

## **Access and politics of higher education for refugees: Comparative contexts from Uganda and Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

*An intricate mesh of factors hampers students from refugee backgrounds from accessing and having success in higher education (HE). The paper examines HE within a broader framework of refugee education and the future politics of its provision. Much research is done on refugee children and youth in schooling contexts, but less is known about students from refugee backgrounds in HE. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 65 million people are currently displaced, of whom over 21 million meet refugee status criteria. Nevertheless, only five percent of this group has access to HE. Thus, access to HE and the success of students from refugee backgrounds are central to the discussion on the future of HE. The paper provides a comparative overview of difficulties regarding access to HE for refugee students in Uganda and Ethiopia, highlighting policy and settlement issues in their legislative and political contexts. It also interrogates students' coping mechanisms, exploring their experiences through interviews. The study uses secondary data, document analysis, and interviews with a total of 30 students from refugee backgrounds, fifteen from Makerere University in Uganda and fifteen from Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** Access to higher education, refugees, displaced people, Uganda, Ethiopia

### **Introduction**

Refugees experience limited access to adequate education at all levels, but opportunities for higher education (HE) are particularly scarce. Very little research has specifically focused on access to HE for refugees whose pursuit of education is contextualised by not having the same

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rights and opportunities as citizens – with experiences of persecution, forced migration and navigating life in a country of asylum or resettlement. The issues and challenges of students from refugee backgrounds attempting to access, participate in and utilise HE study (and the relationship between refugees and HE in general) constitute an under-explored area of research. The question of access to primary and secondary education is widely accepted to be critical to the well-being and livelihood of young people. However, HE for refugees has only come into focus in recent years, following the release of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2012–2016 Education Strategy that included HE for refugees as a key priority area. Prior to this, HE for refugees was rarely considered to be part of a humanitarian response strategy (UNHCR, 2012).

Students from refugee backgrounds have specific experiences that make access to and participation in HE distinct (Koehler & Schneider, 2019). Evidence suggests that education plays an important and protective role in helping refugee individuals and communities cope with their daily existence during protracted waiting periods (Crea & McFarland, 2015). For instance, Ferede (2018, p. 7) highlights the significant role HE plays ‘in advancing refugees’ integration into host societies, in developing skill sets that can be leveraged for entry into labour markets and toward post-conflict reconstruction in countries of origin’. HE is a gateway to upward social and economic mobility in that it enables access to higher-skilled, better-paid positions, well-connected social networks and entry into the middle class (Ma et al., 2016). Koehler and Schneider (2019, p. 2) describe refugee education as a ‘social investment in the long-term’, which can be used to promote peacebuilding and stability. As such, HE holds an important value for refugees in paving the way for repatriation, integration and resettlement into their country of origin.

The prioritisation of universal primary education is a clear illustration of how a limited conception of development goals favours the privatisation of post-secondary education and the widening of educational disparities (Novelli et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the question of providing access to HE services to refugees and addressing the various barriers has been one of the areas of concern for both academic and policy discourses since the UNHCR recognised HE as a basic human right. Even though progress has been made in terms of access to primary and secondary education, access to and retention of refugee students at the HE level remains a barrier. A myriad of challenges accounts for this, including learning gaps owing to interrupted schooling, issues with academic credentials, financial constraints and limited fluency in the language of instruction (Ferede, 2018). Moreover, the cost of HE remains elevated in

comparison with primary or secondary levels, and in addition, tertiary education programmes require multi-year donor commitment to enable students to graduate. Some education interventions may fail to recognise the political, cultural and socio-economic contexts of migration. There is a dearth of cross-sector factors between education ministries and other sectors inside the national borders of refugee-hosting countries, which obstruct access to HE for refugees (Novelli et al., 2014).

The dynamics of the provision of HE for refugees are reflections of the intervention strategies of various agencies and actors ranging from local and national to global. One cannot deny that the influx of refugees has socio-economic and political implications for the host countries, especially if the host is a developing country (Novelli et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the responsibility of providing access to HE for refugee students does not lie only with hosting countries but rather demands a coordinated intervention strategy among national, regional and international bodies. The UNHCR estimates that at least 65 million people currently are displaced, with over 21 million meeting refugee status criteria. Of those numbers, only five percent have access to HE as compared to 36 percent of young people globally (UNHCR, 2021). Thus, the question of access to HE for refugees requires urgent attention. The role of regional and national policies on migration and freedom of movement is important in understanding refugee protection and access to HE services. These policies, relating to the status of refugees, as well as the individual country's refugee protection act(s), inform and regulate conditions surrounding refugee access to education and labour markets.

The Eastern Africa region hosts one of the largest displaced populations in the world, with a total refugee population of 4.5 million as of June 2021 (WFP [World Food Programme] Eastern Africa, 2021b). As such, Uganda and Ethiopia are still the largest refugee-hosting countries within this sub-region, providing refuge to close to 1.5 and 1 million refugees respectively, from more than 14 countries (WFP Eastern Africa, 2021a). This paper aims to provide a comparative overview of the challenges for refugee students in accessing HE services in Uganda and Ethiopia, highlighting both policy and settlement issues. The research explores relevant legislative and political contexts in the two countries. It also interrogates the coping mechanisms of refugee students, exploring their challenges and experiences through interviews. The study relies on secondary data, document analysis and interviews with a total of 30 students from refugee backgrounds 15 from Makerere University in Uganda and 15 from Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia.

## **General overview of refugees and access to higher education in Africa**

Defining a refugee is challenging since the status of each displaced person might differ in terms of their immigrant, refugee, asylee or temporary protected status – with each invoking a set of de facto and de jure implications. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as ‘someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’ (UN, 1951). In most African countries, including Uganda and Ethiopia, the term ‘refugee’ has legal status but is often used more broadly for those seeking asylum and those who are stateless. Although internally displaced people and migrants are not included in the term refugee, they may experience similar challenges in accessing HE (UNHCR, 2020). The country to which refugees flee is commonly called a ‘host country’. However, the notion of a host country is potentially problematic because of its connotations of short-term benevolence – with the refugee positioned as a temporary guest. Yet, research indicates that many refugees are unlikely to return to their original homes and aim to live permanently in what should rightly be called ‘re/settlement’ countries (McIntyre & Abrams, 2020).

The African continent has for many years experienced a refugee crisis as a result of ongoing violence and political conflict on the continent, which shows no signs of abating soon. According to the UNHCR (2020), sub-Saharan Africa is home to more than 18 million refugees (26% of the global refugee population) (UNHCR, 2019). The number of refugees has risen over time as a result of ongoing crises in Somalia, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, South Sudan, Burundi, the Central African Republic and Nigeria, among others. Refugee camps, which were initially concentrated in the Horn of Africa, are now developing at many locations across the continent, particularly in West and Southern Africa (UNHCR, 2019). Civil unrest, conflicts, natural disasters, oppressive regimes and concurrent violations of human rights are the primary causes of forced migration in Africa. While old causes of refugee flows have waned, new ones have emerged, complicating the search for long-term solutions (UNHCR, 2017).

The African Union (AU) made 2019 the year of ‘refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons’ in recognition of the fact that over a third of the world’s displaced persons are in Africa (AU, 2019). Africa also has the highest number of internally displaced people (IDPs) as a result of conflict and violence that has erupted in numerous nations across the continent (UNHCR, 2020). Recent conflicts and violence in Africa have forced millions of

people to flee their homes in search of safety. In East Africa, forced displacement has affected approximately 9.6 million IDPs and 4.7 million refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2021). South Sudan continues to have Africa's worst refugee crisis, with vast displacement, raging conflict and severe food shortages (UNHCR, 2021). Uganda and Ethiopia are the countries on the continent with the greatest numbers of refugees fleeing civil unrest and famine from South Sudan, the DRC, Somalia, Eritrea and Burundi. Despite the recognition by UNHCR of the relevance of HE for students from refugee backgrounds, the provision of the service by host countries has been complicated by legislative bottlenecks, logistic challenges and incompatibility of education systems of home versus host countries.

Many African countries (including Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Morocco) treat refugee students as international students, which puts them at a disadvantage and prevents them from being eligible for scholarships and fee reductions (McIntyre & Abrams, 2020). Thus, refugees and asylum seekers struggle to access bursaries, scholarships and loans designed to help financially needy students. With the launch of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in 2016, many African countries are under enormous pressure to provide HE to the vast majority of refugees despite their socio-economic and political challenges (UNHCR, 2019). The CRRF aims to make lifelong learning accessible to all, from early childhood development to HE, including adult education and vocational training. Where possible, the UNHCR's general approach is the integration of refugee learners into national systems. Besides working with connected learning partners to increase access through distance/blended learning, the UNHCR provides limited scholarships for refugees to universities in host countries.

According to Sheehy (2018), to reduce barriers to accessing HE by refugees (resulting from factors including the need for legal documentation, school certificates and payment of international student fees), strong advocacy is carried out with African ministries of education and local institutions. To access HE, like other applicants refugees must undergo an admissions process demonstrating their eligibility and aptitude for study. Although eligibility requirements vary widely by country and institution, requirements of HE institutions for applicants include proof of citizenship, residence or immigration status; documentation of secondary school level education completion (such as a diploma); transcripts of secondary school level courses and grades achieved; passing scores on secondary leaving examinations; university entry examinations; evidence of language proficiency in the language(s) of instruction; and access

to financial aid or payment forms (indicating ability to pay/financial aid needed) (UNHCR, 2019).

Access to documents of prior learning or credentials for refugees is extremely challenging, as documents may have been lost or stolen during the migration process, or in reception centres and refugee camps. Even if refugees manage to flee with documentation, these credentials must be evaluated and recognised in the host country. Having little or no proficiency in the language(s) of instruction is another barrier to HE access. A further barrier faced by refugees is insufficient knowledge or understanding of the HE system in their host country which is exacerbated by a lack of availability of information and counselling services (UNHCR, 2018). Moreover, the cost of HE is a barrier to HE access with tuition fees varying widely by country and institution type (such as public or private and/or diploma or degree-granting institutions).

As such, refugees' access to education services and opportunities is hindered by structural, procedural, socio-cultural or political factors (Molla, 2021) which results in them being marginalised and alienated from the social, economic and policy contexts of the host country. The settlement options for refugees are usually limited as they either resettle or remain for a long time in the host country, resettle in countries such as the United States of America (USA) or Europe, or go back to their country of origin. Providing HE services offering training and new skills for refugees could open new opportunities for coping in all settlement situations. In countries of settlement, refugees who have engaged in HE are more likely to find work and contribute to the local economy (Cantat, 2022). Nevertheless, the opening of national HE spaces for refugees in Africa is a complex matter with multiple constraints that demand intervention by both national and international agencies. Like all foreigners who seek to access higher educational services in most African countries, refugees are treated as foreigners and are subject to all procedures and regulations of the host country such as tuition fees, compliance with admission requirements and accreditation of documentation.

The provision of funds and scholarships is generally facilitated by international agencies that cover the cost of education for refugees, but national regulatory acts and frameworks related to admission requirements still restrict refugee access to HE. Even though most African countries are signatories of most international conventions on the rights of refugees, it is challenging for the UNHCR to enforce these agreements without the full cooperation of host countries. Apart from national regulatory frameworks, policy dynamics within HE institutions also hinder access for displaced or refugee students. As indicated by

Cantat (2022, p. 90), ‘access programmes for displaced students constantly face institutional obstacles and disempowering dynamics inside universities’, with ‘websites and recruitment booklets relegating them to the margins of institutions’.

As a result, access to HE for refugees requires a paradigm shift from applying a ‘foreigner’ status to a ‘settler in transition’ status to ensure inclusive and equitable access to HE services that promote lifelong learning for all. The notion of access, quality and protection must be conceptualised as integrally connected to effective policy and programmatic approaches for refugee education. Access to HE includes the ability to enrol in and graduate from learning institutions in the host countries. The vision of the UNHCR is also to ‘ensure the right to education [including HE] for all people of concern to UNHCR’ (UNHCR, 2009, p. 4). However, HE has largely remained outside of the global education movement, which tends to focus on primary education (UNHCR, 2021). Given this focus, the UNHCR has been struggling to win over donors to support both secondary and HE services for refugee students (UNHCR, 2021). Yet the provision of education services – from the primary level to HE – is paramount for refugees to address the overall challenges of resettlement and reconstruction of livelihoods.

### **Comparative context from Ethiopia and Uganda**

The refugee host nations in the Global South suffer the brunt of the refugee burden. The East Africa crisis has succeeded in focusing global attention on refugee education in ways that past crises have not, culminating in the current global refugee education movement (UNHCR, 2020). Uganda and Ethiopia are among the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa. From 2012 to date, Uganda has hosted large numbers of refugees as a result of three simultaneous crises in neighbouring countries, namely, South Sudan, the DRC and Burundi. Ethiopia has also had to deal with thousands of people fleeing their homes from Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan – with more than half of those being women and children (UNHCR, 2021). The delivery of humanitarian relief is hampered by ongoing civil war, unrest and access challenges, which result in displacement and food insecurity (UNHCR, 2021). Currently, Uganda hosts close to 1.5 million refugees concentrated in urban areas and refugee camps (predominantly in the north-west, north-east and central districts), while Ethiopia hosts approximately 1 million refugees and asylum seekers (predominantly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Yemen) (UNHCR, 2021).

In recognition of the challenges of hosting refugees, the CRRF was launched in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda to ease the pressure on East African host countries, enhance refugee self-reliance, expand access to third-country solutions and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (WFP, 2021b). Although in principle there are no restrictions on refugees' access to HE in either Uganda or Ethiopia, in practice, there are structural constraints and hurdles that prevent access. While international agencies and ministries of education in Uganda and Ethiopia are working to help refugee youth gain access to HE, there have been several obstacles; in addition, support for the few HE projects that do exist is woefully inadequate. In both countries, the concerns most raised by refugee students include documentation, language barriers and the difficulty of obtaining a job after graduation in host countries. For instance, one of the Eritrean refugees at Addis Ababa University stated:

I receive a monthly scholarship from UNHCR to support my living expenses and accommodation; I have been admitted to the Department of Journalism and Communication at Addis Ababa University, where I will be graduating in 2023. My hope for employment opportunities in the future is not optimistic since, as a foreigner, I am not allowed to be employed, at least in the civil service sector in Ethiopia. There are few jobs available, and they are reserved mainly for citizens (Refugee student 'C' from Addis Ababa University, April 28, 2019).

The narratives of 'temporariness' and 'foreigner' restrict opportunities for refugees seeking employment within the host countries. Only a few refugee youths enrolled in HE institutions by humanitarian and educational agencies have been able to get jobs in the host countries. Barriers to access include matriculation restrictions that limit enrolment of certain refugee groups, such as in the case of Makerere University in Uganda – until recently, they did not accept translations of high school diplomas, making it impossible for anyone educated in the DRC with a French language diploma to enter the university. In some cases, refugees also have difficulties coping with the language of instruction of the host country. Many Congolese refugees in Uganda wish to study using French as the medium of education, but they do not have that option. Refugee students fear that their poor French skills will result in great difficulties (including unemployment) once they repatriate to francophone DRC. A refugee student at Makerere University, Uganda, expressed his concern about returning as follows:

I came to Uganda as a refugee when I was 12 and now, I am 24 years old and doing a Bachelor of Art in Education at Makerere University. Everything we do here is in English, and I am not sure I will be of any use if I return to DRC one day as I have



almost done all my education in English (Refugee student ‘A’ from Makerere University, March 15, 2019).

As of May 2021, Uganda hosts the largest refugee population in Africa and the third largest refugee population in the world, with 1 494 505 refugees and asylum seekers (WFP, 2021b). Most of the refugees come from South Sudan, followed by the DRC, Burundi and Somalia. In the same way, as of May 2021, Ethiopia hosts the second largest number of refugees in Africa, with 806 541 registered refugees and asylum seekers, the majority of whom originate from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan and Yemen. Nevertheless, HE for refugees is still de-prioritised in both countries by governments, international agencies and aid organisations because it is expensive and only caters to a small set of people who are then likely to become the educated elite within the refugee communities. There are also conflicting and competing interests, roles and responsibilities among various agencies, including UNHCR, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), WFP and national governments regarding providing HE services for refugees. Moreover, education as a human right is currently constrained by legal status, fee-based provision, and HE sector differentiation across national settings.

Uganda and Ethiopia are parties to the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and the Africa Regional Training Conference on Tertiary Education (Yizengaw, 2003). These meetings (both held in Senegal) highlighted the importance of HE for displaced persons. The two countries are also signatories to the Global Compact on Refugees and the CRRF, which identify HE as a means of ensuring refugee integration and inclusion in society by allowing them to ‘thrive, not simply survive’ (Grandi, 2019, p. 2). They have also endorsed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 to provide all people with access to high-quality education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019b). Despite growing support and efforts in Uganda and Ethiopia, available HE initiatives frequently fail to address the challenges refugees face in gaining access to HE, such as their isolation in areas with limited resources, a lack of technological infrastructure, electricity, access to devices and internet connectivity (Bauer & Gallagher, 2020).

## **Challenges and prospects**

### ***The case of Uganda***

Uganda has been praised for its progressive refugee management policies on education and promoting the integration of refugees into the country (AU, 2019). However, despite having

considerable rights in principle for accessing higher institutions in Uganda, refugees face myriad challenges beyond educational considerations that prevent them from accessing HE. One of the first hurdles for refugees seeking HE is to meet the academic requirements for enrolment. Once this is accomplished, a slew of structural barriers to continued education must be overcome. Many refugees in both urban and rural areas with the potential of becoming students are prevented from doing so based on the inaccessibility of information portals/hubs (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010). This obstacle to access is exacerbated by a lack of coordination among providers which puts prospective students under pressure to find information in multiple places about the wide range of programmes.

The cost of furthering one's education is also a significant impediment to promising refugee students. University tuition fees are out of reach for the vast majority of refugees owing to a lack of funds (UNESCO, 2019). In practice, foreign students in Uganda pay higher tuition fees, particularly at private universities:

In Uganda, universities and other institutions of higher learning recognise us as international students, and we pay higher tuition costs than domestic students (Refugee student 'C' from Makerere University, March 18, 2019).

The trend of increased fees for international students impacts access to HE for refugees. Both public and private universities treat refugees as international students and they charge them a higher rate than Ugandan students. This impacts on refugees' capacity to pursue HE. The Ugandan government does not offer scholarships or bursaries to refugees pursuing HE. One of the refugee students explained:

For the past four years, I have been hunting down scholarships to quench my thirst and hunger for higher education. And every time I apply for a scholarship, I almost go through but things do not work out well. But I have always kept my head up well, knowing that the educational opportunities that come through are not for everyone but for the lucky ones (Refugee student 'B' from Makerere University, March 16, 2019).

Refugee students are ineligible for the Uganda Higher Education Students' Financing Board (HESFB), a fund intended to provide financing to Ugandan students who have qualified for HE in recognised institutions of higher learning (Kyaligonza, 2017). Most refugee students cannot support themselves financially unless they are enrolled in a programme geared specifically toward refugees. Without financial assistance to pursue HE, the number of refugees

enrolling in institutions of higher learning in Uganda will remain low, irrespective of the progressive policies supporting their integration.

Certification demonstrating prior education is another obstacle challenging refugee students who want to continue their education in Uganda. A refugee student explained that:

In Uganda, educational institutions barely acknowledge refugees' unique challenges and prevent them from progressing to the next level of their education because they lack adequate documentation and certificates detailing past education (Refugee student 'C' from Makerere University, March 18, 2019).

The study found that refugee students frequently struggle to verify their past educational achievements owing to the loss of examination certificates and academic transcripts, as well as the non-acceptance of diplomas gained in other countries. It is also possible that documents establishing identity or nationality requirements have become misplaced. As a result, the process of identification becomes extremely challenging. The prospective students have been known to risk their lives by returning to their home countries to obtain the necessary papers. Early guidance is emerging in response to this key protection problem, with new resources focused on recording suggested procedures to assist institutions in recognising refugee applicants' past learning when full, official, or verified paperwork is not available.

The language barrier is also a major impediment to effective education among refugee youth in Uganda (see Government of Uganda, 2018). English has been a language of instruction in Uganda since colonial times. Many refugees, especially from francophone nations such as Burundi and the DRC, find it difficult to adjust to and succeed with a new curriculum in a foreign language in Uganda. For instance, one of the students noted that:

Language barriers are an unfortunate part of our daily life, especially for students from francophone countries. We frequently rely on information provided by refugees and friends who have gone through similar experiences (Refugee student 'C' from Makerere University, March 18, 2019).

Language barriers explain low enrolment rates/high dropout rates among refugee students in HE. The study showed that refugee students from francophone nations often feel isolated because of limited language skills in their new environment, which exacerbates exclusion from HE. Moreover, the bulk of scholarship programmes in Uganda and overseas, as well as blended learning programmes authorised by institutions in Anglophone countries, are conducted in

English. This further prevents French-speaking students from benefitting from HE opportunities, since learning new language skills is both costly and time-consuming.

Realising the severity of the ongoing crisis and the flaws in global emergency response plans, several new initiatives have emerged, ranging from small programmes serving a small cohort in specific camps or host countries to large online providers with the potential to provide HE courses to an unlimited number of refugee students. Initiated in 1992, the UNHCR DAFI scholarships (with DAFI being the German abbreviation for the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) are invaluable for encouraging and supporting refugees to access HE and register for undergraduate courses in Uganda and other sub-Saharan countries. For instance, one of the DAFI scholarship recipients noted that:

Receiving the DAFI scholarship was a lifelong dream come true. I yearned to finish university and help my family and community, but I lacked the financial means to do so. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me (Refugee student 'B' from Makerere University, March 16, 2019).

The DAFI programme is based on the notion of inclusion in recognised systems, allowing refugees to study alongside citizens in universities in their host countries. Awards cover a wide variety of expenses, including tuition and study materials, as well as a regular stipend to assist with covering rent, transportation and living expenses.

The Ugandan government has taken steps including the ratifying of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the CRRF, to protect the right of refugees (UNHCR, 2017). This indicates the political commitment of the government, at least in principle, to protecting human rights and guaranteeing access to basic services. Nevertheless, in the past two decades, access to HE and employment have still not shown substantial progress.

### ***The case of Ethiopia***

Ethiopia has an open borders policy regarding the influx of refugees and asylum seekers. It permits humanitarian actors to support and protect those seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2020). It has recently gained recognition for enacting a progressive refugee law that addresses refugees' basic needs. In terms of education, the law (FDRE, 2019) specifies that any certified refugee or asylum seeker should enjoy the same treatment as Ethiopian nationals. This includes pre-primary, primary, secondary and HE, technical and vocational training. It also encompasses non-formal and adult education (within Ethiopia's educational policy and available resources).

Despite the above-mentioned milestones and numerous positive developments brought about by the recent declaration and refugee education plan, refugees face numerous obstacles in accessing HE in Ethiopia.

Refugee students confront two sorts of qualification-related obstacles to accessing HE. Firstly, a lack of documentation of previous education (credentials) impedes their access to HE. In Ethiopia, all prospective students must present their academic credentials and all necessary documents of admission to enrol in HE (FDRE, 2019). However, a range of problems prevents refugee students from providing all the required documentation. This situation is likely to worsen with the instability associated with increased forced displacement resulting in refugees losing or misplacing vital documentation. The official institutions in charge of issuing documentation may also be inaccessible across borders, dysfunctional, or discriminatory against specific groups. A South Sudanese refugee student spoke about his traumatic experience as follows:

We fled our country and spent several days on the road before arriving here. I could not carry anything, including my academic certificate, which has slowed my progress toward further education (Refugee student 'A' from Addis Ababa University, April 21, 2019).

Critical documents may also be stolen in refugee camps, or damaged during forced migration. During interviews, refugee students further revealed that, although some of them had fled with documentation, these needed evaluation by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) before being recognised by an Ethiopian institution of higher learning. In complying with global and regional standards and agreements, credential recognition can be a time-consuming process, with validation of the quality of original (including partial) studies. Furthermore, the process of evaluation and equalisation necessitates financial and human resources, both of which may be in short supply in host nations. During the study, the HERQA admitted that recognising and validating credentials can be particularly challenging for refugees arriving from crisis zones where institutions have been plundered and destroyed or exploited for military purposes.

The cost of education is one of the difficulties that refugee students face in their quest for HE. Ethiopia's Out-of-Camp Scheme, established in 2010, allows self-sponsored refugees living in Addis Ababa to attend local private HE institutes on a fee-paying basis, among other benefits. The majority of refugees pursue HE with the support of family members living

abroad, notably in Europe and North America. The situation was described as follows by one of the Eritrean refugee students:

I spent three years in the Adi-Harush refugee camp. Later, I moved to Addis Ababa since my brother in the United States promised to pay me \$200 every month to fund my college expenses. Things were difficult for me in college because I could not sit and learn for hours on end, and I could not be inspired to read because I did not understand anything (Refugee student 'B' from Addis Ababa University, April 26, 2019).

The budgetary allocation by the Ethiopian government and the UNHCR is not disbursed on time and is severely challenged owing to soaring inflation. It is worth noting that funding set aside for refugee students is comparable to that set aside for native students; nonetheless, most Ethiopian students have other income and family assistance. Most refugee students are unlikely to receive further financial assistance from their families because in many cases, their families are also in refugee camps and have no finances or financial assistance.

Language of instruction is a significant barrier for refugees seeking HE in Ethiopia. A significant proportion of refugee students in tertiary education experience major academic challenges owing to a lack of proficiency in both Amharic and English as an additional language. While English is the primary medium of instruction in Ethiopian universities, most lecturers prefer to use Amharic to clarify concepts and ideas, making it difficult for refugee students to grasp the content. For example, one of the refugee students explained:

Our lecturer often uses Amharic to clarify concepts making it difficult for refugee students to understand lessons due to their lack of proficiency in the language. Participation in lectures is often hampered especially when instructors switch to Amharic to facilitate communication (Refugee student 'C' from Addis Ababa University, April 28, 2019).

Lack of language skills can also exacerbate the myriad socio-cultural problems experienced by refugee students. For example, in or out of the lecture hall, conversations concerning academic issues, including clarification of vague concepts, are commonly mediated purely in Amharic, preventing refugee learners from expressing their dissatisfaction or raising questions. It is no surprise, therefore, that among the many academic difficulties they experience, refugee students frequently rate a deficiency of Amharic or English language proficiency as one of the most critical challenges.

Ethiopia's emerging response to refugee HE is encouraging. The current refugee response plan is guided by three broad principles: out-of-camp, encampment and local integration policies. In partnership with global organisations such as the UNHCR, the Ethiopian government has over the last ten years implemented programmes to assist refugees in dealing with their situation. Following the nine commitments made in 2016 at the Leaders' Summit on Refugees in New York, the government has increased HE opportunities for refugees. One of the refugee students explained:

I am grateful that I never had any difficulties during my studies because the Ethiopian government paid my allowance and tuition on time. This has provided access to higher education opportunities on par with Ethiopian citizens (Refugee student 'D' from Addis Ababa University, April 29, 2019).

Some institutions have opened up enrolment to qualified refugees without discrimination and within the constraints of available resources (MoSHE, 2020). Government scholarships available to refugees have mostly been provided to those from Eritrea, although since 2017, few refugees from other countries have been accepted into this programme (MoSHE, 2020). Since 2000, the UNHCR DAFI scholarship programme has also been supporting refugees to access HE both in universities and vocational institutions in Ethiopia. The UNHCR covers 25% of the total cost of education, with the Ethiopian government covering the remaining 75% through government universities (UNHCR, 2017). For instance, one of the Eritrean refugees at Addis Ababa University stated 'I will be forever thankful to DAFI for helping me regain my hope. I was able to earn a first-class degree from Addis Ababa University' (Refugee student 'C' from Addis Ababa University, April 28, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

The challenges faced by refugee students necessitate a better understanding of their circumstances, as well as strengthened institutional support structures that will mobilise the HE community in identifying and addressing the primary impediments to achievement in HE by refugees. The study revealed a significant comparison in access to HE in Uganda and Ethiopia relating to the barriers experienced by refugee students and the initiatives put in place in the respective countries. The findings show that the refugees in both cases are not barred from enrolling in HE institutions if they have the necessary verified certification demonstrating prior education and can afford the fees as international students. The UNHCR DAFI scholarships and initiatives, ranging from small programmes serving a small cohort in specific camps or

host countries to large online providers with the potential to provide HE courses to an unlimited number of refugee students, have assisted refugee students in gaining access to HE.

The finding also reflects the varying levels of access to HE. In Uganda, refugees are ineligible for government scholarships unless they are enrolled in a programme geared specifically toward refugees. They are treated as international students and are charged international student fees at public and private universities. In contrast, in Ethiopia, any certified refugee or asylum seeker enjoys the same treatment as Ethiopian nationals. This includes tertiary education, technical and vocational training, as well as non-formal and adult education (within Ethiopia's educational policy and available resources). Thus the evidence has revealed significant distinctiveness between the two countries.

The effectiveness of HE interventions for refugees is based on decision-makers taking into account knowledge of the context-specific political and cultural dynamics in which policies and programmes arise and take shape. Recognising the importance of HE for refugees in the context of a complicated environment with highly politicised power relationships may aid in avoiding acts that have unintended repercussions that contribute to the persistence of social injustices. Even in settings where refugee students are accommodated in HE, they face a multitude of academic and other related challenges that undermine their success in HE. To inform context-sensitive implementation, it is critical to pay attention to the contextual limitations, identities, voices and aspirations of local, national and global actors that go beyond approaches centred on the state and HE sector. Without such programmes, the core purpose of the laws and policies designed to provide opportunities for refugees might lose meaning and fail to fulfil their goals.

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