

# Global Response Platform Briefing: India

Briefing call: 1100 (GMT), Weds 26 November, [meeting link](#)

26 November 2025

## Summary

- India hosts over 249,000 refugees and asylum seekers. Nearly 43% are aged 18–35 and many are seeking access to higher education.
- Despite constitutional rights to education, refugees face legal ambiguity, documentation constraints, financial barriers, and inconsistent institutional policies that limit access to tertiary education.
- There are immediate opportunities for UK universities to support through:
  - Creating scholarships for [online UG/PG programmes](#) and [foundational programmes](#), which can be delivered in partnership with UNHCR connected learning centres in India; and
  - [Creating Scholarships at UK branch and partner campuses within India](#).
- Activities will need to take into account India's complex protection landscape, including varied legal status of refugee groups, lack of government-issued documentation, financial vulnerability, cultural barriers, and uneven English-language proficiency. Tailored wraparound support through UNHCR, Mosaik and other partners can provide essential for equitable access and progression.
- By creating opportunities for refugees in India, UK universities have an opportunity to support Indian Government ambitions for delivering Sustainable Development Goals, which include equal access to tertiary education.

## 1. Context

### 1.1 Refugee and asylum seeker communities in India

- India has a long tradition of hosting refugees and is currently home to more than 249,000 refugees and asylum seekers with varying registration statuses:
  - As of October 2025, 48,647 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR India, mostly from Myanmar and Afghanistan.

- Additionally, 59,000 individuals from Myanmar live in a refugee-like (but unregistered) situation in North-East India, specifically in Manipur and Mizoram.
- 63,167 refugees from Tibet and 89,611 refugees from Sri Lanka are supported by the Government of India.
- Within the UNHCR-supported population, 47% are Rohingya, 18% Afghans, 23% non-Rohingya Myanmar, and 12% individuals of other nationalities (including Somalis, Yemenis, Sudanese, and others). These communities are mostly concentrated in urban areas in New Delhi (43.65%), Telangana (24.72%), Jammu & Kashmir (15.27%), Haryana (3.79%), and Maharashtra (2.63%).
- Nearly 43% aged 18 - 35 of the UNHCR-supported population are actively seeking higher education opportunities, most of whom completed a portion of their school education in India, and some at their respective countries of origin. In a recent survey conducted by UNHCR India, more than 800 individuals are eligible to access third country solutions. Of them, 281 have completed higher secondary education, 438 hold a bachelor's degree, 78 have completed a master's or other postgraduate degrees, and 9 hold doctoral degrees.

## **1.2 Legal status and need for solutions**

- India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, and it does not have a dedicated national refugee law defining or protecting refugees. Instead, refugee management in India operates through ad hoc administrative measures and general laws applicable to all foreign nationals. Historically, India has extended protection to certain groups such as Tibetan refugees (since 1959) and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees (1983–2009) through special policies and state-level arrangements. However, other communities, including Afghan refugees, Rohingya Muslims, and others fleeing persecution, are governed under the Foreigners Act, 1946 and related statutes, now consolidated under the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025, which primarily regulates entry, stay, and deportation of foreigners rather than granting refugee-specific rights. India does uphold the principle of non-refoulement through judicial interpretation under Article 21 of the Constitution, but the absence of a comprehensive refugee law results in inconsistent protection and differential treatment across groups. Their unauthorised stay puts them at risk of deportation and arrest. There is, hence, a need for long-term durable solutions for refugees and asylum seekers in India to ensure their international protection needs.

### 1.3 Access to education for refugees and asylum seekers in India

- India recognises the fundamental and basic human right to primary education for every child, irrespective of citizenship, through the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989, ratified in 1992), the *Constitution of India*, the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act* ('RTE', 2009), and the landmark judgments of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India<sup>1</sup>.
- Under the Constitution of India, education is a subject under the Concurrent List,<sup>2</sup> vesting the Centre as well as states with legislative and executive powers, and is administered in line with the *National Education Policy* ('NEP', 2020) and the RTE Act. The NEP further affirms bridging social inequality gaps in school and higher education<sup>3</sup>, with emphasis on access, equity and inclusion.
- The *National Institute of Open Schooling*<sup>4</sup> (NIOS) provides flexible educational opportunities for marginalised students, including refugees and asylum seekers.
- Despite steady progress, large disparities persist in school education, at secondary school levels in particular.<sup>5</sup> UNHCR through our implementing partners provide bridge classes to address learning gaps and integrate refugees and asylum seekers into formal schooling.
- Under the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework signed by India, the Government of India recognised refugees and asylum seekers as amongst the most marginalised and vulnerable communities.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers in India

- UNHCR has facilitated access to school education for registered refugees in India, but higher education opportunities - both in India and abroad - remain severely limited. Legal ambiguity, inconsistent policies, and weak institutional support force many to discontinue their studies and accept low paying, unskilled work in unsafe

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<sup>1</sup> *Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh* AIR 1993 SC 2178

<sup>2</sup> Entry 25, Concurrent List, Constitution of India 1950

<sup>3</sup> under headings 9, 10, 11 and 16

<sup>4</sup> NIOS is an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. It provides open schooling opportunities for learners, including refugees and asylum seekers, to earn 10th (Secondary) and 12th (Senior Secondary) certificates. These certificates are recognised by the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) as equivalent to other national boards like CBSE and ICSE, making them valid for admission to all universities in India. NIOS qualifications are also accepted internationally by many universities in countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and the UAE, subject to meeting specific admission requirements and documentation.

<sup>5</sup> Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), National Education Policy, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Government of India and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023-2027 (Pg.17)

informal sectors. Lack of legal status coupled with worsening financial and medical needs, also heightens risks of long-term exploitation and abuse.

- Expanding higher education access for this group aligns strongly with ambitions of many universities in India and the Indian Government on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and their SDG Cooperation Framework.
- Key barriers to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers include:
  - Financial constraints and limited state support - Refugees and asylum seekers in India typically arrive from conflict-affected regions with minimal financial resources, often having lost homes, livelihoods, and savings. Higher education is unaffordable for refugees and asylum seekers who are classified by universities in India as international students, making them ineligible for state-subsidised seats and charged a substantially higher tuition fee relative to domestic students at both public and private universities. This issue is further compounded by the absence of government supported financial aid for most refugee groups.
  - Alternative international pathways remain severely limited relative to the demand - Only six of the 472 refugees and asylum seekers in India who applied for the 2024 Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP) to Australia were accepted in the pilot phase. Only five students from a total application pool of 289 were selected from India for the equivalent 2025 Italian pathway programme (University Corridors to Italy, UNICORE).
  - Lack of documentation and legal recognition - Refugees registered with UNHCR lack government-issued documentation such as Aadhar cards<sup>7</sup>, valid stay visas and lack of travel documentation (in some cases) that are required for enrollment in universities as international students. UNHCR has been able to secure ad hoc exceptions to this on humanitarian grounds with individual universities.
  - Discrimination and exploitation - Bias due to race, ethnicity, country of origin and lack of legal status of refugees, is a further barrier to admissions and continuing education at both public and private institutions.
  - Language-based and awareness barriers - Limited proficiency in English and local languages hinders access to educational opportunities and comprehension of

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<sup>7</sup> Aadhaar, is a 12-digit unique identification number issued to residents of India. It integrates demographic data (name, address, date of birth, gender, mobile number, email) and biometric data (fingerprints, iris scans, facial photograph) to create a secure, deduplicated identity. It serves as proof of identity and address, facilitating access to government subsidies, banking, telecom, and other services.

academic content. Lack of information about available programmes, scholarships, and application processes create further gaps.

- *Gender-based and intersectional challenges* - Gender norms and socio-cultural restrictions disproportionately affect higher education of female refugees. Safety, domestic responsibility norms, discrimination and unequal access to information and opportunities create additional barriers for female refugees.

*(Refer Annex 1 for a detailed description barriers to education in India broken down by group)*

### **3. Existing higher education access pathways and activities**

There are several initiatives to expand access to higher education for refugees, although they remain limited in scale or focus. Below are their details:

- ***The DAFI / Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative scholarship programme:*** *The DAFI programme in India* supports qualified, young refugees who meet the requirements to access higher education in India while empowering them to contribute knowledge, skills and leadership to the refugee community and facilitate peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. In 2025, 43 young scholars were awarded DAFI scholarships in India and are currently pursuing their tertiary education, out of which 30 are enrolled in private universities, 12 in government universities, and 1 in a technical and vocational education and training institute (TVET). To date, approximately 290 scholars have benefited from the DAFI scholarship program. The sustained success of UNHCR's DAFI initiative over several years highlights that, while access to higher education opportunities is possible, it remains fragmented and largely contingent upon the policies and capacities of individual institutions
- **UNHCR - Duolingo University Access Programme:** Started in 2021, the University Access Programme provided support to selected students to apply for bachelor-level university programmes in third countries, including the different stages of the application process, applying for financial aid, and by providing additional support until their arrival in the third country. Thus far, the programme has supported 21 refugee students from India to pursue undergraduate degrees in the USA, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Our scholars have joined prestigious international universities such as Georgetown University, University of Dundee, University of Canberra, Northwestern University, Emory College, and others, having secured tuition fee waivers and coveted scholarships such as the Chevening

Scholarship. The programme was necessarily paused in 2025 due to evolving political dynamics in the United States and a broader rise in restrictive immigration sentiments globally.

- **Scholarships for Afghans:** The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has offered 1000 fully-funded online scholarships<sup>8</sup> to target Afghan youths to pursue their studies online at various Indian universities. The programme is for the academic year 2025-26, and is delivered through e-VidyaBharti (e-VB) i-learn portal.
- **University Corridors to France (UNIV'R):** Led by UNHCR France, UNIV'R provides easier access to the university system in France to refugees to pursue postgraduate studies along with administrative, social, and financial support. In 2024-2025, 2 refugee scholars have been supported through this programme at the University of Toulouse and Sciences Poin France respectively.
- **Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP) Australia:** Implemented by Skills Path Australia, this programme supports refugees and asylum seekers to pursue higher education and vocational training in Australia. In 2024-2025, 6 refugee students from India have been selected for undergraduate and postgraduate studies and will depart to Australia under the Special Global Humanitarian Visa, thereby allowing them to stay permanently in Australia with full study and work rights.
- **University Corridors to Italy (UNICORE 7.0):** Led by UNHCR Italy, the programme provides refugee students the opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies in Italy. Selected scholars are exempted from tuition fees at participating universities and receive financial support for airplane tickets and visa related expenses, in addition to a study grant to help them during their stay in Italy. In 2025, 5 refugee scholars have been selected from India and have departed to Italy.

#### 4. Post-graduate options for refugees

Due to their legal status, refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR are unable to access formal employment opportunities and are limited to informal labor markets for their livelihoods. To address this challenge, UNHCR India collaborates with various partners to facilitate access to employment opportunities in third countries and promote sustainable solutions through complementary pathways, particularly those based on skills and recognised qualifications. The higher education opportunities should be strategically aligned with one or more of the following objectives:

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<sup>8</sup> Special Sponsorship Scheme for Afghan Nationals (SSSAN)

- **Remote Work Opportunities:** Programmes enabling refugees to engage in remote work while in India, with the potential to transition into labor migration opportunities in the long term.
- **Labor Mobility Pathways:** Access to migration schemes such as Australia's *Skilled Refugees Labor Agreement Pilot*, Canada's *Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)*, Italy's *Flows Decree*, and similar initiatives in EU countries (e.g., *EU Blue Card* and skills-based pathways).
- **Addressing Skilled Labor Shortages:** Courses and certifications tailored to meet in-demand labor needs in third countries, particularly in sectors such as Information Technology, Engineering, Cybersecurity, Personal Support Care, Construction, Nursing, Tourism, Hospitality, and related fields.
- **Master's Programmes for Durable Solutions:** Opportunities through initiatives like *UNICORE*, *UNIV'R*, and *RSSP*, which enable refugees and asylum seekers to pursue advanced education and secure long-term solutions in third countries.

## 5. Recommended activities for UK Universities.

### A. Online scholarships delivered by UK universities for refugees in India

#### Possible university contributions

- Waive tuition for a pilot cohort on selected online undergraduate, postgraduate, Level 4–5, or micro-credential programmes in fields relevant to post-graduation options (see section 4 above).

#### Key design considerations

- Programmes must be credit / qualification-bearing from a recognised higher education institution.
- UNHCR learning centres can provide wraparound support (device and internet access, recruitment, application support, social-emotional support); limited monthly livelihood stipends for the students may be possible.
- Initial geographic focus of learning centres will be Delhi, with potential future reach to Pune and Hyderabad.
- Importance of industry-relevant and portable credentials, given constrained integration/employment in India and the importance of remote work and complementary pathways (EU, Australia, Canada, Italy).

### B. Scholarships at branch or partner campuses in India

#### Possible university contributions

- Pilot a small number of fee-waiver scholarships at Indian branch or partner campuses in India where there are larger refugee communities - urban areas of New Delhi, Telangana, Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana, and Maharashtra.
- There is the potential to coordinate with UNHCR on learner welfare and light transport support where needed.

#### Key design considerations

- Since refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR may not have access to government issued documentation (including Aadhar card<sup>9</sup>) and Bank Accounts, ensure flexibility around documentation, to also accept UNHCR issued registration cards as valid documentation to facilitate access.
- This could expand to include 2+2 or 3+1 routes for refugees in the future if and when a framework for humanitarian student visas is developed by the UK government<sup>10</sup>.

### **C. Foundational and English programmes (online)**

Whilst there are prospective students in UNHCR's network who already have the requisite English language skills to access university, English language skills may still be a major barrier for specific groups (see Annex 1). Many students will also require support with academic skills and foundational courses to access option A and B, or access third country pathways.

#### Possible university contributions

- Pilot a small cohort of online pre-sessional academic English and study-skills delivered in partnership with UNHCR learning centres.

#### Key design considerations

- Delivery through Delhi learning centres initially. UNHCR will have facilitators staffing the centre. There may be scope to hire teachers to help deliver blended programmes (in English or other skills) in the future.
- Pastoral support and clear signposting to pathways after completion (remote work, complementary pathways, or progression to UG/PG) can be integrated through UNHCR learning centres and Mosaik Guidance Programmes.

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<sup>9</sup> Aadhaar, is a 12-digit unique identification number issued to residents of India. It integrates demographic data (name, address, date of birth, gender, mobile number, email) and biometric data (fingerprints, iris scans, facial photograph) to create a secure, deduplicated identity. It serves as proof of identity and address, facilitating access to government subsidies, banking, telecom, and other services.

<sup>10</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/strengthening-border-security-and-reforms-to-the-asylum-system>

## Annex 1:

<b>Refugee Community</b>	<b>Legal Status/Recognition</b>	<b>Education Access</b>	<b>Key Opportunities Available</b>	<b>Primary Challenges</b>
<b>Tibetans</b>	Special arrangement with India since 1959; recognised by the government	High access to all levels including higher education	Reserved seats in government colleges; CTA scholarship programmes; Tibetan Children's Villages (TCVs); English-medium education; recognised certificates	Limited to specific institutions; competition for reserved seats; funding limitations
<b>Sri Lankan Tamils</b>	Long-term presence; assisted by the Government of India.	Moderate to good access	Government assistance programmes; established community support; access to Tamil-medium education	Documentation issues; limited higher education pathways; economic constraints
<b>Myanmar (Rohingyas)</b>	Registered with UNHCR. Not recognised by the Indian Government; considered 'illegal foreigners'.	Very limited access; significant barriers at all levels	UNHCR support through DAFI scholarships; Basic literacy programmes; community-based education	No official recognition; documentation barriers; schools refusing admission; lack of Aadhaar cards <sup>11</sup> ; economic constraints; treated as international students by universities
<b>Afghans</b>	Registered with UNHCR. Not recognised by the Indian Government	Moderate; better than Rohingyas but limited higher education	UNHCR Support through DAFI scholarships; Limited access to private college admissions; English language courses	Certificate recognition issues; international student fees; limited government college access; language barriers; treated as international students by universities
<b>Myanmar (Chins)</b>	Registered with UNHCR; those in the North-East region have limited government recognition	Limited access	UNHCR Support through DAFI scholarships; Limited access to private college admissions; English language courses	Language barriers; documentation issues; limited awareness of opportunities; economic constraints;

<sup>11</sup> Aadhaar, is a 12-digit unique identification number issued to residents of India. It integrates demographic data (name, address, date of birth, gender, mobile number, email) and biometric data (fingerprints, iris scans, facial photograph) to create a secure, deduplicated identity. It serves as proof of identity and address, facilitating access to government subsidies, banking, telecom, and other services.

	(allowed to access territory in the North-East region of Manipur and Mizoram) <b>Note:</b> Those in the NE region are not registered with UNHCR.			treated as international students by universities
<b>Other Nationalities from Africa, Middle East etc.</b>	Registered with UNHCR Not recognised by Indian government	Limited access	UNHCR support; basic education programmes; vocational training	Cultural barriers; language difficulties; documentation problems; limited community size; economic constraints; treated as international students by universities. African refugees, particularly, face more discrimination and racism.