CLOSING THE HIGHER EDUCATION GAP

Theory of Change



GLOBAL UNIVERSITY ACADEMY

CONTENTS

Introduction 3

Overarching problem summarised 4

Global University Academy goal and ambition 5

Theory of Change diagram 6

Theory of Change high-level outcomes presentation 8

Existing opportunities 14

GUA solution and eco-system 17

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Introduction

Global displacement has reached an all-time high, with over 122.6 million people forcibly displaced due to conflict, climate change, and economic instability. Among them, millions face significant barriers to accessing higher education, despite the myriad of benefits it has been found to offer displaced people, including enhanced skills and job opportunities needed for all durable solutions, social inclusion into their host communities, and long term resilience and hope for the future. Currently, only 9% of refugees worldwide are enrolled in higher education, which is a direct result of structural challenges such as high costs, legal restrictions on access to education, higher education administrative barriers, and inflexible programme formats and structures that fail to adapt to their specific needs.

Existing higher education initiatives for displaced populations, ranging from scholarships to online or blended courses, have made significant progress in expanding access to quality learning opportunities through innovative design and implementation strategies. While scholarship programmes have provided much needed opportunities to thousands of displaced learners, they still reach only a fraction of those in need. Online and blended learning models have connected millions of students worldwide to higher education, and several programmes have successfully designed innovative ways to offer crucial elements, such as personalised academic and psychosocial support, peer and group learning, and relevant methods and content.

The Global University Academy (GUA) seeks to build upon these achievements, acknowledging that quality higher education for displaced learners must go beyond extending mere access. To do this, the GUA aims to establish an innovative and sustainable model that incorporates displaced communities, local and national institutions, and international partners with a proven track record of success in designing innovative higher education solutions in contexts of displacement.

The GUA model is rooted in the understanding that lifelong learning is a human right for all.



Photo: UNHCR/Claire Thomas

Overarching problem summarised

Too many refugees and displaced persons are stranded in transit countries, camps or other settings where they have very limited or no options to study beyond secondary school and acquire the necessary skills for their successful adaptation and integration into their current or future host countries. The GUA's use of the terms 'refugees' and 'displaced' people may refer to individuals who have been forced to move across or within borders due to conflict, persecution, disasters, or other crises, encompassing the following categories: refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, and others in refugee-like or undocumented situations. The GUA also includes members of host communities facing systemic and other barriers to higher education access, recognising that many of the structural challenges affecting displaced learners also impact marginalised local populations.

The overarching problem addressed in this document is the lack of access to quality higher education and lifelong learning opportunities providing adequate support mechanisms for most of the world's refugees and displaced people and other vulnerable groups.

Global University Academy
Goal and ambition

By joining the expertise and resources of universities, practitioners, and refugee and displaced communities, the core purpose of the GUA is to develop a scalable and collaborative approach towards providing internationally recognised higher education courses and degrees for displaced learners, and their local communities. It seeks to develop new, improved responses to both protracted crises in which displaced people find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo, and immediate emergencies affecting these people and marginalised local communities.

The aim is to develop a scalable education model of blended course delivery that can support displaced learners in different parts of the world, close to where they reside. This means supporting refugees to develop their resilience, wherever they live, including in refugee camps, promoting their social and economic integration into host communities, and/or enabling them to return successfully to their home country or to relocate to third country with skills facilitating their (re) integration.

Overcoming identified barriers, the GUA aims to complement or improve existing solutions by promoting joint responsibility, complementarity and knowledge-sharing between both global and host country institutions, as well a framework to collaborate across sectors.

The GUA aims to leverage lessons learned to create an innovative, inclusive and sustainable approach to higher education for displaced students. This will allow them to access higher education programmes wherever they are, which are relevant to their needs as well as their current or future jobs or studies opportunities - without discrimination of gender, background, age, or economic or family situation.

Central to this ambition is a model built on shared ownership, where displaced learners and their communities are not only beneficiaries but co-creators. Refugees must play a meaningful role in shaping the design, implementation, and evaluation of higher education offers to ensure that these initiatives reflect their lived realities and aspirations.

The ambition of the GUA is to meet displaced learners' academic and personal needs through contextualised educational programmes.

Providing support to overcome personal barriers
Support must be provided to overcome personal barriers such as trauma, family separation or loss, weak sense of belonging, lack of motivation, and hopelessness.

Providing support to overcome socio-economical barriers
Support must be provided to overcome social, economic and cultural barriers such as:

- conflicting activities with livelihoods, and caretaking
- socio-cultural barriers relating to gender roles, religious norms, and material barriers
- access barriers relating to competition for expenditures, and lack of information

Ensuring the social aspect of education
We must ensure the social aspect of education by providing opportunities to build social and emotional learning, social capital, and collaborative skills through peer-to-peer learning, group projects, mentorship, and a supportive learning ecosystem.

In order to reach more learners, the GUA higher education offer should:

- Be transferrable and adaptable to multiple contexts and countries
- Ensure efficient collaboration between a diverse set of actors
- Use technology to amplify human effort and fill gaps
- Build consensus and get support from decision-makers

The GUA aims to address this challenge by establishing an inclusive, flexible, and sustainable higher education framework that balances the tensions of scalability and contextualised support through strong partnerships.

The following section outlines the changes needed, through inter-related outcomes, focusing on those the GUA can most contribute to.

Theory of Change Diagram

A theory of change is a detailed, context-specific articulation of how we 'theorise' change will happen under a programm.

The objective is to describe how and why a purpose or outcome is expected to be achieved in a particular context.

The aim of the GUA is to contribute to improving refugees' and forcibly displaced peoples':



Sustainable voluntary return or relocation



Self-development and self-reliance



Social and economic integration



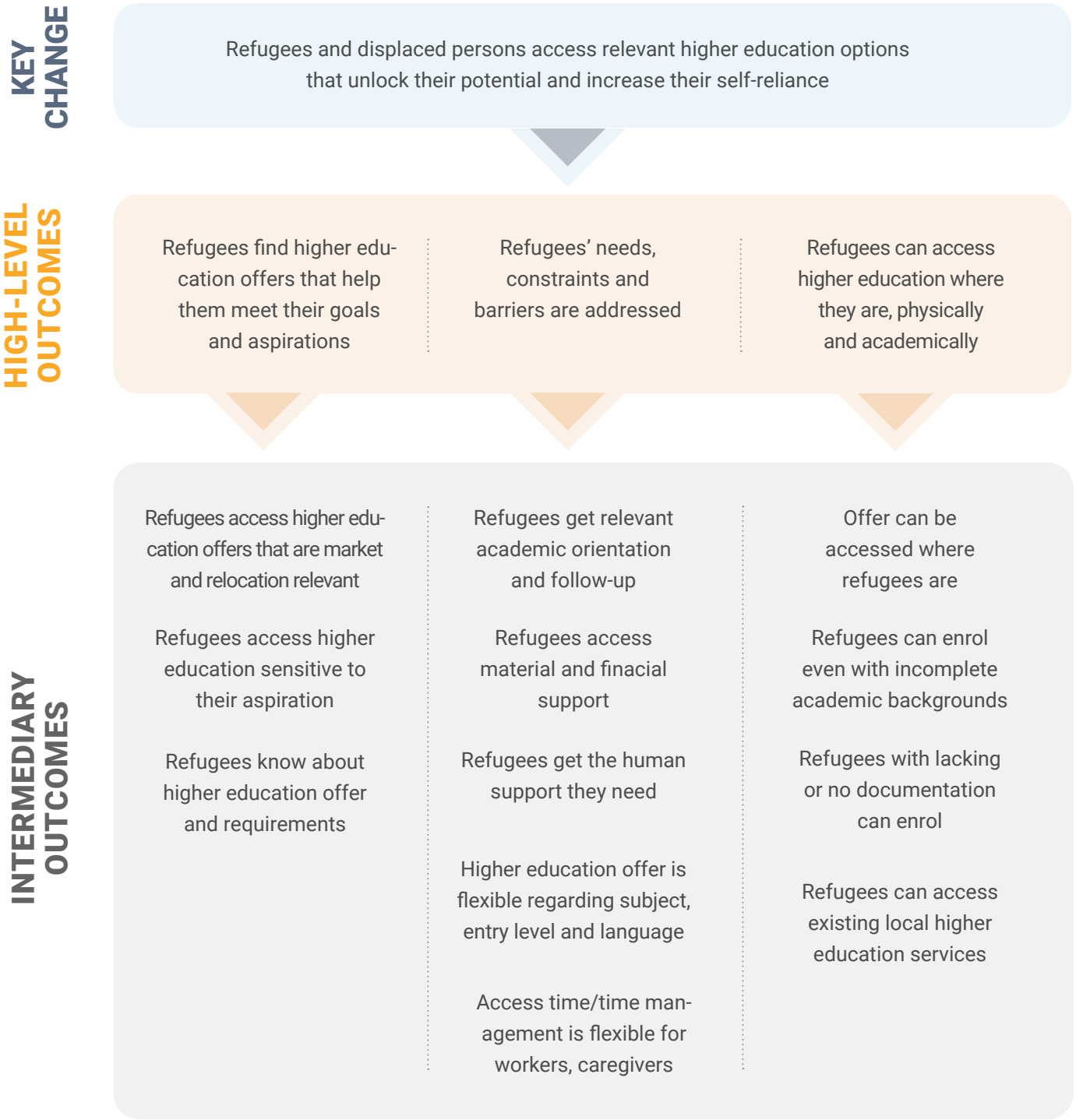
Possibilities for citizenship and contribution to sustainable development

Specifically, we will contribute to this change by increasing refugees and displaced persons access to relevant higher education options that unlock their potential and increase their self-reliance.

The theory of change for the GUA is rooted in the understanding that displaced individuals' self-reliance and ability to contribute to society is greatly enhanced when they have access to quality higher education opportunities. However, this necessitates addressing personal and structural barriers, providing relevant educational offers, promoting equity, and establishing sustainable collaboration between actors at all levels, especially displaced communities themselves.

Figure 1 highlights 3 high-level outcomes identified as key for GUA to meet this goal. Each of them requires intermediary outcomes and steps to materialise. Not all of these will be integrated in the GUA model of action, as the GUA will not have the capacity to act on all areas.

Figure 1.



Theory of Change high-level outcomes presentation

OUTCOME 1

Refugees find higher education offers that help them meet their goals and aspirations

Why? Because higher education and lifelong learning programmes are not adequate for refugees to have an economically secure and dignified future.

Refugees' goals may include getting a decent job in their location, qualify for relocation, or contribute to rebuilding efforts in their country of origin, but the systems and structures of learning programmes are often disconnected from local communities and/or do not always reflect what students need and want from their education.

- Higher education offers are not always designed or delivered with a learner-centred approach (e.g. often lacking important collaborative and peer-learning elements), which can lead to limited engagement, inadequate support, and ultimately, high dropout rates.
- Higher education offers available are not always relevant (e.g. culturally, linguistically, trauma-informed).
- Proper information and career guidance are not always available or accessible.

To address these challenges and ensure alignment between higher education offers and refugee needs and aspirations, participatory design with displaced learners must be systematically included in course and programmme development processes.

Additionally, higher education offers must be tied to tangible outcomes, including employment opportunities, community contribution, or continued education. These outcomes should support learners' social and economic integration in a variety of settings, whether in their host country, country of origin, or through transnational or third-country pathways, as defined by the aspirations and realities of displaced learners themselves.

Figure 2 illustrates the ways higher education offers may address the needs and aspirations of refugee and displaced learners, and identified outputs and activities to achieve the high level outcome.

Figure 2.

Refugees access higher education offers that unlock their potential and increase their self-reliance

The offers are market, return and relocation relevant	The offers are sensitive to their aspirations	Information about the offers and requirements are easily accessible
Overview of, and access to job market	User-centred participatory programme development	Accessible data on relevant offers and actors
Collaboration with relevant stakeholders including employers	Connection with local communities	Relevant and structured information in their languages
	Locally and refugee led evaluations	

OUTCOME 2

Refugees' practical, social and psychological learning needs, constraints and barriers are addressed

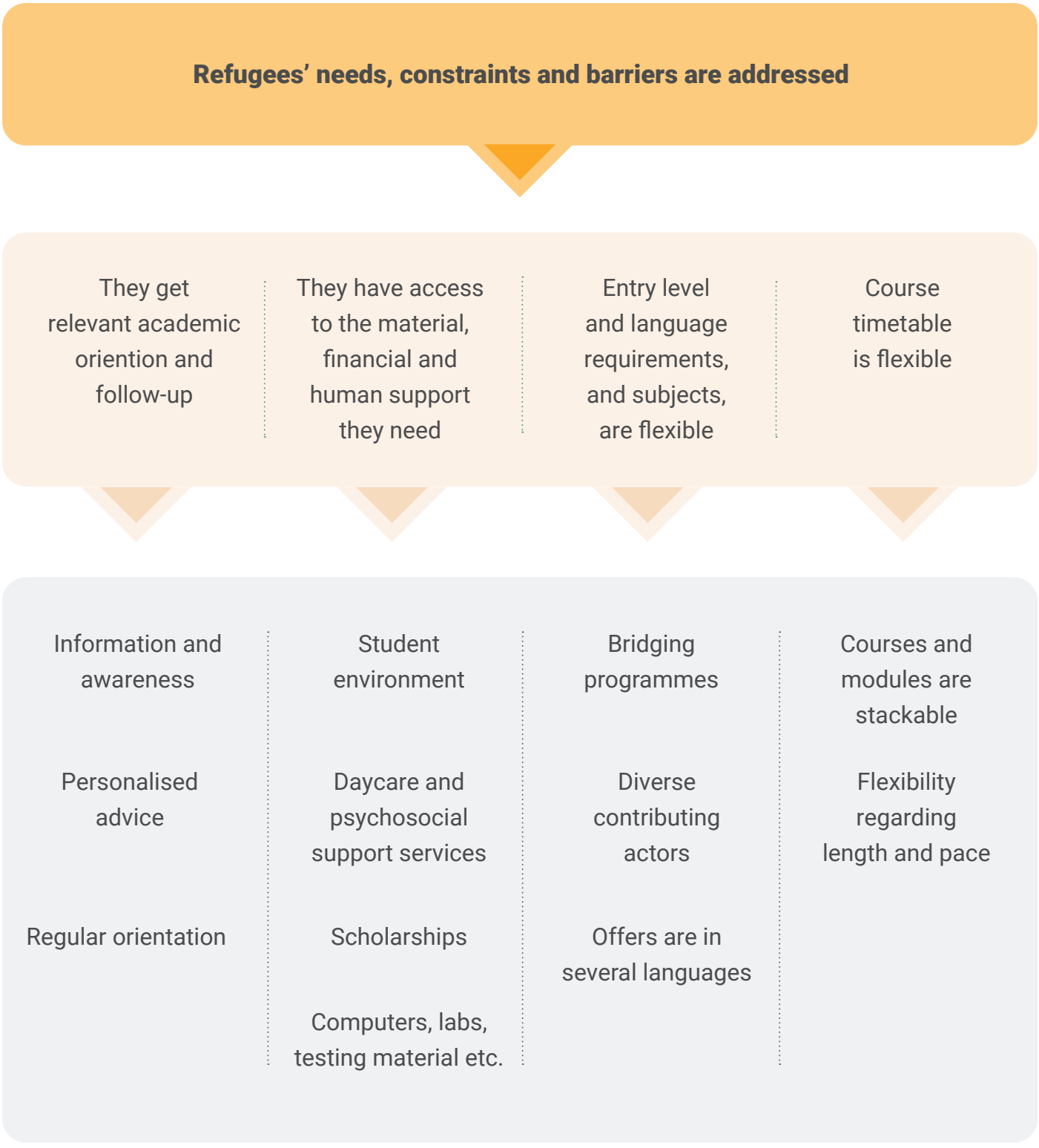
Why? Because migrants and refugees face specific challenges, such as:

- Lack of stability and uncertainty regarding the future in the host country; learning time-line is particularly uncertain
- Lack or loss of documentation of administrative and/or academic situation, or lack of validation or equivalency of documents (legal, procedural barriers, discriminatory practices, etc.)
- Lack of knowledge about the local context, services available and/or labour market needs
- Lack of fluency in host country languages and language of instruction
- Mental health issues (trauma, anxiety), psychological and social barriers that impair engaging in higher education
- Conflicting financial and practical priorities for refugees who have caregiving responsibility, and must work to earn a living
- Need for adequate academic support, tutoring and mentoring that is not available to them
- Need for offers that are designed to address the context-specific needs of students, including the availability of resources and key logistical challenges, such as limited access to reliable internet connectivity, laptops and devices, and distance to learning hubs.

In addition to academic support, students must also be provided with trauma-informed services, peer support systems, and safe spaces to address the mental health and psychosocial challenges of displacement. These services should be embedded into the core programme design, not treated as optional or peripheral.

Figure 3 outlines the ways refugees' needs, constraints, and barriers may be addressed, and identified outputs and activities to achieve the high level outcome.

Figure 3.


Refugees' needs, constraints and barriers are addressed
They get relevant academic orientation and follow-up
They have access to the material, financial and human support they need
Entry level and language requirements, and subjects, are flexible
Course timetable is flexible
Information and awareness
Personalised advice
Regular orientation
Student environment
Daycare and psychosocial support services
Scholarships
Computers, labs, testing material etc.
Bridging programmes
Diverse contributing actors
Offers are in several languages
Courses and modules are stackable
Flexibility regarding length and pace

OUTCOME 3

Refugees access higher education where they are, physically and academically

Why? Because refugees live in challenging environments or temporary shelters, often with low levels of services. And, because their academic background is very diverse and sometimes interrupted. Higher education pathways need to meet them where they are.

- Infrastructure like adequate premises, stable electric power, and internet connection might be lacking
- Access to personal devices to conduct learning activities, including laptops and smartphones, may be limited
- Movement might be complicated, sometimes refugees live in separate/remote areas (even from higher education learning hubs)
- They might have interrupted their studies, or not yet started
- They might have studied in other languages, in a different academic system and conditions
- They might lack documentation or have complex status administrative situation

Figure 4 illustrates how to ensure that higher education offers are designed for where the refugees are both physically and academically, and identified outputs and activities to achieve the high level outcome.

Figure 4.

Refugees can access higher education where they are physically and academically

Offers can be accessed where they are	They can enrol with incomplete academic back-ground	They can enrol with incomplete or no documentation	They can access local higher education services
Stable infrastructure	Flexible enrolment criteria	Simplified entry procedures and criteria	Local higher edu-cation institutions target refugees
Fexible, adapted on/offline access	System for determining academic level		Adapted academic pathways
Safe and equitable physical access			Sustainable funding for institutions and students

Existing opportunities

The following lists existing opportunities that may contribute to the realisation of the high-level outcomes:

- **Humanitarian clusters and organisations operating across multiple sectors commonly employ refugee volunteers in camp settings,** including health, education, protection, livelihoods, WASH, and shelter, among others. NGO-operated capacity building programmes are designed to train volunteers in sector-specific knowledge and skills, though these often lack accreditation. There is a clear opportunity for higher education institutions to collaborate with NGOs to enhance both the quality of the programmes and value added for refugee volunteers through access to university credits.
- **The digital transformation of the higher education sector continues to spread across the globe at rapid speeds**, disrupting traditional systems and overcoming common barriers to educational access such as geographical location and high costs. Likewise, the recent advancement of artificial intelligence tools in education shows great potential to support learning in displacement contexts by tailoring learning support and content to individual needs, enhancing student autonomy, and offering crucial aid for educators, among many others. However, serious ethical and education-related concerns have also been highlighted. Digital educational technologies, including AI, can help extend access to quality higher education, though they must be designed and implemented ethically and in tandem with adequate support mechanisms.
- **Connected learning spaces or 'hubs' exist today** in many refugee camps, where several higher education institutions offer blended and online programmes. These are often operated by implementing partners, such as NGOs that can access designated funding for related humanitarian programming. The existing physical hubs, equipped with digital infrastructure and open to collaboration in their day-to-day operations, offer an opportunity for higher education institutions seeking to deliver blended or online programmes in such contexts.
- **There is high training demand in many refugee camp settings and other displacement contexts.** Refugee camps and other areas inhabited by displaced communities function as microcosms of broader society, requiring services and programmes across all sectors, including public health, mental health, gender and disability studies, human rights, social work, inclusive education, early childhood development, water and sanitation, environmental studies, clean energies, entrepreneurship, digital economy, sustainable agro-development, project management, leadership, media and communication, and others. In cooperation with governments, NGOs and other local organisations often serve to meet these comprehensive needs, often relying on trained professionals and volunteers from local host-country and refugee communities to ensure effective and sustainable programme implementation. This need for trained individuals presents a strong opportunity for universities to collaborate with organisations operating in these locations to develop and implement quality and practical higher education training programmes across all fields.



Photo: UNHCR/Yousef Alhariri

Additional opportunities lie in the ecosystem of actors involved or concerned by displaced persons higher education:

- **Many existing higher education programmes rolled out in connected learning spaces in refugee camps have years of experience, offering an opportunity for knowledge-sharing and implementing partnerships.** These are often operated in partnership with NGOs, including national and local refugee and community-based organisations. Financing has traditionally been available for such programmes through established humanitarian networks, though international trends suggest a widening gap between the ever-increasing demand for humanitarian assistance and the funding they receive. This makes the call for collaborative responsibility sharing and lower costs in programme design and implementation even more urgent. For universities willing to invest in those spaces and programmes, there is an opportunity to develop innovative pedagogic and research projects together with local actors of the refugee camps' ecosystems.

- **Universities around the world are increasingly interested in collaborating in an equitable way.** This collaboration is seen to promote knowledge production and sharing, inspire creative solutions to local and global challenges, and enhance higher education institutions' global competitiveness. It can also aid in developing innovative educational systems and capacities, such as digital pedagogies, and enable collateral research opportunities. Such partnerships also facilitate access to international funding.

- **GUA university members already have a wealth of available free online courses** that could be offered as part of a recognised, credit-bearing and supportive structure offering coherent learning journeys to refugee students.

Through the establishment of a strong network of international and local universities and organisational partners, alongside a structured framework for stackable learning pathways, displaced communities worldwide could gain access to existing online higher education courses and programmes that align with their needs and aspirations. To ensure the quality of such learning opportunities, however, this access would necessarily include intentionally designed support mechanisms.

- **There is a willingness by university students to be more engaged in sustainable development and equitable cooperation.** Connected learning pedagogy relies partly on peer-to-peer learning pedagogy where more advanced students can tutor new learners. This creates opportunities for students willing to commit as tutors, trainees or/and for their own research assignments.



Photo: Student of InZone –
University of Geneva connected learning center

GUA solution and eco-system

The GUA solution founding principles

The GUA approach aligns with current international humanitarian and development commitments and objectives, incorporating more equitable partnerships and building capacities of local and national stakeholders in higher education programme design and implementation.

The GUA collaborative structure will deliver higher education offers that are aligned with local markets and educational pathways in addition to learners' needs and aspirations, thus ensuring their relevance and utility.

Through strong partnerships, flexible learning formats, and strengthened support systems, the GUA model seeks to expand access to quality higher education for thousands of displaced learners.

The GUA will develop and/or curate a sustainable portfolio of academic programmes that will be relevant to refugee's needs and contexts and accessible wherever refugees live, including refugee camps.

The programmes will be built on a model of action that will have the following features:

- Committed to including refugee and displaced learners' voices in all levels of decision-making, including programme design and implementation and monitoring and evaluation by establishing structured, recurring feedback mechanisms and participatory approaches to continuously improve programming.
- Connected to global general skills needs, specific local contexts, local training needs, and to labour market opportunities available to refugees, including in refugee camps and in contexts with limited access to the local labour market.
- Innovative hybrid pedagogy articulating online and on-site as well as theoretical and practical learning experience.
- Transparent and inclusive, employing outreach mechanisms that ensure all refugee and displaced learners in a given location are informed about available higher education opportunities and have a faire chance to apply, regardless of status or affiliation. Recruitment campaigns will use multiple channels and networks.
- Accessible to all learners able to follow successfully but without formal school prerequisite. The GUA will provide flexible entry routes using context-appropriate diagnostics for recognition of prior learning, and language assessments, especially for learners who may not meet traditional admission requirements.
- Pluri-disciplinary, including 'bridge' programmes, foundational academic, ICT, and language modules, for learners lacking prior credentials or formal documentation.
- Flexible, modular and stackable contents.
- Credit bearing, leading to certifications and, for some of them, to a full BA degree. GUA programmes will be tied to tangible outcomes, including employment opportunities, community contribution, or continued education - whether in their host country, country of origin, or through transnational or third-country pathways, as defined by the aspirations and realities of displaced learners themselves.
- Economically affordable, cost effective, designed for scale. Reusing as much as possible existing resources, including open-source, open learning content.
- Non-profit: by definition, the GUA is a non-profit making initiative. Even if the costs will have to be covered by external funding, we aim at creating a "Global Good" in the higher education sector.

This approach incorporates a student-centred design, informed by the lived experiences of refugee and displaced learners, and involves the active collaboration of diverse stakeholders. To ensure its relevance, it is also deeply connected to country-specific contexts and rooted in local eco-systems.

In order to overcome barriers faced by displaced learners, the solution needs to:

- Propose affordable, adapted, flexible and alternative higher education pathways and formats
- Embed mechanisms to address financial and practical barriers
- Ensure holistic approach to admission policies
- Provide access to relevant information and guidance
- Use student centred, relevant (e.g. culturally, linguistically, and trauma-informed), and practical learning approaches
- Unite a large number of actors, building equitable partnerships allowing local actors to play a central role

The ecosystem

This eco-system includes:

- Students and their representants (student associations): their needs and voices should be central in the design of the programmes as well as the rollout. Students are actors of their own learning experience, and their empowerment is central to the GUA ambition. Refugee learners and alumni will be systematically consulted to advise on the design, implementation, and evaluation of GUA programmes, ensuring their lived experience shapes decision-making.
- NGOs, including community based and refugee led organisations. They already offer a large number of education and capacity building programmes to refugees, and they operate facilities, including connected learning hubs, at the very heart of refugee camps. They offer a unique opportunity for universities to reach refugee students beyond campus walls. The Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium offer a wealth of successful experiences worldwide where NGOs, refugees-led community-based organisations and universities collaborate. Where possible, refugee-led and community-based organsisations should be utilised to serve not only as outreach partners, but also as implementing partners in the delivery of higher education programmes. Their community knowledge, local legitimacy, and long-term presence position them as crucial actors for sustainable, trusted, and relevant higher education provision.
- Universities willing to contribute to the GUA portfolio by developing and accrediting courses at regional and or global level.

- UNHCR and other international agencies such as IOM, UNRWA, UNICEF, WFP: their role is essential in low- and middle-income countries for every aspect of refugees' lives, especially in the management of refugee camps. They are expected to support the programme by facilitating partnerships with local actors, including national authorities, and supporting fundraising efforts.

- Local authorities and national regulatory bodies are vital for securing adherence to, and alignment with, national rules, regulations and policies.

- Close collaboration with public and private sector partners to ensure relevant, context-specific offers and solutions that enhance employability.

Existing capacity-building programmes in refugee camps are typically run by NGOs but often lack formal accreditation. Partnering with these programmes to provide accredited academic content and recognised credits could create a sustainable, mutually beneficial strategy:

- **For students:** improved access to the local labour market through recognised qualifications
- **For communities:** enhanced quality of essential services
- **For NGOs:** opportunities to pool resources and strengthen training capacity
- **For educators:** valuable experience delivering practice-oriented and community-based programmes

Some enabling factors may not be addressed directly by the GUA offer itself. To ensure the success of this new offer, we will also need:

- Advocacy to influence policy at both national and international levels, to be more inclusive to forcibly displaced people, facilitating their access to official documentation, recognition of documents form countries of origin or support their access to the labour market for instance

- Stable funding sources that have to be identified and negotiated in order to ensure sustainability of the offer both at global and in-country level

- Political support to promote the value of having educated refugees for the labour market and to improve social cohesion and peace-building.

In addition to these, cooperation with local higher education actors will be key in contextualising the higher education offers, and building local capacities.



Photo: Student of InZone –
University of Geneva connected learning center



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