



Towards Inclusive Higher Education: Refugee Students' Access, Experiences and Support System in Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined refugee students' access, experiences and support system in Ugandan higher education. Guided by Intersectionality Theory, the study analyzed how displacement intersects with selected factors to shape access and experiences of higher education. The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey across five Ugandan universities (two public and three private). Using snowball sampling, 125 refugee students were recruited due to low disclosure of refugee status at enrolment to fill a structured questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using STATA version 17 to produce descriptive statistical results. Findings show that refugee students generally perceive higher education in Uganda as of high quality and protective. The majority reported a safe learning environment, which reflected confidence in institutional responsiveness to academic and socio-emotional needs. Motivations were mainly employment-oriented. However, financial barriers remain the main constraint limiting participation. Although the majority viewed institutional resources as adequate, specialized academic and psychosocial supports were uneven; the majority reported no targeted support for female refugee students. The study highlights the need for sustained financial support, gender-responsive approaches and stronger psychosocial services.

Keywords: Inclusivity; access; higher education; refugee students; support systems.

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Introduction

Higher education has increasingly been recognized as a critical component of refugee inclusion, social

mobility and long-term development (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Sen, 1999; UNHCR, 2019). For refugee students, higher education represents not only an opportunity for academic advancement but

also a means of restoring disrupted life paths, enhancing employability and achieving self-reliance (Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Unterhalter, 2019). However, global participation rates of refugees in higher education remain significantly lower than those of non-refugee populations, reflecting persistent structural inequalities and systemic barriers (UNHCR, 2019, 2023). In this regard, examining refugee students' access, experiences and support system of higher education is crucial.

Uganda offers an important context for exploring refugee students' perceptions of higher education. Hosting one of the largest refugee populations in Africa, Uganda is frequently cited for its progressive refugee policy framework, which promotes the integration of refugees into national education systems, granting them the right to work and freedom of movement (Government of Uganda, 2020; UNHCR, 2023). These policy commitments suggest the existence of enabling environments for refugee participation in higher education. Nevertheless, research indicates that policy inclusion does not automatically translate into equitable access or positive educational experiences, particularly at the tertiary level (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Unterhalter, 2019). As a result, refugee students' perceptions of higher education in Uganda are often shaped by a tension between inclusive policy descriptions and existing institutional realities (Najjuma, 2022; Tulibaleka, 2022).

Existing literature suggests that refugee students generally perceive higher education as a vital pathway toward improved socio-economic prospects and social recognition (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2021; Sen, 1999). At the same time, these perceptions are constrained by multiple barriers, including financial hardship, limited scholarship opportunities, language barriers, inadequate academic preparation and challenges related to recognition of prior qualifications (UNHCR, 2019; Morley et al., 2009). For refugees residing in settlements or those with limited social and cultural capital, higher education may be perceived as distant or unattainable whereas others may view it as an achievable yet precarious opportunity. These divergent perceptions underscore the importance of attending to refugee students' subjective understandings of higher education alongside structural analyses of access.

Refugee students' perceptions of higher education are further shaped by intersecting social identities and power relations. Intersectionality theory highlights that refugee status intersects with gender, socioeconomic background, nationality, language proficiency, disability and legal precarity to produce differentiated educational experiences and perceptions (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). For example, refugee women may perceive higher education as a site of empowerment and autonomy while simultaneously facing gendered expectations, caregiving responsibilities and sociocultural constraints that shape their participation (Collins, 2000; Unterhalter, 2019). Similarly, disparities in prior educational experiences and linguistic capital shape perceptions of higher education institutions as inclusive or exclusionary (Morley et al., 2009).

Despite growing scholarly interest in refugee education, there remains limited empirical research that foregrounds refugee students' own perspectives of higher education in Uganda, particularly at the tertiary level. Much of the existing literature focuses on policy frameworks, institutional responses and enrolment statistics, often overlooking how refugee students interpret and negotiate access within higher education systems (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2023). Understanding these perceptions is essential, as they influence educational aspirations, engagement and the conversion of educational opportunities into meaningful outcomes (Sen, 1999). This study addresses this gap by examining refugee students' perceptions of higher education in Uganda.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the theory of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. This theoretical framework states that overlapping identities, such as race, gender and class interact to create unique compounding experiences of discrimination and privilege, particularly for marginalized groups. (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The theory examines refugee students' perceptions of higher education in Uganda, offering a critical lens for understanding how intersecting social identities and structural inequalities shape lived experiences and interpretations of social institutions.

The theory developed the concept to explain how multiple social identities, such as race, gender and class, intersect to produce unique forms of discrimination and marginalization that cannot be

understood through a single-category analysis. The author argued that systems of oppression overlap and compound one another, shaping lived experiences differently for different groups. In contexts of forced displacement, refugee students' perceptions of higher education are formed at the intersection of refugee status, gender, socioeconomic background, nationality and language.

Intersectionality Theory argues that social identities, such as refugee status, gender, socioeconomic class, nationality and language do not operate independently. These identities intersect within broader systems of power, such as poverty, patriarchy, racism and institutional exclusion. Individuals experience opportunities or barriers differently, depending on how these identities combine. Structural inequalities are embedded in institutions, including education systems. Intersectionality recognizes refugee students' perceptions of higher education as socially constructed and shaped by lived experience (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This framework enables a complex understanding of differentiated refugee experiences and informs more inclusive higher education policies and practices in Uganda.

Refugee students in Uganda perceive higher education differently, depending on how displacement interacts with gender, poverty, nationality, language and duration of stay in Uganda. Although Uganda has progressive refugee inclusion policies that promote inclusion in national education systems (Government of Uganda, 2020; UNHCR, 2023), intersectionality shows that formal inclusion does not eliminate practical barriers, such as high tuition costs, limited scholarship opportunities, language barriers, inadequate psychosocial support and gender norms. These intersections shape perceptions of higher education as both aspirational and uncertain (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Sempebwa, 2024).

Gender remains a central axis through which perceptions are differentiated. Refugee women may perceive higher education as empowering while facing intersecting barriers related to caregiving responsibilities, early marriage and gendered expectations (Collins, 2000; Unterhalter, 2019). Refugee men may experience pressure to prioritize immediate income generation, shaping perceptions of higher education as economically risky (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; UNHCR, 2025). These gendered

perceptions are inseparable from displacement and socioeconomic vulnerability. These perceptions help explain differentiated motivations, expectations and anxieties. Language, nationality, and prior educational experiences further shape refugee students' perceptions. Students from non-English-speaking or conflict-affected education systems may experience higher education as exclusionary due to language barriers, unfamiliar academic cultures and challenges in credential recognition.

Intersectionality shifts the focus from individual shortfalls to institutional systems. It helps identify how universities may unintentionally reproduce inequalities through insufficient refugee-targeted support, lack of language accommodation, weak gender-sensitive services and limited recognition of refugee-specific vulnerabilities. Intersectionality Theory argues that refugee students' perceptions are shaped by displacement experiences, economic hardship, gender norms, institutional inclusion/exclusion, belonging and educational preparedness.

Methodology

This section presents the methodological approach that guided the study. It entails research design, population and sampling, research instruments, validity and reliability, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Design

The study used a cross-sectional research design and employed a quantitative approach exclusively. This design enhanced data collection from refugee students at a single point in time, thereby enabling simultaneous comparisons of variables and providing a comprehensive perspective on the determinants of higher education for refugees in Uganda.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted at five universities in Uganda (two public, three private). The participating universities were Busitema University, Gulu University, Bugema University, Uganda Christian University, and the Islamic University in Uganda. The universities were purposively selected based on proximity to refugee migration routes and the presence of refugee students. The sample included two public and three private universities (Seventh-day Adventist, Islamic and Anglican) to address diversity. Using snowball sampling, 25 students were selected from each university, making a total

of 125 students. Snowball sampling was used because most refugee students do not disclose their identities when enrolling at universities; thus, the first student identified led the researchers to another student, until reaching 25 students from each university.

Instruments

The study used a structured survey questionnaire as source of data through which respondents gave their perspectives.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the survey questionnaire was developed and refined based on set objectives and then subjected to vetting and judgement by the principal author and co-authors as experts to ascertain relevance and clarity of the items.

In an effort to ensure the reliability, the research instrument was pre-tested in Kampala International University (A private university) and Makerere University (a public university). The pre-test involved twelve refugee students, six from each university to identify and resolve any inconsistencies prior to actual data collection. The pretest results are presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data was imported into Excel, cleaned and saved as accordingly. It was then analyzed descriptively using the STATA version 17 software to generate information required to answer the research questions and achieve the guiding research questions.

Table 1: Pre-test Results

What was tested	What we found out	Action made
Detect unclear and confusing questions that respondents could misinterpret.	The researchers realized that some questions were misinterpreted depending on how they were asked.	Questions were made simple and clear.
Time taken to administer the questionnaire	Tool administration time ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours	The researchers maintained the identified time period for adequacy
Response patterns	For all the sections, the questions were well connected, one directly linking to the other. This indicated consistency and good flow of the questionnaire	The researchers maintained the flow

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was officially granted by the Prime Minister's Office, which manages refugee affairs on behalf of the Ugandan Government. Informed consent was obtained from the study respondents prior to administering the survey questionnaire. The study ensured confidentiality by keeping the information obtained from respondents private to avoid infringing on refugee privacy and rights.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on refugee access, experiences and support System of higher education in Uganda, focusing on key dimensions of their educational experiences, including motivations for enrolment, institutional experiences, perceived barriers, institutional support, and the socio-demographic factors associated with these perceptions. The results are organized thematically and supported by descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Demographics of Respondents

In Table 2, the findings indicate that the majority of respondents (53.6%) were in their third year of study, suggesting that most participants had substantial exposure to higher education and were therefore well-positioned to reflect on their educational experiences. All respondents reported not having a disability, indicating a lack of representation of students with disabilities in the sample. The sample was predominantly male (71.2%), pointing to a gender imbalance in refugee participation in higher education. Regarding country of origin, 78.4% of the respondents originated from South Sudan, 20% from Somalia and 1.68 from Sudan.

Table 2 shows that 78% of the respondents reported that war was the main reason for their relocation, highlighting conflict as the dominant driver of displacement among the respondents. Concerning livelihoods, 36.8% relied primarily on humanitarian aid, reflecting limited economic self-reliance among the refugee students.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study		
Year 1	20	16
Year 2	38	30.4
Year 3	67	53.6
Total	125	100
Disability		
Yes	0	0
No	125	100
Total	125	100
Gender		
Male	89	71.2
Female	36	28.8
Total	125	100
Country of Origin		
Somalia	25	20
South Sudan	98	78.4
Sudan	2	1.6
Total	125	100
Reason for Relocation		
War	98	78.4
Famine	1	0.8
Seek quality education	26	20.8
Total	125	100
Major Source of Livelihood		
Depend on aid	46	36.8
Casual labor	21	16.8
Formal employment	5	4
Agriculture	2	1.6
Petty trade	12	9.6
Research	2	1.6
Relatives	37	29.6
Total	125	100
Marital Status		
Married	40	32
Single	82	65.6
Divorced	3	2.4
Total	125	100
Education Support:		
Family	45	36
UNHR Scholarship	47	37.6
Relatives	10	8
Self	23	18.4
Total	125	100
Category of people stayed with in Uganda:		
Stay alone	28	22.4
Family members	24	19.2
Fellow students	3	2.4
Relatives	70	56
Total	125	100
Age Category:		
18-30	96	76.8
31-45	27	21.6
Above 45	2	1.6
Total	125	100
Main reason for enrollment:		
Employment opportunity	83	66.4
Get knowledge	31	24.8
Get friends	11	8.8
Total	125	100

Regarding marital status, 65.6% were single, suggesting fewer family responsibilities that might otherwise constrain educational participation. Regarding educational support, 37.6% received UNHCR scholarships, indicating that a substantial proportion relied on external financial assistance to access higher education. Family support constituted 36% while other sources included relatives and self-sponsorship.

Regarding living arrangements, 56% stayed with relatives in Uganda while 22.4% stayed alone, 19.2% with family members and 2.4% with fellow students. The age distribution shows that 76.8% of the respondents were between 18 and 30 years old, consistent with the typical age range for university students. Regarding the main motivation for enrollment, 66.4% reported employment while knowledge acquisition constituted 24.8% as primary reasons for pursuing higher education suggesting that students viewed education as both a pathway to livelihoods and a means of personal development.

Research Question 1: Under what circumstances are the refugees motivated or demotivated to enroll for higher education in Uganda?

Figure 1 shows refugee students' motivation and demotivation factors as determinants for joining higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uganda, revealing that the dominant motivation is the perception of Uganda as a provider of good quality and holistic education compared to their home

countries, which accounts for the largest share of responses (68%). This far exceeds other motivating factors, such as adequate security and political stability, which were reported by a smaller proportion of respondents (12%), indicating that safety and a stable environment also determine educational decision-making, though to a lesser extent. Additional motivation factors, including the hospitality of Ugandan host communities, students and lecturers constituted 4%. Good teaching methods in higher institutions constituted (1%) while equitable treatment while at these institutions constituted 3%. Good learning environment constituted 10% and freedom of association 2%.

Refugee students primarily valued Ugandan higher education with academic quality, holistic development and future opportunities that support long-term development. These findings further suggest that refugee students primarily perceive higher education in Uganda as a pathway to meaningful academic advancement and future socioeconomic mobility rather than merely a protective space. The prominence of educational quality aligns with studies showing that displaced learners often prioritize host countries offering credible qualifications, institutional functionality and prospects for social integration (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2023). Uganda's comparatively inclusive refugee policy environment may further reinforce this perception by enabling access to national institutions despite displacement-related vulnerabilities (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

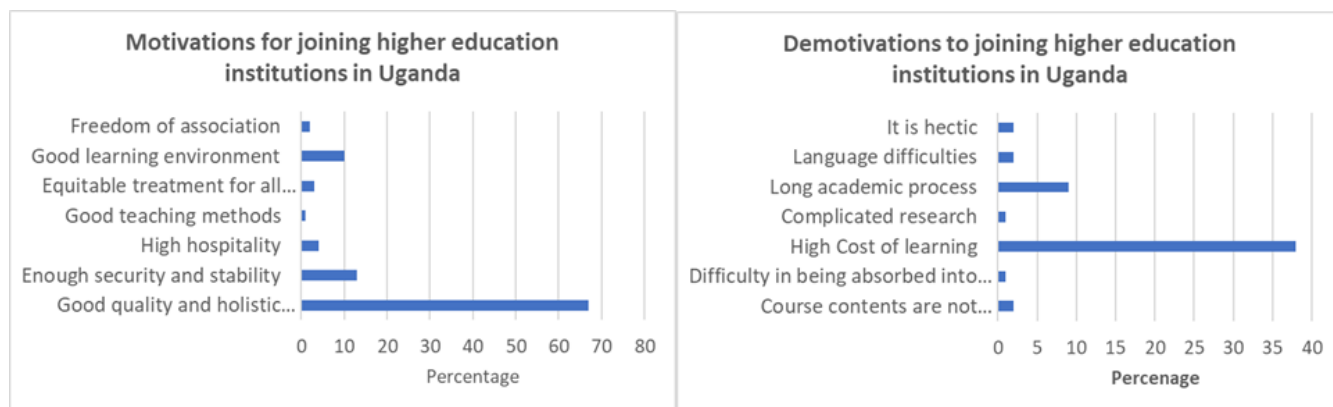


Figure 1: Motivation and Demotivation for Attending Higher Education

However, Figure 1 further reveals substantial demotivating factors, with the high cost of learning in Uganda emerging as the most significant barrier, reported by the largest proportion of respondents (38%). This highlights financial constraints as the most significant barriers to participation in higher

education among refugee students. Other notable demotivating factors include long academic processes (8%) and language difficulties (2.5%). Less frequently reported demotivating factors include complex research requirements (1%), difficulty being absorbed into the academic system (1%) and

perceptions that the course content is not suitable or relevant (2.5%). The overwhelming concern over cost underscores the structural contradiction between policy-level inclusion and practical affordability. These findings align with previous research findings that while Uganda is internationally recognized for progressive refugee governance, higher education financing remains a major challenge because tuition, accommodation and associated academic expenses often exceed refugees' limited livelihood capacities (Molla, 2021). Similar studies across Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that financial exclusion consistently undermines refugee participation even where formal access exists (Sperling & Winthrop, 2021). Language barriers, though less dominant, remain important because many refugees from Francophone or Arabic-speaking backgrounds may struggle within predominantly English-language academic systems, potentially affecting academic adjustment (Naidoo, 2020).

The relatively lower emphasis on security compared to quality education suggests that while physical safety matters, refugee students increasingly evaluate higher education through a developmental lens centered on long-term transformation, employability and dignity. This reflects a shift from survival-focused educational access to aspiration-driven participation, consistent with the capability's perspective, which holds that education expands

freedoms and life chances (Walker & Unterhalter, 2019). Nonetheless, the persistence of cost and academic complexity as major deterrents indicates that inclusion without targeted financial, linguistic and academic support risks reproducing inequalities within institutions.

Research Question 2: What are the refugee intentions for attending higher education in Uganda?

Figure 2 indicates refugee students' intentions for pursuing higher education in Uganda, primarily to gain knowledge and secure formal employment (76%), positioning higher education mainly as a pathway to employability and socioeconomic mobility. This aligns with global refugee education literature, which identifies employability and credential acquisition as key drivers of tertiary participation among displaced populations (UNHCR, 2023; Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Prolonged displacement often disrupts livelihood trajectories, making higher education essential for rebuilding human capital and improving labor market prospects (Molla, 2022). Networking (14%) emerged as a significant motivation, suggesting that higher education serves as a space for rebuilding social capital, professional relationships and opportunities for integration disrupted by displacement (Naidoo, 2020).

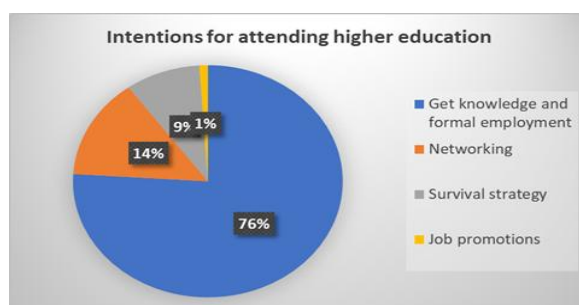


Figure 2: Intentions for Attending Higher Education

Universities function not only as academic institutions but also as sites for mentorship and bridging capital that can reduce marginalization (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018). A further 9% viewed higher education as a survival strategy, reflecting its role as a coping mechanism amid economic insecurity, aid dependency and limited livelihood options. This supports evidence that refugees may strategically use education for protection and resilience in uncertain environments (Koehler et al., 2020). Only 1% cited job promotion, indicating limited prior stable employment (Crea & Sparnon, 2017). Overall,

refugee students' intentions are shaped by employability, integration and survival.

Research Question 3: What support systems are in place to enhance refugee access to higher education in Uganda?

Study findings in Figure 3 shows that refugee students relied on diverse but unevenly distributed sources of educational support. The largest proportion (55%) depend on self-support. This suggests that despite Uganda's progressive refugee-inclusion policies, access to higher education

remains largely individualized rather than systematically supported. Similar studies across refugee-hosting contexts show that refugee students' financial self-reliance often reflects limited institutional funding and inadequate formal support systems rather than economic stability (Molla, 2022;

UNHCR, 2023). For many displaced learners, self-financing increases vulnerability by requiring them to combine academic demands with unstable income-generating activities, thereby raising the risk of educational discontinuity (Koehler & Schneider, 2019).

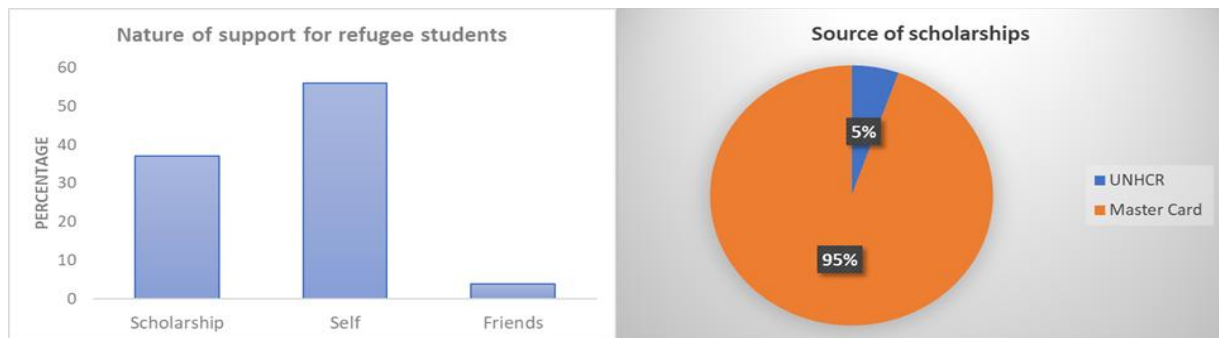


Figure 3: Nature and Source of Support

Scholarships account for approximately 37% of support, mainly from the MasterCard Foundation and UNHCR. While these schemes widen access, they reach only a minority of refugee students, reinforcing literature that scholarship opportunities, though transformative, remain highly competitive and insufficient (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). This suggests donor-led interventions are important but inadequate as comprehensive solutions to refugee educational exclusion. Support from friends is minimal (5%), reflecting limited peer-based financial capacity within economically constrained refugee communities (Naidoo, 2020). Among scholarship recipients, the MasterCard Foundation provides 95% of scholarships while UNHCR provides only 5%, revealing heavy dependence on limited donors. Such concentration raises concerns about sustainability and systemic vulnerability as overreliance on philanthropic actors can create unstable access when governments and universities

fail to institutionalize inclusive financing structures (Sperling & Winthrop, 2021).

Overall, these findings suggest that refugee participation in Ugandan higher education is shaped by resilience and aspiration but constrained by inadequate institutionalized financing, reinforcing calls for broader state-university-donor partnerships to ensure sustainable and equitable access.

Research Question 4: How sufficient are the University's resources to enhance and address refugee learning needs in Uganda?

Figure 4 presents refugee students' perceptions of the adequacy and types of supportive resources available in higher education institutions. The majority of respondents (64%) believed that institutions of higher learning have adequate resources to support and address refugee learning needs, while 36% perceived them as inadequate.

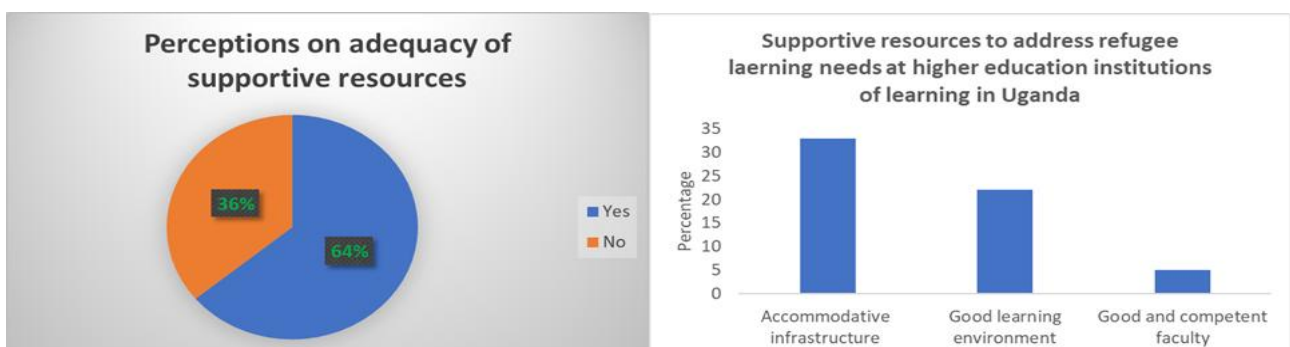


Figure 4: Adequacy of the University's Resources to Support and Address Refugee Learning Needs

This suggests that although a majority view existing support positively, a substantial minority experience gaps in provision, indicating uneven access to or

quality of services across institutions or student groups. Figure 4 further disaggregates the types of supportive resources available. The most frequently

cited supportive resources included accommodative infrastructure (32%), followed by a good learning environment (23%) and good and competent faculty (5%).

However, the findings also reveal an “access versus support” gap, which aligns with the literature indicating that while infrastructure and learning environments are generally perceived as adequate, specialized academic, psychosocial and trauma-informed services remain uneven (Baker et al., 2022; Mendenhall et al., 2017). Further literature indicates that emotional support systems exist, yet barriers related to stigma, language and institutional capacity limit their effectiveness (Joyce et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2022). Intersectionality emphasizes that infrastructure alone cannot address covered vulnerabilities linked to interrupted

schooling, trauma exposure and socioeconomic stress (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Research Question 5: What are the refugee experiences of Ugandan institutions of higher learning?

Figure 5 presents refugee students’ experiences of discomfort in higher education institutions while Table 3 shows specific contributing circumstances. Findings indicate that 32% of the respondents agreed that there are circumstances that make them uncomfortable while 68% reported none. This suggests that although most students do not perceive serious challenges, nearly one-third experience conditions that negatively affect their comfort and academic engagement.

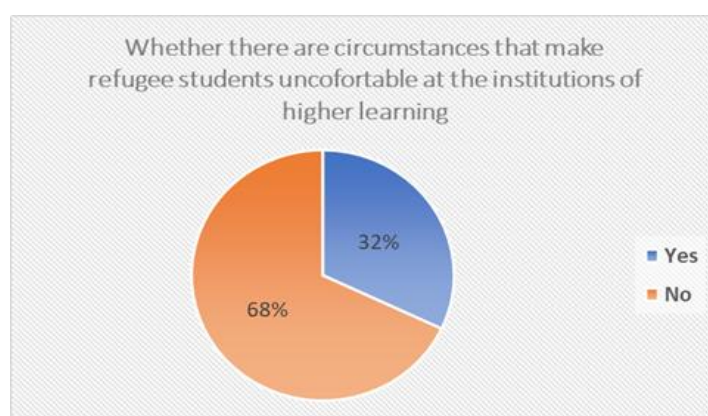


Figure 5: Circumstances that Make Refugee Students Uncomfortable

Further results in Table 3 identify main sources of discomfort. The most frequently reported source is high university fees (72%), indicating that financial burden is the dominant concern. This is followed by

a delayed release of scholarship funds (19.5%), suggesting that even when financial aid is available, administrative delays undermine its effectiveness.

Table 3: Circumstances that Make Refugee Students Uncomfortable

Circumstance	Frequency	Percent
Delayed release of scholarship funds	25.4	19.5
High university costs	90.2	72
Difficulties in making friends	6.3	5.5
Hectic lessons	3.1	3
Total	125	100

Difficulties in making friends (5.5%) and hectic lesson schedules (3%) were reported far less frequently, implying that social and academic workload issues are secondary compared to economic constraints.

Despite positive perceptions of institutional quality and safety, financial constraints remain the dominant structural barrier. Most refugee students rely on aid, particularly scholarships, to enroll and

persist. This finding aligns with evidence that higher education costs exceed the earning capacity of refugee households, whose livelihoods are often based on casual labor or small-scale business (Ssimbwa et al., 2022). Tuition fees are widely identified as the most significant obstacle to access (Avery & Said, 2017; Tulibaleka, 2022; UNHCR, 2023). Although scholarships and partnerships have expanded opportunities, their reach remains limited and eligibility restrictions further constrain access

(Avery & Said, 2017; Mendenhall et al., 2017). Intersectionality clarifies that financial uncertainty intersects with gender, caregiving responsibilities, duration of displacement and stratifying participation. Refugees with stable livelihoods or scholarships report more positive perceptions, reinforcing evidence that economic security strongly shapes educational experience (Joyce et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2022).

Research Question 6: How do the refugee students perceive the learning environment provided by the Ugandan institutions of higher learning?

Figure 6 shows refugee students' perceptions of whether universities provide a safe learning

environment. A large majority of respondents (89%) report that the university offers a safe learning environment while 11% indicate that the environment is only somewhat safe. No respondents selected the option "not safe." This suggests that overall, refugee students perceive universities as secure spaces for learning, although a small proportion experience only partial or conditional safety.

The study respondents attributed a safe learning environment to a natural, good environment, high-quality education, good hygiene, adequate space, good lectures, hospitality from fellow students and strong security, as reflected in Table 4.

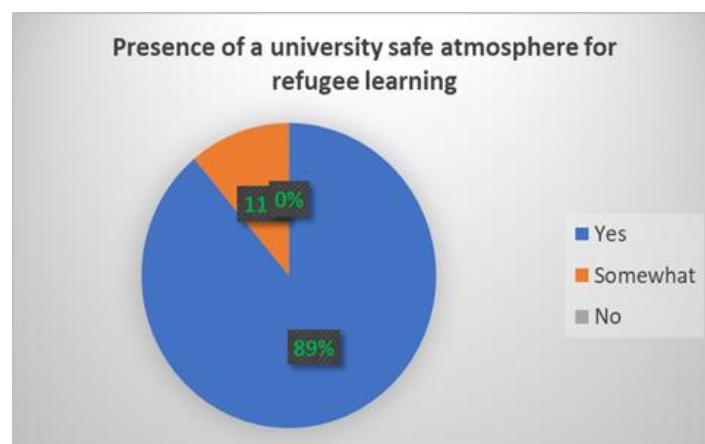


Figure 6: Presence of University Safe Atmosphere

Uganda's progressive refugee policies promote integration into national education systems and grant refugees the right to work and freedom of movement (Government of Uganda, 2020; UNHCR, 2019, 2023). Most respondents perceived universities as safe and nondiscriminatory spaces,

consistent with literature portraying higher education as stabilizing in inclusive host contexts (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2021). Low perceptions of evident discrimination contrast with earlier studies that highlight stigma (Tulibaleka, 2022), suggesting contextual or institutional variation.

Table 4: Factors Determining a Safe Learning Environment

Emotional support system	Frequency	Percentage
Presence of a safe learning environment	109	87.2
High-quality education	112	89.6
Good hygiene	96	76.8
Adequate space	77	61.6
Welcoming lectures	59	47.2
Good hospitality from fellow students	63	50.4
Social stability and high security	97	77.6

Research Question 7: How do universities in Uganda support the emotional well-being of refugee students through psychosocial and counselling services?

Figure 7 (p. 34) illustrates respondents' perceptions of how universities in Uganda manage refugees' emotions through the provision of emotional

support systems. The findings reveal mixed views regarding the availability of such support within the higher education institutions. While the majority of respondents (59%) indicated that emotional support systems are available, a substantial proportion (41%) reported that no such systems exist. This notable disparity points to potential institutional

gaps in the provision, accessibility or visibility of psychosocial support services for refugee students. The findings suggest that existing support mechanisms may be inconsistently implemented, inadequately communicated or insufficiently tailored to the unique needs of refugees. Previous studies have similarly cautioned that general student support services often fail to address complex challenges associated with displacement-related trauma, cultural adaptation and social

marginalization experienced by refugee learners (Molla, 2022). Therefore, the presence of counselling structures alone cannot be taken as evidence of effective psychosocial support for refugee students. The disparity in responses may reflect inconsistencies in the implementation of support services across institutions, limited awareness among students or barriers that hinder the accessibility, inclusivity and relevance of such services to refugee-specific experiences.

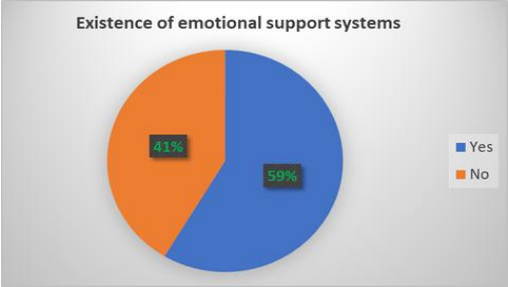


Figure 7: Existence Of Emotional Support Systems

Table 5 further reveals that the existence of the emotional support system is reflected primarily through guidance and counselling services offered in the various departments/colleges and places of worship, suggesting that some institutions have established formal psychosocial and spiritual support structures. The finding that counselling services are generally available reflects institutional recognition of student well-being as part of broader educational support. This aligns with literature emphasizing that psychosocial support is essential for refugee students whose educational experiences

are often shaped by trauma, displacement stress, social exclusion and adaptation challenges (Naidoo, 2020; UNHCR, 2023). Access to counselling and faith-based spaces may therefore play an important role in fostering resilience, belonging and emotional stability within host institutions. In contexts of displacement, educational institutions often function beyond their academic mandate, providing protective spaces that can buffer refugee learners against the psychological impacts of forced migration (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Table 5: Emotional Support Structures

Emotional support system	Frequency	Percentage
University departments and colleges	98	78.4
Places of worship	69	55.2

Research Question 8: Do faculty members accommodate unique educational needs for female refugee students?

In Figure 8, a large majority (75%) reported that no special considerations for female refugee students,

suggesting that most female refugees receive the similar academic treatment with limited targeted support to address the unique challenges associated with their gender and refugee status.

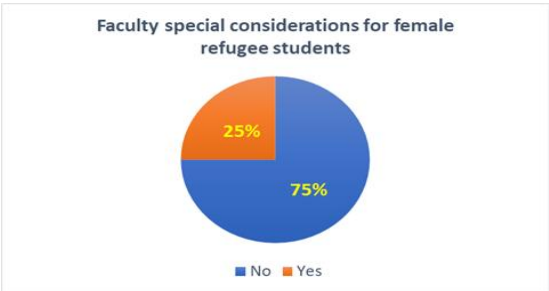


Figure 8: Faculty Consideration for Female Refugees

This finding reinforces the earlier observation that, although most respondents perceived equitable treatment, the limited evidence of gender-responsive accommodations points to an institutional emphasis on formal equality rather than practical equity, where all students are treated similarly regardless of their differing needs and circumstances (Mendenhall et al., 2021; Baker et al., 2022).

Intersectionality highlights how displacement interacts with gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, and economic vulnerability to produce distinct educational experiences and challenges for refugee students (Collins, 2000; Unterhalter, 2019; UNHCR, 2023). While refugee women often encounter multiple and overlapping barriers, refugee men may face social and economic pressures to prioritize income-generating activities over their studies. Consequently, in the absence of trauma-informed and flexible pedagogical approaches, rigid academic structures may reinforce existing inequalities and perpetuate exclusion (Baker et al., 2022).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In conclusion, refugee students perceive Ugandan universities as inclusive, safe and supportive environments that facilitate meaningful participation in higher education. The institutions provide learning opportunities that foster academic growth, social integration and personal development despite existing challenges.

Furthermore, refugee students view higher education not only as an aspirational pathway for self-improvement but also as a strategic means of achieving socio-economic mobility, enhancing future employment prospects and preparing for eventual reintegration. This underscores the significant role of higher education institutions in promoting educational inclusion.

Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening financial support for refugee students through scholarships and other funding opportunities to improve access, retention and completion rates. Universities should enhance psychosocial and counselling services and adopt gender-responsive practices that address specific needs of refugee students, particularly women. In addition, policymakers should apply an intersectional approach when designing support

programmes, recognizing that refugee students have diverse experiences and needs. This will enable the development of more equitable and targeted interventions that promote meaningful inclusion.

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