

# A PATH FORWARD

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Building a **Future** for Refugee Students  
Through **Post-Secondary Education**



The education gap between refugees and their host community peers is wide, especially at the higher levels of education. Today, only five percent of refugees have access to post-secondary education and training<sup>1</sup>, but these learning and educational opportunities are essential to their success. Opportunities to work, earn a living, and be self-reliant are the most effective ways for refugees to rebuild their lives.

## What is post secondary education?

### Post-secondary education takes several forms:

- ✓ Degree programs at higher education institutions
- ✓ Vocational training for careers in local industries and sectors
- ✓ Technical training that teaches sought-after skills

Post-secondary education encourages the development of a sustainable livelihood that is not dependent on humanitarian aid. It allows refugees to establish economic independence and a better standard of living no matter where they are or how long they remain displaced, and it provides better socio-economic inclusion within their host communities. This is particularly important because the majority of refugees (76 percent) have been in exile for at least five consecutive years and less than one percent of refugees are resettled in a final destination country each year.<sup>2</sup>

In its *Education 2030: Strategy for Refugee Education*<sup>3</sup> released in 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a goal of increasing the refugee enrollment rate in higher education from five to 15 percent by 2030.<sup>4</sup> The aim is to provide more access to post-secondary or connected higher education programs for eligible refugees in host and third countries, totaling approximately 500,000 refugees.

Refugees face several challenges when it comes to accessing post-secondary educational opportunities. Countries that may already struggle with providing education to host communities may not have the resources and capacity to provide the necessary support for refugees. Additionally, refugees face unique challenges that prevent free movement and affordable access to training and education.



**Graduation ceremony for refugee students in Abeche, Eastern Chad after completing a teacher training program.**

For the past two years, the challenges refugees face have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, raising the level of refugee participation in higher education over the coming years represents an ambitious but feasible goal.

Given the array of options through which to expand access to post-secondary education — including in technical and vocational training, connected and traditional degree and diploma programs, third country scholarships, and national inclusion — increases in each, along with the continued engagement and commitment of partners and host countries, will make 15 percent access achievable.

This brief summarizes the challenges that prevent access to post-secondary opportunities and highlights programs and people that are increasing refugee participation, including students supported by Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). When programs open doors to post-secondary training and education, refugees can rebuild their lives and maintain a sustainable livelihood. Therefore, governments, practitioners, and communities have a collective responsibility to provide access to fulfilling and meaningful post-secondary opportunities for refugees who seek them.

## CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In their host countries, many refugees find it difficult to pursue post-secondary education or vocational training. Opportunities at the post-secondary level may be limited due to the lack of capacity of the host community. In many host communities, educational systems are inadequately prepared to provide services for refugees. Staff may lack the training and compensation necessary to meet the needs of refugees and host communities. In a report for UNHCR Sudan, a school principal discussed how staffing shortages have occurred because the government cannot afford to pay staff as well as invest in teacher training and learning material.<sup>5</sup>

Post-secondary opportunities are also significantly more limited for refugee girls and women and refugees with disabilities. Refugee girls and women often face social and economic barriers that prevent them from pursuing higher levels of education and training. Stereotypes related to caregiving as well as gender-based violence, forced marriages, sexual exploitation, and trafficking have historically prevented refugee girls and women from pursuing post-secondary education. Meanwhile, refugees with disabilities often find that inclusive education is not available to them, especially with educational system constraints, limited resources for teacher training, and negative societal attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

In some places, refugees cannot easily participate in post-secondary opportunities due to language barriers that may require higher-level language skills. Some host countries also do not recognize certifications from other countries or require documentation that refugees do not have after fleeing

**Refugees in Ethiopia take part in a JRS vocational training program that helps them build specific skills (tailoring, cooking, coffee cultivation) and offers business development and economic support.**



their homes. Host countries like Kenya and Tanzania may also impose limitations on refugee rights such as freedom of movement and freedom to work, thereby adding another difficult hurdle for refugees seeking education and training only available outside their communities.

Technology has become more of a necessity in post-secondary programming. Though technology is meant to disseminate information and educational materials more easily, refugees may have unreliable access to the internet or technology due to prohibitive costs and unstable internet infrastructure. Finally, refugees who seek post-secondary opportunities may find the cost of attendance to be too expensive.

Many of these challenges existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the global emergency has further exacerbated these challenges, with worrying signs that the pandemic has amplified existing inequalities and reversed progress in many areas, including access to education.<sup>7</sup>

**JRS Kenya hosts Mikono Craft Shop that features products created by refugee artisans.**



**Daud Anita, the recipient of a financial grant from JRS Kenya that helped her open a West African food business.**

## Considerations for Post-Secondary Programs

**To design a program that improves access to post-secondary opportunities, the following criteria must be considered:**

- ✓ Quality secondary education, including safe infrastructure and adequate teacher training
- ✓ Access to documentation and relevant credentials
- ✓ Culturally competent education and training to help with transitions into host communities
- ✓ Private sector partnerships that provide resources for internships, training, and apprenticeships
- ✓ Reliable and affordable access to technology
- ✓ Legal status that provides access to post-secondary opportunities at the local and national levels

### JRS'S APPROACH

JRS is actively responding to the need for employment, income generation, and satisfying career paths for young refugees by developing innovative post-secondary educational opportunities. Having the chance to work, earn a living, and be self-reliant is one of the most effective ways for refugees to rebuild their lives. Refugees have their dignity and hope reaffirmed when they acquire the means to earn their own living and support their families.

Through its Pathfinder program, JRS offers a variety of post-secondary educational opportunities that assist refugees and their hosts in planning and beginning their careers by creating a bridge from academic and vocational education to jobs, business, and integration within their communities. The goal is to build resilient refugee and host communities through education that leads to employment or entrepreneurial activities.

For refugees who have completed secondary school and wish to achieve a formal post-secondary education, JRS provides some scholarship opportunities and also partners with online educational institutions to provide accessible, relevant

access to higher education learning opportunities. A critical component of these efforts is relevancy to the local context to ensure that certifications and degrees are recognized in the host community and that focus areas of study provide tangible opportunities for employment.

In addition, JRS targets refugees and host community members who may or may not have completed secondary school but nevertheless need to develop their skills to achieve a fulfilling career. Traditionally, the only pathway for students eager to gain a skill was a livelihoods program offering basic vocational training for menial, low-paid, and insecure positions. To address this challenge, JRS offers short-cycle vocational or professional education and training that prepares refugees to further their education and embark on productive careers.

A key component of JRS's approach is to conduct a market systems analysis of the local area to identify areas of work that provide the most potential for study and employment and to provide start-up support, career counseling, and entrepreneurial guidance. Career guidance and mentoring assists students in transitioning to professional working life and helps them think through their career goals to provide them with the life skills they need to be successful.

Creating pathways to self-reliance for refugees and host communities is critical in ensuring that they can become agents of positive change and social cohesion. By investing in these programs, the U.S. government and others can play a pivotal role in building the political will and generating financial resources to help create a better future for millions of refugees around the world.



**JRS offers English, information technology, and music classes to refugees in Ethiopia.**

## MEET THE STUDENTS

# Fabiola

Fabiola has lived her whole life as a refugee. Now 25 years old, her family fled the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and she was born in a refugee camp in Tanzania. At two months old, her family made its way to Nairobi, Kenya, but is still seeking formal refugee status and all of the benefits that go along with it.

Fortunately, she was able to access education and received a scholarship from JRS Kenya to complete secondary school. But after graduation, she had to stay home for three years as there were no opportunities for further education or legal work. “Being at home was discouraging,” Fabiola said. “I saw other students pursuing university, and I prayed for peace of mind that one day I would have the same opportunity.”

In 2020, JRS reached out to Fabiola about a new initiative — Pathfinder — which would give her the chance to achieve her dream. In Kenya, Pathfinder features a partnership with Southern New Hampshire University that provides refugee students with the opportunity to pursue an associate’s degree and work toward a bachelor’s degree in a field of study relevant to their current context. This includes healthcare management, business management, and communications.

The competency-based program provides a self-paced online learning platform that accommodates students’ schedules. It includes an internship component that has both in-person and virtual components with JRS staff accompanying students throughout their time participating in the program. Students from Nairobi and Kakuma refugee camps in northern Kenya are eligible for the program, which has graduated a total of 18 students since 2018. Today, 130 students are currently enrolled and receive ongoing support from JRS staff, including access to computers and the internet.

“Being with JRS has taught me a lot,” Fabiola said. “I learned how to use a computer when I first started, and now I look forward to graduating with my BA in healthcare management next month. I hope that this program will last a long time so that it can help more refugees. We want to help other refugees and Kenyans so that we can bring change and positively impact the world.”





# Oumarou

Investing in educational opportunities for refugees as well as their hosts is crucial to building strong relationships and successful futures for all members of refugee hosting communities.

Oumarou is a 23-year-old Cameroonian whose village in the eastern part of the country hosts more than 25,000 refugees from the Central African Republic. He sees refugees in his community as his brothers and sisters as they live side by side searching for ways to improve their circumstances.



Having a self-proclaimed love for sewing, in 2018 Oumarou took part in a vocational training program for tailoring so that he could join his brother in his established tailoring shop. After completing the course, he received the top score in the Certificate of Professional Qualification exam and began to work, continually seeking ways to improve some of the techniques he learned during his training.

JRS equipped him with a sewing machine, and he was able to start his own business separate from his brother and even train other community members who were not able to take part in the program. Oumarou has started his own small training program at a reduced cost and has trained three young people in tailoring since 2020. Through income generated both by training other students and through his tailoring business, Oumarou has been able to purchase a second sewing machine, allowing him to expand his workshop and receive more orders.

“It is a joy for me to be a reference in sewing in my village despite the fact that I did not have the same duration of training as my brother. Our luck with the JRS program is the vocational training center in which we were trained, the seriousness and rigor of the follow-up, and local support that allowed us to learn a lot in just six months.”

Oumarou continues to perfect his craft and position himself as a teacher and leader in the community. He now serves as a teacher in JRS’s vocational training program so that even more refugees and Cameroonians can gain a skill that will lead to employment opportunities in their community and beyond.

## MEET THE STUDENTS

# Priscilla

Kakuma is one of the largest and longest-serving refugee camps in the world, home to more than 200,000 refugees, primarily from South Sudan but representing more than 15 nationalities. Generations of children have been born in the camp, and many of them know no other home.

One of these children, Priscilla, arrived in Kakuma in 2001 at two years of age with her mother. She completed pre-primary, primary, and secondary school in the camp and sought every opportunity to further her education. This included taking a two-week basic computer course to familiarize herself with basic digital literacy. A six-month online freelance course followed, and she put her new knowledge to use by starting a profile on LinkedIn and finding her first job online providing consultancy services to a global client.

Her entrepreneurship goals didn't end there. Priscilla then applied for a JRS social entrepreneurship course in 2020 as part of its Pathfinder program and completed it almost a year later. This two-semester program taught her core skills like accounting and business English that positioned her to start her own small business. After taking out a small loan from a women-led savings group in Kakuma, Priscilla started her own kiosk. Today, she sells basic household goods from her home to her fellow community members. She is the sole breadwinner for her five siblings and mother.

"It's my turn to do something for my mother," Priscilla said. "She was the one who did everything for me when we first arrived in Kakuma. She made sure we went to school. I want the opportunity to learn and to be an entrepreneur. If you get knowledge, you can do everything. I would like to be an entrepreneur and expand my business."



“ ...I want the opportunity to learn and to be an entrepreneur. If you get knowledge, you can do everything... ”

PRISCILLA

# John

“The whole world has become IT, so we need to know how to use it.”

John, a 22-year-old refugee from South Sudan, recognizes the important role that access to technology and information systems play in our current world. Raised by a single mother, he arrived in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya in 2004 and completed his formal education in the camp. After financial difficulties caused him to delay seeking a post-secondary education for a year, John enrolled in the first cohort of JRS’s Pathfinder digital literacy program in Kakuma.



The digital literacy program comprises three modules focused on Microsoft Office, Adobe Photoshop, and web development. Although COVID-19 interrupted his studies for three months, he was able to score high marks and complete the program in 2021. One of 44 graduates from the program, John qualified to compete in the 2021 Adobe Certified Professional World Championship, a global competition that tests students’ design skills using Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign. Due to his participation, he earned an award and one-year subscription to the Adobe Creative Cloud.

As an aspiring graphic designer, John hopes to continue developing his skills and help support his family, “Once I complete the program, I can be a graphic designer and earn my own income,” John said. “My dream of becoming a graphic designer is the only hope that keeps me alive here in the camp. The roots of education here in the camp are bitter, but the fruits are sweet.”

“ The whole world has become IT, so we need to know how to use it. ”

JOHN

## MEET THE STUDENTS

## Elaf

Like many other Iraqi refugees, Elaf struggled to find opportunities to continue her studies in Jordan. It was hard to find a scholarship as an Iraqi refugee in Jordan, and to sustain the costs of higher education, such as the tuition fees for universities.

"I took so many activities at JRS, including English courses, and recently I attended a women's empowerment workshop," Elaf said. "It helped me so much. It improved my English, my personality, and it also made me make new friends."

With the help of JRS, Elaf is about to embark on a new adventure as a university student. She was able to register for a unique sponsorship program called the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program, which supports over 150 refugee students per year through active partnerships with over 100 Canadian universities and colleges.

This program combines resettlement with opportunities for higher education and is powered by a youth-to-youth sponsorship model that empowers students in Canada to play an active role in the sponsorship of refugee students. Local students raise funds and awareness for the program on their campus and in their community and play a critical role in offering day-to-day social and academic support to newly arrived students.

"Through the WUSC sponsorship, I hope I will find a better opportunity for higher education, find a good career, and I hope one day I will be a role model in women's rights, especially refugees," she says.

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ELAF



## ROLE OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The U.S. government has been a leader in providing humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of refugees, including access to post-secondary educational opportunities. The *U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education Fiscal Years 2019-2023*<sup>8</sup> included a commitment to addressing “international educational needs across the spectrum, from early childhood to primary and secondary education to workforce development and vocational training, in both formal and non-formal settings.”

In an FY 2020 report to Congress<sup>9</sup>, joint efforts through the Department of Labor, Department of State, Millennium Challenge Corporation, Peace Corps, and USAID highlight that more than one million individuals have been reached with post-secondary, vocational, and other workforce training in 48 countries. While these efforts are commendable, the U.S. government can do more in terms of increasing access to post-secondary opportunities specifically for refugees.

The U.S. government could provide greater access to vocational and technical training. For many refugees, vocational and technical training is the easiest way to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families. Successful training helps prepare refugees with the skills and knowledge needed in the most in-demand industries. Vocational training includes improving teacher capacity and knowledge to provide quality education to refugee students.

One way organizations have decreased barriers to post-secondary opportunities has been to provide funding through scholarships and grants. Refugees have greater chances of pursuing post-secondary education and vocational training when it is affordable. U.S. government spending could provide seed funding through small loans or grants allowing refugees to pursue business ventures.

U.S. institutions for higher education — some with U.S. government support — have positioned themselves as key idea leaders for improving accessibility to post-secondary opportunities. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Arizona State University, and Purdue University have all engaged in consortiums and programs that serve refugee students through online learning and in-person facilitation.

The U.S. government must continue to strengthen these efforts by lending its resources and expertise to help build capacity and accessibility for countries that are hosting refugees. By increasing access to post-secondary opportunities for refugees overseas, the U.S. can play a pivotal role in helping people create sustainable livelihoods in their host communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While progress has been made in bridging the gap that refugee populations face in accessing post-secondary opportunities, much more needs to be done to reach UNHCR’s 15 by 30 goal. By taking the following steps, the U.S. government, other donors, practitioners, host communities, and refugees can take a significant step forward in achieving this goal:

01

Prioritize refugees’ right to access post-secondary opportunities in their host countries. Governments of host countries must address the root causes that prevent the full acceptance of refugees in host communities. Legal barriers, such as movement restrictions that limit access to opportunities, must be removed.

02

Design programs that consider market needs and provide the most potential for study and employment.

03

Ensure access to quality secondary education by investing in teacher training and infrastructure for schooling.

04

Incorporate culture and language lessons to build basic competency skills and social understanding.

05

Include both refugee and host communities in program development to foster greater social cohesion and integration.

06

Ensure that program implementation accounts for the unique experiences of refugee girls and women. Program implementation must also create accessible opportunities for students with disabilities.

## 07

Provide maximum flexibility for participants in school and training, including but not limited to flexible schedules, access to affordable quality childcare, and various forms of class participation and content delivery.

## 08

Seek partnerships with organizations such as non-governmental organizations and higher education institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere to help create and implement programs.

## 09

Provide wrap-around services that consider the whole person including ongoing mentoring and career counseling to ensure students are successful.

## 10

Ensure adequate and sustainable financial resources are allocated to post-secondary educational opportunities including support for all necessary materials such as technology and connectivity.



**Agnes, a Mikono supplier, tailoring some of her patchwork for Mikono Craft Shop that features products created by refugee artisans.**

## CONCLUSION

Access to post-secondary opportunities ensures refugees can build sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families and contribute to economic activity in their host communities. Refugees also benefit the host communities by contributing to the local economy. The students profiled in this brief have compelling stories, and many want to continue their studies or grow their businesses. Yet, many more not mentioned in this brief demonstrate untapped potential. By working together, refugees, donors, and partners can access quality education and training and reach their dreams.



**Above: JRS's Pathfinder program in Malawi provides refugee students with computers to ensure they have access to the tools and resources they need to succeed.**

**Left: With support from the U.S. Department of State, JRS developed a project with displaced young women in Eastern Cameroon to produce face masks to prevent COVID-19 in the community.**



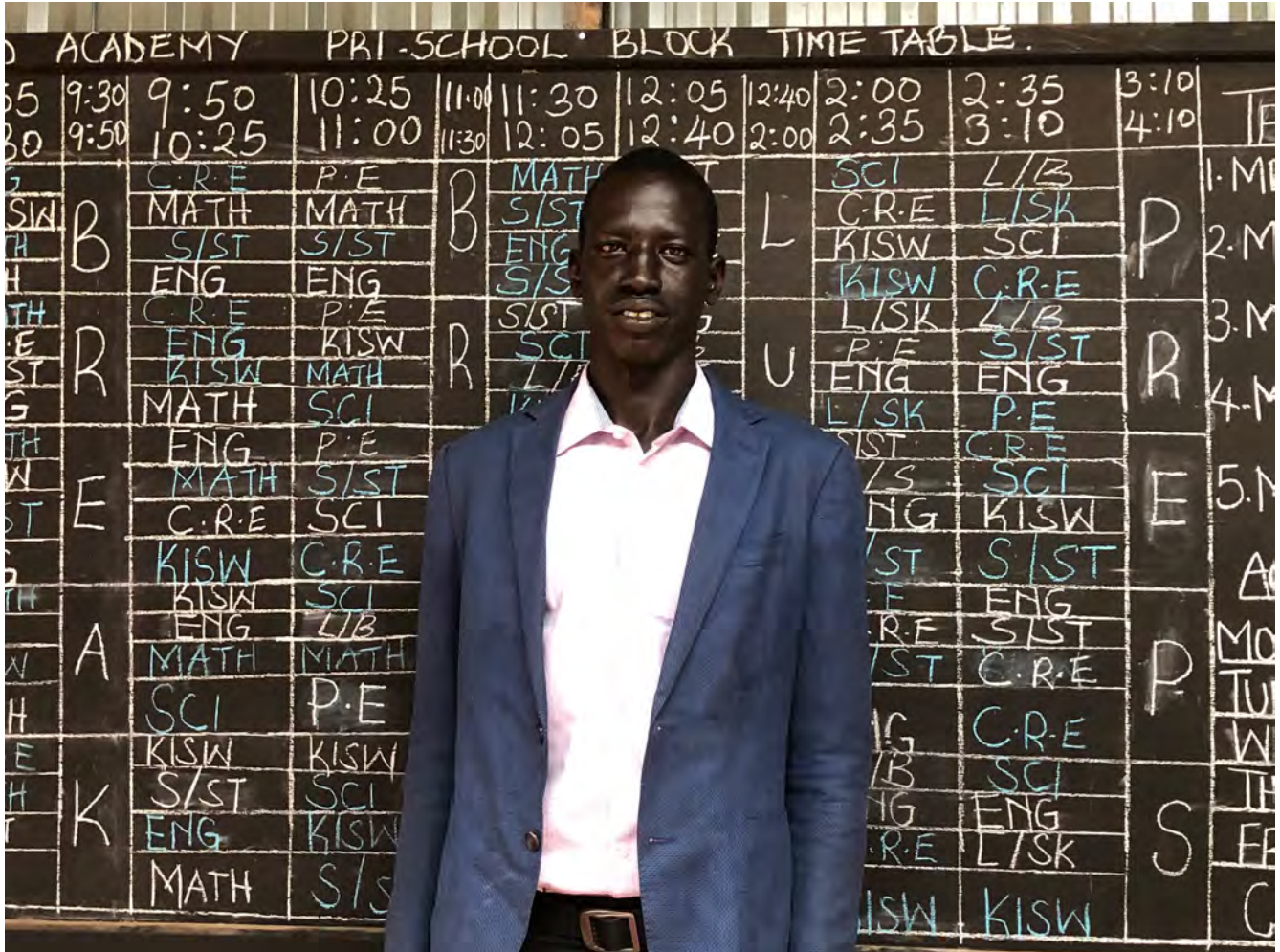
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Refugee students take an English language placement test in Ethiopia.



**Benedict, a refugee from South Sudan living in Nairobi, Kenya benefited from a JRS scholarship that supported his secondary school studies. He's now giving back as a biology & chemistry teacher while finishing his university studies.**

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Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organization serving refugees and other forcibly displaced people. JRS's mission is to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future. Founded as a work of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1980, JRS today works in 56 countries worldwide to meet the educational, health, and social needs of more than one million refugees.