

“More University Places Needed” for Refugees in Global South

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It may be a ‘hard case to make,’ but admitting more refugee students is in low-income countries’ interests, conference hears

The world has made great strides towards boosting refugee participation in higher education, but the hardest work still lies ahead, a Bangkok forum has heard.

The “15by30” target adopted five years ago by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is already nearing its halfway mark. The target is for 15 per cent of refugee youth globally to be enrolled in higher education by 2030, up from just 1 per cent in 2019.

By late 2023, the proportion had skyrocketed to 7 per cent, according to a UNHCR report. But while 75 per cent of the world’s 36-plus million refugees are in low- and middle-income countries, almost 70 per cent of their higher education enrollments are in predominantly rich regions of Europe, the Americas and the Middle East.

For the 2030 target to be realized, far more refugees will need places in the universities of sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific and Asia – often institutions with little additional capacity, Times Higher Education’s Global Sustainable Development Congress heard.

Rebecca Granato, associate vice-president of Bard College in the US, said countries including Brazil, Cameroon, Jordan, Kenya and Rwanda had made policy changes to improve refugees’ higher education prospects. They included improving schooling, boosting work opportunities and negotiating “complementary pathways” for refugees to undertake degrees in neighbouring countries.

But Dr Granato said such initiatives could be “a hard case to make” in countries whose citizens also had low rates of university participation. “Refugees are often perceived both by the population and the government as a burden and as detractors from the emerging opportunities [for] the national students. They’re often also perceived as a security risk,” she said.

Victoria Galan-Muros, chief of research and analysis at Unesco’s International Institute for Higher Education, said the barriers keeping refugees from university were substantial. Some countries’ legislation “explicitly excluded” them from higher education, and when countries abolished such laws – as Ethiopia had in 2019 – this was merely “a starting point”.

“The first question...will be, what have you studied before? Where are your documents? A lot of people come without documents, or those documents are not recognised, or the process for

recognition is just very complex and slow. Or they have informal learning that is simply not recognised for any qualification in that country.”

Dr Galan-Muros said efforts to tackle such problems had been most prominent in Europe, where the Ukraine crisis had prompted rapid reform of refugee policies. She said about 70 per cent of nations were signatories to or de facto observers of Unesco’s Global Convention on Higher Education, which mandates transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications. But most were high-income countries, she noted.

Siam University in Bangkok is the first Thai institution to admit refugee students on the UNHCR’s recommendation, according to the university’s president, Pornchai Mongkhonvanit. He told the congress that six refugees had been enrolled last semester, with plans for 10 more this year.

Dr Mongkhonvanit said local universities needed to try harder, but they also needed support. “[The] Thai government...doesn’t have any programmes. In Asia, we haven’t done a good job, according to the statistics,” he said.

Unesco’s tertiary education lead, Manal Stulgaitis, said inadequate funding of such efforts was commonplace. She said higher education for displaced populations had historically been a “massive blind spot”, with initial emergency responses inevitably focused on basic needs such as food, shelter and elementary childhood education.

She said Unesco had provided scholarships for refugees for the past 30 years. “We’re thrilled and grateful that there are students at Siam University now. In some countries, we have four students. In some countries, where you have massive refugee populations, maybe we have several hundred. But...a full-ride scholarship programme for 10 million refugees is not a sustainable solution.”

Ms Stulgaitis said a massive change of mindset was required. “My challenge is for governments to look at the cost of not funding higher education for refugees. If you have 100,000 refugee youth...on your territory for 20 years who are denied tertiary education, do they become contributors to your society? Do they become active members who are integrated into the community, not confined in a refugee camp situation where they’re 100 per cent dependent on humanitarian aid?” she asked.

“This is where higher education and the humanitarian development nexus really come into context. If we’re talking about sustainable development for all, and there is [a] hard line on access to higher education for refugees, we are not going to get there. It’s a liability to not provide higher education opportunities for more refugees.”