

Barriers and Bridges: Analyzing Capital Factors Influencing Refugee Access to University Education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Western Uganda

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Abstract

Structural, economic and social constraints often limit refugee access to university education. We investigated how capital factors influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Guided by Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977) as the analytic lens, we explored how financial resources, social networks and cultural knowledge shape refugees' opportunities to access university education. Subscribing to the advocacy world view, we used the case study research design. We collected data through interviews, document review and focus group discussions. We used purposive and snowball sampling to select 27 participants for the study. We analyzed data using thematic data analysis. Findings reveal that refugees with stronger economic means, supportive social networks and greater cultural and capital are more likely to access university education, while those with limited resources and connections face significant barriers. The study highlights that structural provisions alone are insufficient; enhancing refugee access requires integrated strategies that combine scholarships, mentorship and culturally responsive educational support. By emphasizing the role of capital, we provide critical insights for policymakers, institutions and communities aiming to foster equitable university education access for refugees in Uganda and similar contexts. This study has demonstrated that various forms of capital influence refugee access to university education by 60%. Thus, interventions aimed at enhancing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement should be implemented across policy, institutional and community levels.

Keywords: capital, barriers, bridges, university education, refugee, access

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Access to university education remains a critical challenge for refugees globally, despite international frameworks emphasizing educational equity, such as the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) and the UNHCR Education Strategy (2022). UNHCR is a United Nations agency mandated to protect people who are forced to flee their homes because of war, conflict or persecution. Its main role is to ensure that refugees' rights and safety are protected and to help them find durable solutions such as voluntary return home, local integration and resettlement to other countries. In Uganda, UNHCR emerges as the leading financier of higher education (including university education) for refugees, operating in close collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and esteemed developmental partners such as Finn Church Aid (FCA), Refugee Law Project, Jesuit Refugee Services, Windle International Uganda, among others (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2021; Office of the Prime Minister, 2024). Refugees face multiple barriers, including financial constraints, social exclusion and limited exposure to cultural and educational resources, which collectively hinder their entry into university education. In Uganda, home to over 1.79 million refugees as of 2024, the government has implemented inclusive policies under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). This framework not only grants refugees the right to access public education at all levels, but it also remains steadfast in active collaboration, continued dialogue and prioritization of refugees' inclusion and support in both national and local

contexts (Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, 2024). This framework has made a substantial contribution to addressing numerous elements of refugees' lives, including higher education. However, enrollment in university remains exceptionally low, particularly in settlements such as Nakivale Refugee Settlement, one of the oldest and most diverse in the country (Save the Children, 2025). While much research has focused on structural and economic barriers, researchers have paid less attention to the role of capital (social, economic, cultural) factors in shaping refugees' higher education trajectories. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework, which explains human action as a dynamic interplay between ingrained social structures (habitus) and objective social fields, mediated by various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social), we examine how refugees' financial resources, social networks and cultural knowledge influence their opportunities to access university education. By foregrounding the interplay of these forms of capital, we aimed to provide insights into both the enabling and constraining factors affecting refugee access to university education. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing policies and interventions that promote equitable and sustainable access to university education for refugees in Uganda and comparable contexts.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Access to university education is one of the global challenges impeding the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 addresses the need to provide fair and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background or personal circumstances (Government of Uganda, 2024; UNHCR, 2019). This challenge not only inhibits refugees from contributing towards national transformation and sustainable growth (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2023; UNHCR, 2022), but it also deters them from acquiring critical skills and knowledge required for improved livelihoods, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and poor health among the refugee communities (UNHCR, 2019). At the national level, this challenge directly affects implementation of the goals outlined in Uganda's national development plan, which emphasizes human capital development and inclusive growth as pillars for socioeconomic transformation (National Planning Authority, 2024).

Despite Uganda's progressive policies under the CRRF, which grants refugees the right to access public education at all levels, actual access to university education among refugees remains strikingly low. Overall higher education enrollment rate within refugee settlements stands at approximately 7%, reflecting a stark underrepresentation of refugee students in advanced learning pursuits. For Nakivale Refugee Settlement in particular, only 3% of eligible refugees are enrolled in higher education programs (UNHCR, 2021). Nakivale Refugee Settlement, one of Uganda's largest and most diverse settlements, faces structural and economic barriers, such as high tuition fees, limited scholarship opportunities and overcrowded learning facilities (Save the Children, 2025; UNHCR, 2020). If this state of affairs continues, progress towards attaining Uganda's commitments to equitable refugee access to education expressed in the CRRF and ERP will be retarded, ultimately compromising Uganda's contribution to SDG 4. Numerous scholars such as Sempebwa (2024), Gallagher et al. (2024), Ahimbisibwe (2022), Erdogan (2023), Dryden-Peterson (2015) and Sempebwa et al. (2024) have studied refugee access to university education in Uganda, but none has examined the role of capital factors in shaping refugees' ability to access university education. Economic, social and cultural capital play a critical role in mediating this access. The absence or limitation of any of these forms of capital can hinder refugees from navigating the pathway to university education, even when structural opportunities exist. This gap underscores the need for an empirical investigation into how capital factors collectively influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing policies, institutional strategies and community-based interventions that aim to enhance equitable and sustainable access to university education for refugees in Uganda.

2. Theoretical Framework

We anchored this study in Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, which introduces habitus, capital and field as conceptual tools essential for dissecting intricate social interactions. Within this framework, habitus comprises the ingrained norms, values and dispositions that shape individuals' perceptions and actions, often formed by their past experiences and sociocultural backgrounds. Capital, as Bourdieu defined it, exists in multiple forms – economic (financial resources), social (networks and relationships) and cultural (knowledge, skills and symbolic capital), which carries symbolic power within different social contexts, as Figure 1 shows.

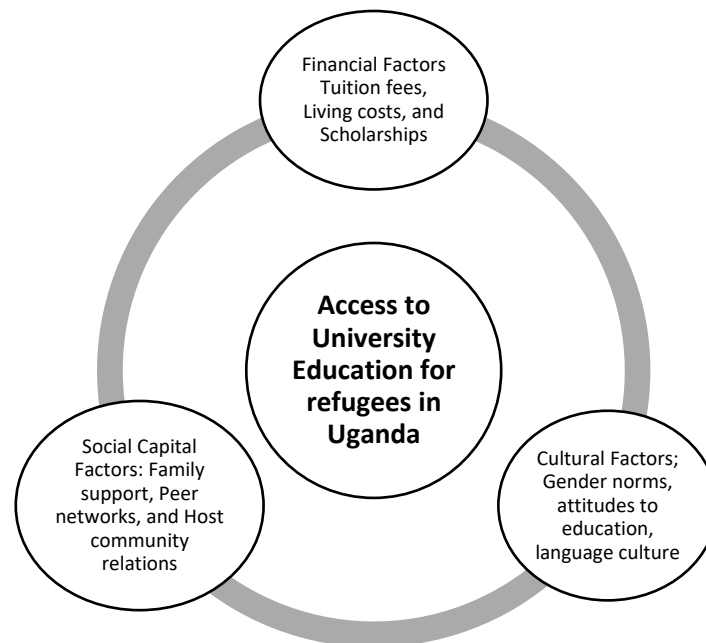


Figure 1. Factors Influencing Refugee Access to University Education in Uganda

Figure 1 illustrates that financial, social and cultural factors, which together determine whether refugees can enroll and succeed in university, influence refugee access to university education in Uganda. Financial factors affect the ability to pay tuition, accommodation and materials. Social factors provide encouragement, information and emotional support, and cultural factors influence attitudes towards higher education.

The concept of field refers to the structured social spaces or environments, such as the university education system, where individuals and institutions interact according to specific rules, power relations and access constraints. Bourdieu's theory (1977) provides a holistic approach to understanding the interplay between social structures and individual agency within various social fields. The theory is grounded in key assumptions, such as the existence of social fields, the concept of habitus as internalized dispositions, the significance of multiple forms of capital and the perpetuation of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1973). Bourdieu's theory provides valuable insights into how refugees' cultural capital influences their access to university education opportunities, how social networks and relationships are mobilized to overcome barriers and how power dynamics within social fields impact refugee access to university education resources (Bourdieu, 1973). The application of Bourdieu's theory of practice to this study enables a nuanced analysis of the complexities surrounding refugee education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. We based our study on Bourdieu's (1977) second component, which is capital factors that influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda.

3. Review of Related Literature

Capital exists in multiple forms – economic (financial resources), social (networks and relationships), cultural (knowledge, skills and educational credentials) and symbolic, which carries symbolic power within different social contexts (Bourdieu, 1977). Socioeconomic factors significantly determine refugee access to university education, often acting as gatekeepers to opportunity or perpetrators of exclusion. Refugees frequently face multidimensional poverty marked by a lack of income, housing, documentation and legal status, which impedes their ability to finance higher education or even qualify for it (Krause & Schmidt, 2020). UNHCR (2023) explained that less than 6% of refugee youth globally are enrolled in university education, a figure that contrasts sharply with the 40% global average. These disparities are rooted in broader socioeconomic conditions, including host country policies, financial hardship and resource limitations within refugee communities (UNHCR, 2025).

The most immediate socioeconomic constraints facing refugee students are financial insecurity, university tuition fees, cost of accommodation, learning materials and transportation. Even when public universities offer reduced fees for refugees, most families are unable to afford them due to chronic underemployment or dependency on humanitarian aid (Ahimbisibwe, 2021). Dushime and Friesen (2021) asserted that 87% of refugee youth blame lack

of school fees as the primary reason for discontinuing their education after secondary school. Lack of access to financial aid or loans due to legal status exacerbates this exclusion, highlighting the structural nature of educational marginalization for economically disadvantaged refugees.

Uganda's refugee policy creates an enabling environment in which refugees can pursue university education, thereby enhancing their prospects for socioeconomic mobility and long-term integration. Section 29(1) specifically provides that 'A refugee shall enjoy rights and be subject to obligations which are enjoyed or imposed on a person generally in Uganda under the Constitution and any other law'. These rights shall include 'the right to education, in particular, the right of access to elementary education, and the right to education other than elementary education in the same circumstances as nationals' (Uganda Refugees Act, 2006, p. 14). Coupled with that, several organizations, including Windle International Uganda, FCA and the Mastercard Foundation, provide financial assistance that covers tuition, accommodation and other academic expenses. These scholarships serve as a vital lifeline, ensuring that at least some refugee students can enroll in university without the constant anxiety of having to raise funds.

Refugee youth are often compelled to engage in informal labour markets to support their families, leaving little time or energy for continued education. Legal restrictions on employment in many host countries force refugees into low-paying, exploitative jobs with no security (Ginn et al., 2022). This diversion from education to labour is not merely a practical choice but a survival mechanism rooted in household economic instability. Even in more progressive policy environments such as Uganda, where refugees have the right to work, limited job opportunities in settlements result in high youth unemployment and educational attrition (Ahimbisibwe, 2021; Krause & Schmidt, 2020). This correlation between livelihood access and university education demonstrates how economic precarity shapes educational decisions and long-term trajectories.

The living conditions of refugee families often marked by overcrowded shelters, lack of privacy and poor lighting negatively impact academic performance and readiness for university (Baker, 2025; Hand et al., 2025). Students living in such conditions frequently lack the physical space and quiet needed for study, preparation or virtual learning. Many students reported difficulties in completing secondary education due to domestic distractions and unsafe living environments (UNHCR, 2020; WFP & UNICEF, 2021). These poor living standards, compounded by food insecurity and water scarcity, contribute to educational fatigue, undermining not only physical health but also mental wellbeing and academic engagement, further obstructing the path to university.

Parents' education levels and their engagement with formal schooling also shape socioeconomic environments that either enable or restrict university access. Refugees from educated family backgrounds often benefit from higher levels of sociocultural capital, such as familiarity with academic systems, emphasis on long-term planning and exposure to formal languages (Hayes, 2024). These assets, even in low-income households, influence students' educational aspirations and outcomes. Students whose parents had completed secondary education were significantly more likely to apply for scholarships or university admission (Ahimbisibwe, 2021). Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital explains how educational advantage is transmitted intergenerationally, despite economic hardship, as Figure 2 shows.

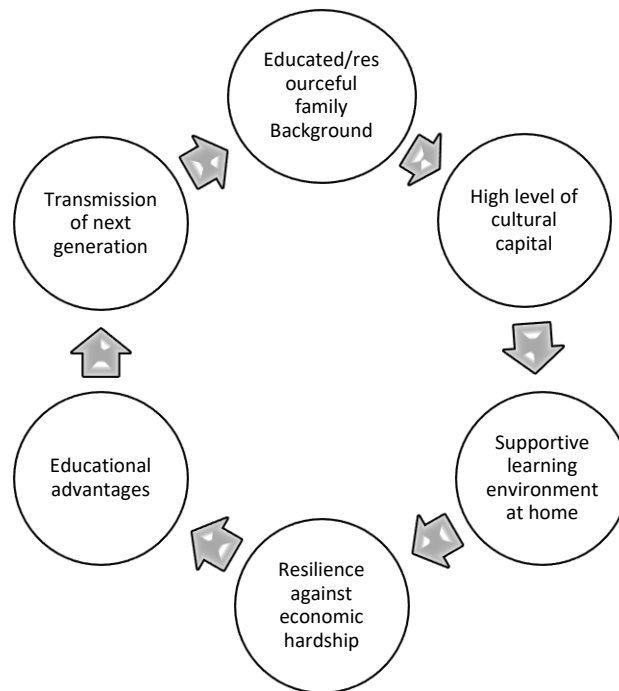


Figure 2. Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Capital and Educational Advantages

The flow starts with a family that possesses education and knowledge about formal learning, which constitutes cultural capital. Cultural capital components include familiarity with academic systems, valuing education, long-term planning, language proficiency and expectations and values. In a supportive home environment, children benefit from guidance, expectations and literacy practices even if material resources are scarce. Next comes economic hardship buffering, where cultural capital mitigates the negative effects of poverty, helping children maintain engagement and resilience in education. Not only does it help students to perform better academically, but it also prepares them for university and develops pathways for upward mobility. Finally, intergenerational transmission means that advantages can be passed on, creating a cycle where cultural capital reinforces educational outcomes across generations.

Social capital in the form of community networks, peer support and mentorship programmes serves as an important socioeconomic buffer that facilitates access to university education. Refugees with access to faith-based institutions, community organizations or diaspora support often receive both material and informational assistance crucial for continuing education (UNHCR, 2024)). In Uganda, programmes that Windle International and Jesuit Refugee Services run have successfully linked high-achieving refugee students with scholarship opportunities and academic mentoring (Ahimbisibwe, 2021; UNHCR, 2020). These networks not only provide economic assistance but also foster educational resilience, showing how non-familial socioeconomic environments play a critical role in expanding university pathways for marginalized youth.

A refugees' legal status (attestation or refugee identity card) – recognized, asylum-seeking or undocumented – is a prerequisite for university admission (UNESCO, 2025). Refugees without formal documentation or recognized status face difficulties accessing national identification systems, limiting their ability to enroll in higher education or even sit for qualifying exams. In Uganda, despite the progressive refugee policy, delays in asylum procedures often exclude students from time-sensitive scholarship programmes such as the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) scheme (Ahimbisibwe, 2021; UNHCR, 2020). These legal and bureaucratic barriers compound socioeconomic exclusion, demonstrating the role of state policy in either mitigating or reinforcing economic inequalities in refugee education.

Access to quality secondary education is a key socioeconomic determinant of university enrollment. Refugee schools are often under-resourced, with overcrowded classrooms, limited qualified teachers and poor infrastructure (UNICEF, 2023). These deficits reduce student preparedness for higher education and limit academic competitiveness. Refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa were five times less likely than their non-refugee counterparts to pass secondary exit exams, a key hurdle to university entry. In Uganda, many refugee students sit for exams in makeshift classrooms or

with outdated materials, placing them at a systemic disadvantage (Ahimbisibwe, 2021; WFP & UNICEF, 2021). The quality of education at lower levels is thus both a reflection of and a contributor to broader socioeconomic inequality.

Geographic isolation of refugee settlements poses another socioeconomic barrier to higher education. In many host countries, refugee camps and settlements are located in remote areas, far from urban centres where universities are situated. This spatial marginalization increases the cost and complexity of accessing tertiary institutions, especially for students without personal transport or boarding options (Okhankhuelet al., 2025). In Uganda, refugee students from settlements often travel long distances to reach universities in Kampala or Mbarara, a financial and physical burden that discourages continued learning (Ahimbisibwe, 2021). Geographic displacement thus intersects with economic hardship, compounding barriers to university access and reinforcing cycles of educational exclusion.

Socioeconomic factors such as financial insecurity, employment constraints, poor living conditions, limited parental education, weak social networks, precarious legal status and geographic isolation collectively influence refugee access to university education. These factors interact and compound each other, creating entrenched cycles of exclusion for refugee youth (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; UNHCR, 2023). Integrating socioeconomic considerations into education planning is essential for improving university participation among refugees and realizing the UN's SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

We used the case study research design because it allowed us to explore a particular phenomenon through multiple methods and sources of data over a sustained period (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin et al., 2018). Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda was the case. The phenomena we studied were capital factors that influence refugee access to university education in the refugee settlement. The case study design enabled us to collect rich context specific data to generate deeper understanding about the factors that influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. We interviewed 27 participants. We held two focus group discussions for refugee students, 16 refugee students participated in the face-to-face interviews and three zonal leaders, three representatives from NGOs, two representatives from OPM and one representative from UNHCR also participated in interviews. This diverse selection of participants enriched the study's findings by capturing insights from both the students and the key stakeholders involved in refugee management.

Table 1. Categories of participants

| Category | Participants | Count |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Refugee Students | Focus Group 1 (10 students) RSFG1 (Refugee Students Focus Group 1) refugee students | 1 |
| | Focus Group 2 (8 students) RSFG 2 refugee students | 1 |
| Refugee Students | Face-to-face interviews | |
| | Refugee students enrolled in the universities RUS (Refugee University Students) | 4 |
| | Refugee students who did not enroll in any university RUS | 12 |
| Zone Leaders | ZL1: Juru Camp RWC (Refugee Welfare Council) III Zonal leader in Juru camp | 1 |
| | ZL2: Base Camp RWC (Refugee Welfare Council III) Zonal leader in Base Camp | 1 |
| | ZL3: Lubondo (RWC III) Zonal leader in Lubondo | 1 |
| NGO Representatives | NGO1: Fin-Church (education focal person) | 2 |
| | NGO2: Windle International (education focal person) | 1 |
| OPM Officials | OPM1: Commandant OPM | 1 |
| | OPM2: Education focal person OPM | 1 |
| UNHCR Representatives | UN Education focal person UNHCR | 1 |

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 1 shows that the participants we interviewed were people directly involved with refugee students at university level with diverse knowledge domain on refugee access into university education. Therefore, the views and experiences we report in this study are of participants who have rich experiences of refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda.

4.2 Philosophical Underpinning

We subscribe to the advocacy or participatory world view grounded in critical and transformative philosophical traditions. This world view rejects the notion of value-neutral inquiry and instead positions research as an inherently ethical and political act (Fine et al. 2021). It emphasises the nuances of social issues, power dynamics and lived experiences of marginalised groups and that inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and political agenda. For advocates of this world view, research should concern an action agenda that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live and the researcher's life. We adopted critical theory as the theoretical perspective for this study. It entails a view of what behavior should entail. Jurgen Habermas's critical theory guided us, a theory devoted to revealing the possibility of reason, emancipation and rational-critical communication latent in modern institutions and in the human capacity to deliberate and pursue rational interest. We based our interpretations on participants' conscious lived experiences and first-person point of view. Therefore, we base the findings we report on factors that influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement on interpretive analyses of the participants' conscious lived experiences in the context of the settlement.

4.3 Sampling Procedure

We used purposive sampling and snowballing methods to select the participants for the study. We used snowballing to easily access refugee student participants. We identified one refugee student at university level who led us to other refugee students with the same attributes. We chose snowballing for the focus group discussions because it enabled us to access the participants with the specific characteristics through referral, it reduced time and resources we needed for locating eligible participants, it enhanced trust and participation because the recommendations came from within the target group and it facilitated deeper exploration of the phenomena under study (Sadler et al., 2023). We chose purposive sampling for the focused interviews because it enabled the identification and selection of participants who had rich experiences on issues of refugee access to university education, and therefore they were best placed to provide the required information as Campbell et al. (2020) and Subedi (2021) suggested. This made it possible for us to obtain in-depth information on the factors that influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement.

4.4 Method

We collected data through interviews that allowed for in-depth questioning and probing and gave participants the opportunity to describe their experiences and express their points of view freely, as Yin (2018) suggested. The method incited the participants to share their experiences, which enabled the identification of subthemes related to capital factors influencing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement.

4.5 Data Analysis

After collecting data from the 25 participants involved in the focused interviews and from the two focus group discussions, we used in vivo codes in coding the data and verbatim data excerpts in reporting the findings. We analyzed the data, then coded them using both deductive and inductive codes. Deductively, we searched for codes that align with the constructs of capital. Inductively, we looked for emerging codes arising from participants' voices or points of view and made marginal notes to highlight any emerging analytic ideas. We then coded the text descriptively and reviewed the codes to eliminate repetition. We related theoretical ideas to the text, deriving from Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and literature review to make interpretations. We then used thematic content analysis to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) within the data. The constructs we derived from Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice formed the major themes under which we reported the findings.

5. Results

We asked participants to describe their views and experiences about the capital factors that influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. Table 2 presents the findings with a focus on economic capital, cultural capital and social capital.

Regarding economic capital factors that influence refugee access to university education, the findings show that refugees' general financial status and economic situation play a fundamental role in enabling them to access university education.

Table 2. Economic capital factors influencing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

| Result | Source / Voices | Solution / Action |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Economic Capital Factors</p> <p>General Financial status</p> <p>We discovered that refugee students still face economic challenges that hindered their enrollment in universities</p> | <p>‘...First of all, tuition in the university is high. That is why here in the refugee settlement, people are not able to have it, because the opportunities are also limited, no means of doing businesses, no land, so no money’. (RS3)</p> <p>‘Of course, tuition is costly and other necessary materials [are] needed. The cost of tuition and other necessary materials’. (RS5)</p> <p>‘Without the support of a scholarship, I would not have been able to attend university. It covered my fees and accommodation’. (RSFG1)</p> <p>‘Despite the presence of scholarship opportunities, the number of available awards remains inadequate compared to the demand’. (RSFG2)</p> <p>From the review of documents, refugee education was included within national education and human capital development frameworks. (NDP IV 2020/21–2024/25,166)</p> <p>Uganda’s refugee policy aligns with international commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, and grants refugees equal access to secondary and tertiary education (Uganda Refugees Act, 2006, p. 14).</p> | <p>Social support structures through remittances from family members abroad, local fundraising efforts and shared community resources serve as a crucial lifeline for some refugee students.</p> <p>Several organizations, including Windle International Uganda, FCA and the Mastercard Foundation, provide financial assistance that covers tuition, accommodation and other academic expenses.</p> <p>UNHCR’s DAFI scholarship is a well-known and sought-after programme. It covers a range of costs associated with university education.</p> |
| <p>Economic Situation</p> <p>We found that economic hardships are common among refugee students.</p> | <p>‘...I have one parent, mum, and she has a lot of people to [take] care of. Like, I’m the second born and there are five and they are all studying and mom is sick, she cannot do any economic activity’. (RS4)</p> <p>‘Economic challenges faced by refugee students hinders their enrollment into universities. Some of the refugee students come here and at times they don’t have projects to give them money and many come here accompanied’. (OPM2)</p> <p>Families with multiple children often employed a rotational approach, ensuring that at least one member attained university education before others could follow. As one participant noted,</p> <p>‘My parents started farming as soon as we arrived in Nakivale, growing beans and maize to sell at the local market. Over time, they saved enough money to send my siblings and me to school’. (RSFG1)</p> <p>‘Our parents are part of a savings group where they contribute a little money every month. When someone needs help, like paying for university fees, they can borrow from the group and repay later’. (RSFG2)</p> <p>Uganda’s Refugee Act 2006 provides an enabling environment that grants refugees the right to work and participate in economic activities.</p> | <p>Organizations such as Alight and Windle International provide vocational training, start-up capital and financial literacy initiatives, enabling refugee families to build sustainable sources of income.</p> <p>Financial empowerment within the refugee community extends beyond personal savings because many families rely on community-based financial support mechanisms such as Village Savings and Loans Associations.</p> <p>Livelihood programmes offered by civil society organizations play an essential role in supporting refugee families to achieve financial independence.</p> <p>Financial literacy training has strengthened the ability of refugee families to manage their income and allocate resources towards university education.</p> |

The results in Table 2 indicate that economic capital factors influence refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. For instance, the findings show that Uganda's legal framework grants refugees the right to work, move and to access education. This inclusive legal framework is an enabler for enhancing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. However, challenges still exist that inhibit refugee access to university education. For instance, the general financial hardships refugees face, the hard economic situation, lack of awareness regarding existing scholarship opportunities, limited scholarship opportunity and insufficient institutional support all presented hindrances to accessing university education for refugees in the settlement.

Regarding cultural capital factors that influence refugee access to university education, participants acknowledged that cultural values are a powerful source of motivation, as Table 3 shows.

Table 3. Cultural capital factor influencing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

| Cultural Capital Factors | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural Values | Families and communities actively encourage academic achievement. One participant recounted: 'In our community, education is celebrated as the ultimate achievement. I grew up hearing stories about people who succeeded through education, and it motivated me to follow that path'. (RSFG2) | |
| The findings that revealed that cultural values are a powerful source of motivation. | 'My parents always remind me that education is the only inheritance they can give me. Their belief in me is what keeps me going. They always find a way to support me. I have seen my mother sell the little food we have just to ensure that I do not miss my exams. There are times when my father goes without transport fare just so that I can attend my classes'. (RSFG5) | |
| Cultural Insensitivity | '...I face a lot of challenges because they would be, like, ah, you're a refugee. Why did you come to a country with something? Because by the time, some friends were, like, they told us that Sudanese eat people. Do you also eat people? I was, like, have you ever seen me show you that act of, like, I eat. No, I don't. We're not cannibals'. (RS5) | Ugandan universities have adopted policies and practices that promote inclusion, ensuring that students from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, including refugees, can pursue their studies in a supportive environment. |
| The study revealed that refugee students were constrained from accessing university education because of cultural insensitivity. | | |
| Sociocultural Beliefs | Many refugee students indicated that, despite economic struggles, their families continuously reassured them of the importance of education, offering moral support and prayer that helped sustain their aspirations. The belief that education serves as a pathway to empowerment is deeply embedded in refugee communities. | Uganda's higher education institutions offer faith-based environments that support students' spiritual needs. Universities maintain affiliations with religious organizations, including Muslim, Catholic, Anglican, and Seventh-Day Adventist institutions. |
| Participants described how their families' unwavering belief in their potential kept them motivated even in the face of financial barriers. | | |

The results in Table 3 indicate that cultural capital factors significantly enhance refugee access to university education in Uganda. For instance, cultural values, cultural insensitivity and sociocultural beliefs act as both enablers and a hindrance to refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement.

Regarding social capital factors influencing refugee access to university education, we found that social networks, support structures and host community relations significantly enhanced refugee access to university education in

Uganda. For instance, peer study groups, extended social networks and informal peer-led systems play a crucial role in bridging financial gaps for students who lack adequate family resources. Many refugee students in Nakivale rely on community-based structures such as welfare councils, religious organizations and informal peer support groups for financial and informational assistance.

Table 4. Social capital factors influencing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement

| Social Capital Factors | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Networks We found that many refugee families prioritise education as a means of social mobility, often making substantial sacrifices to ensure their children can attend university. | Peer study groups, in particular, were highlighted as essential spaces for information-sharing and emotional support. RSFG2 explained that ‘Within our community, we have WhatsApp groups, which we use to share information about opportunities, such as scholarships and career workshops’. RSFG2 stated that ‘We study together as a group because it’s easier to solve problems when we’re working as a team. I remember a time when I almost dropped out because I had no money for school fees. My friends came together and found a way to raise the amount I needed’. ‘I have personally seen families come together to pay the tuition of a bright student whose parents could not afford it. Even those with little contribute what they can because we all know that education is the only way out of this situation. When one of us succeeds, we all succeed’. (NGO3) The document review (FCA 2022–2024) revealed that FCA’s mentorship and bridge-learning activities are integral to refugee tertiary access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. | Welfare councils, community leaders, and peer groups actively disseminate information regarding scholarships, mentorship opportunities, and financial aid, ensuring that students remain aware of existing avenues for educational support. |
| | Support Structures Refugee families receiving financial support from relatives abroad were in a significantly better position to afford university tuition. | RSFG2 illustrated the life-changing impact of remittances in sustaining her education: ‘My aunt lives in Sweden, and every month, she sends money. She has been sending money for years now, and that is what has allowed me to go to university’. NG1 stated that ‘we have noticed that those refugees who have family members abroad, particularly in countries where they have been able to integrate into the workforce, tend to fare better in accessing university education’. ‘There are some students who are at the campus but are not supported by their families abroad, you find them together at the same campus At times they are chased out of the examination room, because they |

| | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | have failed to pay tuition'. (RUS2) | |
| | 'We organize community meetings to share scholarship announcements and post details on noticeboards accessible to everyone. Additionally, we collaborate with NGOs to host education workshops in our zone'. (ZL3) | |
| | A document review framed field-level norms and institutional inclusivity within the global refugee education agenda. It offers a global framework on inclusion of refugees in national systems emphasising equity and participation (UNHCR, 2019, pp. 20–45). | |
| Host Community Relations | 'Because we try to create peaceful co-existence with the people around us, we try to respect people around us. I try to support people where necessary so that people who are surrounding me can benefit and benefit from the work I do and my position in the community'. (RSFG2) | The Uganda national response plan explicitly integrates the CRRF, affirming Uganda's shift from a humanitarian to a development-oriented approach. |

The results in Table 4 indicate that social capital factors play a significant role in enhancing refugee access to university education. The existing social network, support structures and good relationship between the refugees and host communities are enablers for enhancing refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. By implementing policies that respect cultural and religious diversity and ensuring a broad spectrum of university options, Uganda's higher education sector has created an academic environment in which refugee students can thrive.

Therefore, the findings ultimately reveal that capital factors embedding economic, social and cultural capital serve as critical enablers to university access for refugee students in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. However, existing challenges still deter refugees from access university education.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that legal provisions align with Bourdieu's concept of economic capital, enabling refugee families to earn an income that can be directed towards their children's education. Unlike restrictive policies in many other host countries, Uganda's approach fosters a sense of self-reliance among refugees. However, while economic freedom provides a foundation, it does not guarantee equitable access. Many families still face insurmountable financial barriers, illustrating that economic capital is necessary but insufficient on its own. The findings resonate with Erdoğan (2023), who emphasized the importance of institutional support in complementing economic opportunities without systemic mechanisms such as subsidies, tuition waivers or broader financial aid. Access to university education therefore would be difficult.

Family support emerges as a powerful determinant of access to university education for refugee students, serving both as a source of emotional and financial backing. Refugee families in Nakivale demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to education, often making sacrifices to ensure their children can pursue academic aspirations. This phenomenon reflects the internalization of education's symbolic value, which Bourdieu framed as part of cultural capital. Families instill in their children the belief that education is a transformative tool for social mobility and empowerment. This commitment echoes the findings of Mudwari et al (2025) and Erdal et al (2024), who articulated how familial social bonds facilitate critical decisions, such as pursuing higher education. However, the challenges that families face are immense, especially when stretched across multiple children or competing priorities. Larger families often pool resources and responsibilities, as noted in the study, to navigate financial constraints. This collective agency underscores the resilience of refugee households but also highlights their vulnerability when institutional safety nets are absent.

Social networks and mentorship opportunities also play a pivotal role in shaping educational access. The findings underscore that extended networks comprising welfare councils, community leaders and mentorship groups act as

bridges for refugee students to connect with crucial resources such as scholarships, study materials and career guidance. This aligns with Bourdieu's theory, where social capital enhances individuals' ability to navigate and exploit opportunities within their social fields. The vibrant community structures in Nakivale demonstrate the power of collective agency, enabling refugees to mitigate some of the financial and informational barriers to education. These findings mirror Behrendt and Richter (2025) and Nguyen and Ager's (2025) research on the role of social networks in refugee integration, particularly in their capacity to provide emotional, material and informational resources. Yet, as Okten (2023) observed in a different context, the potential of social networks is limited if systemic barriers such as discrimination or xenophobia persist. Social networks in Nakivale, while robust, cannot replace formalised institutional support, which is often fragmented or inaccessible for refugees.

The financial contributions of remittances that relatives send abroad further highlight the critical role of external support in enabling refugee education. These remittances provide families with a much-needed economic cushion, alleviating tuition costs and covering living expenses for students. This source of financial support stresses the global interconnectedness of refugee communities, where relatives in third countries often act as lifelines for those in settlements. The findings resonate with Kavak and Sakiz (2025), who emphasized the significance of stable financial inflows for sustaining educational aspirations among refugee populations. However, reliance on remittances is inherently precarious because it depends on external economic and geopolitical factors beyond the control of refugee families. Furthermore, this dynamic introduces inequalities within refugee communities because not all families have access to such international networks.

Scholarships emerge as a cornerstone for refugee access to university education, bridging the gap for students from financially constrained families. Programmes such as DAFI provide more than just financial support; they represent a commitment to leveling the educational playing field for refugees. These scholarships align with Bourdieu's concept of institutional capital, demonstrating the importance of formalized support structures in enabling marginalized populations to access education. However, as the findings suggest, many eligible students remain unaware of these opportunities, highlighting significant gaps in information dissemination. This mirrors Mairaj (2024) and Abamosa's (2024) critique of fragile contexts, where inadequate outreach undermines the efficacy of well-intentioned programmes. Thus, while scholarships are transformative for those who access them, their limited reach underscores the need for more inclusive and widespread initiatives.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that various forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) significantly influence access to university education among refugees in Nakivale Refugee Settlement. Economic capital, including financial resources and the ability to cover tuition and related costs, emerged as a critical determinant of educational participation. We found that social capital, manifested through supportive networks, mentorship and community connections, facilitated access by providing guidance, information and encouragement. Cultural capital, encompassing prior educational experiences, language proficiency and familiarity with academic norms, further shaped refugees' capacity to navigate higher education pathways successfully. The findings underscore that structural policies alone, such as inclusive education frameworks under Uganda's CRRF, are insufficient to ensure equitable access. Effective interventions must also address disparities in capital endowments among refugee populations. Holistic strategies combining scholarships, mentorship programmes, preparatory courses and culturally responsive support can enhance both access and retention in higher education. By foregrounding the role of capital, we contribute to theoretical discussions on refugee education and Bourdieu's framework, while offering practical insights for policymakers, universities and community organizations. Recognizing and leveraging economic, social and cultural resources is essential for creating sustainable, equitable pathways to tertiary education for refugees in Nakivale and similar contexts.

8. Recommendations

To enhance refugee access to university education in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, interventions should be implemented across policy, institutional and community levels. At the policy level, the government and development partners should expand scholarship schemes, tuition waivers and conditional grants specifically targeting refugee students, ensuring that financial barriers do not impede higher education participation. Policies should also incorporate strategies to strengthen social and cultural capital, such as funding mentorship programmes, preparatory courses and language support initiatives that help refugees navigate academic norms.

At the institutional level, universities should establish structured mentorship and counselling programmes that connect refugee students with peers, alumni and faculty, fostering guidance, confidence and social support. Bridging programmes addressing language proficiency, academic preparedness and cultural orientation can equip refugees with

the cultural capital necessary to succeed in higher education. Capacity-building initiatives for academic and administrative staff should also be prioritized to promote culturally responsive and empathetic support for refugee learners.

At the community level, engagement campaigns involving parents, local leaders and community-based organizations can raise awareness about the value of higher education and challenge cultural or gendered norms that limit participation, particularly for female students. Community-supported peer learning networks, study groups and psychosocial empowerment workshops can further reinforce positive dispositions towards education, enhancing resilience, goal setting and self-efficacy among refugee youth. Collectively, these integrated strategies address both structural and dispositional factors, providing a comprehensive framework to expand equitable access to university education for refugees in Nakivale and similar contexts.

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