



ALL-AFRICA STUDENTS UNION
UNION PANAFRICAINNE DES ETUDIANTS
UNIÃO DOS ESTUDANTES DE TODA A ÁFRICA
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Higher Education for Refugees



POSITION PAPER

At the end of June 2023, 110 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order. This represents an increase of more than 1.6 million people or 1 percent compared to the end of 2022. 1 in 73 people worldwide are now forcibly displaced with the majority of those affected – almost 9 in 10 – living in low- and middle-income countries.

In the first six months of 2023, seven major displacement situations accounted for an estimated 90 percent of new displacement globally. These include, but are not limited to ongoing and new conflicts as well as humanitarian crises in countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Venezuela, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, and Ukraine.

With the rapid surge of crises around the world, we are witnessing an unprecedented scale of forced displacement. Today war and conflicts are not the only forces driving people to flee their homes, climate change is increasingly showing its consequences as natural disasters drown schools and educational institutions, and in climate-vulnerable settings (mostly affecting developing countries) climate disasters lead to cross-border displacement. Nevertheless, climate migrants still do not fall within the legal definition of “refugee” and consequently are not granted the right to residency in their country of destination.

In a corresponding trend, after more than a decade of democratic backsliding, more countries are moving towards autocracies than democracies, all of which intersect with ethnic, religious and other marginalized groups being deprived of basic rights, often in a continuation of systematic repression and colonization. The rising trends are adding new challenges that are increasingly responsible for the escalating displacement crisis without being recognized by the international community and specifically the global legal system. Today, a wide range of issues contributing to the rise of displacement are left out of the legal realm that conventionally defines refugees and therefore are not considered crises of equal recognition and attention.

POSITION PAPER

The UNHCR's annual Global Trends Report consistently highlights that a substantial number of refugees are children and young adults. These individuals often find themselves out of school due to the displacement caused by conflict, persecution, or natural disasters.¹

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, in its 2019 publication, revealed that more than half of all refugee children of primary school age were out of school. The number is even higher for secondary and tertiary education.²

In displacement settings, young refugees, especially undocumented young migrants face numerous barriers to accessing higher education, including a lack of documentation, financial constraints, language barriers, and a lack of recognition of their prior, formal and non-formal educational qualifications and institutional challenges. In many host countries, there is limited availability of higher education opportunities for refugees. This is due to capacity constraints in educational institutions and restrictive policies.

Forced displacement due to conflict and persecution has continued to rise in the years leading up to 2023. The majority of those affected are from countries with large youth populations, such as Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. International organizations and NGOs recognize that youth among the displaced population are particularly vulnerable. They often lack access to educational and economic opportunities, making them more susceptible to long-term challenges.

1. [Global Trends Report 2022 | UNHCR](#)

2. [Global education monitoring report, 2019: Migration, displacement and education: building bridges, not walls](#)

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In response to the above-mentioned challenges that refugees face, the global student movement, as a diverse tapestry of students from every corner of the world, seeks to address this pressing and salient issue: the right to higher education for refugees. We stand unified in our conviction that education is an innate human right, not a mere privilege. Those who have been rendered refugees, displaced due to unforeseen circumstances such as conflict, persecution, or environmental cataclysms, should not be stripped of this fundamental human right.

Higher education transcends the simplistic notion of acquiring a diploma, it is that bridge between quick fixes and sustainable solutions, it acts as a beacon of hope, providing refugees with the empowerment to not only rebuild their shattered lives but also to meaningfully integrate, contribute to their host countries, and eventually rejuvenate their home countries.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

In line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4, which champions inclusive and equitable quality education for all, we underscore the imperative of:

1 Accessibility and Inclusivity

The United Nations should be at the forefront of promulgating inclusive policies and frameworks. This encompasses guaranteeing refugees equal access to higher education without hindrances that stem from language barriers, ambiguous legal status, or onerous financial burdens.

2 Access to health services

We call for universal access to psychological support for all refugees, ensuring that the healing power of mental health services reaches every individual forced to flee their home due to war, violence, persecution or natural disaster.

3 Quality Education

Merely providing access to higher education is only part of the solution. It's vital that the quality of education offered befits the global standards. This mandates fostering synergies between governments, academic institutions, and NGOs, thereby ensuring that refugee students benefit from a top-notch education.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

4 Financial Support

Given the often exorbitant costs associated with higher education, it's essential to craft scholarship and financial aid programs tailored specifically for the unique challenges faced by refugee students. Such financial scaffolds can be instrumental in removing the economic hurdles that frequently deter refugees from pursuing higher education.

5 Recognition of Prior Learning

Many refugees bring along a rich tapestry of academic qualifications and experiential learning from their native lands. A structured mechanism should be in place, promoted by the UN, to recognize and give due weight to these credentials, thereby streamlining their academic journey in their new abodes.

6 Safety and Protection

Given the vulnerabilities associated with being a refugee, there's an onus to ensure that they are safeguarded both physically and mentally within the precincts of educational institutions. The UN must advocate for stringent measures that bolster the security and well-being of these students.

7 Integration and Cultural Sensitivity

It is of paramount importance to weave refugees seamlessly into academic communities. The UN should foster initiatives that emphasize mutual respect, cultural understanding, and the holistic integration of refugees, ensuring they feel valued and included.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

8 Advocacy and Awareness

With misconceptions and biases often marring the perception of refugees, a robust advocacy campaign spearheaded by the UN can play a pivotal role in educating the masses about the invaluable potential of these individuals and the importance of their higher education.

9 Data and Monitoring

Many refugees bring along a rich tapestry of academic qualifications and experiential learning from their native lands. A structured mechanism should be in place, promoted by the UN, to recognize and give due weight to these credentials, thereby streamlining their academic journey in their new abodes.

The Global Student Forum beseeches the United Nations to be the torchbearer in this endeavor. Education is the bedrock upon which pillars of peace, affluence, and the blossoming of human potential are erected. It remains our joint responsibility to ensure this right is universally upheld, leaving no refugee in the shadows.

STUDENT MOVEMENT PLEDGE

We pledge to Advocate for increased Scholarships and Financial Support

We pledge to advocate for increased scholarships and financial aid opportunities for refugee students to help them access and complete higher education. GSF is especially determined to advocate for increased Student at Risk (StAR) scholarships and similar initiatives that protect students deprived of access to education and other rights in their home country because of their activism. The advocacy effort for increased scholarships would be carried out through NUS and regional organizations according to the regional context/situation of refugees which will be then coordinated through GSF on a global level.

Enrollment and Opportunities

We pledge to advocate for increased enrollment and opportunities for refugees in higher education institutions on international platforms.

Mentorship Programs

We commit to establishing mentorship programs that pair refugee students with peers or professionals who can provide guidance and support throughout their educational journey.

We pledge to Advocate for Inclusive Policies

We promise to advocate for inclusive national and international policies that remove barriers to education for refugee students and promote their rights.

STUDENT MOVEMENT PLEDGE

We pledge to raise awareness and fundraising campaigns

We pledge to raise awareness about the challenges faced by refugee students and engage in fundraising efforts to support their educational needs.

We pledge to collaborate with UNHCR for the 15by30 campaign

We will collaborate with non-governmental organizations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to ensure coordinated efforts in supporting refugee students.

We pledge to advocate for visa and resettlement programs

We will advocate for refugee student visa and resettlement programs to provide them with opportunities for higher education in safe and welcoming countries.

We pledge to Foster refugee/non-refugee students' collaboration on national, regional and global levels to achieve 15% refugee enrollment in higher education by the year 2030.

STUDENT MOVEMENT PLEDGE

We pledge to advocate for the equitable representation of refugee students in student representative bodies acknowledging the diverse barriers refugee students face and the necessity of representation in student rep bodies at universities, NUS and regionally.

Online Education and Resources

We pledge to encourage the GSF regional platform/unions to design regionally customized support mechanisms for refugee students.

We pledge to organize the first ever Global student congress for Refugee rights to higher education in 2025 to mark halfway and mobilize resources/stakeholders to assess the progress and re-double the efforts for refugees' increased enrollment in higher education by the year 2030

STATEMENT BY UNHCR TERTIARY EDUCATION

As the global leader on expanding access to higher education for refugees and coordinating higher education response in humanitarian emergencies, UNHCR recognizes the cruciality of solidarity among and for all students, including refugee students, and expresses support for this statement of action to mobilize for rights, equality, and sustainable development through expanded access to higher education, in displacement situations and as an integral part of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Refugee students have a critical role to play in shaping the future of our world and have the right to a quality education, regardless of their background or circumstances. Refugee, stateless and other displaced students have a unique perspective on the challenges facing our world, and are well-positioned to contribute to and develop innovative solutions to these challenges. Support for student-led initiatives should be expanded to ensure that young people can make a positive impact in their communities and can develop and use essential capabilities

Though higher education has long been neglected and omitted from a comprehensive response in emergency and forced displacement situations, advocacy by refugee students has fundamentally shifted the global understanding and today, higher education is understood to be a vital component in planning for the long-term impacts of forced displacement. Moreover, we are witnessing a robust evolution of solidarity and co-organising between refugee and non-refugee students to expand access to higher education for all.

The social, financial and developmental cost of failing to provide post-secondary education, skills and training opportunities are vast and impact everyone – refugee youth, communities, national development and global prosperity and progress. Lack of access to higher education for refugees has tangible, negative impacts on gender equality, security, social cohesion, economic development, and the well-being of millions. UNHCR stands with the global student movement as a ‘moral imperative and with the unwavering belief that education is the most potent tool for empowerment and change’.

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