

Access to Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp



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KAKUMA

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Executive summary

This report examines access to higher education among high school graduates in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. The research for this report was conducted jointly by nine Virginia Tech students and sixteen students in Elimisha Kakuma, a college access program in Kakuma, in Spring semester 2025. The research for this report was conducted jointly and collaboratively by all students and the course instructor.

Globally, around seven percent of refugees have access to higher education; in Kakuma, the number is much lower. Higher education outside Kenya is highly valued among residents of Kakuma as a path toward a more secure future. Yet there are few opportunities available in Kakuma for individuals to pursue higher education, information about those opportunities is difficult to secure, and requirements often exclude most applicants and can make it extremely difficult for individuals to apply.

This report has two main contributions. First, we provide an up-to-date review of eleven major college access and/or scholarship programs available for residents of Kakuma, providing information on their target audience, requirements, and admission numbers. This information is not easily located. The report provides the best available overview of university access programs in Kakuma.

Second, we discuss the factors that limit access to higher education. Of particular importance to our research was the experiences and knowledge of Elimisha Kakuma team members, alumni, and students. As such, we are uniquely able to provide an evaluation from the perspective of applicants. We identify six areas that in different ways create barriers to securing opportunities to access higher education:

- a. Limited number of opportunities available
- b. Low maximum ages
- c. High minimum school-leaver exam results
- d. Complexities of the application process
- e. Difficulty securing documents required for applications
- f. Limits on types of opportunities and expectations for applicants

We conclude with a set of recommendations to break down these barriers and open opportunities to higher education for more residents of Kakuma.

Abbreviations

AAI: Ashinaga Africa Initiative

EK: Elimisha Kakuma

KCSE: Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education

M-M: McCain-Morneau Scholars Program

MCF: Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WCC: Welcome Corps on Campus

WMI: Wells Mountain Initiative

WUSC: World University Service of Canada

I. Introduction

For many years, NGOs and international donors were inconsistent in their support for refugee education.¹ When resources are in short supply, it was argued, food and shelter must take precedence (Monaghan 2021). When NGOs did direct money toward education they prioritized primary and secondary education, with tertiary education rarely considered a priority.² Primary and secondary schools are considerably easier to build, minimally equip, and staff (including by refugees) as compared to a college.

That international organizations did not prioritize higher education for refugees until relatively recently should not be taken to suggest that refugees themselves did not desire it. Quite the contrary: international organizations are rather belatedly catching up to a decades-old demand. With the advent of online learning in the early 2000s came the possibility of delivering classes and programs across the globe, taught by educators located far from their students. These did not necessarily lead to full college degrees, however, but often just certificates or diplomas. By the mid-2010s more international organizations began to direct increased attention to higher education for refugees. NGOs began to issue statements recognizing the broad impact of tertiary education. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2023, p.9):

Linked to the sustainable development agenda, higher education enables personal development and promotes economic, technological and social change. It promotes the exchange of knowledge, research and innovation and equips students with the skills they need to meet ever changing labour markets. For students in vulnerable circumstances, it is a passport to economic security and a stable future. Without access to higher education, options to improve one's economic stability, personal development, political and social engagement are limited, exacerbating cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

The UNHCR-affiliated, German-sponsored scholarship program DAFI similarly pointed to the positive impacts higher education can have for refugees (UNHCR 2023, p. 18):

1. Promote self-reliance and pathways to solutions resulting from the completion of undergraduate qualification.
2. Empower young women and men equally to contribute knowledge, skills and leadership to their communities, and to participate fully in peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and the development of the communities where they live.

¹ In this report we use the term "refugee" in full recognition that it can reduce an individual to a single aspect of their life. We use it here because in this context it is an over-riding factor in shaping these individuals' access to higher education.

² An exception was international support for secondary and higher education for refugees from southern African settler states from the 1960s through the 1980s (Shadle 2012).

3. Strengthen the protective impact of education by encouraging lifelong learning for refugees.
4. Provide role models for refugee children and youth, by demonstrating the positive impact of education on individuals, communities and societies.
5. Contribute to post-conflict peace-building and reconstruction in the event that refugees return to their home countries.
6. Promote social, economic and gender equality.

Proposals to advance higher education have come from the global community. UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for “universal access to quality higher education,” while the 2019 Global Refugee Forum endorsed the 15 by 30 plan, setting a goal of 15% of refugees having access to tertiary education by 2030 (UN n.d.; UNHCR 2023, p. 9).

Despite what is now a shared desire to make higher education more widely available to refugees, results have been limited. Four years into the 15x30 plan it was “estimated that just 7 per cent of refugee youth worldwide were accessing higher education as of 2023, compared to a global average of 42 per cent” (UNHCR n.d. p.4). The UNHCR did not begin reporting on refugee enrolment in higher education until 2019 (UNHCR 2023, p. 42), while a 2020 pilot survey “confirmed the unevenness of access to data across refugee hosting countries...At present, the lack of substantive, standard enrolment data makes it impossible to properly quantify the need, cost the global target or form strategic policy positions” (UNHCR 2023, p. 42). The UNHCR (n.d.) site “Scholarship Opportunities for Refugees” for bachelor's degrees available to refugees in Kenya is incomplete and includes irrelevant information (one opportunity is limited to people from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria). High-level reports that discuss access to higher education do so in the most general terms, failing to take into account local conditions (UNHCR 2023, pp. 22-29).

This is the context in which this research report was conceived: a widely-recognized but unmet demand for higher education by refugees; a lack of hard data about refugee access to higher education; and a gap between information about and requirements of opportunities, on the one hand, and the on-the-ground realities of individuals seeking higher education, on the other.

It is important to note that data for some of the programs discussed below are incomplete and/or not specific to Kakuma. We relied first on websites of the organizations and reached out via email to those for which further information was required, although not all responded. The lack of complete data is unfortunate, as we were unable to accurately calculate the number of students from Kakuma who apply for these opportunities and receive them. Section IV, which discusses the barriers that exist for students seeking higher education through these opportunities, was based in

part on the experiences of the leadership of Elimisha Kakuma, the EK student-researchers, and their friends and relatives.

II. Kakuma and Importance of Education

Kakuma was founded in 1992 for the (so-called) “Lost Boys” of southern Sudan.³ To this group were soon added more people from what is now South Sudan along with Ethiopians and Somalis also fleeing civil conflict in their countries, and later people from Sudan, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and several other African countries. The camp is located in a semi-arid region of north-west Kenya, intentionally far from fertile and more heavily populated areas of the country. Though in existence for over three decades, infrastructure remains rudimentary, with no paved roads, sewer systems, or widespread electrification, and health care centers rarely have sufficient trained staff, equipment, or medicine. Schools are overcrowded and poorly resourced (Elimisha Kakuma-Virginia Tech Research Group 2024).

The population of the camp has fluctuated, but the overall trend is one of growth, such that by mid-2025 it exceeded 300,000. Dadaab Refugee Camp in the eastern part of Kenya hosts over 430,000 refugees, while another 115,000 live in urban areas (UNHCR 2025). There is no opportunity for refugees to become Kenya citizens (those born in Kakuma retain the nationality of their parents, meaning that there are people legally considered South Sudanese or Somali who have never left the boundaries of Kenya). Refugees are not permitted to work freely in Kenya, while those employed in the camp by NGOs, including as teachers, are paid “incentives” far lower than that earned by Kenyan nationals performing the same work. Movement is not permitted outside the camp without a government pass. In 2025 the Kenya government introduced the Shirika Plan, through which it is proposed to allow local integration of refugees. The details of this plan are as yet unclear, and full integration of refugees economically, politically, and geographically does not appear to be the goal (Haki na Sheria 2025; Nyale 2025).

Each year a small number of refugees leave Kenya through resettlement to another country or repatriation to their country of nationality. The available data (UNHCR 2024) do not disaggregate between refugees in Kenya in Kakuma, Dadaab Refugee Camp, and urban areas, but do demonstrate how rare such movement is. In 2019, for example, of 438,901 refugees in Kenya only 2221 (0.5%) were resettled. In 2023, of 538,911 refugees only 1363 (0.25%) were resettled. Repatriation remains an option for a similarly tiny number of people, given ongoing insecurity and ethnic,

³ Strictly speaking, there is Kakuma Refugee Camp and some 20 kilometers away the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement. In most respects there is little difference between the two, and in terms of access to higher education none at all. In this report we use Kakuma to refer to both locations.

political, and gender-based violence in their “home” countries. In 2019, 2337 (0.05%) were repatriated, and only 247 (0.004%) in 2023. In total, in 2019 0.55% of refugees in Kenya were resettled or repatriated, and in 2023 only 0.254%.

Thus settlement in Kenya, resettlement in a third country, and repatriation are all virtually impossible outcomes for residents of Kakuma. For those seeking a better life outside the camp, or even improved livelihoods within the camp, education appears to be the best and indeed only realistic path. Many students and parents invest heavily - in time, resources, and hopes - in primary and secondary education. There is intense pressure to perform well on the school-leaving exam, the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE).

Yet the options after secondary school are nonetheless limited within Kakuma. As noted above, the employment opportunities within the camp are few and poorly paid (Teferra 2023; Elimisha Kakuma-Virginia Tech Research Group 2024). Higher education is thus the goal for many secondary school graduates seeking to improve their own futures and those of their families. Though there are opportunities to explore higher education in Kenya, there are financial and legal issues that make this much less attractive than studying outside Kenya (see Section V below).

While students may apply directly to universities overseas, accessing higher education through a scholarship program is seen as a more secure path. The next section describes the primary opportunities available in the camp based on the best available data.

III. Opportunities to Access Higher Education

In the following sections we examine each program in turn, attending to the following points:

- a. Background and goals
- b. Population served
- c. Requirements
- d. Number of applicants and number accepted
- e. Destination of students

1. Ashinaga

a. Background and goals

- Ashinaga was established over 55 years ago with a goal to eradicate poverty by improving access to higher education for orphaned students. The Ashinaga Africa initiative (AAI) was started in 2014 with a mission to support students who have lost one or both parents in Sub-Saharan Africa. Starting in August 2024, AAI stopped the open application process in

Anglophone countries. Students will be identified and selected via partnering high schools.

b. Population served

- Orphans (those who have lost one or both parents) from 49 Sub-Saharan African countries

c. Requirements

- Citizen of a sub-Saharan African country.
- Aged 17 to 23
- Completed at least 3 years of high school and consistently ranked in the top 10% of their class
- Financial need
- No dependents and no health conditions that could hinder international study
- Have lost one or both parents (death certificate required)
- Commit to returning to their home country and contribute to its development
- Commit to spending a gap year in AAI's College Preparatory Program

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- One student is accepted from Kakuma yearly

e. Destination of students

- Brazil, Europe, Japan, US

2. DAFI

a. Background and goals

DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) was started in 1992 to support refugees in pursuing undergraduate education in their country of asylum. The scholarship covers a range of costs, including tuition, fees, study materials, food, transportation, and accommodation.

b. Population served

- Refugees from over 50 countries around the world

c. Requirements

- Have refugee or asylum seeker status recognized by UNHCR or the Kenyan government
- Age 28 and below (with exceptions for disrupted schooling)
- KCSE minimum C+
- Financial need
- Prior acceptance into institution of higher education
- Only one person per family can receive the scholarship
- Those already accepted for resettlement are not eligible

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 2023 (globally): 15,600 applicants, 1,942 accepted
- 2024 (Kenya): 275-300 shortlisted, 38 accepted
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- Country of asylum

3. Elimisha Kakuma (EK)

a. Background and goals

EK was founded in 2021; among the cofounders and leaders are three former residents of Kakuma. It is a 14 month college-access and college-preparatory program. It does not provide scholarships.

b. Population served

- Refugee and asylum seekers in Kakuma

c. Requirements

- Legally registered as a refugee in Kakuma; asylum seekers who have not yet received refugee status may also apply
- KCSE minimum B-, C+ in exceptional cases
- Strong high school grades and class rank
- Evidence of commitment to community service

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 2025: 500 applicants, 16 accepted
- Students accepted per year:
 - 2021: 12
 - 2022: 5
 - 2023: 13
 - 2024: 17
 - 2025: 16

f. Destination of students

- Canada, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Kenya, UK, US

4. Habesha

a. Background and mission

Habesha was established in 2015 by the UNHCR, the Mexican government, DIME (Diálogo Intercultural Mexicano), IIE (International Institute for education), and COMAR (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance) to assist young refugees from various countries around the world.

b. Population served

- Initially limited to Syrian refugees, now open to all nationalities

c. Requirements

- Status as a refugee or asylum seeker in a first country of asylum
- Aged 18 to 24

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 2024: three students from Kakuma accepted

e. Destination of students.

- Mexico

5. Kenya Scholar Access Program (KenSAP)**a. Background and goals**

KenSAP was founded in 2004 to help high-achieving, low-income Kenyan students gain admission to top colleges and universities in North America. The program offers intensive SAT preparation, application support, and college readiness training. It does not offer scholarships.

b . Population served

- Kenyan students from low-income backgrounds

c. Requirements

- Recent high school graduate
- KCSE minimum A-; minimum B in English
- Financial need

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- Accepts 15–20 students per year, normally admits 2-3 refugee students per year
- 2024: 7 students from Kakuma accepted

e. Destination of students

- US

6. Malengo**a. Background and goals**

Malengo offers students from low-income backgrounds in Uganda and Kenya, including refugees, training as nurses in Germany. It provides financial and logistical support for students during their first year abroad, and helps them build sustainable careers in Germany.

b. Population served

- Low-income youth

c. Requirements

- Possess Refugee ID card, asylum-seeker pass, or a proof of registration from the UN-HCR
- Aged 18 to 25
- Agree that once in stable employment, contribute a portion of their income to Malengo for a 10 year period

d. Application and acceptance numbers

- 2024: 1200 applicants, 120 accepted
- 2025: 2867 applicants, 50 accepted
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- Germany

7. MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program (MCF)

a. Background and goals

MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program was launched in 2021, partnering with different universities. It provides full scholarships.

b . Population served

- Academically talented but economically disadvantaged youth across Africa; some partner universities give special attention to women, refugees, marginalized communities, and people with disabilities

c. Requirements

- Age and grade varies by partner institution
- Strong academic background
- Financial need
- Each partner has its own deadlines, essay prompts, and required documents.

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 40,000 current and former scholars
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- Africa, Europe North and Central America, UK

8. Morneau-McCain Scholars Program

a. Background and goals

The Morneau McCain Scholarship Program was founded by Bill Morneau and Nancy McCain in 2018 to support graduates of Lifeworks Tumaini Girls Secondary School in Kakuma (formerly Morneau-Shepell Girls Secondary Boarding School).

b . Population served

- Graduates of Lifeworks Tumaini Girls Secondary School

c. Requirements

- KSCE minimum of C; minimum B- in English

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- Accepted:
 - 2017: 2
 - 2018: 3
 - 2019: 4
 - 2020: 5
 - 2021: 3
 - 2022: 2
 - 2023: 2
 - 2024: 2

e. Destination of students

- Canada (University of Toronto)

9. Welcome Corps on Campus (WCC)

a. Background and goals

The Welcome Corps on Campus was launched in 2023, whereby Private Sponsor Groups at universities would welcome refugee students with at least one year of financial support and a path to resettlement. The program was cancelled by the Trump administration in early 2025.

b . Population served

- The first cohort included refugee students from Kenya, while the second cohort included refugees from both Kenya and Jordan

c. Requirements

- Confirmed Refugee Status Determination in Kenya, UNHCR proof of registration, and Republic of Kenya refugee ID card or waiting slip
- Aged 18 to 24
- KCSE minimum B+ for men, B for women
- Proficiency in English
- Single with no children
- Suitable and eligible for resettlement to the United States, including meeting the definition of a refugee under US law
- Self-reliant, mature, suitable for integration in the US

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 2024: 31 accepted
- 2025: over 3000 applicants, 85 accepted
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- United States

10. Wells Mountain Initiative (WMI)

a. Background and goals

The Wells Mountain Initiative was founded in 2005 to provide scholarships to highly motivated and community-minded young people pursuing undergraduate degrees in high-need sectors. It provides partial undergraduate scholarships, leadership training, and ongoing support.

b . Population served

- Youth from 55 developing countries

c. Requirements

- Age 35 or below
- Above average to excellent secondary school grades
- Able to fund part of college costs
- Background of and commitment to ongoing community volunteering
- Applying to or currently enrolled in college
- Plan to live and work in home country

d. Number of applicants and number accepted

- 1500 applicants annually, 50-60 accepted
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- Home country of applicant or another developing country

11. World University Service of Canada (WUSC)

a. Background and goals

WUSC was founded in the 1920s, while the Student Refugee Program (SRP) began in 1978 to provide post-secondary education and resettlement opportunities to young refugees. Refugees are first accepted to WUSC and then matched with a Canadian institute of higher learning, with a one to four year scholarship depending on the school.

b . Population served

- Refugees in Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, and other countries of asylum

c. Requirements

- Aged 18 to 25
- Possess original UNHCR proof of registration and a refugee ID from the host country
- Have lived in host country for at least two years
- Possess original academic certificates
- KCSE minimum B+ for men, B- for women
- Proficiency in English or French
- Self-reliant, mature, and suitable for integration in Canada
- Single with no children

d. Application and acceptance numbers.

- 130-150 accepted annually, from multiple countries
- No data specific to Kakuma

e. Destination of students

- Canada

IV. Implications for those Seeking Higher Education

Based on the information gathered about these opportunities, our research on Kakuma, and the personal experiences and knowledge of the EK members of the research team, we have identified six areas that can pose significant barriers to individuals seeking higher education.

(a) Number of opportunities available

The data available to us do not permit a firm conclusion about the number of students from Kakuma who are able to access higher education, nor how many apply annually to the opportunities discussed here. We estimate under 200 individuals per year from Kakuma are accepted into these opportunities.

In 2024, 3627 students took the KCSE in Kakuma schools; an unknown number, but likely several hundred, took their exams outside Kakuma. We might estimate, then, that there were 200 of these opportunities available for 4000 new graduates, for a 5% access rate. However, students continue to seek opportunities year after year, such that new graduates are competing against those who graduated the previous five or six years.

Of course, not all secondary school graduates decide to pursue higher education. Yet in Kakuma such a decision is not based solely on a lack of interest in higher education. Students are also discouraged by the seeming impossibility of accessing higher education. That is, when so many

high qualified individuals fail to leave camp for college, the idea of higher education can come to seem illusory and unworthy of pursuing. Many young people can become demoralized and decide not even to pursue higher education at all. Indeed, some students decide against completing their secondary school since post-graduation opportunities are so rare. When refugee teachers in the camp promote the value of education to their students, their words can ring hollow. One former teacher recalls being in the middle of a lesson when a student asked if he was going to Canada (meaning if he had received a WUSC scholarship). When he admitted he had not but that he would continue trying, the student immediately turned away and starting singing. The implications were: why listen to a teacher who had not received a scholarship, and why study when the future for top students was to teach for a pittance in the camp.

(b) Age limits

Most of the programs have maximum age limits, from 23 for AAI up to 35 for WMI (Table 1). The majority of opportunities are thus unavailable to high school graduates in their mid-20s and above. In countries such as the US, the vast majority of undergraduate students have matriculated well before this age. In Kakuma, however, this maximum limit excludes a large number of individuals. Many students are at least 20 years old upon graduating high school. Due to disruptions in schooling or lack of schooling in their home countries, and/or unfamiliarity with the languages of instruction in Kakuma (Swahili and English), some students begin their schooling in grades lower than is typical for students of the same age elsewhere. Other students are delayed in their progress due to the numerous illnesses common in Kakuma or lack of school fees. Some who do not receive a high score on their KCSE decide to retake it, which requires repeating the entire school year before sitting the exam again. It is uncommon to find a high school graduate in Kakuma aged 18 or 19. Students who graduate at age 21 or 22 are already approaching the limit of several scholarships.

Table 1: Age limits

Program	Maximum age
AAI	23
Habesha	24
WCC	24
WUSC	25
<u>Malengo</u>	25
Dafi	28
WMI	35
<u>KenSap</u>	“Recent high school graduate”
MCF	Varies by school
EK	None listed
M-M	None listed

(c) Minimum grades

Although the KCSE is being phased out, students under the new Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) system have yet to complete secondary school. It is unclear how the organizations examined in this report will determine minimum grade requirements under CBC.

Currently, any student with a grade of C+ or above on the KCSE is eligible for entry into a public university in Kenya. Few students who complete secondary school in Kakuma earn a grade in that range (Table 2 and Table 3). In 2024, none of the 3627 test-takers in Kakuma scored an A or A-; one male and zero females scored a B+. Only 100, or 2.79% of all students (2.2% of females), scored a C+ or above.

Table 2: Grade distribution in Kakuma schools, 2024, by number of KCSE takers

	Number	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	E
Female	1229	0	0	0	0	3	23	20	38	90	282	484	223
Male	2398	0	0	1	4	17	42	48	106	294	586	885	293
Total	3627	0	0	1	4	20	75	68	144	384	868	1369	516

Source: UNHCR

Table 3: Grade distribution in Kakuma schools, 2024, by percent of KCSE takers

	Number	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	E
Female	1229	0	0	0	0	0.2	2	1.2	3	7	23	39	19
Male	2398	0	0	0.04	0.2	0.7	2	2	4	2	24	37	12
Total	3627	0	0	0.04	0.2	0.55	2	1.8	3.9	10.6	23.9	37.7	14.2

Based on minimum KCSE grade requirements, the vast majority of students who finish school in Kakuma are automatically excluded from most opportunities examined here (Table 4). With DAFI and Malengo being the most inclusive, with a minimum grade requirement of C-, at best only 8.5% of students (and only 6.4% of women) are eligible for any of these opportunities.

Table 4: Eligibility of 2024 Kakuma KCSE takers for each opportunity by percent

Organization	Minimum grade (Male/Female)	Percent of 2024 Kakuma graduates eligible		
		Total	Male	Female
KenSAP	A-	0	0	0
AAI	B+	0.04	0.04	0
WUSC	B+/B-	0.11	0.04	0.2
WCC	B+/B-	0.11	0.04	0.2
EK	B-	0.6	0.61	0.2
Habesha	C+	2.8	2.9	2.2
MCF	C+	2.8	2.9	2.2
M-M	C (B- in English)	4.6	4.9	3.4
DAFI	C-	8.5	8.9	6.4
Malengo	C-	8.5	8.9	6.4

Note: WMI does not list a KCSE grade requirement

There is no data, however, on students who live in Kakuma but who took their KCSE in schools elsewhere in Kenya. “Downcountry” schools tend to be better resourced than those in Kakuma, and their higher average KCSE grades reflect this. It is likely that a high percentage of those who secure one of these opportunities were schooled downcountry, meaning they had had a scholarship or a sponsor to cover school fees and other expenses related to living outside the camp. Students who attend school in Kakuma face a range of barriers prior to graduation that dramatically reduce their ability to continue to university (Elimisha Kakuma-Virginia Tech Research Group 2024).

(d) Identifying and applying for opportunities

There is no one central clearinghouse in Kakuma or online for information about higher education access. The UNHCR website on scholarship opportunities in Kenya is both difficult to locate and incomplete. Some programs are well known, such as WUSC, Dafi, and Mastercard, and application information is readily available online. Much of the information about opportunities, however, comes through word of mouth or announcements at schools, houses of worship, or another public spaces.

All applications are completed via online forms. It is extremely rare for a resident in Kakuma to have a computer, and there are few publicly accessible ones (free or for pay). Long and complex forms, including essays, must generally be completed on mobile phones. Applicants must pay for

wifi, which is often unreliable. Applicants may lose access to wifi while completing a form and potentially have to begin the entire application over again. Organizations often communicate only through email and give short windows for applicants to reply to a call for an interview or to accept an offer of admission. With the unreliability of communications in Kakuma, opportunities are thereby lost.

For individuals with little experience with online forms, essay-writing, and other requirements, the applications can be challenging to complete. One individual explained how they struggled with the essay portion of one application. Writing essays is not commonly taught in Kenyan schools, and the required citation format was entirely unfamiliar to this individual. They tried to research the citation format, brainstorm possible essay topics, and work through the rubric provided, even as they were teaching full time in a camp school. They eventually gave up on the application, despite a deep desire to pursue higher education. This individual later won admission and full scholarship to a US university, indicating that they are not easily deterred and are highly capable; that they were stymied by the application process suggests that the same would be true for a large number of other would-be applicants.

Most programs interview shortlisted applicants, in-person or via zoom. Attending in-person interviews can be costly and difficult. There is no public transportation in camp. Candidates must take long rides by motorcycle taxi (“bodaboda”) and arrive for the interview hot and exhausted. One individual had been assigned a date for a scholarship interview, but had to flee to Nairobi for safety during an outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in the camp. The individual’s attempts to re-schedule the interview were denied, and they were eliminated from further consideration. As noted above, reliable technology in the camp is rare. One individual was in a zoom interview for a scholarship opportunity when the wifi dropped them. They were not permitted to schedule another interview and they too were eliminated from further consideration.

Many organizations do not share information about the number of applicants and/or scholarships offered, nor inform candidates when they have not passed to subsequent rounds of review. As discovered in researching this report, information about opportunities, the application processes and timelines, the number of applicants and spots available, and precise criteria for acceptance are not always easy to locate or are not publicly available at all. Some organizations contact only those who move to subsequent stages of the process, leaving other candidates to conclude they were unsuccessful only when learning of others’ success.

The lack of information contributes to the spread of disinformation and rumors, discouraging and frustrating applicants. The comments of former Kakuma resident Abebe Feyissa (Feyissa and Horn 2008, p. 16) are relevant here:

People starved of vital information about their future will devour anything they can obtain. The news then becomes a hot point of discussion and speculation for about a month, after which it disappears to nowhere, as it came from nowhere. And hopelessness and emptiness return, with fear and uncertainty filling the minds of those refugees who had such hope a few weeks earlier.

One WhatsApp group dedicated to sharing information about scholarships is filled with queries about how to access, fill in, and track applications, pointing to the confusion and lack of information available to applicants. As a member of the group commented, “In a nutshell, it is hard to understand how [a particular organization] works. I just have trust issues with them.”

(e) Collecting documents

Most of the opportunities discussed here require applicants to submit an array of documents simply to apply. These include at a minimum one or more documents proving refugee status, secondary school transcripts, and KCSE results. Difficulties collecting the number and type of documents required to apply for opportunities, and problems with the documents themselves, can create significant barriers to prospective applicants.

Officials registering new refugees can be careless in transcribing names: they may use the most common spelling of a name rather than attend to variations, be unfamiliar with naming conventions of refugees from certain countries, or simply make a typographical error. It is thus very common for names to be misspelled and/or vary in spelling between different documents. As most organizations require documents at the first stage, applicants must ensure that all their documents are, if not correct, at least consistent. For example, one individual born in Kakuma had their name correctly spelled on their family’s UNHCR document (manifest), but misspelled on their birth certificate and KCSE. In order to pursue higher education they had to align the names, and found it easier to have their manifest changed than her KCSE results - meaning that their legal name is now the incorrect spelling, which has followed them to their university overseas. A slight inconsistency in documents can prevent or delay applications and/or entry to university. One student’s names on their English entrance exam were in a different order from that on their manifest; they were required to resit the exam. Similarly, birth dates are often estimates (especially for individuals coming from countries where hospital births and birth certificates are not common) or are simply entered incorrectly on their documents. There are cases of an individual’s documents indicating that they are a full decade older than they actually are. With maximum ages common for many opportunities, individuals must undergo a lengthy process to have their dates of birth changed in order to apply.

There are multiple reasons why a prospective applicant may not have the required documents. Flooding in parts of Kakuma is common, as are pests, and papers can easily be destroyed. Students who completed all or parts of their education prior to arriving in Kenya may have left transcripts behind or have lost them during their flight to Kakuma.

The time, effort, and costs associated with collecting, correcting, and/or making consistent documents can be prohibitive. Fees can be high at downcountry schools and many graduates from Kakuma have outstanding debts. Documents may not be released until the debts are cleared, which can be difficult or impossible for a refugee. To reprint lost or damaged documents requires travel to the school, which can be expensive. In some cases, schools no longer have older transcripts due to loss of data or changes in how data are stored.

There is an important procedural difference between those arriving in Kakuma from Somalia and South Sudan, and those arriving from other countries including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, and Sudan. The former two countries are accepted and registered by the UNHCR as refugees on a prima facie basis, that is, by virtue of having come from South Sudan or Somalia they are assumed to have a legitimate basis for being refugees. Those who come from any other country have to apply for asylum. In 2023, there were a total of 41,852 asylum seekers in Kenya (UNHCR 2024).

Opportunities directed toward refugees and/or run in conjunction with UNHCR, including WUSC, DAFI, and Habesha, require applicants to have official refugee status in order to qualify. But the process of seeking asylum can be long and torturous, locking out many people from these opportunities. One individual explained how they arrived in Kenya in 2016 and applied for asylum, but were not called for a refugee status determination interview until 2021. They did not receive official refugee status until 2023. During that time they lost eligibility for several opportunities based on age; this case is not unique.

(f) Resources offered

Not all of the opportunities provide full scholarships and/or cover related university expenses (laptops, books, etc.). WMI, for example, explicitly states that it is not intended to be a full scholarship and does not provide computers or other items needed at university. Students accepted into WUSC do not learn until a few months before matriculation how many years of financial support they will receive at university. College access programs like KenSAP and EK provide no scholarships, although both have shown success in helping students receive full scholarships from universities.

Each program offers something slightly different, and so may be thought to be of interest to different individuals. Malengo should appeal primarily to those interested in nursing, EARTH University (via MCF) to those interested in agriculture. Yet given how few opportunities there are, individuals often apply even if their career goals do not align with a particular program. One individual applied for Malengo although their interests were in international relations; one applied for Habesha although it did not offer any paths in medicine, their preferred career; another applied to EARTH despite their professed interest in media.

Some opportunities require students to present themselves in certain ways with which they may not be comfortable. Applicants can feel pressure to describe their story according to the stereotyped refugee narrative. This is especially true for opportunities that include resettlement. As one individual explained of their experience in (successfully) applying for one program, they were expected to “act like a poor refugee and become more vulnerable for the sake of the scholarship.” Through multiple stages of interviews the applicant must retell their story, with any discrepancies serving as a basis for rejection. “The entire process is hectic and stressful, it always reminds you that you’re a poor and vulnerable refugee who should solicit sympathy in exchange for the scholarship. It forces a person to memorize the entire story regardless of how hurtful it is.”

V. In-Country Programs

There are numerous institutions of higher education in Kenya, which would seem to offer the easiest path forward for students seeking to continue their studies. There are in fact no legal barriers to those with refugee status enrolling in Kenyan schools, so long as they earn a C+ or above on the KCSE. As noted above, however, less than 3% of those who sat the KCSE in Kakuma in 2024 achieved a C+ or higher. Compared to schools in the US tuition and fees in Kenyan universities are inexpensive. For refugees, however, these costs can be prohibitive. As noted, refugees are barred from employment in Kenya, and “incentive” pay by NGOs in the camp for even the most educated or highly trained refugees remains very low. As non-citizens, refugees are ineligible for government loans or scholarships to defray costs. A branch of Kenya’s Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology was established at Kakuma in 2018, and required students to pay only 40% of the normal tuition (with UNHCR paying 40%, and the university waiving 20%). Even this amount proved too high for many students (Bellino, 2019).⁴

There are also several remote learning projects operating in Kakuma which provide various levels of access to higher education. The largest and longest running are Jesuit Worldwide Learning

⁴ The campus appears to have closed in the intervening years, and EK students had no knowledge that it had ever existed.

(JWL) and Southern New Hampshire University's Global Education Movement (SNHU GEM). JWL (formerly Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins) offers bachelor degrees in Sustainable Development (accredited via XIM University in India) and General Studies (accredited via St. Louis University in the US). GEM offers associate and bachelor degrees and draws on SNHU's extensive experience in remote learning programs in the US. Starting with a site in Rwanda in 2017 before expanding to other countries, they have graduated 3500 students. It is not clear how many of those have come from Kakuma.

Pursuing higher education in one's country of refuge offers certain benefits. The UNHCR asserts that "Taking into account limited opportunities for education mobility, desire to remain close to family and financial limitations, the majority of refugee youth need access to higher education opportunities in the countries where they have sought asylum" (UNHCR 2023, p. 12). The value of in-country education, however, is limited by other factors, such as the lack of freedom of movement and freedom of work for refugees in Kenya. Thus a college graduate in Kenya with refugee status is likely to be forced to return to live in a camp and work for an NGO for an "incentive" salary, start a small business, or remain idle while seeking opportunities for further educational opportunities.

Complementary Education Pathways, or access to higher education outside the country of refuge, is more attractive to most students. In contrast to college graduates in Kenya who are unable to pursue careers using their new skills, and often remain warehoused in the camp, those living overseas can have significantly expanded life and employment opportunities. International students studying in the US may be employed on their campus, and so are able to send small remittances to their families. Students can also tap into financial and human resources at their universities to develop projects that give back to their communities. One student in the US secured a grant from their institution to develop and implement a coding boot camp in Kakuma during their summer break. Paid or unpaid internships can also be more widely available outside Kenya. Although universities in Kenya have their strengths, they are often much less well-resourced than their counterparts overseas.

This is not to say that there are not drawbacks for refugee students attending universities outside Kenya. Depending on their scholarship packages, ability to find on-campus employment, and cost of living, students may face serious financial challenges. Expectations from family for remittances can strain students' finances and emotional well-being if they are unable to send back money. Cultural adjustments can be difficult and stressful. Although they may face discrimination in Kenya for their refugee status, they can face racism and xenophobia in other countries. Separation from family and friends for months or years is another burden students face.

It is clear, based on the number of applicants for overseas scholarships, that for many people in Kakuma the benefits of studying outside Kenya outweigh the drawbacks. Until life (freedom of movement and employment in particular) for highly educated refugees in Kenya improves, and likely even then, it is certain that many individuals will strive for opportunities to study outside the country.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Higher education for refugees is perhaps one of the few reliable ways to address the problems faced by refugees. Refugees with advanced knowledge and skills, with the cultural capital and credentials to gain them entry into business, political, educational, and humanitarian worlds, are the ones who can best articulate and find solutions for refugees' needs. The universities and communities that welcome them are also enriched in a multitude of ways.

Despite the demand for higher education among residents, the efforts of numerous organizations and partner universities, and the promises of the global community, access to higher education for the people of Kakuma is severely limited. This is due to the exceedingly small number of opportunities available for a growing refugee population, along with limits on who can apply and impediments in the application process.

It is clear that much more can and should be done to increase access to higher education for refugees. We propose several recommendations that, while specific to Kakuma, are undoubtedly generalizable to other camp settings around the world:

1. Better data collection on the number of spots available and number of applicants. Understanding these data will help illuminate the current limitations on opportunities and hopefully spur more organizations to set up recruitment and scholarship programs in Kakuma.
2. Better sharing of information about opportunities. Despite having the time and resources to conduct research, and EK students having extensive experience in applying to such opportunities, it proved difficult for the authors of this report to collect all relevant information. It is certainly far more difficult for Kakuma residents to discover all opportunities.
3. Support during the application process. Sponsors should partner with and provide financial and technological support to local groups, especially refugee led organizations, in order for applicants to have access to computers and reliable internet, as well as guidance

in filling in forms. Information should be shared with all applicants about the status of their application at all stages of the process.

4. Flexibility in application requirements. Organizations should not automatically reject applicants who do not have all of their documents in hand, but work with them to secure those documents.
5. Make greater allowance for those who have schooled in camp. Given the state of educational facilities in camp and thus lower KCSE scores, organizations should try as much as possible to lower minimum grade requirements for those who lived and schooled in camp.
6. Increase the number of opportunities. Even if the previous recommendations were adopted, a vast unmet demand for higher education among Kakuma residents would remain.

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