

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Voices of Refugee Youth

A youth-centred longitudinal panel study
on the impact of post-primary education
for refugees in Pakistan and Rwanda

About this document

This executive summary is taken from the full [Voices of Refugee Youth research report](#). It summarises the objectives, methodology, findings and recommendations from the research. It is encouraged that readers refer to the full research report when citing findings.

The full research report, alongside other outputs from the initiative, can be found on the Voices of Refugee Youth [website](#). Additional resources include: a participatory research toolkit; youth advocacy reports from Rwanda and Pakistan; and a policy brief.

Authors:

Rebecca Daltry, Katrina Barnes, Matthew Thomas, Amy Ashlee, Aime Parfait Emerusenge, Umer Farooq, Gentille Gasanabandi, Catherine Gladwell, David Hollow, Divya Jose, Gabriel Karerangabo, Aimée Mukankusi, Julia Pacitto, Asma Rabi, Noor Ullah, Abdul Musawer Zahedi, Rozina Zazai, and Annette Zhao.

Acknowledgements:

The Voices of Refugee Youth initiative would not have been possible without the team of 31 Youth Researchers. In addition to those authored in this report, thanks are due to: Abdullah Ahmadzai, Khatira Ahmadzai, Zainab Bibi, Eric Gustave Bizimana, Israr Ullah Hajat, Kelly Donnelle Iradukunda, Alexandre Irakoze, Christophe Irakoze, Rahim Jan, Gaëlle Kaze, Khalid Khan, Khalil Khan, Sheer Khan, Javan Mugenzi, Zohal Nasimi, Emmanuel Ndayikengurukiye, Elvis Nininahazwe, Fabrice Nininahazwe, Steven Nshizirungu, Agnes Nsingizimana, Josiane Ntakarutimana, and Hina Shikhani. The study has also benefited from the ongoing support of our partner UNHCR and our donor Dubai Cares.

Recommended citation:

Daltry, R. et al. (2023). *Executive Summary - Voices of Refugee Youth: A youth-centred longitudinal panel study on the impact of post-primary education for refugees in Pakistan and Rwanda*. Jigsaw.

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](#).



This research is part of the Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Envelope, funded by Dubai Cares. Read more about Dubai Cares [here](#) and the funding envelope [here](#).

Executive Summary

Refugees have the right to quality post-primary education. However, a wide range of barriers can impede both refugees' access to and experience of post-primary education, as well as impact transitions from education to employment. There is increasing global recognition of the need for better evidence to improve decision-making across the sector and help overcome the challenges faced in refugee education.

This report presents the findings and recommendations from the Voices of Refugee Youth research study: a youth-centred longitudinal panel study across two countries – Pakistan and Rwanda. The primary objective of the research study is to contribute to building the evidence base for post-primary education for refugee youth, through adopting a youth-centred methodological approach.

The research study is part of the broader Voices of Refugee Youth initiative, which ran from 2018-2022. The initiative was a partnership between Jigsaw, Refugee Education UK (REUK) and UNHCR, and funded by Dubai Cares as part of the e-cubed funding envelope. In addition to addressing current gaps in the evidence base for post-primary education for refugees, the initiative aimed to address the marginalisation of refugee youth from research. A team of 31 refugee Youth Researchers were recruited in 2018 to take part in each stage of the research study, and were equipped through the provision of a university-accredited training programme in applied research. The initiative thus aimed to inform good practice around refugee participation in research and facilitate pathways to employment for the Youth Researcher team.

A mixed-methods design was adopted for the research study. The methodology centred

around a longitudinal panel study in Pakistan and Rwanda, which tracked two cohorts of refugee students—from the final year of upper secondary school and of undergraduate-level university degrees—as they completed their current stage of education and, in some cases, transitioned into employment or further studies. In total, 1,126 refugee youth were tracked across the three data points of the survey, which focused on capturing participants' experiences and perspectives of post-primary education and the realisation of their plans for the future. Key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) provided supplementary qualitative data, which was gathered to add nuance and additional detail to the findings of the quantitative survey. The study design and timeline was adapted to account for the Covid-19 pandemic, and to facilitate the continuous participation of Youth Researchers throughout the research process. Descriptive, inferential and thematic analysis was undertaken, and the findings—summarised below—are structured thematically around the seven research questions.

Post-primary education has a significant positive impact on participating refugee students

Refugees' perceptions of the impact of post-primary education on their skills development and social capital were highly

positive. At all data points, secondary school students most commonly reported the development of their general knowledge and skills to have been the most significant change as a result of their education, while the development of communication skills was commonly selected as a key way post-primary education had prepared them for the future. Another prominent theme was the confidence gains that resulted from post-primary education, especially for female Afghan secondary students in Pakistan, when comparing survey responses to those of their male peers. Participants in both countries also noted the impact of post-primary education on their ability to contribute to their communities, such as enhancing their capability to support other students, act as role models or contribute financially.

Significant systemic factors constrain the ability of refugees to access and thrive in post-primary education

Financial challenges were reported to be the most significant barrier to completing secondary and higher education across all data points in both Pakistan and Rwanda, with interviewees reporting both the negative impact of household poverty on their ability to continue studying and the prohibitive cost of school and university fees. At secondary level, this was compounded by challenges accessing educational resources, such as books and computers in Rwanda or school infrastructure in Pakistan. Students and teachers also identified poor teaching quality and a lack of counselling and emotional support services as specific impediments to young refugees thriving in secondary education, exacerbated by high teacher turnover, low teacher salaries and a lack of teacher training. While participants provided a mixed response regarding the

impact of undertaking paid and unpaid work during their studies, they noted that refugee status can impede equality of access to education support. Finally, a significantly higher proportion of female Afghan participants had experienced an interruption to their secondary education compared to their male peers, and language of instruction was a topic of concern in both countries.

Participating students' access to and experience of post-primary education was negatively impacted by Covid-19

Low levels of device access, internet connectivity and institutional support amongst secondary school students negatively impacted learning and wellbeing for refugee students during Covid-19. Secondary students were more likely to state that the pandemic had negatively affected their ability to sustain learning than higher education students, especially in Pakistan, possibly due to higher levels of device ownership amongst university students. The majority of participants in both contexts responded that they received no institutional support during school closures, and interviews with teachers suggested that device access and connectivity issues may have contributed towards this. Higher education students whose universities were already providing blended learning prior to the pandemic were amongst those least likely to report having experienced disruption. However, the majority of students across the research study said that their mental wellbeing had worsened during Covid-19. Teachers expressed concern about students' ability to re-engage in education following schools reopening, with the highest drop-out levels observed amongst secondary-level refugee students in Pakistan.

Socio-economic and structural factors hinder refugees' transitions to future education opportunities

There is clear evidence from the research that refugees face significant struggles in attaining their future education goals. At the beginning of the study, the majority of secondary students said that continuing to higher education was their primary aspiration for the future and that they felt confident that they would achieve this goal; but by the end of the study, the large majority of participants had not yet made the transition to enrol in university. The majority of every participant group also said that they would rather be doing something other than their current occupation at the final data point. The primary reported barrier to higher education was financial, and, as a result, students indicated that scholarships are a major factor facilitating access. Documentation and administrative requirements in Pakistan were a significant additional barrier to applying for and enrolling in university, while participants in Rwanda reported that their transition to higher education was hindered by restricted subject choices.

Participating students struggle to navigate pathways to employment from post-primary education

Participants expressed the general conviction that higher education is essential for securing a desirable job, which may be supported by the fact higher education refugee students in Rwanda had over double the employment rate of any other participant group by the end of the study. A lack of employment opportunities was recognised as a challenge across most data points, as well as discriminatory factors such as legal barriers to employment or employer prejudice against refugees. Participants recommended that an increase in practical skills development at

both secondary and higher education could better prepare refugee students for the workplace.

Participation in higher education is likely to enhance the agency of refugee youth

At the end of the study, participants who were at university were much more likely to express that they were doing what they wanted to be doing when compared with other groups. In contrast, secondary refugee students in Rwanda were more likely to report that their current circumstances were outside of their control. In Pakistan, decisions were more likely to be taken jointly with parents and other family members, although female Afghan refugees were significantly more likely than their male peers to report that decision-making was out of their control. In both countries, financial challenges were cited as the most significant factor in determining whether participants' current situations were within their control. Finally, despite the majority of all participant groups stating that they had not achieved the goals that they had set for themselves, a high proportion (excluding secondary students in Rwanda) nonetheless expressed both satisfaction about their present situation and optimism about the likelihood they would attain their goals in the future. This suggests high levels of resilience in the face of as-yet unachieved aspirations and plans.

Refugee youth perspectives of post-primary education are affected by the availability of post-education opportunities

Participants expressed both positive and negative perspectives on the value of post-primary education, all of which were associated with the potential for their studies to provide post-education opportunities.

Positive perspectives of education were associated with its capability to provide the knowledge and skills required for entering the job market. In contrast, participants reported that their motivation to invest and continue in education can be negatively affected by a dearth of post-education opportunities, and that the belief that their current circumstances are unlikely to change even after graduating can cause demotivation. The type of motivating factors for post-primary education also varied across different refugee groups. The benefits for increasing personal development and self-reliance were prominent for secondary students in Rwanda and female secondary students in Pakistan. In contrast, higher education students in Rwanda and male secondary students in Pakistan were more likely to be motivated by the anticipated positive impact that their education would have on their community.

Recommendations for global and national education stakeholders

The findings of the study highlight the need to maximise the beneficial impacts of post-primary education for refugees, prepare education systems to support refugees through disruptions to their education, tackle barriers which hinder access to and experience of post-primary education, and create more robust pathways for refugees from post-primary education to employment.

The final chapter of the report provides detailed, practical recommendations for education stakeholders, at both the global and national levels. Readers are encouraged to engage with the recommendations in their full form, in the final chapter of [the report](#), in order to appreciate the nuanced nature of what they advocate for. A summary of each recommendation is provided below.

Global education stakeholders

- 1 Education policymakers should continue efforts to centralise transferable skills, including communication, confidence and critical thinking, in secondary and higher education curricula design, and ensure that refugee learners have full and equal access to these components.
- 2 A targeted research strategy is needed to address the evidence gap regarding the comparative and complementary benefits of higher education and technical and vocational education and training for refugees.
- 3 The international refugee education donor community, led by UNHCR, should work with host-governments to establish and boost inclusion in technology access schemes that are specifically tailored to the needs of refugee communities.
- 4 Specialist training and associated finance is required so that education institutions are better equipped to provide holistic care, including trauma therapy, to ensure the wellbeing of refugee students.

- 5 Teachers from a refugee background should be paid a salary aligned with that of teachers who are host country nationals, based on their qualifications and experience.
- 6 UNHCR and government ministries should continue to work in partnership to provide on-going teacher professional development opportunities for both refugee and national teachers.
- 7 The education donor community should work to introduce targeted funding to supplement government provision that addresses the funding gaps for refugee students in relation to fees, grants and loans and ensure parity with national students.
- 8 Education institutions should prioritise the development of practical skills within national curricula to improve refugee readiness for the workplace, and add targeted content within teacher continuous professional development programmes to ensure this is applied in the classroom.
- 9 UNHCR should continue to invest in the development of strategic partnerships with providers of workplace readiness training schemes across the private and public sectors.
- 10 Governments should explore opportunities for technical and vocational training for refugees to be better aligned with local emerging markets and context-specific employability trends.

Pakistan education stakeholders

- 11 The education community should continue to advocate for prioritising refugee girls' education and specifically invest in Afghan community-level advocacy efforts to highlight the individual and societal benefits.
- 12 The education community should ensure there is a coordinated effort to address the causal factors that lead to refugee drop-out from education after periods of disruption, and provide accessible ways to re-enrol in secondary school.
- 13 UNHCR and other education stakeholders should consider establishing an awareness campaign to improve refugee girls' knowledge of and access to mechanisms that can support them through disruptions to their education.
- 14 The government of Pakistan should make a coordinated effort to increase refugee access to free, quality secondary education.
- 15 The Higher Education Commission should work with the relevant higher education institutions to improve access policies and establish a more administratively streamlined and financially equitable route for refugee students to participate in higher education.

- 16** Scholarship providers, Pakistani universities and the Higher Education Commission should work to expand the scholarship pool for refugees in both public and private universities.
- 17** Efforts should be made by the relevant government departments to update policies which currently demand unobtainable documentation from refugees when entering employment.

Rwanda education stakeholders

- 18** Secondary schools should facilitate peer-learning and mentoring opportunities, as an effective way to develop role models within the refugee student community that can increase motivation for education.
- 19** Education institutions and donors should increase free access to a greater range of high quality learning resources for refugees, to reduce the pressure on them to earn money to pay for resources, which will in turn help to reduce absenteeism.
- 20** Providers of scholarships for refugee students should ensure that the scholarship package is transparent about the level of financial support and accompanied by financial advice mechanisms.
- 21** Providers of scholarships for refugee students should ensure that a wide range of subject options are provided and accessible for application.
- 22** MINEMA and UNHCR should collaborate to establish improved and ongoing English language support provision for refugees.
- 23** A targeted advocacy campaign should be implemented that is focused on private sector awareness of refugee employment rights.
- 24** A policy change should be implemented to allow refugees to register on the MIFOTRA platform with their refugee ID.