International Students Overcoming War

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The Importance of Developing a Complementary Education Pathway for Qualified Refugees who would be Eligible for Resettlement While Accessing Higher Education

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY (UNGA)

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Hello, I'm Nazillah, a woman from Afghanistan. I'm just finishing my qualifying year and I will start my masters in global justice, religion and culture. I wish to become a citizen of Canada, study my PHD in Canada and become a wonderful immigration lawyer and work in Canada.

1. What Are Complementary Education Pathways?

Throughout the history of the world, millions of people have been forced to leave the lands they considered home due to war, persecution, legal restrictions, and violence. Resettlement has been considered one of the most important and vital solutions for refugees; however, each year it includes less than one percent of the world's refugee population (UNHCR, 2025). A fundamental issue in this context is that refugees' access to higher education remains severely limited. Only about 9 percent of refugees worldwide can access higher education (OECD, 2023).

However, the world continues to develop, and new solutions are constantly being explored. Complementary education pathways offer a response to both challenges. Complementary education pathways are safe and legal routes that allow refugees to move from a country of asylum to a third country to pursue higher education, while continuing to benefit from international protection (UNHCR, 2019a). These pathways do not replace resettlement or asylum; rather, they complement them and function as additional supportive solutions within the framework of the *Global Compact on Refugees* (UNHCR, 2019a).

The Global Compact on Refugees defines complementary pathways as additional legal channels for admission that complement existing resettlement and asylum systems. These pathways include education, labor, and family reunification pathways (UNHCR, 2019a). Complementary pathways provide a foundation for building a refugee's future, as education can be a key tool for empowerment and social participation. For those already eligible for resettlement, education pathways serve as a stepping stone, opening access to higher education while supporting protection and stability (UNHCR, 2025).

Operational guidelines issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) emphasize that education pathways should be structured as qualifications-based pathways that preserve access to asylum, incorporate clear protection safeguards, and contribute to durable solutions for refugees (UNHCR, n.d.-b; UNHCR, 2025). Specifically, these pathways should respect refugees' right to seek asylum while providing protection safeguards and, where possible, lead to long-term outcomes such as permanent residence or resettlement (UNHCR, 2025).

Similarly, the Global Task Force on Refugee Education Pathways to Third Countries defines complementary education pathways as education-based admission routes that must incorporate protection safeguards, responsibility-sharing, and durable solutions, with the aim of expanding refugees' access to higher education while upholding international protection principles (Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways, 2022).

2. Why Should Complementary Education Pathways Receive Attention?

Forced displacement is not merely a political crisis requiring the attention of governments around the world; it is a human experience in which people's lives, futures, and sense of security are lost amid conflict and political instability. For many refugees, leaving home does not mark the end of hardship, but rather the beginning of a prolonged period of uncertainty and continuous efforts to rebuild life under unpredictable conditions. In such circumstances, the search for solutions that can preserve human dignity, security, and hope for the future becomes one of the central questions in discussions of refugee protection. Within this context, the situation of Afghan women stands as a clear example of this reality; for many of them, exclusion from higher education is not merely an educational interruption, but represents the loss of identity, future, and the right to choose one's own life.

At the same time, refugees' access to higher education remains alarmingly low. According to sources from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, only about 9 percent of refugees worldwide are enrolled in higher education, compared to a global average of more than 40 percent (OECD, 2023). This significantly limits refugees' active participation in society. In response, the Global Compact on Refugees adopted in 2018 called on states to expand complementary pathways particularly education pathways as part of a broader responsibility-sharing approach. Education pathways were further emphasized during the *Global Refugee Forum*, where governments, universities, and international organizations committed to increasing refugees' access to higher education (UNESCO, 2023).

Despite these commitments, academic research shows that tensions remain between refugee protection and educational mobility. Bratanova (2025) notes that education pathways often operate "at the intersection of migration management and refugee protection," highlighting the need for careful and deliberate policy design.2

The creation of complementary education pathways for refugees who are already eligible for resettlement offers several important advantages.

1. **Expand safe and legal routes:** Education pathways complement resettlement, reducing reliance on dangerous and irregular migration while upholding international protection obligations (OECD, 2023).
2. **Strengthen human dignity and agency:** Refugees who access higher education gain skills, credentials, and opportunities to contribute positively to host societies both socially and economically (UNHCR, 2025).
3. **Support responsibility-sharing:** By involving universities, communities, and governments in third countries, the burden of refugee protection is not borne solely by countries of first asylum (UNHCR, 2025).

4. **Align with global development and education goals:** Expanding refugees' access to higher education supports inclusion, economic participation, and social cohesion, reflecting broader Sustainable Development Goals commitments (UNESCO, 2023).

However, realizing these benefits depends on the existence of strong protection safeguards to achieve the intended outcomes.

3. Existing Models of Complementary Education Pathways

Several countries and universities have implemented complementary education pathways (CEPs) to support refugees in accessing higher education. These programs provide education while linking, in some cases, to resettlement or protection frameworks.

Canada

1. **World University Service of Canada – Student Refugee Program (SRP)**
   - Resettlement-focused pathway; students are identified outside Canada, often in refugee camps.
   - Offers scholarships, housing, academic advising, and social integration support.
   - Students enter as resettled refugees, gaining permanent residence alongside education (World University Service of Canada, n.d.).
2. **ISOW – International Students Overcoming War**
   - University-based program at Wilfrid Laurier University for students whose education was disrupted by war or conflict.
   - Provides full tuition, living support, academic guidance, and mental health assistance.
   - Students enter on study permits; legal status is tied to enrollment rather than refugee protection (ISOW, n.d.).

Spain

- **Education Mobility Pathway – University of Barcelona**
- Scholarships, academic support, and recognition of prior learning for refugee students.
- Students enter on study visas rather than resettlement pathways, so protection is limited (Bratanova, 2025).

Japan

- Programs include **Japan Education Pathways (JEP)**, **Japan-Ukraine University Pathways**, and **Toshizo Watanabe International Scholarship (Pathways Japan)**.

- Provide tuition support, academic and language preparation, and integration assistance into university communities.
- Students usually enter Japan on student visas; protection is temporary and conditional on enrollment and academic performance (Refugee Education Japan, n.d.; Pathways Japan, n.d.; Husseini, 2025).

Germany

- **DAFI and DAAD Refugee Scholarships**
- Offer access to higher education through scholarships, tuition coverage, and academic guidance.
- Pathways are linked to protection frameworks, helping students maintain legal status and pursue durable solutions (UNHCR, n.d.-a; EUAA, 2022).

Philippines

- Provides Rohingya refugees with access to higher education through partnerships with universities such as **Columban College, De La Salle Araneta University, St. Louis University, and Tarlac State University**(UNHCR Philippines, n.d.).
- Offers **tuition support, scholarships, academic guidance, and integration assistance**.
- Students study under **safe, regulated pathways**; legal status is tied to program enrollment rather than formal resettlement (UNHCR Philippines, 2022).

Across these national and institutional models, a key distinction emerges between pathways that are directly linked to refugee protection frameworks and those that rely primarily on student mobility regimes. Programs such as Canada's Student Refugee Program and Germany's DAFI scholarships integrate education with resettlement or recognized protection status, offering greater legal stability and clearer durable solutions. In contrast, visa-based pathways in countries such as Japan and Spain expand access to higher education but often leave students' protection conditional on enrollment and academic performance. While all models contribute to expanding access, those embedded within protection frameworks more effectively balance educational opportunity with long-term security, highlighting the importance of aligning education pathways with refugee protection mechanisms.

4. Critical Perspectives and Challenges

While CEPs expand access to education, several challenges remain:

- **Legal status:** Many programs rely on student visas rather than resettlement, leaving refugees' protection dependent on enrollment (Husseini, 2025; Bratanova, 2025).
- **Equity and access:** Selection criteria such as prior academic achievement, language proficiency, or uninterrupted schooling histories can unintentionally exclude refugees from marginalized backgrounds, including those affected by prolonged displacement, conflict-related educational disruption, or limited access to language training (Fratzke et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2019c)
- **Academic and social pressures:** Students often face language barriers, disrupted prior education, and high expectations from host institutions (Husseini, 2025; Brunner et al., 2025).
- **Funding and institutional capacity:** Unequal support across countries or universities can limit opportunities; programs without adequate mentorship or financial support risk leaving students isolated (Sabchev et al., 2023).
- **Integration with protection frameworks:** Limited coordination between education pathways and refugee protection reduces the potential for durable solutions (Husseini, 2025; UNHCR, 2024).

Taken together, these challenges reveal a fundamental tension at the heart of complementary education pathways: the balance between educational mobility and refugee protection. While CEPs expand access to higher education, pathways that rely heavily on student visa regimes risk reproducing legal precarity rather than alleviating it. Refugee students may face the threat of losing legal status due to academic failure, health issues, or financial hardship, factors that are often beyond their control. At the same time, selective admission criteria and uneven institutional support can exclude the most vulnerable refugees, undermining equity goals. Without sustained funding and strong coordination between education providers and protection actors, CEPs risk functioning as isolated scholarship schemes rather than durable solutions. These challenges underscore the need for policy frameworks that explicitly integrate protection safeguards into the design and implementation of education pathways. CEPs are valuable for providing education and future opportunities, but must be designed as **rights-based, protection-linked pathways**, not just mobility or scholarship schemes.

If complementary education pathways are designed without equity considerations, they risk benefiting only a small, highly qualified segment of the refugee population. For UNGA delegates, this raises concerns about fairness, responsibility-sharing, and alignment with the Global Compact on Refugees. Addressing these gaps allows member states to propose policies that balance academic standards with flexibility, expand preparatory programs, and ensure that education pathways do not replace, but rather complement existing protection mechanisms (Fratzke et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2019c).

5. Policy Gaps and Areas for Improvement

Despite progress, **Complementary Education Pathways (CEPs)** face several policy gaps:

- **Limited protection guarantees:** Many programs rely on student visas rather than refugee status, so students' legal security depends on continued enrollment (Husseini, 2025; Bratanova, 2025).
- **Inconsistent recognition of qualifications:** Refugees' prior learning is often not fully recognized, creating barriers to higher education access, despite UNHCR guidance calling for flexible and alternative credential recognition mechanisms within qualifications-based pathways (UNHCR, n.d.-b; UNHCR, 2025).
- **Weak integration with resettlement systems:** Education pathways are not always linked to protection frameworks, reducing durable solutions. Students may lose legal status or face uncertainty after graduation if pathways are not coordinated with asylum or resettlement mechanisms (Husseini, 2025; UNHCR, 2024).
- **Funding and scale limitations:** Many CEPs operate on short-term or project-based funding, limiting expansion and continuity (Sabchev et al., 2023; Fratzke et al., 2021).
- **Cross-country inconsistencies:** Policies differ widely across regions, making it difficult for refugees to access CEPs consistently (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022; Kerwin & Schrag, 2023).

Addressing these gaps is essential to make CEPs **fair, sustainable, and accessible** to more refugee students worldwide.

6. Recommendations for the United Nations General Assembly

Based on these gaps, the UNGA could:

- **Reaffirm CEPs as complementary to resettlement**, ensuring students retain secure refugee status while studying (UNHCR, 2019a; Husseini, 2025).
- **Harmonize policies across countries**, including admission, scholarship, and protection frameworks, to reduce inequities (Kerwin & Schrag, 2023; European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).
- **Promote partnerships** between governments, universities, civil society, and communities to provide comprehensive academic and social support (Miaci & Giudici, 2022; UNHCR, 2019b).
- **Increase funding and sustainable financing** so pathways can expand to meet global refugee education needs (Sabchev et al., 2023; Fratzke et al., 2021).
- **Monitor and evaluate outcomes** to ensure CEPs improve both protection and academic success for refugee students (Kerwin & Schrag, 2023; UNHCR, 2019b).

7. Conclusion

Complementary Education Pathways combine protection, education, and international responsibility-sharing. When implemented effectively, CEPs allow refugees to:

- Continue their education and rebuild their lives.
- Contribute skills to host societies.
- Participate meaningfully in their communities.

To maximize impact, CEPs must:

- Maintain legal protection alongside educational access (UNHCR, 2019a; Husseini, 2025).
- Address policy gaps and inequities (Bratanova, 2025; Kerwin & Schrag, 2023).
- Be supported by long-term funding and institutional commitment (Sabchev et al., 2023; Fratzke et al., 2021).
- Encourage collaboration across states, universities, and civil society (Miaci & Giudici, 2022; UNHCR, 2019b).

In conclusion, CEPs are a critical tool for UNGA member states to expand safe, educational, and protective opportunities for refugees, supporting global commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2019a; Husseini, 2025; Bratanova, 2025; Kerwin & Schrag, 2023; Sabchev et al., 2023; Miaci & Giudici, 2022).

8. Tasks of the Committee

As the primary deliberative body of the United Nations, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) is responsible for setting global norms, fostering political commitment, and promoting responsibility-sharing among member states. While UNGA does not implement Complementary Education Pathways (CEPs) directly, it plays a key role in shaping how states design, fund, and expand these pathways through resolutions, forums, and political declarations, including those linked to the Global Compact on Refugees. The committee's task is to encourage coordinated, realistic, and rights-based approaches that support the expansion of CEPs while respecting refugee rights and national capacities.

More information can be found here: https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml

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