



LERRN **WORKING PAPER SERIES**

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT REFUGEE
RESEARCH NETWORK

PAPER NO. 19 - SEP 2022

CAN HIGHER EDUCATION BE A PATHWAY TO REPATRIATION FOR YOUTH LIVING IN DISPLACEMENT?

**A Study of the Career Trajectories of Master of
Education Students from Dadaab Refugee Camp**

ABDIKADIR BARE ABIKAR

Master of Education Graduate, Dadaab Response Association

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Title: Can Higher Education be a Pathway to Repatriation for Youth Living in Displacement? A Study of the Career Trajectories of Master of Education Students from Dadaab Refugee Camp

Authors: Abdikadir Bare Abikar

Year: 2022

Working Paper No. 19

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22215/glrnw/224041>

Recommended Citation: Abikar, A. B. (2022). Can Higher Education be a Pathway to Repatriation for Youth Living in Displacement? A Study of the Career Trajectories of Master of Education Students from Dadaab Refugee Camp. Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). <https://doi.org/10.22215/glrnw/224041>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper reports on the results of a research project conducted as part of a Fellowship with the Open Society University Network. In this paper, I asked how has participating in post-secondary education in the Dadaab refugee camps – specifically completing a Master of Education degree through the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project – shaped the career pathways of graduates? To answer this question, I interviewed four men and four women who graduated from the Master of Education program in the Dadaab camps. Some graduates of the BHER Master of Education program have returned to Somalia and become employed in meaningful careers with the UN or NGOs, supporting the rebuilding of the country.

Higher education opened up the possibility for sustainable voluntary repatriation, meaning that resettlement is not the only durable solution that is connected to higher education. Other graduates have remained in the camps but have used their skills supporting other students in the BHER project, teaching, doing research, and leading refugee-led organizations or community initiatives.

Overall, graduates have the options either to go back to their countries of origin, or to remain in the camps. However, what is important is not going back as solution but that wherever you go, the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired are applicable in multiple ways. The BHER program positively influenced the youths in the camps and their career pathways. The paper recommends continuing the BHER program and starting other similar programs that provide hybrid or online higher education opportunities for refugees, without the need to leave the camps to access education. UNHCR, universities, donors, and NGOs can support these programs to expand access to higher education. For refugee youths, the paper recommends taking advantage of all possible higher education opportunities that are available, especially online courses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dadaab refugee camps are located in the northeastern part of Kenya, in Garissa County, around 100 kilometers south of the border with Somalia (Kipng'etich and Osman 2016: 11). The camp complex was established in 1992 as a temporary camp for refugees who were fleeing Somalia after war broke out following the collapsing of the government of Somalia (UNHCR 2022).

At the end of July 2020, there were

218,873 refugees

living in the Dadaab camps, many of whom arrived in the 1990s or were born in the camps (UNHCR 2022).

The Dadaab refugee community is in need of durable solutions that will allow them to have the same rights as the local communities do.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has identified three “durable solutions” for refugees:



Voluntary repatriation:
returning to the country of origin



Local integration:
economic integration and citizenship in the country of residence



Resettlement:
to a third country

(UNHCR 2011: 28)

A durable solution is achieved when refugees or Internally Displaced Persons “no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are directly linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement” (UNHCR 2011: 25). For example, with local integration there would be equality and fairness in employment opportunities. Being able to exercise their civil rights, for instance through getting identification cards, would allow refugees to move from one place in Kenya to another in search of better living environments or employment. Refugees seek greater economic inclusion even if it means also assuming responsibilities for paying taxes as part of their economic participation. While the often-traumatic experience of displacement cannot be undone, persons living under conditions of displacement in camps like Dadaab need to be able to access at least one possible durable solution. Refugees hope one day to stop being a refugee. Finding durable solutions encompasses significant human rights, humanitarian, development, and peace-building challenges. Therefore, concerted efforts involving multiple actors – governments, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and, most importantly, refugees and displaced persons themselves – are required to make decisions (Norwegian Refugee Council 2019).

Many youths in the refugee camps in Kenya see education as the best hope to get out of the difficulties imposed by forced migration.

Education is seen as the key to a brighter future. Education is a basic human right that is recognized in a number of international conventions, including the 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations (UN). It is also one of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and is seen as critical for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies. Refugees in Kenya are given free education (primary and secondary). The global refugee regime has shifted its focus from providing primarily humanitarian assistance toward a development approach to forced displacement in protracted displacement contexts (United Nations High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement 2021).

These changing priorities acknowledge that education and jobs help restore vulnerable populations' autonomy and dignity. This is all the more important since the durable solutions of return, integration, and resettlement are increasingly difficult to pursue.

As a researcher, a displaced person, and a beneficiary of higher education, I saw that higher education was giving many opportunities to the youths living in the camps as it helped them be able to return to their country of origin to participate in rebuilding their nation. From my observations and discussions with youths, I saw that many youths who studied in Kenyan refugee camps have now moved back to their home countries (Somali, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Congo) to become change makers rebuilding the nation, while others have started supporting the mission of humanitarian organizations in conflict zones.

In Somalia specifically, many of the top officials working in the humanitarian sector or as politicians have a background of displacement that has given them the strength to support their people, since they understand the context and struggles of displacements. A good example is the story of Abass Siraji, who was the youngest Cabinet Minister in Somalia, serving as the Minister of Public Works and Reconstruction (Dahir 2017). At age 7, he fled Somalia with his family and grew up in the Dadaab refugee camp, completing primary and secondary school in the camp before doing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration in Nairobi. Unfortunately, he was killed in a likely accident, but he inspired many youths to consider returning back to their country to participate in rebuilding their nations.

This study explores the impact of one university education program – the Master of Education program of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project – and the career trajectories of some of its graduates. Usually when education is considered in connection with durable solutions, it is considered as a possible pathway for scholarships that provide access to resettlement in a third country.



However, this paper argues that educating youth in the camps can be an important catalyst for people to participate in rebuilding their nations, to gain the opportunity of working in international and national organizations, and to pursue repatriation as a durable solution.

In existing research and policy discussions, there has been limited discussion of how education can be a pathway to the durable solution of repatriation. However, post-secondary education helps refugees stand on their own feet, allowing them to prepare for the future and create their own solutions, whether that is in a host country (local integration) or in their own country upon their return (repatriation). As noted in a recent report: “highly educated refugees can also contribute to the sustainable development and reconstruction of their home and host countries” (World Bank and UNHCR 2021: 14).

The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees

BHER

project was designed to “provide accredited university programs to working, untrained refugee and local teachers where they are”

in the Dadaab camps and surrounding region (BHER 2022a). BHER provides university programs in Dadaab through online and on-site teaching in the camps, making it one of few programs in the world to offer higher education to encamped refugees within the camps (BHER 2022a). Since most of the participants are working as teachers, most of the BHER program teaching takes place in an intensive format during the school holidays in April, August, and December (Gladwell et al. 2016: 18). BHER is made up of a consortium of Canadian universities (York University and University of British Columbia) and Kenyan universities (Kenyatta University and Moi University) (BHER 2022b). In addition to teaching courses online from Canada, professors from Canada have travelled to

teach parts of courses in the camps (Kipng’etich and Osman 2016: 15). Following preparatory programs covering English language and writing skills, computer skills, and research skills, the BHER program offers several certificate and degree program options: Certificate in Educational Studies (Elementary), Diploma in Teacher Education (Primary), Diploma in Teacher Education (Secondary), B.Sc. Community Health Education, B.Ed. Science Arts, B.Ed. Primary Teacher, B.A. Geography, B.A. Educational Studies, and Master of Education (BHER 2022b). Since 2013, BHER has been enrolling students in accredited university programs, and since 2018 it has offered a Master of Education program (BHER 2022b). These programs are “stackable” meaning that students who earn a certificate or diploma can later apply their course credits towards a full university degree (BHER 2022b). The teaching diplomas are offered by the Kenyan universities and allow graduates to meet the Kenyan qualification requirements for teachers (Gladwell et al. 2016: 19). As of 2022, the third cohort of students in BHER have graduated with their Master of Education degrees. The BHER program believes that

“

the provision of quality higher education to refugees and locals will contribute to the conditions for justice, sustainability, and peace in Kenya, Somalia, and the surrounding region (BHER 2022a).

”

The project aims to promote “peaceful coexistence with the host community” by including at least 25% of students from the local Dadaab community (BHER 2022a).

Potential candidates are verified through their documents. Refugees are verified through their Proof Sheets (a refugee status document that constitutes proof of refugee status) and Kenyans are verified through their national identifications. For both groups, the Certificate of Secondary education is a requirement for admission.

The BHER project operates in a context where opportunities for higher education are very minimal.

3% Worldwide, only 3% of refugees were enrolled in post-secondary education in 2018, compared to 37% of non-refugee students

(UNHCR 2019: 7).

Dadaab youths have needed opportunities for furthering their education. In 2018, the UNHCR Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa visited Dadaab and called on the international community, private sector, Somali civil society, Somali businesspeople, Somali government, and NGO partners to increase the number of higher education scholarships for Somali refugees (Refugees Respond 2018). While the number of graduates from secondary schools has been increasing every year, the scholarships to study outside the camps are minimal. Only a few top students are selected each year for scholarship opportunities outside of the camps, including the World University Service Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program to study in Canada, the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship programme offering qualified refugee and returnee students the possibility to earn an undergraduate degree in their country of

asylum or home country, and the DD Puri Foundation Tertiary Education Scholarship Program in Kenya. BHER has been able to accept a much larger number of students due to its blended education model in the camps, so it has benefitted many students in the camps who would otherwise not have had an opportunity for postsecondary education. It is also a helpful model as it allows Dadaab students to study where they are close to their families. The BHER project has also inspired similar initiatives to increase access to higher education for refugee youth. In 2021, Open Society University Network introduced a similar project to BHER, using blended learning to reach interested and motivated students who were not selected by the BHER project.

Youths in Dadaab value programs that give them credentials that will enable them to secure jobs. However, even when refugee youth have the chance to receive higher education, legal restrictions make it difficult for them to find work in Kenya. According to Kenya's Citizenship and Immigration Act, it is illegal for foreign employees to enter and work in the country without holding a valid work permit (Government of Kenya 2011). Kenya does not give work permits to refugees living in the camps, even if they have a Master's degree or a teaching certification. As a result of these limited employment opportunities, many refugee youth do not see education as worth supporting, since upon graduation they are still not allowed to work in the host country. As a result, the only option for refugees to work as subordinate incentive workers for NGOs or international organizations and receive a very small honorarium payment.

It is impossible in Kenya for refugees to get work that matches their level of education because they are not Kenyan and there is no program of local integration in place. While some of these refugee youth decide to return to Somalia for work, others are afraid to return since the country is still struggling with security and they fear being killed (Okello 2021).

With challenges in Kenya and in their countries of origin, educated youth in Dadaab face difficult choices in terms of what to do in the future. Previous research has not looked at how and why youth make these difficult choices.

Knowing more about the long-term career trajectories of graduates is also important for supporting advocacy for increasing access to higher education for refugees.

As noted by Giles: The impact of a university education on livelihood and employment outcomes for people who have been exiled, as well as leadership roles in rebuilding the homeland (e.g., Somalia) could provide important validation (or not) for access to higher education for refugees (Giles 2018: 178). This study asked: how has participating in post-secondary education in the Dadaab refugee camps – specifically completing a Master of Education degree through Borderless Higher Education for Refugees – shaped the career pathways of graduates? More specifically, this study aimed:

- To describe the various career pathways following graduation of refugee youth who have graduated from the Master of Education through the BHER project.
- To understand the factors that influence why educated refugee youth in Dadaab choose to stay in the camps or return to their countries of origin for better job opportunities following graduation from university.
- To understand the factors that influence why educated refugee youth in Dadaab choose to stay in the camps or return to their countries of origin for better job opportunities following graduation from university.
- To understand the hopes, dreams, and expectations of youth who complete Master's degrees in Dadaab, and whether their situations following graduation meet these expectations.
- To examine the barriers that educated refugee youth face in their careers.
- To contribute to the discussion of how refugees create their own durable solutions that might not fit clearly within the three traditional durable solutions (repatriation, local integration, and resettlement).
- To make recommendations related to the future of post-secondary education in the Dadaab refugee camps and in similar refugee situations.

2. METHODOLOGY

For my research, I conducted a single phase of data collection involving key informant interviews with BHER graduates from the Master of Education program in the Dadaab camps. So far, there have been 31 graduates who were enrolled into three different cohorts of the Master of Education program. Cohorts 1 and 2 have already completed their degrees. In 2022, the third cohort of students are completing their final research papers.

From these 31 graduates, I conducted one-on-one interviews with eight graduates, four men and four women. Participants included a mix of people who are still living in the camps and others who have left for employment opportunities. I conducted face-to-face interviews with six participants, four of them in Dadaab and two in Somalia. The two remaining participants were interviewed over Zoom because of the distance.

I transcribed the interviews, translated the interviews into English, and coded the transcripts using thematic analysis. Finally, I grouped all the related themes and analyzed the responses to answer my research questions. The interview questions are included in Appendix A. Key informant interviews were chosen as a research method with the idea that participants will give more information when they are interviewed individually. In addition, my participants come from different camps in Kenya and it was hard for me to bring them all into one location due to challenges with transportation and security.

Lastly, since some of my participants moved out of the country after they completed their studies, it was easier for me to interview them through online technologies like Zoom. For participants with a fear of COVID, it was also convenient to participate virtually. The proposal received research ethics approval in March 2022 from the Open Society University Network Human Subject Research Ethics Review.

Since I am part of the Dadaab community and also a graduate of the Master of Education program, I have connections with many of the graduates. Some of the graduates were in my cohort, so we studied together and supported each other in completing our studies. I acknowledge my privilege as a researcher, while also finding common ground in experiences related to my life growing up in Dadaab and seeking higher education in the camps. I also bring my first-hand experience of being a graduate student in the program into this research.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review considers the contribution of existing studies to answering two questions. First, what is the role of higher education for refugees, especially in connection with durable solutions? Second, what has been the impact of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project, especially for the graduates of the program?

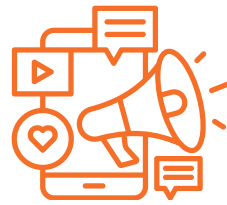
3.1 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Existing studies discuss the role of education, and especially higher education, in empowering refugees. Abuwandi talks about the blended higher education opportunities for refugees, emphasizing that: “Higher education for refugee students is highly regarded as an investment that can contribute to empowerment and voice in an era of uncertainty” (2019: 11). Crea explains that

“education can be seen as a means of personal empowerment and efficacy by providing a sense of purpose amidst the ‘uprootedness’ of refugee status and being indefinitely contained in a camplike setting (2015: 12).

This empowerment was clear in this research study, as the refugee participants educated through BHER were able to voice their needs and share their thoughts, both in the research and beyond.

The role of higher education and virtual teaching in refugee contexts has been discussed by several authors. Different virtual teaching methods are possible in refugee contexts: “real-time interaction between instructor and students, such as video-conferencing or live chats, or non-real time interactions, such as posting on discussion boards or learning from videotaped lectures” (El-Ghali and Ghosn 2019: 65).



The use of social media and other internet platforms can facilitate more informal interaction between students and their peers, and between students and their instructors, which complements their formal learning

(El-Ghali and Ghosn 2019: 65).

In the context of refugees pursuing higher education and engaging in international teaching and learning opportunities, digital technologies have been critical features of programmes offered to those living in and near to the Dadaab refugee camps (Abikar et al. 2021: 81). The BHER project has included interaction with peers in social media apps like WhatsApp, as well as sending course materials by CD or USB as needed when Internet access is challenging (Gladwell et al. 2016: 20).

Research has shown how various educational programs for encamped refugees have made a strong effort to pursue inclusion for learners who face different kinds of barriers.

As one article reviewing some of these programs noted: “Educational programmes provided to the refugees in their local areas demonstrated strong commitment to ensuring access for women and vulnerable people from both refugee and host communities” (Dushime et al. 2019: 67). A review of eight hybrid online and on-site higher education programs for encamped refugees in different contexts found a variety of strategies to break down barriers for refugee learners and to support success:

- 1 Free tuition**
- 2 Nutrition, security, and transportation accommodations**
- 3 Gender equity provisions**
- 4 Course accreditation**
- 5 Preparatory courses**
- 6 Student support and development**
- 7 Durable solutions related to employment**
- 8 Tailored curricula**
- 9 Flexibility of course structure**
- 10 Flexibility of course structure**
- 11 Hybrid, adaptable, and portable course delivery**
- 12 On-site technology support**
- 13 Accommodations related to electricity and internet connectivity**

(Abuwandi 2019: i).

In one good example from a program in the Kiziba refugee camp in Rwanda, the women’s leadership programme offered preparatory classes to support female applicants to improve their skills and to encourage them to apply to the degree programme (Dushime et al. 2019). Interventions like these preparatory classes and an equity-based approach to admissions have achieved a 50:50 student gender balance on the campus (Dushime et al. 2019: 67).

It is important to consider how education is understood in the context of durable solutions. Looking into the struggles and beliefs of the youths living in the camps, it is clear that many of the youths take a lot of responsibility in looking for higher education opportunities. Dryden-Peterson notes: “The provision of educational opportunities is one of the highest priorities of refugee communities” because they see it as “the key to the future” (Dryden-Peterson 2011: 8). Education can be “a mechanism for enabling present and future durable solutions” (Dryden-Peterson 2011: 85). The potential for local integration has become even more restrictive since 2013, as the Kenyan encampment policy reacted to the Nairobi’s Westgate Mall attack with further restrictions to prevent refugees from moving outside of their designated camps, rearing cattle, or working or integrating with the host community (Okello 2021: 7). Meanwhile, repatriation is also not always a viable or positive choice. Refugees leaving Dadaab to return to Somalia face famine, security concerns, limited economic opportunities, limited access to education and medical services, and limited assistance from UNHCR (Okello 2021). Sometimes refugees who repatriate to Somalia are displaced again and return to Dadaab (Okello 2021).

Chimni explores the wider meaning of this focus on returnee aid. In his view, the justification of returnee aid involves the recognition that economic or material factors play a critical role in causing refugee flows, as also in the rehabilitation and reintegration process (Chimni 2004: 69). More research is needed on how refugees contribute to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and rebuilding their nations upon their return, and what can be done to prepare refugees (for example through education) to contribute to these roles (Bradley et al. 2019: 34).

3.2 IMPACT OF BHER FOR PROGRAM GRADUATES

Previous research about the BHER program has shown benefits for Dadaab primary and secondary students (due to the investments in teacher training) and for the graduates of the program. The BHER project responded to the high percentage of teachers in the camps without formal teacher training.

72% Among refugee teachers in the camps, 72% only have secondary school qualifications.

(Duale et al. 2019)

Thus, BHER designed teacher education to assist with the challenges faced by teachers in the camps. Researchers have documented a variety of ways that teachers trained by BHER have changed and improved their teaching practices. For example, untrained teachers in the camps commonly use corporal punishment as a tool of classroom discipline, which has negative short and longer-term impacts for refugee students (Oyat 2021).

As one teacher from Dadaab explained in an interview “here in Dadaab, the stick used for punishment is often referred to as the assistant teacher” (Duale et al. 2019). Teachers trained by BHER learned alternative and more positive discipline methods that they could use in the classroom (Abikar 2021). Trained teachers can also better contribute to rebuilding the education system and to curriculum development if they return to their countries of origin (Kipng’etich and Osman 2016: 11).

As this study will explore further, BHER has also had an impact on the individual graduates of the program. Similar to other education programs for encamped refugees, in the BHER program,

“Significant support is provided to ensure the inclusion of marginalized learners, with a particular focus on affirmative action to facilitate women’s participation in the programme (Gladwell et al. 2016: 59).

Some of the initiatives BHER has taken to promote women’s participation in the program include allowing women into the program with a lower grade, considering work or life experience in admissions, encouraging women to apply, making space for women to bring their children into the learning centre, providing solar lamps so women can study in the evenings after completing household work, providing transportation, integrating gender equity into coursework, mentoring students, and creating a gender equity committee with representatives from the different universities (Gladwell et al. 2016: 16, 22).

The BHER program has also offered data bundles for mobile devices so students can participate in online classes from their homes, which has helped reduce barriers especially for women who are balancing studies with motherhood and household responsibilities (Duri and Ibrahim 2020). Graduates of BHER have been able to gain jobs in Somalia and also within the camps with NGOs, as well as envision future careers in politics in Somalia (Duri and Ibrahim 2020).

4. FINDINGS

4.1 BECOMING INVOLVED IN THE BHER PROJECT

Out of the eight participants, six had finished both their primary and secondary school in the camps and looked to further their education in the camps before BHER provided this opportunity. For the two other participants, one came from Uganda and had already finished his primary and secondary education in Uganda, while another was a student from the host country (Kenya), so she finished both her primary and secondary school outside Dadaab before joining the BHER program. One of the participants described how eager he was to get the scholarship to further his education. He noted his struggles to get the proper documents to apply for future job opportunities:

“ Unfortunately, because, when we came here (Dadaab) we had no document, completely that can prove our study. That how much we have studied [i.e. our level of educational attainment]? How much we have learnt the level of our education. Until recently when Borderless Higher Education came in (**Participant 3**).

This was one of the participants who left his country of origin due to political issues. All his documents were burned, and he was taken to Dadaab for safety. Therefore, he saw BHER as giving him the official documents to recognize his knowledge.

Another participant noted that because he had been a teacher, he was an automatic grantee, because BHER's mission was to improve teacher education to better the learning in the camps. Other participants also noted that there was a long wait for the program of further studies and the way that they justified their interests made them the most successful candidates:

“ I stayed outside without access to tertiary education for seven good years so I put that in my statement. I clearly stated I think the panel is I think confused about this statement because I was someone who have finished high school 7 years ago and of course they just looked at the statement and I just became successful into qualified the program (**Participant 2**).

So that, I moved on and the interest, which I showed to the sponsor, that is why I believe they picked me. Therefore, I wanted to further my studies and I showed my interest, I showed my ambition, everything I wanted to do about education they learnt they saw so the way I wanted (**Participant 3**).

Unlike some other scholarship opportunities that have age restrictions, BHER is open to students of different ages, so students were from different age groups and genders. BHER brought together students who finished high school long ago and students who had recently completed secondary school.

This was a good idea as they exchanged ideas and supported each other in studying.

The participants interviewed reflected their ambitions in studying:

“ I feel like this could also help me my goal in the future because once I finished higher education, I feel that I could manage to get a better life chances than others who have not completed the higher education because in the world system we are now it is competitive. The higher the person or the educator is equipped with knowledge the better chances one can achieve better life **(Participant 1)**.

Participant 1's expectations were achieved, as he had already realized his dreams of a better life shortly after graduating. He is no longer in the camps; he is working with the peace mission program in Somalia (one of the UN programs) working on the stabilization of Somalia. Another participant noted his mission in studying:

“ Well, I think that is if we look widely, the reason why somebody studies is because number one the person [looks] at how the future of his or her family will be. Then hence, the perspectives from the community to the country, so those are the basic areas – that if I learn this thing how will it influence my family? That is the reason for education. We do not go for education you do not educate yourself just because people are going to school **(Participant 3)**.

This participant also justifies his need for education and the intention for studying; he has bigger ambitions to make changes to his country. Another participant also noted that education is a tool to show one's ability. She compared herself to Ilhan Omar, a Somali-American politician serving as the U.S.

representative for Minnesota's Fifth Congressional District since 2019, who was formerly a refugee:

“ I have high ambitions, and I want to show those people that I can become a parliamentarian, a researcher, a good example like Ilhan who is part of the US parliament and was a woman from the refugee camps. So I can also be the same as Ilhan one day **(Participant 5)**.

Like Ilhan Omar, this participant wanted to become a leader of her people. Another female student wanted to study to become a role model for other young women, including her sisters and students:

“ young girls are still having that challenge of being told to stay at home. You are still women and women have no other role...apart from marrying and bearing children. Young women who are coming up... there is no limitation for women; they can do what men can do. I wanted to mentor them to show them that women can do what man can do. I also wanted to be a role model to the rest of the young sisters, because even right now whenever we talk to them or other fellow men talk to them they feel proud when they see us at the top level of the studies. I also wanted to change life of many young women and educate them as a teacher **(Participant 4)**.

Since the BHER program was blended learning, most of the students also took advantage of online learning opportunities at other universities that provide free courses to students. These courses teach specific skills like program management, human resources, logistics, and security that are useful for future work with NGOs.

Therefore, that was a double benefit for the youths as they learned both computer skills and their course instructions in international communications.

“ Sure, [it was] very helpful. I learnt as a teacher in the education program within the learning program. There are so many skills and knowledge that are acquired, apart from the other knowledge, the skills of computer packages programs and skills were helpful to me with online connection. Moreover, all these were just helpful to me so in one way, I was able to adjust to the system (Working areas system of online work or work from home system) well better than somebody who had no knowledge **(Participant 1)**.

Overall, participants expressed their high ambitions that education would lead to a better future for themselves, their families, and their countries of origin. Out of the eight participants I interviewed, four of them left the camps to look for better job opportunities, while the remaining participants saw the camps as the hope to get better jobs. Some participants still living in the camps saw developing a refugee-led organization (RLO) as part of their career development and as another way to apply the knowledge and skills they learned as part of their education.

4.2 CAREER TRAJECTORIES FOR GRADUATES WHO RETURNED TO SOMALIA

Some of the graduates saw their future in helping the refugees by giving back to the society where they stayed, while others saw that their skills were highly valued outside the camps.

BHER provides youths with skills, knowledge, and good attitudes that are applicable in different fields of work. The graduates who stayed in the camps and those who moved outside the camps apply the knowledge acquired differently. Four of the participants are still in Dadaab, one is in Nairobi for family reasons, and the last three are in Somalia, having gone back to their country of origin.

To start with, the three participants who moved to Somalia saw that the chances of getting jobs in Somalia was very high. With the skills to work in programs, they opted to move to Somalia. Those graduates who have left the camps in search for better and sustainable jobs are succeeding in getting sustainable jobs.

“ One thing that has motivated me to go back to Somalia is about job opportunities. So, when I was in my last year to complete the master education through the BHER program. I was also applying [for] job opportunities in Somalia, I completed the last semester in Master Education program in Somalia while I was working. So currently, I am working with the peace mission program in Somalia, one of the UN programs and working on Somalia stabilization **(Participant 1)**.

Another participant described returning to Somalia following graduation and finding a job with a project led by an Italian NGO:

“ I am living in Somalia, Mogadishu. After attaining my bachelor's degree, it was easy for me to now seek a job. I applied for a job while studying for my master in the same university. Currently, I am project manager. I am managing in a resilience a project called BRICS, which is an abbreviation for building in resilient community in Somalia, so I am now the country manager **(Participant 6)**.

This participant expressed how the skills he learned in his program prepared him for his job:

“ Currently I am a project manager. All the skills and knowledge I have acquired, when I was doing the master program is what I am applying now in my real life situation. Managing a project, writing proposals, making reports, doing monitoring and evaluation - many things. Moreover, my degree was the one of best for everything; the degree program and research skills I have learnt in the program helped me so much **(Participant 6)**.

This participant also compared the opportunities in Somalia to the restrictive context in Dadaab:

“ Yes, I returned to Somalia because now I got skills and education and that skills and knowledge acquired and degree certificate enabled me to secure a job in Somalia. In addition, Somalia is my country and I will not face any discrimination or [need a] work permit; no one will ask me. When I am in Dadaab, refugees are not allowed to work after getting these skills and knowledge.... the best place to work is by that time and this position my country of origin and I am giving back to my community **(Participant 6)**.

In Dadaab, it is very difficult to get a work permit and in case you are given a job, you will have to be paid as an incentive (worth only a small fraction of a regular salary) regardless of your educational qualifications. In contrast, this participant saw his skills as being valued in Somalia and through his education, he was able to get the job of his dreams.

Another participant who moved to Somalia also noted the need for her skills in Somalia:

“ You know Somalia is a country that has been devastated by war. Moreover, most of the experts have already gone abroad so Somalia needs especially skilled learners to be able to solve the problem in education (Lack of proper education system for the children in Somalia). Because, most of the graduates who have been there need some who have skills to help the community. So that their illiteracy is reduced **(Participant 7)**.

This quote is quite interesting because she sees that the country needs educated persons to participate in the rebuilding of the nation. I agree as a researcher that the country needs its educated youths to provide capacity-building programs and to support the marginalized communities who were devastated by wars. This graduate explained how she used the knowledge from her education in her day-to-day activities in her office, since she deals with the people with special needs:

“ My knowledge, I am applying in many ways. Now currently so far I am dealing with children who are disabled. My main role is to advocate for the right of these children, since the Somali community, we do not have much understanding of the importance of education. Therefore, we normally carry out mobilisation, awareness and workshops. Knowledge that I have learnt through many ways, has helped me to incur or impart to those people **(Participant 7)**.

For these three participants who moved to Somalia, their education gave them access to meaningful employment opportunities in which they could use their knowledge and skills to contribute to rebuilding their country.

4.3 CAREER TRAJECTORIES FOR GRADUATES WHO STAYED IN THE CAMPS

That denied her from continuing her studies and diminished her potential, and she ended up as a child labourer. The mother never had in mind the productivity impacts of her daughter to the family and society when she completes her learning. Halima sacrificed her learning for the immediate well-being of other family members. The mother's relationship Education is a tool that can be used in different ways. Graduates who stayed in the camps, even if they one day hope to return to their countries of origin, have been applying their knowledge in the camps in different ways. One participant put into practice lessons from her Master's research project through her role as a guidance counsellor for female students:

“ Right now, I work as guardian and counselling teacher in Windle International Kenya and KEEP Project. We normally counsel...and talk to women because my research also has that topic...So my job now is a teacher or I offer services counselling services to the young girls who are in school both individually and I believe that help many young girls to overcome their problem or challenges they are facing **(Participant 4)**.

She used her knowledge from her education to help her figure out the way to best guide and advise students. She also saw herself as a role model for young girls, showing them by example that they can also continue to study and to pursue their dreams. Some graduates received part-time employment supporting the BHER programs to help the undergraduate

students through mentorship programs:

“ (When) I finished with my educational program I saw that there are many issues now in my mind becoming wide, [thinking] critically and think[ing] about my people living here in the camps. I decided to actually continue with BHER program as a Teacher Assistant (TA). However, I later became a Program Mentor, after actually meeting with the York University dean of education and later on, we changed [my role] to program mentor **(Participant 2)**.

Well, we have applied [our knowledge] and we are applying in different ways. Number one, under York University, we have been employed by the project to help the students who are learning in the Borderless Higher Education project. So we are helping them, we started as Teacher Assistants but later we changed to mentors but still we are using the same process, we are helping them **(Participant 3)**.

Participants in the camps also applied their knowledge in helping their communities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through refugee-led initiatives:

“ Number 2, during the COVID 19 we aroused the campaign of helping the refugees with COVID 19 through sensitization and talking to the Communities in the blocks, because when the schools were all closed, all the economic activities were shut down. There were many problems going in and out among the youth. Youth were committing suicide, suicide were at that time very many as many of the youths felt stressed and some of them already committed suicides. The strategy of making sure that we sensitize the youth; so we conducted series of the workshops in the schools **(Participant 3)**.

Participants who have remained in the camps after completion of their graduate studies see that helping refugees in Kenya and using their knowledge to give back and to form Refugee-Led Organizations can also be a solution for the long stay in the camps.

Other graduates have used the research skills they learned in BHER to continue to research issues faced by the community. For example, four of the graduates formed a refugee-led organization called the Dadaab Response Association (DRA) to serve the community within the camps. One participant reflected on how his education prepared him to do this research:

“ *We have trained; you know the university I learnt [at] was a Research [Based] University and is actually different from theoretical university. So, this means now that you should have gotten enough knowledge skills and experience of doing research. This is actually one-way is supporting Refugees by research any challenges and forwarding to the right persons (Participant 2).*

The participant noted that the research knowledge acquired from BHER was encouraging him to critically analyze things that happen in the camps. He compared his experiences to before his postsecondary education, when he never understood the way out of situations that happened daily in the camps, like the inequality and injustices that were enforced on the refugees in the camps. Through the research papers he writes, he can express any challenges about which refugees are complaining, unlike previous years when he only spoke about it but did not have the right channels to share these issues.

Among other things, members of the DRA have been researching the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for education in Dadaab and the challenges of following protocols to minimize the spread of the virus in the refugee camp context with few resources for physical distancing in overcrowded classrooms, limited access to masks, and a chronic teacher shortage (Oyat et al. 2022). The DRA has also advocated through their research work to support youth staying in schools and to support girl child education in the camps.

This kind of refugee-led research is especially important given that external researchers who do not live or work in the camps have conducted most research in the past. Due to insecurity or other challenges in the camps, external researchers who only visit the camp briefly can easily misinterpret or misunderstand the local situation or make problematic assumptions. Since researchers are coming from outside the country, they may submit irrelevant information and the humanitarian aids are either reduced or cut off from the refugees. Local refugee researchers have good knowledge of the area and can provide understandable information to the concerned people to support the refugees in the camps. Thanks to the BHER, trained youths can write articles and use their voices for the voiceless refugees.

Finally, one participant stayed in Kenya but moved to Nairobi for family reasons:

“ *Because my husband is employed and he could not move to and from Dagahley (Camp), and he was based in Nairobi, we are relocated to Nairobi (Participant 8).*

She also put her skills to good use by teaching her children and other community members:

“ You know this knowledge and skills - it is not necessary you to apply for working for an NGO. I work as a home based teacher, I give tuition to my kids and whosoever needs my knowledge. I also extend to support other youths, when it comes to giving knowledge there are several girls who always contact me back in Dadaab **(Participant 8)**.

Participants who stayed in Kenya used the skills and knowledge from their education in various ways: to support other students in the BHER program, conduct community-based research, support their community's COVID-19 response, and teach children and other community members.

4.4 CHALLENGES SHAPING CAREER TRAJECTORIES

Participants encountered several challenges following graduation that influenced their career trajectories. Graduates feel pressure to get a good job to give back to their families and communities who supported them throughout their education:

“ You have been a knowledge consumer when you are [finish being a] student. You have to at least try the market environment. Yeah, getting a job, because they are people who are supporting you, family including your wife and children, have been supporting you and because your children have been told your father is a student, the relatives and the community expect you actually to pay back **(Participant 2)**.

One participant sees being a refugee itself as a barrier to employment. The status of being a refugee will haunt the graduates in applying their knowledge in the camps and outside the camps. That is why many youths who leave the country denounce their refugee status in order to be successful for their job area.

“ The status, yes, you know when I talk about the status [I mean] the nationality. Because me being not alien but a refugee, so this refugee status, that title status, enables [people] to discriminate [against] anybody within this country. Moreover, I believe even beyond this country because when we look at my example: when I went for the Global Refugee [Forum] in 2019, [...] The title refugee is the only discriminating adjective or discriminating noun which has been posted on somebody who has run away that should be looked into and to be supported **(Participant 3)**.

Others also face challenges of finding job opportunities, as they require work experience (in addition to their degree) for them to be trusted with a new role as a manager or officer. In Dadaab, many youths have never been given such high ranking roles but were only used as supporting staff (and paid incentives). When they go back to Somalia, it will be difficult to be employed right away as workers, so they start from low value jobs and grow their skills gradually.

“ Sure, they are so many of my colleagues that were part of BHER program that I also came to know in Dadaab that are now currently in Somalia. They face the issue of [needing to gain] work experience in Somalia and they do not have a good background in working Somalia. Because maybe the only work that they did was in Dadaab **(Participant 1)**.

Female graduates also noted some challenges that kept them from moving out of the camps. Out of the four female graduates I interviewed, only one female participant was able to travel to Somalia to look for jobs due to family commitments. One female participant (Participant 4) hoped to return to Somalia for a better job opportunity in the future, but at the time of the interview was staying in the camps because of family responsibilities as the eldest child with an aging mother and younger siblings still in school. Worries about insecurity in Somalia and family responsibilities held them back from moving to Somalia to seek better jobs than the ones in the camps. The hopes to be selected for resettlement was also a factor that prevented them from moving. As one female participant who remained in the camps explained:

“ For returning to Somalia, there is a lot of insecurity, many challenges in our country but I always want to go to a country with peace and good stability; this is one reason why I am not leaving the camps. On the other hand, in camps there are free services like education like the BHER, which I am almost completing soon. On another issue, I am hoping to get resettlement but if I missed the opportunities for resettlement, my hope is to go back to my country **(Participant 5)**.

Female participants also noted the challenge of cultural attitudes that made it difficult for them to escape traditional gender roles. It is evident from this study that female students benefit the most from using the knowledge and skills they learn in the BHER program.

However, women who graduate from BHER would benefit from more opportunities for flexible jobs that would allow them to work from home while serving their family members, like online marketing or freelance jobs (translations, transcriptions, writing research, online teaching, subtitling, and video graphics).

4.5 MESSAGE FOR OTHER YOUTHS

Since youths play important roles in societal development and many refugee youths are currently finishing their secondary school, I also asked the graduates what advice they would give to the upcoming generation of youth in order to help them go through the higher education journey. The participants gave different reasons for encouraging youths to pursue higher education:

“ I think, they should not just waste their time idling in the camp. They have to take every opportunity that comes on the way, so if they get such opportunities like the one we got like BHER program or any other program; I think that is very precious. You need to grab it, because you have to benefit from that opportunity to learn, develop skills, and gain knowledge. Because, that is what will help you in your life, so, I will advise any person who finishes secondary education should join BHER the program if it still exists. Because, that program is very beneficial and because the graduates to finish their masters from BHER program all of them are working in Somalia **(Participant 6)**.

“ I will tell the youth in Dadaab currently that if there are opportunities still in Dadaab to get a higher education, I will suggest to them that they should continue to further their education and once they further their education, they acquired necessary knowledge and skills then they can still come back to the country [Somalia]. Some community are also here [Kenya] as well even the refugees in Dadaab. So there are better chances in Somalia in terms of payment, the issue of work permit is not there the person works as a national unlike in Dadaab **(Participant 1)**.

As this participant suggested, youths completing secondary school should pursue further studies to open up work opportunities in Somalia that are not possible with only secondary education. Another participant also encouraged youths in the camps to pursue higher education but noted that access to higher education is still very limited for refugee youths:

“ Well, for youths, we have been advocating. Even as I am speaking now I am advocating. I tell them that learning is the basic thing; we need to go for further studies. If you go for further studies, do not stop for secondary, go for tertiary education, because, the global vision says by 2030 they need to see that 15% of the refugees must reach tertiary education. Before was only 1% but now they have increased. So far, by this year, no by last year, it was 3%. By this year, I do not know I have not yet come into - we need all the students to go for further studies so that it opens their mind. The unfortunate part [is that] even if we talk about access to that tertiary, education is limited **(Participant 3)**.

If these youths do not get access to higher education programs like BHER, which would engage them to complete their dream carriers, then they may end up losing hope, as one of my participants noted during the interviews:

“ I know quite a number of people who are focused and who are very much analysed and have no way to get support and they cannot go out of the camp because of the Kenyan policy. I say let them be patient, and they should not actually choose dangerous routes, either going back into Somalia where they can actually have no documents that would preferably allow them to be employed to work. Alternatively, Maybe, choosing this dangerous crossing [via the] Mediterranean Sea and to actually go into Europe or may be North America I said be patient. Many issues are going on the quite number of education opportunities are coming here in the camp **(Participant 2)**.

This participant advises refugee youths to pursue educational opportunities in the camp, even if they are limited, rather than choose other more dangerous and difficult pathways out of the camp.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, higher education provides refugees with the skills they need to overcome the challenging situations in the camps. It also opens up opportunities for durable solutions, especially for voluntary repatriation through sustainable employment.

Resettlement is not the only durable solution that is connected to higher education. Compared to those who have not gotten any tertiary education, there are more chances for educated youths to get long-term jobs that can sustain themselves and their families in their home countries. Education builds critical thinkers. BHER has been phenomenal in delivering education to the refugees at their doorsteps and can serve as a model for other programs.

It is clear from my interactions with participants that the BHER program positively influenced the graduates of the Master of Education in their lives and future career pathways. Graduates have the options either to go back to their countries of origin, or to remain in the camps. However, what is important is not going back as solution but that wherever you go, the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired are applicable in multiple ways. Some graduates of the BHER Master of Education program have returned to Somalia and become employed in meaningful careers with the UN or NGOs, supporting the rebuilding of the country. Other graduates have remained in the camps but have used their skills supporting other students in the BHER project, teaching, doing research, and leading refugee-led organizations and community initiatives.

Documents are very important when it comes to employment, so youths in the camps should not only wait for resettlement, relocation within Kenya, or formal repatriation processes, but should also focus on getting education which can move their lives to another level. UNHCR has been providing several kinds of humanitarian aid including food, shelter, security, water, and education. All the other aids provide short-term satisfaction, while education provides long-time contentment and life-long skills to the people who have acquired it.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

First, I recommend that the universities involved in BHER continue the program and that other organizations and universities establish similar hybrid or online programs to expand access to higher education opportunities for refugees in the camps.

It is evident from this study that the impact of BHER is positive and tangible. The BHER project has now been completed but should be continued, especially given that more youth are completing high school now than in previous years. Previously there were only seven secondary schools in all the three camps (Ifo, Dagahley and Hagadera). Now, there are more than 30 secondary schools and still more secondary schools are in the process of opening. All the youths have high ambitions of one day getting good scholarships and paying back to the society from where they come. Similar projects to BHER, like a new project by the Open Society University Network, can also expand access to higher education opportunities for refugees inside the camps and take advantage of hybrid and online learning to offer training that would not be available locally in Dadaab. These programs can reach many refugee youths inside the camps, more than the number who can benefit from small scholarship programs to study outside of the camps. UNHCR, universities, donors, and NGOs can support these programs to expand access to higher education.

Second, like my participants suggested, I would advise youths in the camps to take advantage of all higher education opportunities that are available to them, either online or face-to-face in the camps.

In addition to programs like BHER, there are free online university courses like those offered by the “University of the People” in business, computer science, health science, and education. There are also courses or training programs offered by NGOs in the camp like electrical courses, plumbing and hairdressing. Based on my research and my experience as a graduate of BHER, I agree that these opportunities are very important and valuable. In my Somali language we say that “Taalada adiga uu bahan moye ayaada kuma baahno” which literally means you need the advice, but the advice does not need you. I hope many youths will be able to benefit from the valuable advice my participants provided and take advantage of opportunities for higher education.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1** What is your country of origin?
- 2** Why were you selected as BHER beneficiary from the rest of the Youths?
- 3** Where are you currently living (e.g. Dadaab refugee camps, Somalia, Kenya or other parts of Africa)?
- 4** Why did you decide to complete higher education? How did you think it would help you achieve your future goals?
- 5** Why did you decide to return to Somalia (or another country) OR why did you decide to stay in Dadaab?
- 6** What is your current employment situation?
- 7** What barriers did you face in starting a career after graduating from post-secondary education (e.g. refugee status, work permits, family responsibilities, etc.)?
- 8** How are you using the knowledge and skills you learned in post-secondary education?
- 9** What would you tell youth living in the camp right now about post-secondary education?

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This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.