1), 83% of the secondary school students interviewed hoped to access higher education. This number dropped to 78% at DP2 and further fell to 66% at DP3 when the research study concluded. As seen from these figures, most refugee students would like to continue studying post secondary school. However, at the end of our study in secondary school, over half of the respondents (56%) reported 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 barrier. In Pakistan, in order to ensure all children in the family have access to minimum levels of education, higher education is generally compromised in families with more children.

### Aspirations of secondary school refugee students

Expressed desire to study further post secondary school DP1	83%
Expressed desire to study further post secondary school DP2	78%
Expressed desire to study further post secondary school DP3	66%
Not doing what they had planned after secondary school DP3	56%

Table 2: Aspirations of secondary school refugee students

Participants also mentioned the role of gender as a barrier, with female students being the first to experience interruptions in education when faced with financial constraints. Our research shows us that 28% of the respondents at DP1 had already experienced some kind of interruption in their secondary education at the start of the study. Of these, 84% were female students out of which 31% reported over a year of interruption. The primary reason for these interruptions was financial costs, and in the absence of gainful employment as a result of education, many students find it harder to get the support of family to continue in their education.

“Financial issues are the biggest challenge because education requires money and we have to pay our fees, we need to get copies [of set texts], we need to pay for transport for access to school, so without money education is not possible.”

> Research participant in Pakistan

As refugee students, we desire to be change-makers in our communities, and education gives us the opportunity to do that. However, the lack of scholarships and financial support for refugee students pushes many of us away from achieving our goals. 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 Pakistan shows that poverty and unemployment were significant barriers in access to education.

## The solution we propose

Taking into consideration the challenges faced by refugee students in accessing higher education as a result of the high costs associated, we recommend that the UNHCR, NGOs and the Government of Pakistan set aside funds to increase the number of full and partial scholarships to refugee students in higher education. Further, both public and private universities should be given subsidies to help with overhead expenses, which will enable them to reduce the costs of higher education. Programs like DAFI that offer scholarships, should increase the number of seats for undergraduate refugee students. We believe there needs to be more advocacy around this issue. Think tanks and donors must be activated to take steps to reduce the financial burden on refugee students accessing higher education.

## Barrier 2: Lack of prospects after higher education

Our research and lived experience have shown that our status as refugees acts as a barrier to opportunities in education and employment. These barriers cause many of us to lose motivation to continue with our education, as it is very difficult to find employment as refugees post higher education. It is extremely disheartening to end up unemployed after the investment of time and money required for our education, simply because of our refugee status and lack of documentation. Our research shows that a lack of employment opportunities is a key concern amongst refugee students—38% of the higher education participants stated that this would be their biggest challenge after finishing university, alongside other top answers such as financial issues. Even with regards to access to higher education, our experience is that there are very few universities in Pakistan that offer seats to refugee students. Further, there are no opportunities for technical and vocational training for refugee students as alternate pathways to higher education. This seriously limits the opportunities refugee students have in their access to higher education, and

subsequently affects their ability to find employment and thrive in their careers.

“We as refugees are left out everywhere. And there are also many job opportunities that Afghans can’t apply to, even though they do complete the eligibility criteria but they are not accepted as they don’t have the nationality. Like my sister went to an organisation and they accepted her, but the head person told her that we won’t be giving you any salary nor be providing even an experience letter/certificate.”

> Research participant in Pakistan

The lack of opportunities post higher education experienced by refugee students, causes them to lose motivation in accessing higher education. The inability to contribute towards our futures and the wellbeing of our family as well as that of our country, causes us

to lose our self-confidence, affecting our mental health and wellbeing.

Our personal experiences have shown us that many refugee students struggle to build a positive future when they experience

interruptions in their education. The interconnected nature of the barriers we experience means that over time our challenges compound and we begin to lose sight of our ambitions and dreams.

## The solution we propose

We have seen first hand the impact that interruptions in our education, combined with our refugee status, can have on our future prospects as well as our mental wellbeing. We propose that the Government of Pakistan along with the UNHCR create employment opportunities for refugees at the entry-level so that we can be gainfully employed as a result of our education qualifications.

To create a positive mindset and give refugee students tools to fight the low confidence and motivation they experience as a result of their circumstances, universities and NGOs should provide vocational training, professional skills, career guidance and organise seminars and workshops to build confidence and hope among the students.

We also believe it is important to create spaces for refugee students to have direct conversations with policy makers, to enable us to raise our demands and create the change we want to see.

## Barrier 3: Educational resources

Education is the road to national development. It creates a sense of responsibility among people and helps them understand their individual, national and societal rights. All these are possible through a quality education system. However, as refugee students, one of the challenges we face is the quality of education that is accessible to us. Our research shows us that access to educational resources for refugee students is limited, with 44% of the respondents citing it as a challenge in their secondary education. Refugee students in Pakistan report that most schools do not have a single computer, let alone a computer lab. Further, there is little or limited access to

essential resources such as books or even a library, blackboards, chalk, textbooks, teacher support material and supplementary learning aids.

### Availability of education resources in secondary school

Not enough education resources at school (DP1)	44%
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Table 3: Availability of education resources in secondary school

These challenges were further exacerbated during Covid-19 with most students unable to access online learning during that period,

and schools were not in a position to provide any kind of online support to the students. 71% of the secondary school respondents at DP2 said they received no support from their school when in-person classes were not possible due to covid. In fact, even teachers didn't have access to resources or training to conduct online classes.

Another key challenge is unqualified teachers. Respondents in Pakistan have shared that schools do not have the finances required to train their teachers and provide them with the skills and resources they require to provide a decent level of education. In our experience, we have found that most of the teachers have only studied till the secondary school level and couldn't access higher education because of financial constraints. The teachers, therefore, are not skilled to deliver the lessons they are teaching. Human resources at refugee schools are limited, and there is a lack of administrative and support staff to keep the school running efficiently.

The lack of educational resources affects the quality of education we receive, and a sub-par experience at secondary school does not sufficiently equip us for higher education. This further hinders our future prospects and leads to unfulfilled goals.

In addition, the limited number of higher education institutions leads to a limited number of seats available for refugee students in higher education institutions.

“As I look to the future I think the lack of resources and limited university places in Pakistan is a big issue for Afghan refugees [...] I thought that I may get a scholarship for higher education but it is not possible for me to get access due to limited places.”

> Research participant in Pakistan

The lack of qualified teachers is a critical barrier as it affects our experience of education as well as our ability to access higher education and employment. We recommend that the UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan support Afghan refugee secondary school teachers with the necessary skills and training to be able to deliver a high quality education.

We recommend that the UNHCR mobilise donors to raise funds to improve the infrastructure of refugee schools. The funds should be utilised to provide schools with important practical resources like computer labs, libraries and internet facilities. We also recommend that the number of secondary and higher education schools be increased to ensure that there are enough seats available for refugee students to access education.

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

### The Government of Pakistan should:

1. increase the number of secondary schools in Afghan refugee villages, in partnership with local organisations, international NGOs and the UNHCR.
2. provide secondary school teachers with training in both subject matter and pedagogies to enhance their ability to deliver their curriculum effectively.
3. increase the number of scholarships available for refugee students accessing higher education. This should be done in collaboration with the UNHCR and INGOs.
4. support universities in Pakistan by providing subsidies for their running costs to help reduce higher education fees thereby making it easier for refugees to attend university.
5. work closely with business leaders to reserve a portion of entry level jobs in different administrative sectors for refugee students who graduate from university.

### Universities should:

6. work with the Government of Pakistan to identify additional funding to help reduce course costs for refugees, increasing access to a greater number of refugee students.
7. increase the number of seats reserved for refugee students in higher education and increase the number of scholarships for refugees provided by universities across the country.
8. increase the flexibility of courses offered by the university by equipping staff with expertise in the use of technology and increasing the number of online courses available ensuring that refugee students, who are more vulnerable to interruption, can continue their education uninterrupted.
9. develop pathways to employment for refugee students, linking businesses with graduating students, offering industry placements, and additional workplace skills training for students.

### Relevant UN agencies should:

10. create systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of education being delivered in refugee schools and advocate on behalf of refugees to the government.
11. seek additional funding to provide basic educational resources such as equipment for computer and science labs to refugee secondary schools.
12. seek additional refugee higher education scholarship providers and link them with universities
13. develop clear guidance for refugees on navigating applications to university and how to access scholarships. Coordinate with secondary schools to ensure all students are aware of this information.
14. gather local business leaders, secondary schools and universities together to help identify pathways to employment for refugee students, including internships, course placements, and skills training.
15. create space for young refugees to meet with policy makers to advocate for their educational needs.
16. facilitate collaboration with INGOs and NGOs to explore the provision of alternative educational pathways including technical and vocational training to refugee youth.
17. Work alongside multiple stakeholders and harness the power of social media in order to:
  - increase awareness on the importance of practical skills in improving quality education for refugees in Pakistan.
  - change misconceptions and negative stereotypes about refugees.
  - share positive stories of resilience to inspire change.
  - publish this advocacy report on different platforms to reach a wider audience.

this report, and continue to champion inclusive and accessible education for all refugee students in our communities and across Pakistan.

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 .

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