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## **ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES WITH DISABILITIES IN DADAAB REFUGEE CAMPS**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**This paper investigates higher education opportunities for refugees with disabilities in the Dagahaley refugee camp (Dadaab, Kenya) with an emphasis on inclusivity, parent support, resource availability, barriers, and recruitment processes.**

The study employed qualitative methods to uncover existing tertiary opportunities for persons with disabilities, while exposing the challenges they encounter. The research included interviews with high school graduates who had no tertiary opportunities and with those who had received scholarships in Kenya from international non-governmental organizations and donors. Participants highlighted the problem of accessibility to scholarships and lack of opportunities for persons with disabilities in higher education. The recruitment process for higher education was quite restrictive and highly competitive, based largely on high school grades. Participants suggested ways to make recruitment more accessible to persons with disabilities. Access to tertiary education for refugees with disabilities in Dadaab is still immensely challenging, despite its value in strengthening skills and expertise for refugees.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research study is to investigate access to tertiary education opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWD) in the Dagahaley refugee camp.

**PWD = persons with disabilities**

Dagahaley refugee camp is one of the refugee camps in the Dadaab refugee complex, Garissa County, Northeastern Kenya. It is approximately 19 km from Dadaab town. It was established in 1992 and is mainly populated by refugees and asylum seekers who fled from protracted civil war in Somalia as well as natural disasters like drought. Also, refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Burundi, South Sudan and Uganda are part of the population. In November 2013, a tripartite agreement was signed between the Kenyan government, Somali government and UNHCR to seek durable solutions for protracted refugees. In December 2014, the first group of refugees returned to Somalia through voluntary repatriation.

**92,150 refugees** So far, from 2014 through 2021, 92,150 refugees voluntarily returned to Somalia (UNHCR 2021).

The Kenyan government announced the closure of Dadaab refugee camps due to security concerns, yet presented no evidence linking to that claim. In 2017, Kenya's high court ruled that the closure of the Dadaab camps was unconstitutional. Moreover, on 9th May 2016, UNHCR issued a statement appealing to Kenya not to end refugee hosting. The statement said:

“It is with profound concern that UNHCR takes note of this announcement. For almost a quarter of a century, Kenya has played a vital role in East Africa and the Horn of Africa in providing asylum to people forced to flee persecution and war [...] The safety of hundreds of thousands of Somalis, South Sudanese and others has hinged on Kenya's generosity and its willingness to be a leading beacon in the region for international protection. Tragically, the situations in Somalia and South Sudan that caused people to flee are still unresolved today” (UNHCR 2016).

UNHCR called on the Kenyan government to reconsider its decisions and avoid taking actions against international obligations.

Again, in March 2021, the Kenyan government issued a 14-day ultimatum to UNHCR to develop a strategic plan to close the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps and threatened to forcefully return refugees to unsafe countries if UNHCR missed the deadline. At the end of April 2021, the UNHCR High Commissioner for Refugees visited Kenya for discussions with the Kenyan government and they agreed to implement a solution strategy including voluntary repatriation until June 2022 (UNHCR 2021).

The scholarship programs in Dadaab refugee camps for tertiary education are delivered by different non-governmental organizations in partnership with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

These organizations include the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) for teacher training, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) for technical vocational training, as well as Danish Refugee Council (DRC) for short information computer technology (ICT) training courses and limited university scholarships. However, the most sustainable scholarship opportunities are quite restricted and are delivered by the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) Project, World University Service of Canada (WUSC), DD Puri Foundation Scholarships, and the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) project through Windle International implementation.

According to DAFI's 2018 annual report, the initiative provides higher education opportunities for refugees across the globe.

**15,000**  
refugees

**51**  
countries

**It has supported over fifteen thousand young refugee students to date and it is currently implemented in fifty-one countries, of which the vast majority are in the global South.**

Moreover, the project also offers structural assistance that is beyond academics and provides services that include psychosocial support, academic bridging, language classes and career training. The goals of the initiative include the personal and professional development of each student who graduates with certifications, as well as cultivating positive leadership for change in students' communities and the world (UNHCR 2019).

**However, the recruitment process is quite restrictive and highly competitive, mainly based on high school completion and high academic qualifications. Thus, students with disabilities may be excluded from the recruitment process, as they often encounter barriers in school.**

Scholarship opportunities are also offered by WUSC projects in partnership with Windle International in Kenya. The scholarship is a unique program that combines resettlement to Canada and access to tertiary education in Canadian universities. Under the Student Refugee Program (SRP), refugee students are sponsored to enter Canada and become permanent residents if they can secure support from the WUSC local committees (comprised of universities, colleges, staff and faculty) across Canada and acceptance by the Government of Canada or the Government of Quebec. However, this scholarship opportunity is highly competitive and, once again, is offered to those few students who have achieved excellent or outstanding results on their high school final exams.

As a former student in Dadaab, I am aware of the struggle refugee students go through to obtain the required grades to receive this scholarship and to resettle in Canada. Some students repeat the final high school exam (KCSE) twice or even thrice in order to fulfill the eligible required grade for this scholarship opportunity. These types of competitions, which are framed on specific understandings and assumptions of merit, often undermine the opportunities for refugees with disabilities.

Indeed, due to existing circumstances in the refugee camps, students with disabilities might appear less than ideal candidates when based only on competition results. Examples of these barriers that can impact competition results might include exclusion from primary and secondary education. At the primary level, students with severe impairments are often taught within special units apart from the general classrooms.

**However, inadequate learning resources and shortages of qualified local teachers continue to be challenging and undermine students' performances.**

Lack of motivation to support students may also become an issue since the work of local teachers is voluntary and they are only paid incentive wages every month. Most teachers do not have teacher training opportunities to pursue professional development because they cannot secure scholarships from these highly competitive WUSC, BHER, and DAFI scholarship opportunities, which could sustain their academic and inspirational development. According to Duale et al. (2019: 57), most refugees teachers from the Dadaab complex are considered incentive and paid low wages, which results in demoralization and lack of motivation.

Another scholarship opportunity is offered by Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER). The BHER project started as a consortium of implementing partners and support organizations.

The project received support from different organizations including Global Affairs Canada, Open Society Foundation, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and MasterCard Foundation (Giles 2018). The main goal of the BHER program was to establish quality education in secondary and primary schools in the Dadaab refugee camps, while providing credited tertiary education to teachers of Dadaab refugee camps and host communities around Dadaab and Wajir. The project mainly aimed at the provision of inclusive and gender sensitive university teacher scholarships comprised of certificates, diplomas, and degrees.

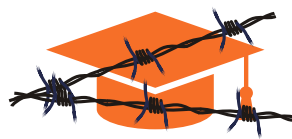


**18,000**  
children

**According to the Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform (2020), the BHER project successfully provided training for 590 men and women who enrolled and made significant progress in delivering education to nearly 18,000 children and youth in the camps and surrounding host communities.**

BHER graduates employed inclusive pedagogy in their classrooms and also initiated voluntary in-service training for their fellow teachers, who were untrained. Graduates have also successfully conducted workshops in their schools and convinced fellow teacher participants of the need to reduce and discourage all forms of exclusion based on gender, race, ability, and religious stereotypes.

They trained their fellow inexperienced teachers who are secondary graduates to practice fully engaged, multicultural pedagogy that promotes equal inclusion for all learners. In terms of recruitment, the BHER project has repeatedly demonstrated careful consideration of gender in both local and refugee communities, by providing for enhanced recruitment of refugee women and local women into the program.



**Nevertheless, access to tertiary education for refugee students with disabilities was**

**quite restricted compared to the extensive need**

For instance, three students with hearing and visual impairments and other disabilities have now been recruited as part of the Third Cohort of the program. However, it is crucial to begin to think systemically about access to tertiary education for the larger numbers of students with disabilities in the camps. These opportunities could nurture the individual aspirations of these students by helping them realize their dreams while also advancing their academic aspirations, and in turn, further enhance inclusive participation at all economic, social, and political levels in refugee communities.

**It is worthwhile to prioritize access to higher education for refugee youth with disabilities and promote participation in community initiatives as well as in sustainable development upon repatriation to their countries of origin.**

These dreams cannot be realized if these youths are not given fair and equitable consideration for refugee scholarships. For instance, the most sustainable and essential scholarships for Dadaab youth are those provided by WUSC, which allows for an opportunity to leave the encampments, travel, and engage in new environments. As they interact with an entirely new world, they could demonstrate and develop their potential skills. However, access to this incredibly valuable opportunity is very difficult for youth with disabilities in Dadaab camps due to several systemic barriers.

Recently, some of the more active youth in Dagahaley have begun to mobilize and advocate for the creation of more inclusive pathways to existing scholarship opportunities for tertiary education. As a former student in Dagahaley, I have observed first-hand extraordinary improvements led by students with disabilities who have already gained access to college teacher training and came back to help their fellow refugees with disabled students in primary schools in Dagahaley. Dagahaley has two special education centres within the public primary schools: Juba and Unity primary schools. Non-governmental organizations that implement education in these centres continue to hire some trained non-local teachers from other parts of Kenya, which further streamed out refugee teachers with disabilities who would fill the gap if they were adequately sponsored and provided the required postsecondary scholarships.

As a graduate student in the Master of Education Program at York University, Canada, I gained skills and expertise on how education can transform lives. After beginning my studies, I was introduced to academic research and given the opportunity to conduct it myself. In this research, I am interested in investigating access to tertiary education for persons with disabilities in Daghaley refugee camp with a specific emphasis on



**NGO scholarships**



**inclusivity**



**resource barriers**



**recruitment process  
for scholarships**

Many research studies have been published around the world about tertiary education for PWD. However, there have been limited research studies in the context of Dadaab refugee camps to examine possible barriers to access to tertiary education for PWD.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY IN THE KENYAN CONTEXT

Over one billion people live with some sort of disability and the numbers are increasing gradually due to demographic trends, medical conditions, and other reasons (WHO 2021). Almost every person is likely to experience disability at some point in their lifetime, but people with disability often experience discrimination, stigma, and inadequate access to quality services (WHO 2021).

**There is a need to increase disability inclusion in all aspects of life, especially access to tertiary education and durable solutions for PWD.**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) contemporary definition, disability refers to

“the interaction between individuals with a health condition (e.g., cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and depression) and personal and environmental factors such as (negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports) - **World Health Organization (2021: 1).**”

The WHO further highlights the importance of addressing disability as a human rights issue and reports that people with disabilities are often subject to acts of violence, prejudice, abuse, and disrespect because of their disability status. This is an important perspective when addressing how people with disabilities continue to experience barriers in access to higher educational opportunities in Dagahaley refugee camps.

Often, people with disabilities experience attitudinal barriers and report prejudice, discrimination, and stigma in access to lifelong opportunities like tertiary scholarships. However, Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlights that “States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities” (WHO 2021: 1). Unfortunately, society has a limited understanding of the rights and needs of people with disabilities. People with disabilities are often not involved in decision making about the provisions of the services and opportunities they like to access. Furthermore, financial barriers also have an impact on many candidates with disabilities who have an ambition to pursue tertiary education.



**People with disabilities in the Dagahaley refugee camp who had the inspiration to continue to tertiary education .**

**cannot afford the costs and tuition fees. They need to be given priority to access higher education opportunities**

Refugees with disabilities in Dadaab learn from the Kenyan Special Need Education (SNE) curriculum similarly to all Kenyan citizens. Kenya signed international treaties that allow equal opportunities to learners with disability (Randiki 2015). The Kenyan government signed the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 which ensures that the unique characters, abilities and learning needs of students with disability are met. The Salamanca declaration concluded that;

“Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system” (Ainscow M. et al. 2019: ix).

In 1989, Kenya was also among the countries that ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which directs states to provide free education to students with disabilities (UN 1989). Beyond these international treaties, Kenya also signed the “Education for All” framework and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006).

Moreover, in 2009, the Kenyan Ministry of Education developed Special Need Education frameworks that ensure learners with disabilities receive equal access to special education opportunities in order to achieve the country’s goals of education for all (Republic of Kenya 2009). The policy framework was an essential guiding document that helps to provide special education and includes specific areas of development: advocacy and awareness creation, research, technology, assessment and intervention, capacity building, and utilization of special services. Debates about higher education in sub-Saharan Africa have been at the forefront of international education policies since 1970 (Wright and Plasterer 2010).

“education is one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for sustained economic growth - Harber (2014: 18)

However, access to tertiary education in refugee camps is quite restricted compared to the need. The Global Compact on Refugees digital platform emphasizes the widespread denial of education for all students with disabilities:



The UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development finds that worldwide, persons with disabilities are less likely to attend school [...] are more likely to be illiterate. Available data from developing countries shows that, on average, one in three children with disabilities is out of school [...] The inclusion of refugees with disabilities in higher education is central to broader goals of promoting an equal and inclusive society (**Global Compact on Refugees 2020: 17**).



Recently, literature on access to tertiary education for refugee students with disability in Dadaab refugee camps has focused on barriers, with few studies on the opportunities to pursue tertiary education in Dadaab camps. If disabled refugee youth in Dadaab refugee camps get access to tertiary education, it will empower their economic growth and reduce the inequalities they face in their communities. Moreover, refugee families live in poverty and giving educational opportunities to their children may be the only way out of poverty, if not granted other durable solutions like resettlement. Societies that provide access to tertiary education for their youth enhance social and economic development on a national level. For refugees to achieve sustainable development, the UN member states adopted SDG4 2030 in order to promote inclusive, quality and equitable education for all learners. The Sustainable Development Goals strongly emphasize access to tertiary education, especially for people in displacement and conflict areas.

The DAFI project has helped some youth with disabilities in accessing tertiary education in specific selected countries, however refugee students in Dadaab camps who also have disabilities have yet to benefit from such scholarships. In Dadaab, many disabled youth refugees who complete secondary education express a strong desire to secure enrollment in universities to yield benefits for their individual development and that of their communities and societies.

**However, their dreams remain unfulfilled when they find that their education aspirations halt at the secondary**



**education level due to a lack of financial support to pursue their academic achievements.**

It is crucial to provide financial support to persons with disabilities who did not qualify for the limited scholarships offered by NGOs, businesspeople, and other generous donors from the community.

The number of children with disabilities continues to increase in Dadaab refugee camps, creating new challenges to access education. Many students with disabilities in Dadaab refugee camps experienced social stigma and limited access to educational opportunities (Krupar 2016).



**Moreover, the study also points to the lack of necessary training and professional skills among refugee and disabled teachers who often are unable to help**

**learners with disability and implement inclusive education in the camps.**

Therefore, to successfully implement their mandate of achieving inclusive education in the camps, more refugee teachers are required to be trained beyond the certificate level and given access to university education. UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca declaration calls on states to provide any extra support required by disabled students and ensure their effective education since access to quality education for all is considered a paramount means of combating discrimination and building an inclusive society.

However, the question of implementing equitable quality inclusive education should be understood and contextualized in relation to the frameworks and policies that have been developed and established to support PWD. Policies can undermine students with disabilities who may encounter barriers when participating in competitions based on perceived ability. According to Bartlett et al. (2002) welfare public institutions such as schools are infused with market principles that dictate adherence to neoliberal concepts such as deregulation, competition and stratification. If these concepts are applied to educational opportunities, some sections and members of the community may be ignored and alienated rather than empowered to seek participation in economic, social and political developments. According to the WHO (2011),

students with disabilities are marginalized both in social structures as well as restricted from economic power. In light of the literature on the factors and effects of marginalizing disabled students through unquestioned principles of merit and competition, there is a need to reconsider Dadaab refugee scholarship recruitments. Greater consideration should be given to accessibility for disabled youth (Giles 2018).

Based on the social model of disability, it is

“the societies' failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization (Oliver 1996: 32)”

According to this model, it encloses all factors that impose limitations on persons with disability, ranging from negative social attitudes, discriminations in the institutions, segregated education, exclusion in work arrangements and unusable transport systems (Hiranandani 2005). The social model acknowledges that the barriers persons with disabilities face are the consequences of social and economic factors especially in capitalist societies. The model shifts the focus from disability-related impairments to social environments as the primary site of interventions that need to be implemented. Moreover, disability is not just an individual issue, but is produced from the environment/social context, such as policies, practices, social norms and attitudes. This paper considers the notion of disability from a social and rights perspective instead of individual deficiency or inadequacy (Hiranandani 2005).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My qualitative method relied on interviews with four Daghaley youth with disabilities who have completed high school. The approach focused on the experiences the participants had undergone throughout their professional and social lives. Specific attention was given to social lives, perspectives, cultures, and how meaning was constructed. There were four interview participants in total. Two (above 18 years old) are enrolled in tertiary education and two (above 18 years) have not enrolled in tertiary education.

**The main objective was for participants to share their experiences around accessing tertiary education, including the barriers/challenges they encountered and how it impacted their lives.**

I would like to thank the four participants who agreed to be interviewed and share their experiences.

Due to Covid-19 guidelines from the World Health Organization, participants were interviewed remotely through Zoom and Skype. My prior knowledge as a former student at the same camp was an important asset to develop rapport with the participants. Participants could speak English since they successfully completed high school, so translation was not required.

Two of the participants helped me to get relevant information on why they did not have access to tertiary education, while the other two participants helped me to understand how they were able to access tertiary scholarships in Dadaab camps.

My approach was to interview individuals separately. This approach helped me to understand the unique life experiences and situations of each of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured. This approach allows the interviewer to get information from the participants with the help of research questions. This research guide ensured that I made use of the limited time on Zoom since I conducted remote interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to be flexible in the interviewing process and to understand the participants' narratives and experiences. It also allowed me to ask to follow up questions.

Recording the interviews was important so I could transcribe participants' contributions. To analyze the data, I transcribed, assessed, read several times, coded, and then identified themes and categorized them according to patterns and meanings. I have also explored the relationship between themes. Identification of themes was considered important during the analysis in addition to rigorous reading, and coding of the transcripts helped me to identify major themes (Elliott & Gillie 1998: 331). Throughout the analysis, I continued to refine the themes.

It is difficult to extrapolate to a larger sample size because this study offers the insights and experiences of the four participants interviewed. However, the study outcomes can be deemed as a valid and reliable. I hope it will provide policy makers, donors and humanitarian actors an opportunity to reflect on the experiences and insights raised in the study. The study captured one of the Dadaab refugee camps (Dagahaley), so I therefore recommend future research in other camps with a larger number of participants to gain experiences and insights that can result in more equitable access to tertiary opportunities for PWD.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 PARTICIPANTS OVERVIEW

Pseudonyms	Gender	Tertiary Education
Ibra	Male	Yes
Rashka	Male	Yes
MK	Male	No
Hamdi	Female	No

**Ibra**



Ibra, was born in Somalia but fled to the Dadaab refugee camp in 1991 after the Civil War and the fall of the Somali government. He is 35 years old now, spending most of his time servicing non-governmental organizations in the Dagahaley refugee camp. In our discussion, he spoke about his educational background. He enrolled in Central Primary School, sat the national examination in 2003, joined Dagahaley secondary school and successfully completed it in 2007. Ibra attended Immaara Training College, then proceeded to join MOUNT Kenya University, Kenyatta University, and finally York University to earn his geography degree. He was a committed student who fulfilled his academic aspirations through challenges and inadequate resources in a refugee camp. Ibra highlighted that he had experienced an injury to his left eye that resulted in permanent injury and loss of his eye while studying in secondary school.



**Due to ongoing disability discrimination, this injury resulted in personal, social, and economic challenges while pursuing his academic journey.**

Despite all these challenges, including marginalization and lack of financial support, he believes that he gained access to tertiary education through his high school academic qualification and then he managed to successfully finish his tertiary education.

**Rashka**



Rashka is 31 years old, born in Somalia. He currently lives in Dagahaley Refugee Camp. Rashka started his primary education in Central Primary School and Unity Primary School then proceeded to join Dagahaley secondary school in 2007 and successfully finished in 2010. He then sought to pursue higher education and applied for a scholarship opportunity from Mount Kenya University, which was sponsored by the European Union through the implementation process from Central Learning Partnership Trust (CLPT). He was one of the six out of forty students who received the opportunity and joined Mount Kenya University to pursue a diploma in public relations and diplomacy. When I asked him how he qualified for this scholarship, he highlighted the Kenyan High School grading system and how he met the recruitment criteria (C plain) from his high school.

While speaking about the problems and challenges he encountered throughout his studies, Rashka mentioned that he experienced discrimination from his own community targeting his disability and giving him names related to his physical appearance and his status. He also highlighted that the distance between his home and school was far and there were no buses that could take him to school, so he was forced to walk to school. This lack of transportation significantly impacted his academic performance, particularly in math. In addition, he mentioned that the resources in the schools were inadequate for all students.

When I asked him how the schools and other people supported his learning, he explained that there were supportive teachers, peers, and leaders who motivated him to pursue his education. They told him that his disability could not stand in the way of his goals, he can be successful, and he can even perform better than other people. He also mentioned that there was educational awareness from NGOs, which encouraged him to continue his education. He emphasized that different scholarship opportunities can be found, but few disabled people were enrolled because



**they have encountered barriers to meeting key academic high school criteria for scholarship recruitment**

He showed interest in pursuing a university education up to Master's level and PhD, but due to financial factors, he cannot afford to sponsor himself and expressed disappointment at the limited scholarship opportunities in the camp. He hopes one day to join a university and complete his degree.

**MK**



MK was born in Somalia and currently lives in Dagahaley Refugee Camp. He commenced his primary education in Central Primary School in 2002 and then proceeded to Tawakal Secondary School. He successfully completed it in 2013. MK is physically disabled and has not received any scholarship opportunities after completing his high school. Despite applying to many advertisements, he did not manage to receive tertiary opportunities. When asked why he did not qualify for tertiary opportunities,

**he claimed that he had a good grade to secure a place in the university, however, the criteria for recruitment were based on the academic grade from high school. Although he had such qualifications, disabled people were not given any consideration.**

While speaking to the barriers and challenges he encountered throughout his journey, he mentioned that he also had financial problems since his family could not provide for his sustenance and the support needed. However, he highlighted that his parents and teachers played an outstanding role and helped him finish his high school degree. In addition, he mentioned that his classmates and friends marginalized him. In contrast, his parents and teachers used to encourage and motivate him while telling him that "disability is not inability" and he can perform better and excel in school.

This encouragement gave him ambition and dedication to pursue his education regardless of all the negative attitudes from classmates and peers. He also spoke of his interest in pursuing a university education up to Master's and PhD level. He explained that most jobs in Somalia and Kenya require undergraduate or graduate degrees and he was not able to secure a job because he had only a secondary certificate.

## Hamdi



Hamdi was born in Dagahaley Refugee Camp with a partial hearing impairment and currently lives in the camp. She is 27 years old. Hamdi started her primary education in Unity Primary School and then successfully completed her secondary education in Tawakal Secondary School. Hamdi did not receive any scholarship opportunities from non-governmental organizations and she holds a high school diploma as her highest level of education. When I asked about the problems that she has undergone throughout her primary and secondary education, she highlighted that she was marginalized by her peers because of her hearing impairment. Her requests to repeat their statements were frequently declined. In addition, she had challenges understanding the lessons from her teachers since each class had more than eighty students. When I asked if her teachers considered her disability and accommodated her in class, she said most of the teachers from the camp were untrained.

The trained teachers informed her to sit at the front desks before delivering lessons. Like the other participants, she emphasized inadequate resources and financial challenges that her family encountered.



for  
**4-5**  
students

**She mentioned that her parents could not afford to buy her learning resources, so she used to share the few resources available in the school with other students in a ratio of one book to four or five students.**

However, she worked hard and was supported by parents, teachers, and her siblings.

When I asked if she had or applied for any scholarship opportunities, she responded that she applied but did not meet the academic criteria and emphasized that it was not inclusive for disabled people since they cannot meet the high school grade. She displayed an interest in pursuing tertiary education up to a Master's degree to advance her career skills, secure a decent job, and help her family. When I asked about her future, she showed concern about her academic future since the Kenyan government declared the closure of Dadaab camps in 2022. Her academic future is in despair and she prays to join a university and start to develop her career before the closure of the camps.

## 4.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

---

I have analyzed the transcribed the interviews and applied a comparative method to develop four key themes that emerged from the interviews:

1



**recruitment criteria for scholarship opportunities**

2



**inadequate resources**

3



**marginalization**

4



**parent/family support**

### 4.2.1 RECRUITMENT CRITERIA FOR SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

---

The term tertiary education means knowledge received from a university, college, or technical institute. Inclusion of people with disabilities in tertiary education is vital for social, political, and economic development.

Participation in tertiary and vocational training education has been found to positively influence life outcomes in various spheres (Butler et al. 2016). However, in the Dadaab context, inclusive postsecondary education for PWD is limited. Opportunities are competitive and scarce. There is a need for full inclusion based on the perspective of a human rights model. The goal of this model is to guarantee equal access to education for all vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations by 2030 (MacNaughton 2015: 563).

**Inclusive tertiary education for PWD is paramount for their personal development since it helps them to gain employment and financial resources that enhance their family livelihoods and lead to individual independence.**

It further helps the economy, thus benefitting the whole community. Since PWD are part of society, if their accessibility to tertiary education is limited and barriers are not addressed, their participation will continue to be limited.

In the interview, Hamdi mentioned that she applied to scholarship opportunities. However, she did not meet the academic criteria to get into tertiary education. When I asked if she had ever applied or accessed tertiary education, she said: "Yes, I have applied for scholarship opportunities, but I did not meet the academic criteria they wanted. My grade was D plain (Kenyan high school grading system), and the academic requirement was C+ and above."

This statement indicates that



**the qualification for tertiary scholarships was based on academic merits from high school. If the individual candidate cannot meet these criteria, he/she will find it difficult to get access to these opportunities from non-governmental organizations.**

In addition to that, Hamdi explained in the interview that students with disabilities do not have equal access to university education and there are barriers that restrict and limit their access:

“They (people with disabilities) don’t have equal access to university education, and they were not given special consideration to get access to university education. The barriers, as I have told you already, disabled people usually undergo learning challenges both at the family level like financial challenges and, also at the community level like underscoring their potential ability to success in life.”

Hamdi emphasizes the challenges that exist at the family level as refugee families cannot afford to educate their children even when they complete high school. They cannot help them to enroll in university education due to financial problems.

The other issue Hamdi raised is the societal problems she has encountered where her potential abilities were underestimated. This experience is not what was expected from a society that considers disability from a social model as well as a human rights perspective. Society needs to encourage and support people with disabilities, especially those who need to pursue their education at the university level, and also advocate for their inclusion and rights. She explained that:

“Those challenges are mostly common in high school and these result in PWD to get low grades compared to non-disabled students. - Hamdi”

These barriers are common in high school and discourage PWD from pursuing further education. Barriers can result in low grades in the final exams, which later exclude any tertiary opportunities from non-governmental organizations and donor programs.

Ibra had an opportunity to pursue tertiary education through scholarships and enrolled in different colleges and universities in Kenya and later at York University earning a Bachelor’s degree. When asked if he received those opportunities because of his disability, in contrast to Hamdi, he explained that he met the academic criteria and said, “Personally, I have met the academic criteria they are looking for.” Additionally, he mentioned that some donors like the BHER program would take students with disabilities into consideration: “There was a student [...] he was considered as an applicant although he didn’t meet the criteria which was a C plain grade.”

This situation highlights that disability-informed consideration must be part of the recruitment process and persons with disabilities must be made a priority. Currently, the BHER program cohort admitted two or three disabled students who pursued Bachelor's degrees in Education.

Another cause for tertiary educational exclusion occurs during secondary education, with inadequate resources available for students with disabilities. When I asked participant Ibra about the main causes of tertiary exclusion, he emphasized that there was a lack of trained personnel that could help PWD to excel in high school. He says,

“

They (PWD) don't have teachers who are trained for that field which will make them competent enough to go up to university level and they end up in the wrong place.

-Ibra

”

Despite scholarship criteria which are based on high school grades, PWD can be supported at the primary and secondary levels to be more competitive at post-secondary educational opportunities.

MK had met the academic qualification from high school. However, he did not receive a scholarship and his education level remains high school graduate. When I asked about the scholarship criteria, he mentioned that it was highly competitive and based on academic merits from high school.

He said, “For the scholarships, the criteria was based on the grade you got from secondary or high school but for me I managed to get those grades to get tertiary education so I don't know what they have been considering.”

This statement from MK portrays that despite meeting academic requirements to access higher education, he was not given the consideration and priority he deserved to be enrolled in tertiary institutions. Furthermore, he emphasizes that students with disabilities did not have equal opportunities for university education like other students. He states that “they (PWD) have no equal opportunities with students with no disability because of their physical damages.”

**There are many disabled students who successfully completed their high school (with low grades) but did not receive any support or scholarships compared to other students who were non-disabled and met the academic merits required.**

This situation leads to dropouts. The fact is that when disabled students see their pioneers stranded in the villages and the markets without employment or tertiary education, it will discourage them from pursuing their education and aim for a higher level.

While speaking about her ambition, Hamdi contemplated her future and illustrated that her future to get a university education is in desperation since the camp will be closed and all limited opportunities will be in a state of denouement. She revealed:

“

Now the future is not promising, and I hear that the camp will be closed I wish to complete a university degree and a Master's degree if granted the opportunity. I have now high school qualification and I don't have career skills that can help to get a decent job because I have an ambition to help the livelihood of my family. - Hamdi

”

Now all activities in the camp seem futile and donors are already thinking of the next steps from the Kenyan government, as the camp is slated to close in June 2022. If this camp closure is implemented, there will be a significant loss of generations like participant Hamdi, who had an academic goal and aspirations to be among one of the future leaders.

Rashka had access to a scholarship opportunity from the CLPT trust program which was sponsored by the European Union. He was the only disabled candidate who succeeded to benefit from that opportunity and he pursued a diploma in Public Relations and Diplomacy. When I asked how he qualified to receive the scholarship, he stated that the candidate should have a C plain grade (Kenyan high school grading system) and above:

“The goodness is, my grade was C plain and above. Another qualification is that the person needs to hold a refugee status, willing to continue his/her career and must not drop out.” Besides the academic criteria, persons with disabilities have all other criteria mentioned above and can meet them. They have the inspiration to register for university courses and excel at them. All participants are refugees: vulnerable and cannot afford university tuition fees and learning expenses. Moreover, while speaking about equity in tertiary education, Rashka stressed that PWD were not given any priority access to tertiary education. While those who met the academic criteria could be admitted, the ones who do not have the necessary high school grades will not be admitted:

“

PWD were not given specific special priority. There might be some criteria for admissions and if they met them, they would get the opportunity. But, if they don't, there is no specific priority for them. -Rashka

”

This statement proves that PWD are not being prioritized, nor are there specific considerations for the barriers students with disabilities may face in recruitment processes. Based on this interview analysis and existing literature, there is a need to reconsider how scholarship criteria were established and investigate diversity and inclusion for marginalized people.

## 4.2.2 INADEQUATE RESOURCES

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The paucity of qualified special needs (SNE) teachers and learning resources in the Dagahaley Refugee Camp amounts to a crisis in the high school settings in the Dadaab complex. According to Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), “State Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education” (WHO 2021). These kinds of teachers are key in helping disabled students, understanding the barriers to education they face, and supporting them to get tertiary education. Approximately twenty disabled high school students were accommodated in Tawakal Secondary School in Dagahaley in 2019. However, they do not have adequately qualified or trained teachers for all subjects. In addition to that INEE recommends that “teachers should be ‘competent and well-trained’ and ‘knowledgeable in the subject matter and pedagogy’” (122). This knowledge includes “participatory methods of instruction and learning processes that respect the dignity of the learner” and the ability to create “a safe and inclusive learner friendly environment” (ibid.). Moreover, educational excellence depends on qualified teachers and pedagogical approaches (INEE 2010).

**Unfortunately, quality education for people with disabilities in Dagahaley refugee camp is unpredictable, with inadequate resources available.**

There are few qualified refugee special needs teachers in primary and high schools. However, their acquired skills and level of education were undermined by government policies. In 2009 and 2010, UNHCR and Volunteers in International Service (AVSI), coordinated with Mount Kenya University and Masindo Muliro University in Kenya to sponsor a fifteen-week in-training program and one-year teaching diploma for 100 and 126 refugee teachers respectively. (Mendenhall et al. 2015). Qualified refugee teachers do not often enter the teaching professions in the camps, as teaching positions are paid incentive wages only. Many teachers left the teaching profession and secure better paying positions in unrelated fields with other non-governmental organizations in Dadaab.

**Inadequate learning resources in Dadaab refugee secondary schools are also extremely detrimental to students with disabilities as well as their teachers. It hinders the delivery of quality education and results in low academic performance at the high school level, which will have an impact on access to tertiary education,**

since scholarship opportunities from NGOs in Dadaab camps depend on grades from high school. In terms of learning resources for effective teaching, it is recommended to have “adequate and relevant materials for teaching and learning, appropriate class sizes and teacher-pupil ratios” (INEE 2010: 122). In contrast, refugee high school classrooms in Dagahaley accommodate almost ninety students in every class, violating INEE recommendations, resulting in overcrowding and inappropriate/ineffective teaching practices.

Furthermore, integrating technology into all classrooms was very difficult despite installing solar energy in almost all high schools in the Dadaab refugee camps. The following analysis from participant interviews will discuss the resources available for refugee students with disabilities.

When I asked MK, Rashka, Ibra, and Hamdi whether they received enough resources in the school, they all responded that they had not received enough resources to bolster their learning activities. Instead, they emphasized that they have been receiving basic learning resources. Participant MK answered: "I received some basic resources that were needed in the school but it was not enough resources." When asked to explain the basic resources he was receiving, he elaborated and said that "I was receiving like books, pencils, basic needs." Likewise, participant Rashka mentioned that

“there were no adequate learning resources that was available in the school.”  
-Rashka

These comments suggest that inadequate learning resources made it difficult to excel in academic exams. It explains why people with disabilities acquire low grades and are prevented from pursuing their education at a higher level like other students.

When I asked Rashka if there were specific learning resources meant for people with disabilities he responded:

“Throughout my experience, there were few resources available like textbooks, notebooks, pens but they were not specifically provided to disabled people and were provided generally to all students as equal.”  
-Rashka

People with disabilities, like Rashka, complained that their disability status was not considered nor accommodated within the school. Resources were distributed to all students equally and sometimes students shared limited resources in groups that lived in distant villages and blocks.

Moreover, Ibra, explained that the school where he was learning was not designed to accommodate disabled students. Despite improvements in recent years, the accommodations are still inadequate. He mentioned that he was sharing the learning resources with other students. He says: "I was just sharing the resources available for all students regardless of whether that student is living with a disability or not." Like the other participants, Hamdi, elaborated that she was not receiving adequate learning resources in high school. She was sharing with other students in groups. She said: "We were told to share learning resources in a ratio of one book to five or four students."

Sometimes they were individually provided solar lights to revise lessons at home and complete homework since there was no electricity at the camp during the night. In addition, Hamdi highlighted that students who were blind and/or with severe impairments were provided more adequate learning resources such as braille, however, accommodation of other disabled students in the school has been inadequate.

The availability of learning resources for PWD can help them to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills required to excel in national exams, which can help them to be competitive in the recruitment process and achieve their academic goals.



**Adequate learning resources for people with disabilities in Dagahaley refugee camp are vital for their future to access tertiary education,**

increase their productivity, and enhance their experiences so that they grow individually and participate in social, political, and economic developments in their societies.

### 4.2.3 MARGINALIZATION

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Social exclusion was a common theme in which the participants emphasized challenges to accessing higher educational opportunities, scholarships, and resources that were available to others. Participants reported being denied social inclusion because of their disability. However, the Refugee Convention states that in Article 24: “All refugees are entitled to the same social security rights as all citizens of the country” (Couldrey and Herson 2010).

In addition, access to tertiary education in protracted displacement settings, like the Dadaab complex, was the only option to secure more durable solutions besides resettlement opportunities within other developing nations. Non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance in the Dadaab refugee camp highlight their projects and programs, non-discrimination acts, and their provision of assistance and entitlements to persons with disabilities. However, PWD who completed high school report that they do not have equal access to tertiary scholarships and their conditions were not considered. The guiding principle to deliver humanitarian assistance emphasizes the protection and rights of persons with disabilities. According to UNHCR handbook for protection, it highlights that

“

[t]here is a need to ensure the protection of persons with disabilities and focuses on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, with particular emphasis on gender, violence and health as these relate to persons with disabilities - (Couldrey and Herson 2010).

”

There is a need to include persons with disabilities and adopt alternative ways of recruitment to ensure equitable access to scholarship opportunities as well as resources available in the refugee camp.

The research participants highlighted that they had encountered marginalization and discrimination that resulted from their disability status from the community, their peers, and classmates. Two of the participants, Ibra and Rashka, mentioned that they were called names from the community describing their specific physical disability. Ibra reported that “I have received names like ‘ileey; which in English means the mono-eyed like a person with one so, I received names I did not before the injury. This also caused low morale.” Giving names to persons with disabilities based on their perceived impairments violates the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Moreover, it can lead to discrimination and low morale for PWD, and undermines their potential abilities to participate in social and life activities. In addition, Rahska mentioned that “the communities discriminated against me due to my handicapped issues by giving me some other names which my parents did not give me.”



**This is an abuse of basic rights to a person with disabilities and it can lead to social alienation and hatred within the society.**

**It hinders inclusivity in social activities as well as school activities, therefore leading to poor participation in academic competition and in social, political, and economic developments.**

Moreover, Hamdi also emphasized that she experienced discrimination from her own peers who looked down on her when participating in group activities.

She highlighted that “some of my peers used to look down upon me when we were chatting. Then, when I requested them to repeat for me what they said, they used to marginalize me to engage in their group activities.” As a female refugee with disabilities, she encountered many challenges in pursuing her education. However, through her dedication and effort, she completed high school, but was unable to pursue tertiary education due to financial constraints and limited scholarship opportunities from NGOs.

Besides discrimination based on their status, the participants reported facing challenges in getting scholarships and university education like other students and their disability status was never considered and accommodated in consideration of refugee tertiary scholarships. For instance, participant MK reported that he was never considered for scholarship opportunities like other students. When he was asked if students with disabilities had equal access to university opportunities, he mentioned,



They have no equal opportunities like other students who had no disability because of their disability. -MK



Likewise, other participants reported that prospective students with disabilities do not have equal opportunities and are alienated from accessing tertiary scholarships. They suggested that special priority and consideration to PWD or other alternative pathways for university education would be helpful.

Ibra suggested that “they (PWD) were supposed to be given special priority when it comes to scholarship and other opportunities arise.” If implemented, this measure would enhance inclusive tertiary education as well as equitable durable solutions for all candidates regardless of their academic merits from high school.

On the other hand, MK mentioned that he was despised and alienated in school. He said,

“

They were telling me to go away because of my disability [...] when I want to accompany in sittings, they look down upon me, but they could not stop my ambitions. -MK

”

He highlighted that despite the discrimination/marginalization from his own society, he put a lot of energy and zeal into accomplishing his studies and successfully acquiring a high school certificate. He was committed to working hard in his studies and competing with other students. However, he could not secure tertiary opportunities and his education level remains high school graduate. Moreover, when asked how it had an impact on their life, the two participants who had no tertiary education claimed that, despite having academic goals, they could not get the opportunity to pursue them based on their poor performance in high school. This issue resulted in exclusion from the labour market as the job market is competitive and employers need potential university graduates with hands-on experience and specializations.

#### 4.2.4 FAMILY/PARENT SUPPORT

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Parental support is key to success in academic achievements, especially when the learner has disabilities and requires a myriad of forms of support and assistance. Extreme income conditions were the main challenge to accessing resources and excelling in high school. Stigma, discrimination, and limited access to opportunities have also been a common challenge to all participants. Parental/family support influences educational attainment. During the interview, MK highlighted:

“

People who have supported my education during my high school were my parents, they helped me a lot. They just strived to survive and helped me to continue my learning. -MK

”

The support MK received from his parents/family enabled him to continue his education and accomplish his high school education. He showed his appreciation to his parents who gave him inspirational support and monetary support, despite their financial challenges. Furthermore, he emphasized that his teachers encouraged and motivated him to continue his education and perform well since he had the potential ability to compete with others: “I was encouraged by my parents and also teachers. I had good teachers who told me disability is not inability, I was just doing what I can, and I was really performing well.”

He said that his parents tried their best to provide him with motivation, rewarded him when he excelled in exams and provided him with learning materials and technical assistance. As a refugee, they encouraged him to focus on his education and pursue tertiary studies.

**However, his dream became unrealistic when he finished high school and was not able to access tertiary education due to limited opportunities as well as negligence of equity and inclusive scholarship opportunities.**

Rashka, also mentioned that he was encouraged to pursue his education by his parents and teachers, who informed him that disability is not an inability and he can perform outstanding and fabulous work at school as well as in life. They told him: “my friend, you are disabled we know it, but what we can tell you is that you can further be successful and perform well than other people who are not even disabled.” This gave Rashka strong motivation to work hard with energy and zeal, which later rewarded him with a scholarship opportunity and a study diploma in Public Relations and Diplomacy.

Likewise, Ibra was supported by his parents after he become disabled, but he did not receive any assistance from humanitarian agencies. He stressed that his parents and teachers encouraged him to continue his study. Their remarks outline important encouragements that helped Ibra to continue and focus on his education. He acknowledged the importance of education to his life as the vital support that he received from his family/parents.

His reflections illustrated that there is a connection between family/parental and educational attainments, which are extremely needed in fragile settings like refugee camps. Establishing supportive structures for persons with disabilities as well their parents/families to promote domestic income requires a lot of effort.

**Humanitarian organizations leave families/parents on their own to support persons with disabilities and they do not cater to their individual needs. Instead, they generalize their relief assistance.**

Hamdi illustrated that her parents and siblings supported her throughout her educational journey: “my parents and my older siblings supported me to complete up to high school.” As a female refugee with a disability, she overcame challenges through her dedication and support from her family, especially her mother who stood beside her when she faced disappointments and stigma from her own community. She uttered these remarks with courage: “In case I met disappointment issue, I used to inform my parents especially my mother and she encouraged me to ignore these challenges and continue my education.” This statement clearly illustrates that, with the help of her family, Hamdi managed to continue high school and focused on her studies. Hamdi also acknowledged that without the support of her parents, she could not enroll in school or finish high school. Now, as a high school graduate, she is optimistic about her academic future, getting a university education, and achieving her ambitions despite financial constraints to attain university admission.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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This research study examined the experiences of persons with disabilities accessing education and tertiary education scholarships in the Dadaab refugee camp. My interviews with four participants (two who had tertiary education and two who had no tertiary education) explored a series of sub-questions and I have explored the findings in the study based on the themes of recruitment processes, resource availability, discrimination/marginalization, and role of parents. My analysis of two participants who had access to university education and two who had no tertiary education revealed existing factors that continue to hinder access to scholarships and tertiary education for persons with disabilities.

To begin, I realized that recruitment criteria for scholarship opportunities in the refugee camp had a negative impact on PWD.

**Participants noted that recruitment criteria for tertiary education in Dadaab refugee camps have not considered persons with disabilities, and instead, base access on competitive grades from high school education**

Research participants contended that, in high school, they did not receive the adequate learning resources and support they required. Similarly, they emphasized that due to their low-grade achievements in secondary education, they could not secure admission to tertiary scholarships from donor organizations. In addition, participants highlighted that they came across discrimination from the school and the community. Many were called names related to their disability by their own peers and by those within the community. They also mentioned that despite society's discouragement, they were able to continue their studies with energy and zeal.

Some of my discussions with the participants were also related to parental/family support. The importance of parental support was vital to learners, and it had a positive impact, particularly on learners facing significant problems with financial income and inadequate learning resources. Although the school resources were not adequate, participants highlighted that their parents and family supported them, particularly when they faced discrimination from their community. One of the participants mentioned that her mother motivated her to pursue her education and accomplish her studies up to the tertiary level. They noted that family support had a fundamental influence on their learning.

However, all the participants did not receive financial assistance from their families to pursue higher education, which contributed to two participants being unable to access tertiary education. Family income in the refugee families is too low to afford tuition fees for tertiary education, and therefore, refugee scholarships in Dadaab camps are critically important. Yet, their recruitment process continues to be competitive and exclusionary towards persons with disabilities.

**Education is vital in the emergency refugee context and can lead to sustainable solutions for refugees seeking opportunities to further their education. It is important for recovery and state-building processes.**

There is a need to improve inclusion in higher educational opportunities available in the refugee camp. The participation and leadership of persons with disabilities is critically important.

Despite the incredible achievements of UNHCR and its partners in the education sector, especially primary and secondary education, there is a need to review services delivery, particularly scholarship opportunities available for persons with disabilities and respond to their needs effectively. Furthermore, involving the disability community in the decision-making process can reduce the gaps that exist in tertiary education.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of this study have implications for practice, policy, and research. Access to tertiary education, especially for persons with disabilities, shapes future dreams and individual development. Furthermore, it creates life-long chances for employment opportunities, political representation, as well as social life development. Based on the situation on the ground in Dadaab, there is a need to urgently establish equitable policies that can enhance access to tertiary educational opportunities and scholarships for refugee students with disabilities.

**As the lead organization responsible for refugee protection under the 1951 Convention, the UNHCR needs to commit itself to this endeavour and consider equitable access to tertiary education in the Dadaab refugee camps regardless of disability status. In addition, UNHCR needs to develop supportive policies and measure to ensure access to scholarship opportunities for persons with disabilities. There is a need to emphasize long-term development programs rather than temporary relief programs. Donors and implementing organizations in Dadaab refugee camps should focus on educational developments that can enhance long-term development and sustainable solutions.**

My study demonstrates the importance of listening to persons with disabilities who had access to tertiary education and others who did not. I suggest that there is a need to engage persons with disabilities and seek ways to consider and reinforce change in tertiary opportunities. Moreover, higher educational opportunities must enable persons with disabilities to fully develop their potential capacities, reduce their vulnerability within society, and call for the elimination of all inequalities in the education sector in Dadaab refugee camps. These goals need community participation in decision-making to enhance meaningful interventions in access to tertiary education opportunities. The study further recommends:



Advocate for UN agencies and NGOs in the refugee camp to foster inclusive environments that meet the specific needs of PWD beyond one-size-fits-all solutions, with the aim of inclusion as a right.



UNHCR and the implementing partners working in tertiary education need to consider alternative entry pathways and preparatory programs for persons with disabilities to facilitate access to tertiary education for PWD, since they faced different challenges at high school that hindered them from meeting the standard admission criteria.



Review tertiary scholarship policies in Dadaab camps with the guidance of persons with disabilities to ensure equitable and inclusive admission processes of PWD. The limited scholarship opportunities available in the refugee camps should nurture equity and address the needs and barriers faced by persons with disabilities.



Design scholarship programs in the camps to address barriers faced by PWD.



Address the issue of low funding for refugee education, particularly higher education, by urging donors and UNCHR to provide sufficient funding for tertiary education pathways that support future employment.



Promote community participation in decision-making to create meaningful interventions for access to tertiary education.

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