



East African Journal of Education Studies

eajes.eanso.org

Volume 7, Issue 2, 2024

Print ISSN: 2707-3939 | Online ISSN: 2707-3947

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-3947>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda

Christine Semambo Sempebwa^{1*}

¹ Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9858-9287>; Email: csemambosempebwa@gmail.com

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

21 May 2024

Keywords:

Refugees,
Tertiary
Education,
Support,
Resilience,
Uganda

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), set a global target of 15 percent enrolment of refugees, in higher education, by 2030. Relatedly, UNHCR stated that beyond access, higher education should build individual and collective resilience of refugee students. This paper looks at the support mechanisms various stakeholders use, to build the resilience of South Sudanese refugee higher education students, from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. This is within the context of Uganda's Education Response (ERP) for refugees and host communities. The study adopted a qualitative approach, an exploratory case study design, and an advocacy/ participatory philosophical lens, using the intersectional theory. Twenty-seven (27) purposively sampled participants took part in the study. They included 12 undergraduates from two private Ugandan universities, a total of 13 government and non-governmental organization (NGO) officials, and two officials from public and private universities, all involved in refugee higher education. Data was collected through a literature review, in-depth interviews with key informants and students, and a students' focus group discussion. The study established that, within the context of Uganda's ERP, South Sudanese refugee higher education students have their resilience built through support, mainly from HEIs and NGOs. The support uses multiple approaches and takes place mainly within the HEIs, with a bit in the settlement. However, it is offered within each stakeholder's context and thus takes on a silo rather than integrated approach. Support also does not always consider the individual and complex student needs. Nevertheless, the support, which is relatively student-centred does register good social and academic resilience. The study therefore recommends that through a situational analysis and needs assessment, Uganda develops clear objectives, activities and outcomes in the ERP, to guide stakeholders, towards strengthening refugee higher education students' resilience. The study also designed a model towards enhancing student resilience.

APA CITATION

Sempebwa, C. S. (2024). Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 7(2), 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934>

CHICAGO CITATION

Sempebwa, Christine Semambo. 2024. "Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda". *East African Journal of Education Studies* 7 (2), 255-270. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934>

HARVARD CITATION

Sempebwa, C. S. (2024) "Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda", *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 7(2), pp. 255-270. doi: 10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934.

IEEE CITATION

C. S., Sempebwa "Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda" *EAJES*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 255-270, May. 2024. doi: 10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934.

MLA CITATION

Sempebwa, Christine Semambo. "Beyond Access: Building the Resilience of South Sudanese Refugee Higher Education Students from the Bidi Bidi Settlement, Uganda". *East African Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 2, May. 2024, pp. 255-270, doi:10.37284/eajes.7.2.1934.

INTRODUCTION

The call by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to raise refugee higher education enrolment to 15 percent by 2030, also maintains that higher education builds refugee students' individual and collective resilience (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants too asserts that higher education, "...shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women by maintaining their hopes for the future, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination and acts as a catalyst for the rebuilding and recovery of post-conflict countries (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2016, para. 82). In light of the importance placed on higher education access and building the resilience of refugee students at that level, UNHCR, working with a number of refugee hosting countries and other stakeholders, has established a number of regional and country refugee response plans (Abebe, 2021; Carciotto & Ferraro, 2020; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020; UNHCR, 2021). Furthermore, UNHCR (2021) notes that in line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the response plans have evolved beyond short-term plans and now embrace medium to long-term planning, which helps to build refugee resilience. In 2018, Uganda, through her Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) developed her Education Response Plan (ERP) for refugees and host communities (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2018). The ERP, which guides all refugee and host community education, was to respond to refugee education needs and build the resilience of refugees, at all levels of education (MoES, 2018). This was to be done through what the ERP termed

as a multi-stakeholder/ partnership and whole-of-society approach (MoES, 2018). A number of scholars from both the global north and south concur that higher education should not end at access but should go further and build the resilience of refugee students (Abebe, 2021; Baker et al., 2019; Devereux, 2017). Baker et al. (2019) maintain that there is a relationship between higher education access and the refugees' enhanced social connection, in the host communities and countries. Abebe (2021) and Devereux (2017) assert that support offered to refugees can ensure the well-being of traumatized refugees and can lead to better social relationships and helps refugee in overcoming barriers and stereotypes. Nonetheless, there is also evidence that refugees are subjected to discrimination from certain rights and privileges and are often victims of stigmatization (Carciotto & D'Orsi, 2017; Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022). Thus, Dryden-Peterson et al. (2018) suggests that resilience needs to be realized in a number of ways that are tailored to the specific needs of refugees. Nevertheless, not much is known about how stakeholders support the resilience of South Sudanese refugees from Bidi Bidi settlement, within the context of Uganda's ERP and the multi-stakeholder/ partnership and whole-of-society approach.

The objectives of this study were (1) to determine how the Education Response Plan (ERP) influences higher education access for South Sudanese refugee students from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. (2) To explore how the Education Response Plan (ERP) influences resilience of South Sudanese higher education refugee students from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. Therefore, based on the study findings

under objective two, this paper underscores the achievements and the gaps in the mechanisms that the stakeholders use to build the students' resilience. Thus, the paper contributes to the body of evidence on post-access support towards the resilience of the South Sudanese refugee higher education students, from Bidi Bidi settlement in Uganda. This paper goes further and suggests recommendations that can contribute to strengthening the stakeholders' roles in building students' resilience. Additionally, it introduces the refugee access and resilience (RARE) model that can support in streamlining mechanisms for building refugee students' resilience. Hence, the paper provides evidence-backed information that will enable policy makers and education practitioners, to make informed decisions towards strengthening refugee higher education students' resilience, as well as conducting further research in the same area.

Background and Contextualization

Under the 2030 Agenda, which calls for leaving no one behind, the UNHCR's Global Education Strategy (GES) 2012–2016 calls upon states to incorporate higher education for refugees into national plans and policies. This is in order to increase refugees' access to quality higher education and nurture resilience and self-reliance (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Hence, by 2016, a few of the largest refugee hosting countries were taking steps to incorporate refugees in their national frameworks (UNHCR, 2021). Additionally, in 2018, UNHCR met with education stakeholders from Europe to dialogue on the inclusion of refugees in host country plans and policies (Stoeber, 2019). Subsequently, on 24 November 2020, the European Commission Action Plan on Integration of third country nationals, including refugees, was adopted (Stoeber, 2019).

In addition to enhancing access to education at all levels, "the Commission supports first line practitioners from across Europe to develop best practices and equip them with the skills they need to address violent extremism, support resilience building and disengagement" (European Union,

[EU] 2020, p. 6). Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), nine pioneer countries (Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia) rolled out the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and committed to incorporating higher education for refugees into their national systems, working with a number of stakeholders (Thomas, 2017; Crawford & O'Callaghan, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Intergovernmental Authority for Development [IGAD], (2017) notes that member states further reaffirmed their commitments, "...in support of ...education for refugees...including the commitment to...their self-reliance, social inclusion and resilience (IGAD, 2017, paragraph 12).

In Uganda, the ERP mentions safe learning environments and psychosocial support, as mechanisms towards addressing social emotional and psychosocial issues, in order to build refugee students' resilience (MoES, 2018). It also talks about allowing refugees freedom of movement and the right to work and set up businesses, as pathways towards building their resilience (MoES, 2018). However, despite the premium placed on refugees' higher education access and resilience, the ERP only mentions resilience mechanisms in general terms, with nothing specific to refugee students at higher education level (MoES, 2018). Yet according to UNHCR (2024) as of March 2024, Uganda was hosting up to 1,611,732 refugees. Of these 58% (935,260) were from South Sudan. Out of the 935,260 South Sudanese, 198,061 (21.1%) were from Bidi Bidi settlement. The age group of 18-35, within which the study population falls, made up approximately 23% (45,974) of all the South Sudanese in Bidi Bidi settlement. However, despite this sizeable percentage of young people, refugee higher education access in Bidi Bidi settlement has remained low. It was estimated that as of 2020, out of the South Sudanese refugees of higher education going age (18-24 years) in Bidi Bidi settlement, only 3 percent had accessed higher education (Global Platform for Syrian Students [GPSS], 2020; MoES, 2018). This was below Uganda's gross enrolment rate (GER) of 5.3% and

far below the current Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) average of 9.4% and the global average of 38% (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2019; UNHCR, 2021). Furthermore, existing evidence from refugees' lived experiences suggests that the refugee higher education students continue to experience gaps in resilience in Uganda (Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022). Refugee students have reported varying instances of stigmatization, exclusion and ethnic profiling, by some students and even some members of staff at the universities (Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022).

In this paper, a refugee is “a person who having qualified to be granted refugee status, has been granted refugee status, or is a member of class of persons declared to be refugees” (Republic of Uganda, 2006, Part I Section 2). This definition aligns with the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Access refers to admission into post-secondary education institutions through a selective and equal-opportunity admissions process, (including any support and affirmative action) in line with a country's set minimum entry requirements (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019; GPSS, 2020). Resilience refers to an individual or group's ability to adapt to the refugee situation, and higher education institution (HEI) environment and resume learning and other life-sustaining activities at higher education level, with minimal dysfunctional behaviour, and incrementally contribute to peaceful coexistence and community and national development (UNHCR, 2019; Wang, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW, PHILOSOPHY AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Existing evidence indicates that most literature on how stakeholders support refugee higher education students to build resilience is situated in the global north (Detroube & Goastellec, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Jungblut et al., 2018;

Stoeber, 2019). Literature from SSA, including Uganda, often talks about the mechanisms to build refugee resilience in general terms (Abebe, 2021; MoES, 2018; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020). Where there are attempts at being more specific, the voices of the students, as well as the stakeholders who offer support, are mostly non-existent (Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020).

How Stakeholders Help to Build the Resilience of Higher Education Refugee Students

State and non-state actors offer various types of support towards building the resilience of refugee students at higher education level (Abebe, 2021; Detroube & Goastellec, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Jungblut et al., 2018; Stoeber, 2019; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020). In countries which subscribe to the European Commission Action Plan on the Integration of third country nationals, Grüttner et al. (2018) and Jungblut et al., (2018) assert that there are tailor-made supportive measures for the social inclusion and ultimately resilience of refugees. The aforesaid measures are tailored to the special needs of refugees, based on a needs assessment that looks at country of origin, age, sex, language level or educational background. Refugee higher education students are also eligible for student accommodation, some income, access to sports and cultural activities, as well as subsidized food, transport, health care and child care (Jungblut et al., 2018; Stoeber, 2019). Stoeber (2019) notes that in Italian HEIs, refugee students receive support through a university mentorship programme, which builds on a network of already existing similar programmes. In England, in order to foster resilience, there are positive efforts to make refugees welcome in the communities and on campuses (Lambrechts, 2020). McCann (2017) infers that HEIs have been at the forefront of building resilience, through confronting stereotypes, as well as addressing refugee students' discrimination and frustration. Thus the HEIs are “perfectly positioned to strengthen assimilation; facilitate intercultural activities; facilitate knowledge induction for employment, and present narratives that can register many positive experiences (McCann, 2017, p. 20).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Tamrat and Habtemariam (2020) relay that the Ethiopian government, which is party to the Djibouti Plan of Action, has an ‘out of camp’ policy, where refugees can live and move freely across the country. The scholars note that this ‘out-of-camp’ policy has created an opportunity for refugees to adjust better and even pay their way and attend local private higher education institutions (PHEIs). Furthermore, before they commence their studies, refugees go through an orientation, organized by Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), the leading refugee protection and coordination agency in Ethiopia (Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020). The authors further assert that ARRA ensures that during the course of their studies, the refugees are assisted with academic issues such as department change and grading (Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020).

The national plans of the pioneer countries that rolled out the CRRF, outline some general support measures towards resilience for the general refugee populace. In Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia, where there are refugee camps, all three countries put in place provisions to ease movement out of the camps (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2018; Republic of Zambia, 2019; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020; The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018). This is in order to allow refugees more social interaction and exposure, thus increasing opportunities to get jobs and make some money (Abebe, 2021; Kenya Ministry of Education, 2018; Republic of Zambia, 2019; Tamrat and Habtemariam, 2020; The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018). In addition to the aforesaid, Ethiopia and Kenya mention providing psychosocial and mental health support for refugees (The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018; Kenya Ministry of Education, 2018). Alternative and clean energy sources like briquettes and solar are also mentioned by Ethiopia, who also mentions providing refugees with sanitary kits (The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018). UNHCR and the various response plans also give guidelines on what areas should be considered when building students’ resilience. They mention

among others: offering mental health and psychosocial support; increasing academic and economic self-reliance; increasing social-cohesion and active community participation; encouraging students to serve as environment champions and strengthening students’ active participation in advocating for and developing solutions (Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018; MoES, 2018; UNHCR, 2019).

Conversely, a number of studies raise issues averse to building refugee students’ resilience. Maringe et al. (2017) reveal that owing to lack of finances, refugees are denied basic pleasures like watching a soccer game, going out and having a meal and drinks with other students, and having the appropriate clothing to wear according to the occasion. The authors further specify that in the Republic of South Africa, there were times when refugee students had to use their study offices as bedrooms, when funds for accommodation had run out. On a number of occasions, good Samaritans had to support them financially, so that they could buy food and other personal essentials (Maringe et al., 2017). Similarly, Dare and Abebe (2018) aver that despite the progression to accord refugees equitable rights at national level, refugees are treated with suspicion and are at the worst viewed as terrorists. Dryden-Peterson et al. (2018) shares that in Kenya, Somali refugees have been openly called terrorists or Al-Shabaab. Kimoga et al. (2015) also mention that in Uganda, refugee students are sometimes perceived as dangerous, and as a result they suffer social discrimination and stigma. However, overall literature on how stakeholders help to build the resilience of refugee students at higher education level is very scanty, in all the countries that rolled out the CRRF in Africa and assented to the Djibouti Plan of Action (Abebe, 2021; Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020).

Philosophy and Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is anchored in the advocacy/participatory philosophy and is guided by the intersectional theory of Crenshaw (1989). The advocacy/participatory philosophy holds that research inquiry needs to address issues of

inequality, exclusion, marginalization, and should contain an action agenda for reform. The agenda may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals are situated, and the researcher's life (Creswell, 2013). The study was also guided by the ontological stand that reality is subjective, there is no single reality and all individuals have their own unique interpretations of reality (Creswell, 2013; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It was also guided by the epistemological underpinning that knowledge of what affects the person is accessible through what they share, based on context and their lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Intersectionality theory, also at times referred to as intersectionality, was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to interrogate societal oppressions among black women. The theory as credited to Crenshaw (1989) has over time, evolved into an international theoretical research paradigm, which is highly relevant to the commitments to inclusion of vulnerable people, made in international policy agreements and agendas (Chow, 2016; Yuval-Davis (2006). In light of the United Nation's human rights treaty bodies, intersectionality is a "basic concept for understanding the scope of the general obligations of states parties" (Chow, 2016, p. 454). Furthermore, intersectionality theory centres the voices of the individuals and groups that are most impacted by inequality or discrimination and includes them in processes to identify solutions, develop programs, or create policies and plans, as well as participating actively in the implementation of interventions, in order to reduce inequality (Chaplin et al., 2019). The intersectionality theory resonates well with the study which addresses resilience as a means of social and academic inclusion for refugees. Furthermore, as stipulated by the intersectionality theory, the study brings to fore the voices of refugee higher education students from Bidi Bidi settlement, ultimately making recommendations based on their lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

The paper focuses on interpreting the different subjective accounts given by various state and non-state stakeholders and Sudanese refugee higher education students, regarding support towards building the refugee students' resilience, both within the settlement and in the HEIs. The study employed a qualitative approach, which is best suited to provide in-depth investigation of lived experiences of the marginalized or disenfranchised and the multiple perspectives of key actors (Creswell, 2013). In keeping with Creswell (2013) and Yin (2014), the study used the exploratory case study design, which helped to provide insight into the mechanisms that different stakeholders use to build the resilience of refugee higher education students.

Purposeful sampling was used, in order to identify and select individuals that had experience and knowledge about refugees' higher education and were duty-bearers or rights-holders, within the context of Uganda's ERP. The sample size for the study was 27 people from national, district, and settlement levels. These comprised a total of 13 government and non-governmental organization (NGO) officials (7 government officials, 5 NGO officials, 1 representative from an Education in Emergencies (EiE) working group), 2 officials from a public university and a private university, and 12 South Sudanese students (18-34) from Bidi Bidi settlement, enrolled at a university. In deciding the sample size, it was taken into consideration that 12 to 15 participants can provide multiple perspectives, while using additional data sources to support the findings (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Data was collected through multiple methods, including the review of documents and records relevant to the study, semi-structured interviews with key informants and students, and a focus group discussion (FGD) with students. This was in order to enlist diverse perspectives, at the same time enabling triangulation, and enhancing credibility and transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Interviews were conducted from June to September 2022. Quality of the study process,

data, and results were warranted in accordance with the qualitative laid down parameters of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. To ensure credibility, distinct questions aligned to the study's specific objectives, and study questions were asked and participants were encouraged to support their statements with examples (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Wherever necessary, probing questions were asked. There were also member checks, through participants across the various levels (national, district, settlement and higher education institutions). Additionally, there was methodological triangulation. Transferability was ensured through gathering copious data and providing detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the context, sources, data collection and analysis process and findings. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was ascertained through documenting the study process in a logical, traceable, and clearly documented manner (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Data analysis

In keeping with Creswell (2013), the study applied priori and emergent thematic coding. Initially seven topic codes which aligned with the study purpose and questions were identified. By the end of the line-by-line analysis, these initial seven codes had expanded into 14 codes. In addition to the manual line-by-line analysis and generated codes and memos, NVivo 12 analysis was applied. Since NVivo clusters participants and their viewpoints under codes, it became easy to identify similarities and differences within the codes. It is out of these extended codes that the main theme and sub-themes under which the study findings are discussed, were generated.

Ethical Considerations

The study was given clearance by Office of the Prime Minister (OPM); the AIDS Support Organization (TASO) research ethics committee (REC), reference number TASO-2021-69, and by Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST), reference number SS1186ES. A letter of introduction was obtained from the College of Education and External

Studies, East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, Makerere University. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was assigned a letter and a number, with the letters N, D, and S, denoting national, district, or settlement for key informants (KIs). For students, FGD or IDI were added to their numbers, to denote focus group discussion or in-depth interview. Before enrolment into the study, eligible participants were informed about the aims of the study, the potential length of the interview, and their discretion to participate or withdraw at any time. Participants were assured that all information obtained from them would be kept confidential. Finally, they all gave their verbal and written informed consent.

FINDINGS

At the HEIs and within the settlement, students receive support to help them adjust to life at the HEI and become resilient. This support is explained in the sections that follow.

Support from the HEIs

One HEI official noted that the HEI has its own rules within which they support the refugee students, noting "Yeah of course when students come to the university, we support them within our rules and regulations" (HEIKIN 1). HEIKIN 1 went further and expounded on the support mechanisms in the HEI and pointed out that on arrival, all the first-year students, including refugees, undergo an orientation, to acclimatise them with the HEI culture, systems, policies and procedures. He was however quick to add that perhaps the HEI should have a special orientation for refugees. "Apparently our orientation has everyone. We could however start orienting refugees separately. They are not ordinary students, they are unique students, because of their background, because of their history. So I think we need to help them more" (HEIKIN 1). In addition to the general orientation, the refugee students have an orientation specifically organized for students on the Windle International scholarship.

Those of us supported by Windle International, when we are admitted, before we come to university; all of us are collected in one place, then they orient us. Windle International pays for everything, even transport from the different settlements, till we reach Kampala. (SIDI 2)

After orientation, a lot of support is offered at the HEI, towards building the resilience for the South Sudanese refugee higher education students. This support is largely through well-established intersecting and mutually reinforcing structures, which proactively supported refugee students. For instance, it was asserted that “As a university, we have a network of counsellors at our different campuses. These work alongside, the Counselling Department, the Dean of students, the chaplain, and the Assistant Academic Registrar in charge of international students” (HEIKIN 1). HEIKIN 2 too affirmed the support accorded to refugee students and said that at her university, they charge the refugees the same accommodation fees as nationals, to enable them to reside within the university. Likewise SIDI 3 noted that:

We have a Faculty Admin' who helps me when I have a challenge. We also have the Scholarship Officer. If a student has a problem, they just go to her and she will help. She is kind and also counsels students who have challenges. (SIDI 3)

Alongside the institutional administrative structures, there was some effort to have in place strong student structures and bodies. HEIKIN 1, noted that there is a cabinet slot of minister for international students, who is in charge of mobilizing and coordinating his or her colleagues. He added that there is a South Sudanese students' Association. “Through these structures, students identify any challenges and share them with the relevant HEI authorities. Administration then helps these young people to settle in well at campus and eventually, they graduate and excel out there” (HEIKIN 1). In addition to taking on leadership and attending meetings, it was revealed that the students attend cultural and sports galas,

as a way of building their social cohesion (HEIKIN 1).

It was further shared that most of the South Sudanese students are mature people. They therefore often prefer to stay off campus, outside the general students' halls of residence. Off campus, they can also prepare their own meals since they often find it difficult to adjust to the new diet suddenly (HEIKIN 1; SFGD 5; SFGD 7; SIDI 1; SIDI 2; SIDI 3). According to HEIKIN 1, the students are supported by the HEI, which gives them a letter permitting them to become non-residents. The HEI also goes further and meets with the local authorities and asks them to ensure that the students are welcome in the off-campus community and that their security is catered for (HEIKIN 1). SFGD 3 and SFGD 7 maintain that the off-campus community is welcoming and friendly. HEIKIN 1 affirmed that overall, students are receptive to the support and even encourage other students to seek out institutional support. However, findings unearthed some gender connotations, when refugee students are seeking support. Based on HEIKIN 1's submission:

According to their culture, the ladies are not supposed to be at the forefront. It is rare for the ladies to come directly to us for assistance. If a lady has an issue, it is the male who come and tells us that, my sister has a, b, c d she needs help (HEIKIN 1).

Some of the students too agreed that it was the male students who support female students to address challenges and settle in comfortably, at the HEI (SIDI 2; SIDI 3).

Support by NGOs in the Settlement

The support within the settlements is mainly offered by the NGOs that are education partners, within the context of the ERP. During the holidays, they gather all the refugee students on their higher education scholarships and take them through mentorship, leadership, and peace-building programmes (NGKIS 1; NGKIS 2). In light of the above, NGKIS 1, from an NGO partner confidently shared the following.

Recently, we had a meeting with the students we support at university. Their discussions with us showed that they are focusing on peacebuilding. The stories which they were telling us were, "When we are done with education, we wish to change our nation". We also noted that they now select their student leaders, based on merit and do not segregate potential leaders, based on ethnicity or clans (NGKIS 1).

NGKIS 2, from another NGO pointed out that "Recently we had one of our former students, who now lives in the United States, come here to inspire our current higher education students in Bidi Bidi settlement" (NGKIS 2).

Challenges Faced by Students and Some Mitigation Measures by HEIs and NGOs

However, despite receiving support in the HEIs and in the settlement, the students did cite some challenges that affect their social and academic resilience (SFGD 1; SFGD 5; SFGD 6; SIDI 1; SIDI 2; SIDI 3; SIDI 4). One student shared as follows. "Some lecturers, they don't come for lectures in time, so time is wasted. Then they also sometimes use local language in lectures. That has been very disturbing" (SIDI 4). With regard to challenges, SIDI 1 noted:

Windle is there for us and they pay for our university courses and give us an allowance. However, the allowance does not always arrive on time, this is demotivating. Sometimes some of us have been stressed because of issues of the allowance (SIDI 1).

However SIDI 2 said that the HEI, through their designated staff, looked into the aforesaid and other challenges that refugee students faced.

Sometimes when the scholarship office does not send the tuition in time, the university gives us a deadline, within which to pay our tuition. The role of that lecturer is to go to the accounts officer and explain that we are on Windle International scholarship. She asks the university to give us meal cards, and allow us to attend lectures, until Windle pays. Also if there is any problem like missing marks or

they deny a refugee from sitting examinations due to unclear reasons, it is again her role to sort things out. (SIDI 2)

Despite having annual medical cover each year, SFGD 5 also noted that, sometimes the payments were made late. However, another student went further and noted that there was an attempt by the sponsor, to ensure students received medical care, even as payment issues were being sorted out. "The delay is not so much. The sponsor encourages us to still access medical services, even if they have not yet paid" (SFGD 6). Similarly, SIDI 2 pointed out that when they have personal issues, the refugee students can also get support from the custodian, the guild representatives or guild office.

Despite the uniform comprehensive scholarship and other support, it was apparent from some of the students' submissions that in addition to the general challenges, they also have individual perceptions, experiences, challenges, and needs. One student shared that when he joined university, because of the ethnic differences back home, he did not trust anybody. Nonetheless he added that:

The Christian ethics and group discussions helped us to learn to trust people again. We socialize with people in our groups, even us who come from the settlement. The university community is very social and we have also become a part of all this (SIDI 1).

Another student said "We sometimes realize that at home, family members do not have enough food. So we contribute a little, from the allowance we get and support our families" (SIDI 2). She also added that, "But at the beginning of each semester, lecturers give out typed notes, which we are supposed to photocopy, using our little pocket money" (SIDI 2). Paradoxically, SFGD 5 stated that the students were sometimes targeted because of the misconception that South Sudanese have a lot of dollars and money.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that while in principle the South Sudanese students from Bidi Bidi

settlement fall within the precepts of the ERP, the ERP allows the HEIs and NGO partners to support the students within their various rules and regulations. In the settlement, the NGOs meet with the students they support and motivate them through alumni speaking to them, or by discussing their goals for the future. It is further revealed that at the HEIs, the students receive multiple forms of support. In consonance, a number of studies indicate that within their individual contexts, HEIs offer students various forms of support, geared towards enhancing their social cohesion and building their resilience (Grüttner et al., 2018; Jungblut et al., 2018; McCann (2017)). This study shows that the first line of support that refugee students receive when they join the HEI is a general students' orientation organized by the HEI, which they receive, along with the rest of the freshmen. However, findings also suggest that it would be good to have a separate orientation for the refugee students, since they have unique challenges and needs, based on their history of conflict and trauma. It was further pointed out that some ERP education partners like Windle International, organize special orientations, specifically for their refugee scholarship beneficiaries.

From this study it is indicated that within the HEI, there are well-laid out institutional systems, through which the refugee students get support. Among the institutional support systems mentioned is a network of counsellors at different campuses, and a full-fledged counselling department. Also mentioned were designated university staff such as the Dean of students, the chaplain, and the Assistant Academic Registrar in charge of international students, who coordinate student support. Similar findings, on well-structured, systems, which support students to adjust and build their resilience have been reported by scholars such as Grüttner et al. (2018) and Jungblut et al., (2018). According to Grüttner et al. (2018) and Jungblut et al., (2018), the HEIs' supportive measures towards resilience are tailored to the special needs of refugees.

It is further indicated in the findings that along with the institutional administrative structures, there is effort to have in place strong student structures, bodies and mechanisms, towards building resilience. For example, in one private university, there is a South Sudanese students' association, where the students meet at least four times in a semester and identify the challenges and needs, which they share with the relevant HEI structures. The refugee students can also compete and be elected to student bodies within the HEI. In a way, this finding aligns with Stoeber (2019) who notes that in Italy, refugee students receive support through a university mentorship programme at Italian higher education institutions, which builds on a network of already existing, similar programmes. This study's findings also noted that the HEI holds cultural and sports galas. In consonance with the above finding, Stoeber (2019) avers that refugee students are exposed to cultural activities and other platforms for exchanges with domestic students, which can play a critical role in the integration of refugees and in building their resilience.

With the support from the HEI, the students adjust well and as a result, students who are supported, encourage the others to make use of the existing support systems. However, some gender undertones also came through. For instance, the female South Sudanese refugee students are more laid back and it is rare for them to directly approach the designated HEI representatives for assistance. So the male students sometimes present any challenges on their behalf. Findings also indicate that sometimes the female students have children and since the scholarship packages do not make special consideration for babies, this affects the resilience of the female refugee students. If a female student has a baby and they are supposed to perhaps go to university with a maid, the responsibility to meet these additional costs, is solely upon the student. Departing from the above finding, Jungblut et al. (2018) note that in countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in order to build students'

resilience, among the support offered is subsidized child care.

Sometimes students' allowances are released late, yet that is their sole source of finances while at the HEI. Moreover sometimes the students use part of their allowances to support their families back in the settlement. Furthermore, money for their medical insurance is also sometimes remitted late. However, the education partner mitigates this challenge by requesting the service provider to offer the students services, until the medical insurance is paid. Scholars Tamrat and Habtemariam (2020) posit that in Ethiopia, students' financial challenges are mitigated through the 'out of camp' policy, which enables refugees to move freely across the country. The scholars further assert that owing to the 'out of camp' policy, refugee students can earn some money, to cater for their study-related costs. In addition, this study found out that the students sometimes face challenges directly related to their academics. There are instances where lecturers sometimes skip lectures or give explanations in the local language. Students also incur additional costs because they have to photo copy study notes. However, with regard to some of the academic challenges faced, it was pointed out by students that they get support through a designated HEI staff. This resonates with Hajjisteris (2023) and Unangst and Crea (2020) who note that HEIs have tailor-made academic support, to help refugee students become academically resilient, through one-on-one or group support services.

It is indicated in the findings of this study that the majority of the South Sudanese refugee students are mature people. So some of them opt to stay outside the student halls of residence. The HEI supports the refugees who opt to stay off campus by liaising with local community leadership. This is in order to ensure that the refugee students are welcome in the community and their safety is well catered for. This finding resonates with Jungblut et al. (2018) and Stoeber (2019) who point out that in Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, refugee higher education students are aided to adjust to life in the host country and settle in

better. This is done through various forms of support, including accommodation (Jungblut et al., 2018; Stoeber, 2019). Nonetheless, the study findings also indicate that there are misconceptions that South Sudanese have dollars and lots of money, so sometimes, students are targeted by thieves. This finding on misconceptions, stereotyping and profiling refugee students resonates with studies where students have been victims of stigmatization, ethnic profiling and xenophobia (Carciotto & D'Orsi, 2017; Hakami, 2016; Nambi et al., 2023; Tulibaleka, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders especially HEIs and NGOs play a central role in building the resilience of South Sudanese refugee higher education students. Institutional mechanisms and student-centred support exist both within the settlement and HEIs. However, the support towards building students' resilience often happens in silos and takes on a generalized approach, which does not always address the individual needs of refugee students. Thus, it can be concluded that the stakeholder mechanisms towards building the resilience of refugee students are not integrated and do not cater for the specific, individual needs of the students. There is therefore need to strengthen the stakeholder mechanisms towards more integration and in order to address the needs of individual students better.

In light of the study findings, the paper makes a number of recommendations. It is hoped that these recommendations will strengthen the stakeholders' support towards building refugee students' resilience through evidence and needs-based integrated interventions, both inside and outside the settlement. The recommendations will possibly also enable the ERP Secretariat to coordinate and monitor and evaluate all refugee interventions that support refugee higher education students' resilience. Outside Bidi Bidi settlement, the recommendations could provide valuable insights towards building refugee students' resilience. The recommendations are:

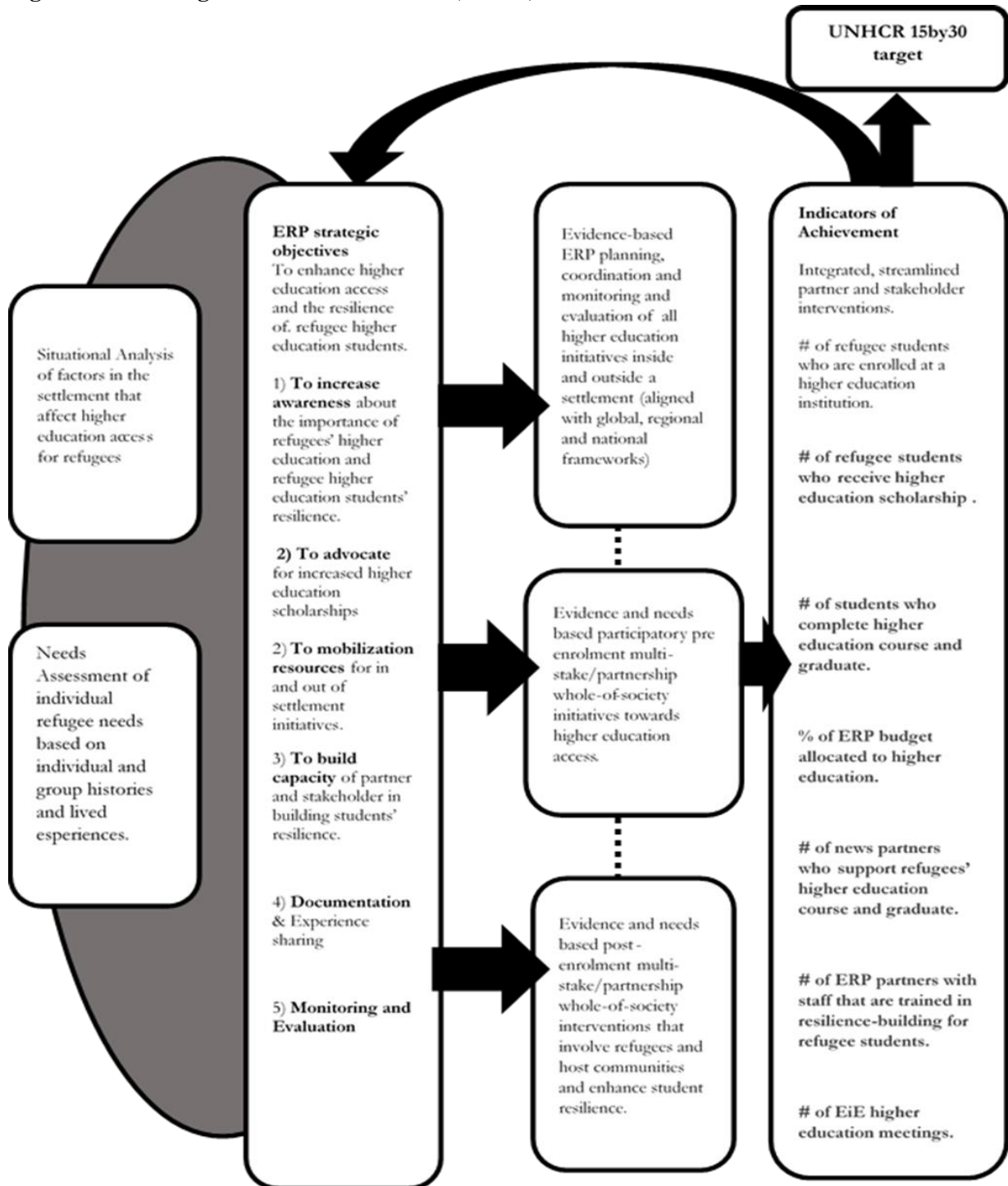
- Drawing upon provisions within the various frameworks and working through its multi-stakeholder approach, the ERP Secretariat, in Uganda's MoES should raise awareness on the importance of building the resilience of refugee higher education students.
- Following the awareness raising, the ERP Secretariat should conduct a situational analysis on factors surrounding the refugee students' resilience. There should also be a needs assessment to find out what the individual refugee students' needs are, in light of building their resilience.
- Using information from the situational analysis and needs assessment, the ERP Secretariat should develop clear strategic objectives, activities outcomes and indicators of achievement, in the ERP, towards influencing refugee higher education students' resilience.
- Working through the multi-stakeholder/partnership approach, the ERP Secretariat should work with the various stakeholders to identify areas where the stakeholders need

more capacity towards building students' resilience.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Based on the findings of the study and drawing upon relevant literature, the study has come up with the refugee access and resilience (RARE) model. The RARE model is premised on the principles of the UNHCR Education Strategy 2012-2016 that at national level, refugee education response frameworks should undertake situational analyses, in their particular dynamics. The 2012-2016 Strategy further notes that this will enable the development of country-level strategic objectives, expected results and indicators of achievement. The RARE model is also in line with the study findings on the need to understand refugee needs and this aligns with the 2012-2016 Strategy's call for host countries to determine the most appropriate refugee interventions based on refugees' actual and not just perceived needs. The model can be adopted by policy makers and stakeholders in Uganda, in order to strengthen higher education access and the resilience for refugees at higher education level. It is also a model that can be adapted towards supporting refugees outside Uganda.

Figure 1: The refugee access and resilience (RARE) model



Limitations

By employing the qualitative research approach, within one case of Bidi Bidi settlement, the findings may not be generalized to other refugee settlements. However, findings, especially those from the HEIs, may have valuable lessons on building refugee students’ resilience in HEIs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and the Office of the Prime Minister for the support toward this study. I extend my appreciation to the professors who provided invaluable guidance, and I highly value all participants’ contributions.

REFERENCES

- Abebe, T. T. (2021). Ethiopia's refugee response: focus on socio-economic integration and self-reliance. Institute for Security Studies.
- Baker, S., Lenette, C., & Ramsay, G. (2019). Students from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds and meaningful participation in higher education: From peripheral to fundamental concern. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 21(2): 4-19. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.2.4>.
- Carciotto, S., & Ferraro, F. (2020). Building blocks and challenges for the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees in Africa. *The Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 21(2): 120-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502420908247>.
- Carciotto, S., & D'Orsi, C. (2017). *Access to socio-economic rights for refugees: A comparison across six African Countries*. Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa.
- Chaplin, D., Lovell, E., & Twigg, J. (2019). Intersectional approaches to vulnerability reduction and resilience-building. *Resilience Intel*, 12, 1- 35. doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.13404.03209
- Chow, P. Y. S. (2016). Has Intersectionality Reached its Limits? Intersectionality in the UN Human Rights Treaty Body Practice and the Issue of Ambivalence. *Human Rights Law Review*, 16 (2016), 453-481. doi: 10.1093/hrlr/ngw016
- Crawford, N., & O'Callaghan, S. (2019). *The comprehensive refugee response framework: Responsibility-sharing and self-reliance in East Africa*. Overseas Development Institute.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (3rd Ed.). Sage.
- Dare, O., & Abebe, A. M. (2018). Regional Solutions and the Global Compact on Refugees: The Experience from Africa. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 30 (4), 704-706. doi:10.1093/ijrl/eey063
- Détourbe, M., & Goastellec, G. (2018). Revisiting the issues of access to higher education and social stratification through the case of refugees: A comparative study of spaces of opportunity for refugee students in Germany and England. *Social Sciences*, 7(186): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100186>.
- Devereux, E. (2017). Refugee crisis or humanitarian crisis? *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 24, Spring, 1- 5. <https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-24/refugee-crisis-or-humanitarian-crisis>
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education: The crossroads of globalization. *Educational Researcher*, 45(9): 473-482. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16683398>.
- Dryden-Peterson, S., Adelman, E., Alvarado, S., Anderson, K., Bellinob, J. M., Brooks, R., & Suzukia, E. (2018). Inclusion of refugees into national education systems. Paper commissioned for the 2019 global education monitoring report, migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls. UNESCO.
- European Union. (2020). Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027. European Union.
- Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2018). Ethiopia country refugee response plan: The integrated response plan for refugees from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, January- December 2018. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

- Global Platform for Syrian Students. (2020). Higher education in emergencies: On the road to 2030. International Conference on Higher Education in Emergencies, April, 2018, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Grüttner, M., Schröder, S., Berg, J., & Otto, C. (2018). Refugees on their way to German higher education: A capabilities and engagements perspective on aspirations, challenges and support. *Global Education Review*, 5(4): 115-135.
- Hakami, A. (2016). Education is our weapon for the future: Access and non-access to higher education for refugees in Nakivale refugee settlement, Uganda. [Masters Dissertation, University of Stavanger]. University of Stavanger.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development. (2017a). *Djibouti Declaration on Regional Conference on Refugee Education in IGAD Member States*, (Adopted on 14 December, 2017). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60a28cea4.html>
- Jungblut, J., Vukasovic, M., & Steinhardt, I. (2020). Higher education policy dynamics in turbulent times: Access to higher education for refugees in Europe. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(2): 327- 338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1525697>.
- Kenya Ministry of Education. (2018). National education sector strategic plan for the period 2018–2022. Kenya Ministry of Education.
- Kimoga, J., Kibuuka, E., Namuli, P., Namuwaya, E., & Mukalere Nadongo, E. (2015). Refugees and higher education accessibility: Issues of policy and law. *British Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 10(1): 1- 13. <https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2015/18007>.
- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A.B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26- 41. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>
- Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2017). Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1): 120-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>.
- Lambrechts, A. (2020). The super-disadvantaged in higher education: barriers to access for refugee background students in England. *High Educ.* 80(4), 803–822. doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00515-4
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Sage. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
- Maringe, F., Ojo, E., & Chiramba, O. (2017). Traumatized home and away: Toward a framework for interrogating policy–practice disjunctures for refugee students in higher education. *European Education*, 49(4): 210-230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2017.135245>.
- McCann, G. (2017) Migration and public policy in a fragmenting European Union, *Policy & practice: A development education review*. 24, Spring, 104-125.
- Nambi, R., Najjuma, R., & Gallagher, M. (2023). Integrating refugee students into Ugandan higher education: Language, othering and everyday enactments of participation. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 18(4), 600- 619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999231185647>
- Republic of Uganda. (2006). Refugees Act. 4 August 2006. <http://www.judiciary.go.ug/files/downloads/Act%20No.%2021of%202006%20Refugees%20Act2006.pdf>
- Republic of Zambia. (2019). Implementing a comprehensive refugee response: the Zambia experience. Republic of Zambia.
- Stoeber, H. (2019). Higher education for third-country national and refugee integration in

- Southern Europe. International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- Tamrat, W., & Habtemariam, D. (2020). The quest for refugee higher education in Ethiopia: The case of self-financing Eritreans. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 21(2): 120-140. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.2.120>.
- Thomas, M. (2017). Turning the comprehensive refugee response framework into reality. *Forced Migration Review*, 56: 69-72. <https://www.fmreview.org/latinamerica-caribbean/thomas>.
- Tobin, G. A., & Begley, C. M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48, 388–396. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2004.03207.x
- Tulibaleka, P. O. (2022). Refugee education: Refugees' perceptions of educational challenges in Uganda. *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*. 4(1), 38-45. DOI: 10.5897/IJEAPS2022.0729
- Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports. (2018). Education response plan for refugees and host communities in Uganda (2018–2021). Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports.
- Uganda National Council for Higher Education. (2019). *A report on higher education delivery and institutions*. Uganda National Council for Higher Education
- UN General Assembly. (2016). New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, (3 October 2016), A/RES/71/1. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57ceb74a4.html>
- Unangst, L., & Crea, T. M. (2020). Higher Education for refugees: A need for intersectional research. *Comparative Education Review* 64(2), 228-248. DOI: 10.1086/708190
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2014). Toward a learning culture of safety and resilience: Technical guidance for integrating disaster risk reduction in the school curriculum. UNESCO.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019: Migration, displacement, and education: Building bridges, not walls. UNESCO.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2012). *The 2012-2016 Education Strategy*. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019). A strategy for refugee inclusion. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). UNHCR Tertiary Education Strategy: 15by30 target – achieving 15% enrolment of refugee learners in higher education by 2030. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022a). The Regional Refugee Response Plans: Ten years of coordinated action in support of refugees. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024). Uganda – population dashboard as of March 2024. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/uga>
- Wang, J. (2009). A study of resiliency characteristics in the adjustment of international graduate students at American universities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(1), 22-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307308139>
- World Bank. (2021). The global cost of inclusive refugee education. World Bank.
- Yin, R.K. (2014). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (5th ed.). Sage.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3), 193–210. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752>