

# Exploring Higher Education Demand and Opportunities for Young Refugees in Africa

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## **Abstract**

Higher education for young people, including marginalised groups, is essential for equitable and sustainable development. There is limited research on refugees' access to higher education, especially in developing countries. This article contributes to the literature on refugee education by raising awareness of the demand for education and issues surrounding refugees' access to higher education in West and Central Africa (WCA). We consider changes in the population of young refugees as a proxy for shifts in their demand for education and map available opportunities and challenges. Our analysis of refugee youth demographic data indicates increasing trends in most WCA countries, signalling rapidly growing demand for (higher) education by refugees in their countries of asylum. Mapping these countries' provision of refugee education opportunities and dedicated scholarship programmes for refugees, as well as interviews with refugee students promotes understanding of the conditions and challenges they confront in the transition to higher education in their host countries. The article highlights the urgency of the refugee situation in Africa and calls for immediate and practical action to facilitate and support refugees' access to tertiary education.

**Key words:** higher education, refugee education, SDGs, inclusive development, Africa

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## Sommaire

L'enseignement supérieur pour les jeunes, y compris les groupes marginalisés, est essentiel pour un développement équitable et durable. Il existe peu de recherches sur l'accès des réfugiés à l'enseignement supérieur, en particulier dans les pays en développement. Cet article contribue à la littérature sur l'éducation des réfugiés en sensibilisant à la demande d'éducation et aux questions entourant leur accès à l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre (AOC). Nous considérons l'évolution de la population des jeunes réfugiés comme un indicateur de l'évolution de leur demande d'éducation et nous dressons la carte des opportunités et des défis qui se présentent à eux. Notre analyse des données démographiques des jeunes réfugiés indique des tendances à la hausse dans la plupart des pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre, signe d'une augmentation rapide de la demande d'éducation (supérieure) dans leurs pays d'asile. La cartographie des opportunités d'éducation et des programmes de bourses pour les réfugiés dans ces pays, ainsi que les entretiens avec les étudiants réfugiés, permettent de mieux comprendre les conditions et les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés lors de la transition vers l'enseignement supérieur dans leur pays d'accueil. L'article souligne l'urgence de la situation des réfugiés en Afrique et appelle à une action immédiate et pratique pour faciliter et soutenir l'accès des réfugiés à l'enseignement supérieur.

**Mots clés:** enseignement supérieur, éducation des réfugiés, ODD, développement inclusif, Afrique

## Introduction

*“Higher Education is instrumental in fostering growth, reducing poverty and boosting shared prosperity. It benefits not just the individual, but the entire educational system.”* The World Bank (2021)

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. Additional inclusive measures are required to achieve this goal among marginalised groups such as refugees, especially in developing countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Education

Strategy, Refugee Education 2030 (UNHCR, 2019) defines refugees as “People fleeing conflict, persecution and human rights abuses who have crossed a border into another country” (UNHCR, 2023). While the global refugee gross enrolment rate at primary and secondary school level stood at 68% and 34%, respectively, in 2020, a rate of only 5% was recorded at post-secondary level (UNHCR, 2021). The situation in WCA is of even more concern, with 59%, 15% and 1.2% gross enrolment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education, respectively (UNHCR, 2021a). For SDG-4 to be achieved, policymakers and humanitarian and development organisations will need strong evidence on the dynamics of refugee populations, as well as data on local legal frameworks and refugee education pathways. Surprisingly, the academic literature on refugee education is very limited, especially in relation to higher education (HE) in sub-Saharan Africa. This article aims to fill this gap by: i. providing insight into the dynamics of refugee youth population data, considered as a proxy for their demand for tertiary education; ii. discussing HE opportunities for refugees; and iii. highlighting the current challenges preventing refugees in WCA from accessing HE and how best to support them.

The article is grounded in a number of key philosophical assumptions. From a human rights perspective, refugee education is an inherent right, as emphasised by SDG-4 and the UNHCR's Global Education Strategy, Refugee Education 2030. Our theoretical framework incorporates contemporary concepts like acculturation and transculturalism (Berry et al., 2006; Hope, 2011; Habtemariam et al., 2023) that highlight the need to integrate refugees into the educational and economic fabric of their host countries. Acculturation theories consider the dynamic interplay between refugees and the host culture, acknowledging their mutual influence in the educational process, while transculturalism advocates for the blending of diverse cultural elements in educational environments in alignment with the multicultural nature of refugee communities. In so doing, we aim to assess refugee youth population dynamics and explore the legal frameworks, scholarship opportunities, and the barriers that shape access to HE. Furthermore, our study aligns with the view that HE for refugees serves not just as an academic pursuit, but as a catalyst for inclusive development, social mobility, and the cultivation of human capital for both refugees and their

host countries. The underlying philosophy thus emphasises education's transformative potential as a key driver of societal integration, stability, and peace-building.

The study drew on recent demographic data on refugees in the WCA region from the UNHCR's Refugee Population Statistics Database (RPSD, 2021). We mainly focus on populations of young refugees (12 to 17 years old) by country of asylum for the period 2001 to 2020. Analysing refugee youth population data not only informs policymakers about the seriousness of the refugee situation in WCA countries; it also reflects current and future demand for secondary and tertiary education among refugees.<sup>1</sup> In addition to trends and conditional distribution analyses of the refugee population data, we map local laws surrounding refugee access to HE, scholarship opportunities, and the challenges surrounding such access in WCA countries.

Education is a human right that refugees are increasingly able to access (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Higher education has proven to be a gateway for inclusive development and social mobility and can be regarded as a tool to promote access to secure, decent jobs in host countries. For host countries, it is a sound investment in (refugees') human capital. Researchers such as Ma et al. (2016); Koehler and Schneider (2019) and Kirk and Sherab (2016), among others, note that HE overcomes the social exclusion and abuse refugees might otherwise experience. Fazel et al. (2012) argue that quality education could help young refugees and asylum seekers to satisfy some of their social and emotional needs. Moreover, by providing individuals with skills, higher-skilled roles and access to well-connected social networks (integration), refugee HE is a social investment that can be used to promote peace-building and stability upon their return to their country of origin (Coffie, 2014; Milton and Barakat, 2016; Ferede, 2018).

The academic literature on the issues surrounding refugee access to HE in Europe, Australia and the United States notes that individual characteristics as well as contextual elements affect refugees' transition to HE in their host countries (Delgado, 2012; De Haene et al., 2018; Unangst, 2019; Molla, 2021a). Among other things, these studies identify the lack of institutional support (Molla, 2021a), racial bias, discrimination and inequality (Halse, 2017; Kubota, 2020), early disadvantages and experiences of trauma and isolation (Molla, 2020,

2021b) as factors affecting refugees' access to HE in the host countries.

In the WCA context, Sule et al. (2020) and Kyereko (2020) argue that young refugees face difficulties in exercising their right to education. The literature mentions several reasons for this situation, including refugees being required to present valid documents proving their age, educational background or schooling history and place of residence (Sule et al., 2020; Kyereko, 2020). Bruni et al. (2017) add that economic hardship, a lack of information and language barriers keep university-ready refugees out of school. Crush and Tawodzera (2011) and Kyereko (2020) note that some African countries do not facilitate refugees' access to their national education systems due to the ambiguity of their education policies. In conclusion, due to the lack of explicit legal provisions for refugees and migrants, the educational policies of most African countries do not facilitate their transition to HE systems (Crush and Tawodzera, 2011; Kyereko, 2020) that are themselves often underdeveloped and overburdened (Lowe, 2019).

There is relatively limited academic research on refugee-related issues in WCA, and even less regarding HE demand and opportunities for refugees. Against this background, this article assesses refugee youth population data, and maps and discusses HE opportunities/challenges for refugees in WCA to raise awareness of refugees' demand for HE and the issues surrounding their access to HE. In doing so, we address the following research questions: i. How have populations of young refugees evolved over the past two decades in WCA? ii. What are the legal provisions surrounding refugee access to HE in WCA countries? iii. What refugee-specific scholarships are available in the region? iv. What are the main challenges faced by refugees in accessing HE?

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the data and methodological approach. Section 3 presents the analysis of UNHCR data on refugee youth populations in WCA, while Section 4 summarises the findings from mapping refugee education opportunities and challenges in WCA. Section 5 discusses the results and draws conclusions.

**Data and Methodology**

**Data**

This article aims to raise awareness of the rapidly growing refugee population in Africa and the resulting potential demand for education. To do so, we consider UNHCR data on the demographics of refugees by asylum countries over the period 2001 to 2020 in WCA. The data encompasses forcibly displaced populations, stateless people and others of concern to UNHCR, but does not differentiate between economic and political refugees, among other categories.

The UNHCR Regional Bureau for West & Central Africa covers 21 countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Cameroon, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. While Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tomé and Príncipe are also included, the UNHCR database reports no refugee population data for these countries.

**Table 1:** Young refugee population in the WCA region

Statistic	Number of Countries	Mean	St. dev.	Min	Max
Year: 2020					
Population of 12-17 year olds	18	11 368.33	22 406.24	46	73 299
Total population	18	75 190.61	149 492.70	342	478 649

Notes: Data from UNHCR Refugee Population Statistics Database for the 18 countries listed above.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the total population of young refugees in the 18 countries under consideration. The standard deviations point to extensive heterogeneity in the number of refugees in the different countries. The data shows that while Sierra Leone and Gabon hosted only 46 and 53 young refugees (aged 12 to 17), respectively, in 2020, the figures for Cameroon and Chad were 64 770 and 73 299, respectively. Table 1 also reports data on the total refugee population in WCA with similar characteristics in terms of heterogeneity.

**Methodology: Demand and provision for refugee HE**

A mixed method approach was employed to explore the data on refugee youth populations in WCA countries and their HE opportunities as well

as challenges in accessing quality HE. In addition to a review of the existing literature on refugee HE and its importance for sustainable development and refugee self-reliance, we conducted trend, distribution and convergence analyses. We also mapped refugee education opportunities as well as the challenges they face in accessing HE.

**Trend and Convergence Analysis (Demand)**

**Trend analysis:** To understand the urgency of the refugee crisis in WCA and the demand for HE, we initially plot UNHCR data on the refugee youth population by asylum country. This depicts the evolution of young refugee populations in each country over the period considered. This trend analysis is by definition a descriptive analysis. Therefore, although very informative, it is by no means appropriate to assess group dynamics and the presence of a convergence process. For this purpose, authors such as Johnson (2000) and Islam (1995) propose a conditional distribution and convergence analysis.

**Distribution and convergence analysis:** Besides the trend analysis, we use conditional distribution and convergence analyses in panel data framework to reach conclusions relating to the presence of a convergence process among the sample of countries considered. A convergence process is also known in the (economic) literature as a ‘catch-up’ process in which countries from the bottom of the sample and thus with relatively small young refugee populations, grow faster and tend to catch-up with the top-tier countries (see e.g., Sala-i-Martin, 1996; Quah, 1997). The latter instruments complement the trend analysis and are deemed appropriate to understand the group dynamics when assessing the refugee population data in WCA.

**Mapping Refugee Education Opportunities And Challenges (Provision)**

The assessment of the landscape of refugee education opportunities aims to provide a clear picture of country-specific provisions for refugee access to tertiary education, including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). To strengthen our background knowledge of the context and stakeholders of refugee education, we initially conducted three in-depth interviews with refugee students in Ghana in 2021. Lastly, we systematically reviewed country-level data related to refugee protection

law, pathways to HE and TVET for refugees (in asylum countries and third countries), scholarship opportunities and the challenges faced by refugee students.

**Analysing the Population Data**

**Trend Analysis**

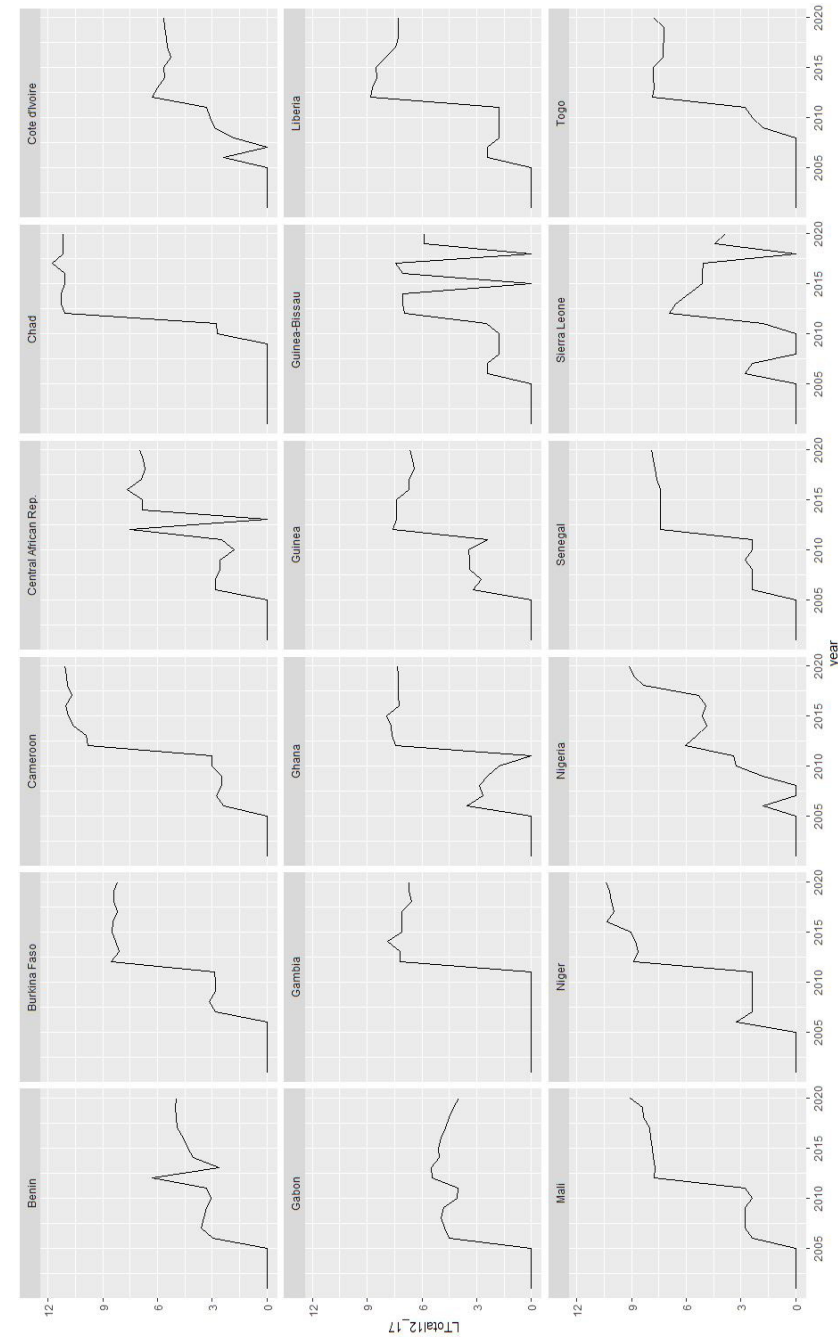
In addition to Table 1, which offers descriptive statistics, Figure 1 shows the evolution of the population of young refugees in each of the 18 WCA countries for which data is available.

Figure 1 shows comparable trends in the evolution of young refugee populations over the period 2001 to 2020 in most of the countries considered. This upward trend points to an increase in refugee populations in WCA. However, after 2012, flatter slopes are observed in some countries with large young refugee populations (e.g., Chad, Burkina Faso and Liberia), while steeper slopes are evident in Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger. More sophisticated analysis, as provided in the following sub-sections, is required to determine whether this signals a convergence process among WCA countries in terms of refugee populations.

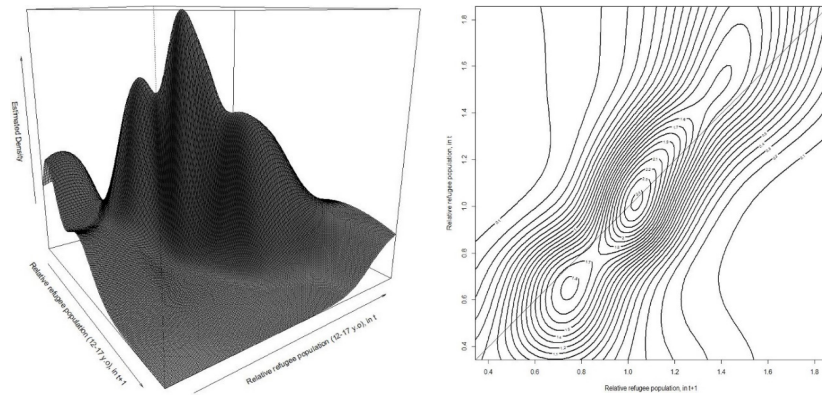
**Distribution and Convergence Analysis**

For the distribution analysis of the population of young refugees in WCA countries, we first observe the behaviour of the annual waves (cross-sections) in relation to the entire sample distribution. To do this, we standardise the observations (each data point) with respect to the annual mean of the entire sample. The analysis offers insights into the relative performance of the entire sample distribution.

Figure 2 displays the joint distribution of the refugee youth population (conditional density) and the corresponding contours, where we assume that the data generation process is of first order.<sup>2</sup> As noted by Quah (1997), Johnson (2000) and Lawson et al. (2020), this graphical/distribution approach is grounded in growth econometrics and complements the quantitative convergence analysis.



**Figure 1:** Evolution of young refugee populations in WCA countries (log-modified)  
Notes: The data was log-transformed for this plot.



a. Conditional density estimate                      a. Contour plot

**Figure 2:** Conditional distribution of young refugee population in WCA countries

In observing the contour plot in Figure 2-b, it should be noted that the observations which do not change their relative values from  $t-1$  to  $t$  lie on the 45°-line, while those below the 45°-line improve their relative position over time (increase in  $\ln$  conditionally to information in  $t$ ). For relative values less than 1.2, the observed peaks (high-density areas) are below the 45°-line, suggesting that the observations (countries) improved their relative position over time. This means that a shift towards higher values is observed in countries with low relative values (smaller refugee populations). Overall, the graphical illustration suggests a catch-up process (convergence) of refugee youth populations in WCA, where countries with smaller refugee populations are growing faster towards higher figures.

**Convergence Analysis**

Our last examination of refugee youth population data in WCA relies on a convergence analysis. As the dataset covers 18 countries observed over more than a year, we use the well-known panel data approach for the study of conditional convergence introduced by Islam (1995). It starts with the following regression model for a population  $y_{it}$  in a country  $i$  at time  $t$ , with  $\mu_i$ , where  $\mu_i$  stands for the individual effects and  $\epsilon_{it}$  are the error terms. The latter equation captures the local dynamics of the refugee population and describes its behaviour over time.

In the convergence literature (e.g. Johnson, 2000; Islam, 1995), the estimated value of  $\alpha$  is defined as  $\frac{\lambda}{\lambda + \tau}$ , where  $\lambda$  and  $\tau$  are respectively convergence rate and time span.<sup>3</sup> Upon estimating the parameters of the regression model, we recover  $\lambda$ , which, when statistically significant, supports the hypothesis of a convergence process. Table 2 reports the results of the estimation using different time spans.

**Table 2:** Convergence analysis for young refugee population data in WCA

Time span	1 year	2 years	5 years
Estimated $\alpha$	0.863*** (0.028)	0.932*** (0.027)	0.793*** (0.045)
Adj. R-Squared	0.736	0.877	0.804
F-stat (p-value)	972.968 (0.000)	1168.530 (0.000)	310.379 (0.000)
Corresponding	0.147*** (0.032)	0.035** (0.140)	0.046*** (0.011)

Notes: \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ . The specification test suggests a fixed-effects model. Robust std. errors are in brackets.

The results of the independent parameter estimations (Table 2), independently on time span, indicate that the model is globally significant as shown by the test statistics (F-statistics). Regarding the convergence hypothesis, the results show a significant convergence rate whether we consider 1-, 2- or 5-year time spans. This convergence analysis, together with our graphical illustrations (Figures 1 and 2), suggests that faster growth is ongoing in countries with relatively small or average young refugee populations, which will lead to a catch-up as noted by the distribution analysis.

In conclusion, our trend, distribution, and convergence assessments of refugee youth population data over the period 2001 to 2020 show a convergence process towards higher figures. In addition to the intensification of conflicts, the increase in insecurity issues in the Sahel region and climate change, as noted by Diarra (2012) and Abdalla (2009), this implies that rapidly growing populations of (young) refugees are to be expected in the WCA countries, at least in the near future.

As noted earlier, our working hypothesis considers increasing youth populations as a signal of increased demand for secondary and higher education (Cosentino et al., 2019). Therefore, the observed

trends and distributions raise questions relating to HE opportunities for young refugees in WCA. Specifically, what are the legal provisions surrounding refugee access to HE in WCA countries? What refugee-specific scholarship programmes are available in the asylum countries? What are the main challenges faced by refugees in accessing HE? The following section answers these questions.

**Refugees’ Tertiary Education Pathways**

The trend and distribution assessments revealed that the population of young refugees aged 12-17 in WCA countries is converging towards higher figures. Consequently, questions arise in relation to refugees’ access to HE in order to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all. In mapping the educational pathways of refugees in WCA, we examine the conditions surrounding refugee access to HE in each country as well as existing scholarships dedicated to refugees.

**Refugees’ Access to Higher Education**

Country-level legislation regulating refugees’ access to HE in most WCA countries is included in a Refugees Act or in national education policies or decrees. Our review of these for the 18 countries considered reveals not only a lack of clarity (no clear policy) but also of harmonisation among WCA countries in the manner in which refugees are treated in terms of access to HE. Table 3 summarises how each WCA country manages refugees’ access to HE, compared to primary and secondary education, where countries treat refugee students the same as nationals.

**Table 3:** Synopsis of legislation regulating refugees’ access to HE in WCA

	No less favourably than nationals	No clear policy
<b>Tertiary education</b>	Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo	Central African Rep., Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Cape Verde, Sao Tomé and Príncipe

**Notes:** In the “No clear policy” group, some countries do not have a ‘Refugee Act’ (e.g., Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire). Senegal has a Refugee Law which does not distinguish between the conditions surrounding access to secondary and tertiary education. As things stand (in 2022), in practice, refugee students in Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal are considered foreign students.

Overall, in most countries, refugees accessing public education are treated no less favourably than nationals in the same circumstances. More specifically, as stated by the Nigerian National Commission for Refugees (1989), the refugee legislation of most countries clearly obliges the authorities to “accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regard access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships”.

Compared to primary and secondary education, where most asylum countries in WCA accord refugees the same treatment as nationals (Table 3), some deviations are observed regarding HE, since no policy on refugee education was identified in countries such as Central African Republic and Côte d’Ivoire. In Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal, refugees are considered international students, implying higher tuition fees and no access to some social services (e.g., government scholarships).

**Refugee-Dedicated Scholarship Programmes**

In addition to the legal frameworks surrounding refugees’ access to HE in each country, some scholarship opportunities dedicated to refugees can be identified. However, our interviews with refugee students and UNHCR (2021b) suggest that demand far outstrips supply.

Of the existing scholarship programmes to support HE for refugees, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Scholarship Programme (known as the DAFI Programme) can be considered the most visible in WCA. In 2020, 46% of refugee students supported by the DAFI programme (3 407) lived and studied in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). UNHCR (2021b) figures indicate that 657 refugee students, or 19.3% of DAFI scholars identified in SSA, are located in the WCA region.

The landscape of existing scholarship programmes shows that in addition to country-specific scholarship provisions, for which refugees may be eligible depending on local legal frameworks, some transnational programmes dedicated to refugees are applicable to those residing in WCA. These include, among others, the Emergency Scholarship

**Table 4:** Overview of main refugee-dedicated scholarship programmes in WCA

Asylum countries	DAFI Prog.	DAAD Leadership for Africa Prog.	Refugee EdTech Prog. Emergency Scholarship Prog.	MasterCard Scholarship Prog.
Benin	✓		✓	✓
Burkina Faso	✓		✓	
Central African Republic			✓	
Chad	✓		✓	
Cameroon	✓	✓	✓	
Cote d'Ivoire	✓	✓	✓	
Gabon			✓	
Gambia	✓		✓	
Ghana	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guinea Bissau	✓		✓	
Guinea	✓		✓	
Liberia	✓		✓	
Mali	✓		✓	
Niger	✓	✓	✓	
Nigeria	✓		✓	
Senegal	✓	✓	✓	
Sierra Leone			✓	
Togo	✓		✓	

**Notes:** The superscript V indicates that the programme is available in the asylum country. Note that the data from Scholarship Opportunities for Refugees (2022) may change over time. An exhaustive, up-to-date list of refugee-dedicated programmes is available at: <https://services.unhcr.org/opportunities/>

Programme, the Refugee EdTech Program, the DAAD Leadership for Africa Programme, the DAFI Scholarship Programme and the MasterCard Foundation Scholarship Programme. It is worth pointing out that these programmes are not available in all WCA countries. For instance, the MasterCard Foundation Scholarship Programme is only available for refugees in Benin and Ghana (asylum countries). Furthermore, some scholarship programmes are available in the asylum country (e.g., the DAFI Programme) or a third country (e.g., DAAD Leadership for Africa). Table 4 shows that the main programmes relate to the country of asylum.

**Challenges Confronting Refugee Access to Existing Education Pathways**

The review of the existing literature and interviews with refugees helped to identify some intersecting challenges that refugees face in accessing

and completing HE in WCA countries. These include very limited scholarship programmes, language and entry barriers, economic issues, incompatible education systems among WCA countries, and the distance between refugee-hosting areas and campuses.

- **Limited Scholarship Programmes and Economic Barriers:** The evidence suggests that “in almost all DAFI country programmes, the demand for scholarships is far higher than the slots available” (UNHCR, 2021b). This signals the existence of very limited refugee-dedicated scholarship programmes and HE financing opportunities for refugees compared to demand. Consequently, thousands of young refugees who successfully complete secondary school and are motivated to access and complete tertiary education in WCA will face very strict selection criteria to obtain a scholarship, if any. In the context of WCA, where it is virtually impossible for refugees without financial support to access and self-fund graduate programmes, the lack of scholarship opportunities exacerbates the economic challenges faced by them and their families.

Furthermore, access to HE in WCA is hampered by high tuition fees, especially at nationally accredited private HE institutions. The cost of food, transportation, rent, textbooks and other material necessary for a good education programme increases the financial burden on university-ready youth populations without financial support. This also applies to refugees. As pointed out by refugee students, and Fynn (2010) and Tamrat and Habtemariam (2019), they struggle to exercise their right to education, especially HE:

*While there's not even food in the house. The parent does not have money to give stipends to children... They (young refugees) will definitely not go to school. [...] I know it was difficult because the main concern was how to cater for our shelter and our feeding, so the education part wasn't really a priority at that time. (Anonymous refugee student in Ghana)*

- **Language and Documentation Barriers:** Our interviews with refugee students and the existing literature indicate that language barriers significantly affect refugees' transition to HE in host countries with a different language from that of their country of origin. This echoes Tamrat and Habtemariam's (2019) findings on Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.

In WCA countries, where French, English, Arabic, Portuguese and



Spanish are the main languages of instruction, some young refugees are forced to return to an earlier/lower grade, as they face language barriers and lack the proper documentation to directly transition to HE in their asylum country. A refugee student in Ghana observed: 'It was difficult to even enrol in a school [...] due to language barriers so I had to go back. If you were able to express yourself and write in English, you're good to go [...] but the system was completely different.' (Anonymous refugee student, Ghana)

- **Security Issues in Asylum Countries:** UNHCR data and Essah et al. (2021) note that when people flee their homes due to war, social unrest, persecution or natural disasters, they mainly find refuge in neighbouring countries. Unfortunately, some face additional security challenges due to unrest in host countries, which prevent them from accessing education. This is the case for most refugees living in refugee-hosting camps in Mali, Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic, among others, where recurrent terrorist attacks are observed.

- **Other Challenges:** Other difficulties in accessing HE in WCA host countries include incompatible education systems between the asylum country and the country of origin and the long distances between refugee-hosting areas (the main refugee populations) and university campuses in some cases. These issues make it difficult for some refugee students to access available opportunities. Furthermore, besides cultural, ethnic and religious barriers, inadequate teaching material, unsuitable or overcrowded classrooms, discrimination against refugee students by the local population and non-recognition of prior studies reduce young refugees' chances of obtaining quality HE.

## Overall Assessment and Concluding Remarks

### Overall Assessment

- **Young Refugee Populations:** This article assessed the evolution of young refugee populations aged 12 to 17 over the period 2001 to 2020. Our rationale for doing so was twofold. Firstly, data on university-ready young refugees is almost non-existent, and it was virtually impossible to extract data on the age group over 18 from the Refugee Population Statistics Database. Secondly, using data on refugees aged 12-17 has the

advantage of capturing groups of refugees that are mainly in secondary education and likely to express demand for HE in the near future.

- **Increasing Youth Population Leads to Growing Demand for Education:** The assessment indicated that the young refugee population in WCA countries is increasing rapidly and converging towards higher figures. Moreover, our regression analysis supports a statistically significant convergence process over the considered period.

As noted in previous research (e.g., Hewitt, 2020; Perie, 1997; Fuller, 2004), the share of a country's youth population (5-29 years old) is an indicator of potential demand for school enrolment. In the same vein, this article considered the increasing population of young refugees as an indication of growing demand for social services, including education. Moreover, since the convergence hypothesis holds, our results suggest faster refugee population growth and thus, increasing demand for tertiary education by refugees in countries where a relatively small or average refugee population is currently observed.

Lastly, taking into account refugees' increasing demand for tertiary education, symbolised by the growing population of young refugees and UNHCR data indicating that globally only 5% of young refugees, and 1.2% in WCA, are effectively enrolled in HE, understanding (mapping) refugee HE opportunities/challenges is a research priority.

- **Mapping Refugee Education Opportunities and Challenges:** The urgency of the refugee situation in developing countries created by the increasing refugee population calls for immediate, practical and concrete action to facilitate their access to HE. Thus, systematically mapping the HE opportunities and challenges faced by refugees in exercising their right to education is a logical step in identifying existing and potential HE pathways for refugees.

The mapping of refugee education opportunities revealed that, in most WCA countries, refugees have access to tertiary education under the same conditions as nationals. The two exceptions are Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, where refugees are (for now) treated as international students, which is associated with higher tuition fees and no access to government scholarship programmes. With regard to scholarship schemes, the mapping exercise identified refugee-dedicated scholarships available

in the host countries in addition to opportunities that allow refugees to study in a third country (e.g., DAAD Leadership for Africa). Lastly, it is worth noting that although granting refugees access to education under the same conditions as nationals is commendable, the interviews with refugee students revealed that they confront severe socio-economic challenges in exercising their right to education.

### Concluding Remarks

This article analysed UNHCR data on refugee youth populations in WCA using a combination of graphical and inferential methodologies. Considering overall growing refugee youth populations as a proxy for their demand for education, it mapped HE opportunities for refugees in the 21 countries under consideration. In addition, it drew on interviews with refugee students to identify the most recurring challenges they face in exercising their right to education. The findings from the available literature, data from the country-specific Refugee Acts, available refugee-dedicated scholarship programmes and the challenges identified inform the following remarks.

Our analysis indicates that, although an indispensable prerequisite, granting refugees access to education under the same conditions as nationals in WCA countries is not a sufficient measure of equity, as young refugees are differently positioned to transform such opportunities into valued outcomes. Moreover, since some young refugees face linguistic barriers and have access to limited information on the various policies, opportunities and laws surrounding refugee education in their host country, education leaders, international organisations and decision-makers are encouraged to take action to ease refugees' transition into the HE system in their respective countries in WCA. This should include institutional support to learn the local language of instruction, counsellors to help refugee students navigate the educational system and financial support to fund access to quality HE.

Regarding scholarship opportunities, our data and analysis show that refugee-dedicated programmes are very limited compared to demand. Since most refugee students already face financial burdens in their respective host countries, higher tuition fees, especially at private HE institutions, and the cost of educational material prevent refugees from exercising their right to tertiary education in WCA. Hence, the education

authorities and funders of refugee scholarship programmes should increase the number of refugee-dedicated scholarship programmes and, where feasible, offer reduced tuition fees or even exempt refugees from HE tuition fees. In addition, ensuring that refugee-focused policies are adhered to in both public and private HE institutions in WCA countries would curtail the economic barriers to accessing HE.

Lastly, a review of the literature on refugee education policies in industrialised countries assisted in identifying (complementary) HE pathways that are lacking in the African context, and that could help improve young refugees' access to tertiary education within the WCA region. The UNHCR defines complementary education pathways for admission as safe, regulated avenues that complement resettlement and provide refugee students with a lawful stay in a third country. Developing similar frameworks within the WCA region will increase education opportunities for refugee students, especially in settings where these are very limited. In order to initiate this and facilitate refugees' lawful stay in a third country within WCA for education purposes, the regional network of UNHCR partners and the public authorities should harness existing regional economic blocs and corresponding agreements that enable entry, residence and establishment of citizens from member states in WCA.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 The age groups, as collated by UNHCR (0-4, 5-11, 12-17 and 18-59 years old), do not dissociate the 18-30 group that can be considered as a proxy for HE-ready refugees.
- 2 A process is said to be of first-order when the observations at date depend on the values observed at .
- 3 The time span here refers to the period of time between observations. Originally, the refugee population data is an annual observation, thus  $\tau = 1$ . We consider different time spans in the data analysis, as such a process can help avoid short term disturbances.