

CASE STUDY

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University-INGO partnerships for refugee education: the case of Elimisha Kakuma

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Abstract

How can higher education institutions contribute more effectively to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: inclusive and quality education for all? This paper explores the question through the case study of *Elimisha Kakuma*, an association supporting young refugees in Kakuma Camp, Kenya, in accessing higher education abroad. In collaboration with American, Canadian and UK universities, Elimisha assists students throughout the admissions process, offering tailored support to navigate cultural barriers, application procedures, and financial challenges. Beyond admission, Elimisha prepares students for their transition to life abroad, equipping them with academic skills, emotional resilience, and practical tools for adaptation. The association also provides a dedicated study space within the camp, fostering a learning community supported by resources such as computers, books, and academic mentoring. Through online learning opportunities, students engage early with their future universities, developing a sense of belonging before departure. This paper argues that Elimisha represents a best-practice model of NGO-university collaboration, showing how partnerships beyond academia can create meaningful opportunities for displaced learners. By analysing the strengths and challenges of this initiative, drawing on a field visit to the camp (January 2025) and twelve semi-structured interviews with students, association staff, and university partners, the paper identifies effective strategies and scalable solutions for improving refugee access to higher education worldwide.

Keywords Higher education, Refugees, 15by30, Inclusion

1 Introduction

“Education is one of the best investments for the future. If you educate a child and they grow up well, the next generation will follow the same path of growth and learning. In the end, this can lead to real change in the community, as I see it.” (P, student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma).

The latest data from UNHCR¹ report alarming numbers: more than 120 million people in 2024 were forced to flee their homes. In this global context, Kenya is the fifth largest

¹Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/planning-funding-and-results>



refugee-hosting country in Africa and the thirteenth largest asylum country in the world, with more than 830,000 refugees and asylum-seekers²: “For more than three decades, Kenya has generously hosted refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Somalia, South Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.³ The country is home to two of the world’s largest refugee camps—Dadaab in Garissa County, which hosts over 420,000 people, and Kakuma in Turkana County, home to more than 300,000.” (Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-s-grandi-hails-launch-kenya-s-landmark-refugee-inclusion-plan>).

Living as a refugee means existing in a state of limbo: one that begins with arrival at a refugee camp and stretches into years marked by dependence on aid and subsidies, curfews, and restrictions on movement outside the camp. Access to education offers a chance for redemption, a semblance of normality within a dystopian reality.

The starting point for this research is the broader and often deeply entrenched challenges that refugees face in their efforts to access higher education, defined by scholars as a *super disadvantage* [22]. Higher education institutions carry both a social and moral responsibility to serve the public good, a viewpoint supported by scholars such as Rundell et al. [55], Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al. [54], Berg [4], and De Maria et al. [56]. From this standpoint, universities are seen not merely as centres of knowledge production and dissemination, but as vital social actors whose purpose extends to shaping a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world. As Rundell et al. [55] suggest, higher education has the transformative potential to act as a catalyst for societal betterment.

“Post-secondary education is the essential pathway to developing skills, building livelihoods, and transitioning to self-reliance.” (Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-expanding-higher-education-skills-and-self-reliance-refugees>).

For refugees in particular, access to education can provide a crucial sense of structure, continuity, and purpose: qualities that are often stripped away during displacement. The routine and predictability of academic life may offer a stabilising force with inherent therapeutic value [15]. Beyond its instrumental role, education can also function as a symbolic space of liberation, a realm where individuals who have endured profound adversity may begin to reclaim agency, identity, and dignity [3]. Ideally, this process also supports psycho-social well-being, helping individuals to rebuild their lives with renewed hope and confidence [20].

“Refugees living in camps like Kakuma rarely get the opportunity to exert much control over their lives and the environment around them. They are generally prohibited from leaving the camp and have limited access to the camp’s institutional resources. This is especially difficult for the many young people in Kakuma. Higher education is one of the few avenues available to them to invest in their hopes, empower themselves, and forge a better future” [23].

² Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-s-grandi-hails-launch-kenya-s-landmark-refugee-inclusion-plan>

³ On March 28th, 2025, the Government of Kenya launched the *Shirika Plan*, which translates to *cooperation* in Swahili. “The Shirika Plan is a phased approach with a four-year transition period (2024-27), four years of stabilisation (2028-31) and four years of resilience (2032-35). The first four-year transition phase includes enabling regulatory and policy regime, transitioning the camps into municipalities and the inclusion of refugees into Kenya’s national systems and local services and supporting economic development plans in Turkana and Garissa, the countries where the refugee camps are located.” Source: https://www.unhcr.org/ke/sites/ke/files/legacy-pdf/Shirika-2page_Edited_112024.pdf

To situate this study within a clearer conceptual framework, the analysis draws on two complementary perspectives. First, a multi-level governance approach helps explain how refugee education initiatives emerge within complex interactions between international agencies, national governments, local authorities, NGOs, and community-led organisations. This perspective highlights how responsibilities are distributed across governance layers and how actors negotiate resources, authority, and constraints, an essential backdrop for understanding Elimisha's position in Kakuma.

Second, scholarship on community-based education partnerships foregrounds the role of locally grounded organisations in filling institutional gaps, mediating access to services, and crafting context-sensitive responses to forced displacement [57–59]. Elimisha exemplifies this model through its grassroots structure, its role in bridging students and universities, and its reliance on relational networks to overcome systemic barriers.

Together, these frameworks illuminate how a refugee-led initiative like Elimisha navigates the broader governance architecture while leveraging community-based practices to support access to higher education. Building on this theoretical grounding, the article starts with a clarification about its methodology and an overview about the context of Kakuma Refugee Camp, in Kenya. In the following sections, the author recollects the birth of the association Elimisha Kakuma, its strengths and criticalities. The association's partnerships with universities and other stakeholders are then presented as best practices. In the conclusions, new priorities are identified to improve the association's success.

2 Methodology

“Elimisha gave me permission to dream, to set goals and to speak up and be myself”.
(N., student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma)

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach to explore the perspectives of research participants and the professionals working alongside them. The methods used included desk research, field observation (the author visited the camp in January 2025), and dialogic interviews with administrative and academic staff of the Elimisha Kakuma association, a professor from an American university collaborating with the association, and students involved in the project.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which combined a set of pre-defined questions with space for open-ended responses. This method fostered a genuine and open exchange, allowing for the exploration of subtle and meaningful aspects of the participants' experiences.

Participants were guaranteed complete anonymity and informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any moment, in line with established ethical research guidelines. The analysis of the collected data was conducted using TurboScribe and Atlas.Ti softwares, through a thematic coding process designed to highlight recurring patterns and emerging themes within the narratives. Short, inductively generated labels were assigned to meaningful text segments without relying on predefined categories. These initial codes were then reviewed and organised into broader conceptual categories through axial coding, allowing connections to surface. Finally, categories were compared across participants and synthesised into higher-order themes. The study followed an inductive approach: codes were generated directly from participants' narratives

during the open-coding phase, where labels were applied to ideas, experiences, or concerns expressed in the interviews. As patterns emerged, codes were compared, merged, or distinguished. In the axial-coding stage, related codes were grouped into categories capturing shared dynamics, such as admission challenges, structural barriers, emotional pressures, or the role of partnerships. These categories were subsequently refined into higher-order themes that distilled the main insights. The iterative movement between data, codes, and interpretations ensured that themes remained grounded in lived experiences while revealing cross-cutting patterns.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the study employed methodological triangulation by comparing three complementary data sources: interview transcripts, field notes from the author's visit to Kakuma, and documents collected during desk research. These materials were systematically cross-checked throughout the coding and theme-development process. Field notes provided contextual grounding for interpreting interview narratives, while documentary sources offered an external reference for institutional practices, programme structures, and broader policy frameworks. This comparative process helped confirm convergent patterns and reveal inconsistencies, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness and depth of the final themes.

A brief reflection on positionality is necessary given the author's dual role in conducting field observation and analysing participants' narratives. As a short-term external researcher in Kakuma, my understanding of camp life was inevitably partial, and my presence may have shaped how participants discussed sensitive issues. To mitigate this, interviews prioritised openness, confidentiality, and participant-led narration. Field notes were used both to contextualise the data and to document moments in which my assumptions or positional advantages might have influenced interpretation. This reflexive approach acknowledged the asymmetries of the research context while ensuring a respectful and ethically informed engagement with participants' voices.

This analytical approach enabled the identification of key insights into both the strengths and the limitations of the project, while consistently prioritising ethical integrity and the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality.

A total of 12 interviews were taken: 3 Elimisha Kakuma's founders, 2 members of the staff, 1 university professor, and 6 students).

Among the respondents, 7 are male and 5 female, making the gender balance almost perfect (Fig. 1).

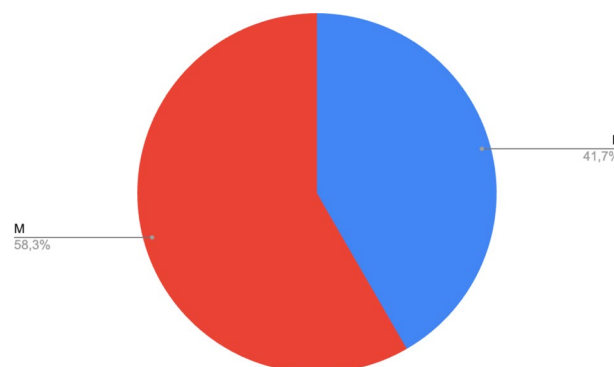


Fig. 1 Gender of the respondents

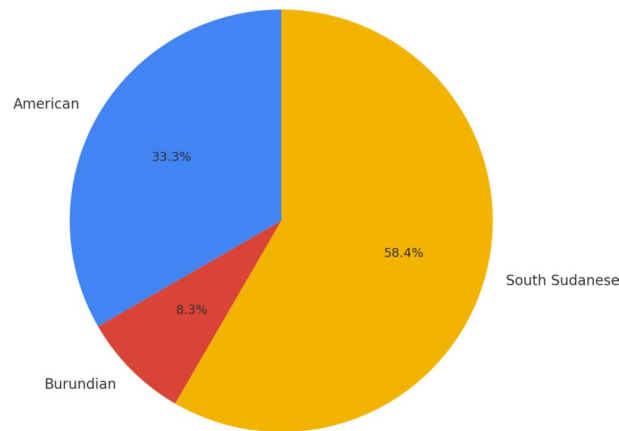


Fig. 2 Citizenship of the respondents

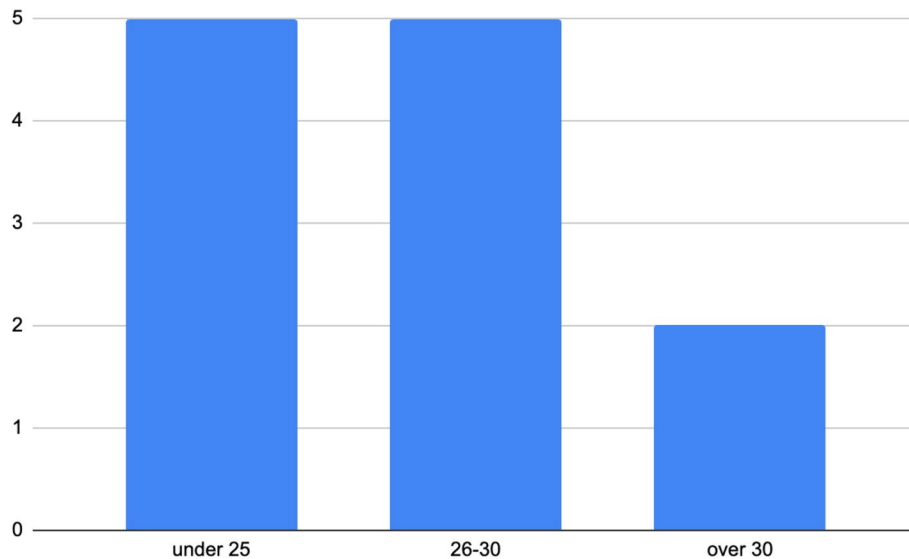


Fig. 3 Age of the respondents

The majority of respondents are South Sudanese nationals, being refugees from Kakuma (Fig. 2).

The majority of respondents are under 30-years old, and precisely: 5 persons are under 25, 5 persons between 26 and 30, and only 2 over 30 (Fig. 3).

In general, the personal details of the interviewees accurately reflect the reality of the association, considering the population of the camp.

However, key methodological limitation concerns selection bias in the composition of the interview sample. Participation was voluntary, and the final group of twelve interviewees reflects those who were available and willing to take part within the timeframe of the research. As a result, the perspectives captured may over-represent students who felt particularly engaged, motivated, or comfortable sharing their experiences, while under-representing those who were less reachable or less inclined to participate. This limitation restricts the generalisability of the findings and should be interpreted as a feature of an exploratory qualitative study.

3 The context: Kakuma

“Most of us struggle with the idea of home and some of us have never really had a place to settle. Life in the camp gets hard: there’s water and food shortages, there’s no electricity, there’s poor education, there’s tough conditions. Elimisha taught me how to find the good, even in those challenges, and it became a safe space.” (N., student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma).

Kakuma Refugee Camp, located in Turkana County in north-western Kenya, was established in 1992 following the arrival of the so-called *Lost Boys of Sudan*,⁴ a group of unaccompanied minors fleeing conflict. Over the decades, the camp has evolved into one of the largest and most complex humanitarian settings in the region, hosting people displaced by violence, persecution, and disasters from across East and Central Africa (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 The camp seen from above (picture taken by the author during her visit in January 2025)

⁴Source: <https://www.rescue.org/article/lost-boys-sudan>

As of 30 June 2025, Kakuma Refugee Camp and the adjacent Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement⁵ host a combined population of 297,235 individuals. Of these, 171,359 reside in Kakuma itself, while 125,876 are in Kalobeyei. The population comprises refugees and asylum-seekers from more than 20 countries, the majority originating from South Sudan (around 55%), followed by significant communities from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Ethiopia.⁶

Kakuma operates under the coordination of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in partnership with the Government of Kenya, specifically the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS). A broad range of international and local humanitarian organisations provide vital services across multiple sectors, such as primary and secondary education, healthcare, shelter, food assistance, and water and sanitation. These include the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Windle International Kenya, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), among others.

At present,⁷ the camp hosts 19 pre-primary, 27 primary and junior, and 9 secondary schools. In Kakuma, these are overseen by the Lutheran World Federation, while Finn Church Aid manages those in Kalobeyei. Although the schools operate within the framework of Kenya's national education system, and follow the national curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, they rely on financial support from NGOs. Since the camp's early days, most teachers in Kakuma have been refugees, employed as *incentive teachers* and paid by NGOs at significantly lower rates than Kenyan nationals.⁸

Despite the coordinated efforts of numerous organisations, the camp's physical environment remains extremely challenging. The arid climate, limited access to safe water, and unreliable electricity significantly affect daily life and the ability to study. Infrastructure is fragile: most roads are unpaved and eroded, making long walks to school unavoidable, and occasional heavy rains cause sudden flooding due to inadequate drainage. These floods can damage homes and learning spaces, disrupt movement, and spread waste and disease in the absence of a formal waste-management system. Such structural conditions create persistent obstacles for students and teachers, who must navigate demanding physical and logistical constraints in their pursuit of education.

These structural hardships disproportionately affect girls. Domestic responsibilities such as fetching water, cooking, and caring for younger siblings often limit the time and energy they can devote to school. Social norms that undervalue girls' education, alongside early and forced marriages, lead many to drop out before completing their studies. Pregnancy, stigma, and the lack of adequate support further contribute to the disengagement of girls from formal schooling.

⁵The Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, established in 2015 approximately 40 kms northwest of Kakuma, was created to alleviate overcrowding in the Kakuma Refugee Camp and to introduce a new model of refugee assistance. Unlike traditional camps, Kalobeyei is designed to foster self-reliance among both refugees and host communities, promoting shared access to services and economic opportunities through a collaborative development approach led by UNHCR, the Government of Kenya, and international partners. Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/about-us/where-we-work/kalobeyei-settlement>

⁶Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/media/kenya-statistics-package-30-june-2025>

⁷Data presented by the UNHCR office in Kakuma, during an interview with the author in January 2025.

⁸It is important to clarify that, despite the pay gap and limited rights, teaching remains one of the few well-paying opportunities available to refugees.

Seeing the reality of the camp with one's own eyes is essential to grasp the vital role that education plays in bringing hope to young lives caught in the limbo of that isolated place, far from cities, far from any real opportunity for growth or learning. As one of the Elimisha Kakuma founders explains: "One of the things we try to do is get the schools to go there and actually see the situation that the students are in. It's hot. The students are eating one meal a day. There are not enough resources. So you have to go and see. One of the admissions officers actually went and what ended up happening is their school opened a new scholarship".

4 Elimisha Kakuma

"Elimisha came in, gave us hope" (P, student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma)

Elimisha Kakuma is the first college-preparatory, gap-year programme specifically designed for refugee students living in Kakuma.⁹ Founded in 2021, it is a refugee-led initiative established by three former residents of Kakuma (Joseph Dudi Miabok, Diing Manyang, and Mary Maker) who went on to study at esteemed US universities through highly competitive programmes. Together with their former teacher, Deirdre Hand, they created Elimisha Kakuma as a response to the structural barriers they themselves had faced in accessing higher education. The organisation is registered as a non-profit in the United States.

The name *Elimisha Kakuma* encapsulates the very mission of the organisation: to bring education (*elimisha* in Swahili) to Kakuma. It reflects both a call to action and a commitment to transform the camp from within, through learning and opportunity.

The genesis of Elimisha is deeply personal. Its founders experienced firsthand how difficult it was, not only to excel academically in an under-resourced refugee camp, but also to access scholarships and university pathways abroad. One of the co-founders recalls spending 3 years after completing secondary school applying for scholarships without success. Another recounts the extreme challenges involved in simply leaving the camp for a university preparation programme in Rwanda, having to fabricate a date of birth to avoid revealing her refugee status, negotiating exit documents from embassy officials, and travelling on a temporary paper authorisation. The reality, as she puts it, is that even when selected for a prestigious access programme, there was no guarantee of success: only the prospect of return, if no scholarship was secured within 16 months.

This experience highlighted both the scarcity of opportunity and the determination required to seize it. Recognising that there were many students in Kakuma just as capable as themselves, the founders resolved to bring those opportunities *to* the camp, rather than expect students to find a way out. As one of the founders recollects: "I kept thinking, *why me?* I didn't think I deserved more than others in Kakuma. I didn't think I was smarter than them. I didn't think I worked harder than them. So maybe I could open a pathway to others."

The discontinuation of refugee recruitment by the Rwanda-based programme they had benefitted from became the catalyst for action. Though dispersed across time zones

⁹There is a growing number of scholarship opportunities facilitating access to higher education, such as DAFI, the Mpesa Foundation Academy, the Mastercard Foundation, UNICORE, and WUSC. However, Elimisha Kakuma remains the only programme that provides dedicated preparatory support for university admission while students are still residing in the camp.

and despite three of them still pursuing their own university studies, the four founders came together and began building what would become Elimisha Kakuma.

The programme offers a rigorous 15-month curriculum, beginning each April and concluding the following July, designed to prepare students for entry into competitive international universities by the autumn semester. The initial months focus on foundational skills: basic IT literacy, typing, public speaking, and core academic readiness. Students then progress to more advanced topics including research methods, critical thinking, global politics, and social justice: subjects designed to simulate the intellectual and cultural environments of international higher education institutions.

All instruction is delivered through a blended model: students are guided by in-person facilitators in Kakuma and supported by a global network of over 40 volunteers. These include university lecturers and students who offer one-on-one tutoring, and specialist seminars. Volunteers assist with everything from writing personal statements, preparing for college interviews, understanding visa processes, and developing soft skills necessary for academic success abroad. (Fig. 5).

Mentorship is a cornerstone of the programme. Each student is paired with a mentor, often a university student or one of the co-founders, who supports them not only academically but also emotionally. Mentors help students navigate the challenges of the application process and life as a university student, offering both practical advice and empathetic guidance.

Elimisha also provides vital material support. Recognising that fewer than 5% of Kakuma's residents have access to electricity, the programme has invested in solar panels, laptops, and internet connectivity to ensure students can meaningfully participate. Without such infrastructure, applying to universities would be virtually impossible.

Crucially, Elimisha is not a scholarship provider; it is an access programme. This means that 90% of the effort must come from the students themselves. As one founder notes, it is a message that is difficult but necessary to convey: success requires exceptional dedication. The programme offers the structure, mentorship and tools, but it is the students who must seize the opportunity).

A comparative look at other higher-education pathways for displaced learners helps to clarify what makes Elimisha's model distinct. Initiatives such as KIRON, UNICORE, and the DAFI programme have each developed robust structures to expand access to tertiary



Fig. 5 Students admitted by Elimisha Kakuma every year

education, yet operate through markedly different mechanisms. KIRON,¹⁰ for instance, relies heavily on online learning and modular academic bridging courses, enabling scalability across borders but often struggling to provide the personalised, context-sensitive support required in camp settings. UNICORE,¹¹ coordinated by UNHCR Italy in partnership with Italian universities, has succeeded in creating safe academic corridors with full scholarships, but its model depends on intensive institutional negotiation, significant financial investment, and the administrative capacity of large universities. The DAFI¹² scholarship programme, supported by the German Government and UNHCR, has achieved considerable global reach, yet remains largely shaped by national policy priorities and formal scholarship infrastructure that can exclude students lacking documentation or stable legal status.

By contrast, Elimisha's approach is rooted in refugee-led governance, low-cost operations, and community-based mentoring that takes place directly within the camp. This structure allows the organisation to respond quickly to students' needs, accommodate contextual complexities that larger institutional programmes often struggle to capture, and operate with minimal bureaucracy. While Elimisha's scale is currently limited, these characteristics make its model highly adaptable: it requires comparatively few resources, builds on local knowledge, and fosters close relational ties between students, staff, and partner universities. Situating Elimisha alongside these established programmes therefore highlights both shared structural constraints and the unique, replicable features of a grassroots, community-driven approach.

Despite resource limitations, Elimisha has achieved remarkable success. It maintains a 100% university acceptance rate and a 100% retention rate among its students, evidence of the depth of preparation and support it provides. Yet its reach remains small: only 16 students per cohort, a fraction of the need within a refugee camp of over 300,000 individuals. The founders hope to expand the programme to 30 or even 40 students annually, but this ambition hinges on strengthening organisational capacity, including hiring paid staff, expanding stipends, and improving infrastructure Fig. 6.

In sum, Elimisha Kakuma is a rare and powerful example of a refugee-led, community-rooted, and academically rigorous programme. Born from exclusion and designed with empathy, it seeks not only to open doors to higher education, but to fully prepare students to walk through them. It bridges the gap between potential and opportunity, between isolation and global citizenship, and between survival and transformation.

5 Partnerships

“When you're in the program, we think of it like a small thing, but it's always a life changing opportunity. It changes the trajectory of your life. And it's a huge opportunity that people really need to invest in. I feel that if more investors, more donors, more schools, more people invest into the program, they can change more lives in the future.” (D., student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma).

¹⁰Source: <https://www.kiron.ngo/about>

¹¹Source: <https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/>

¹²Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/higher-education-and-skills/dafi-tertiary-scholarship-0>

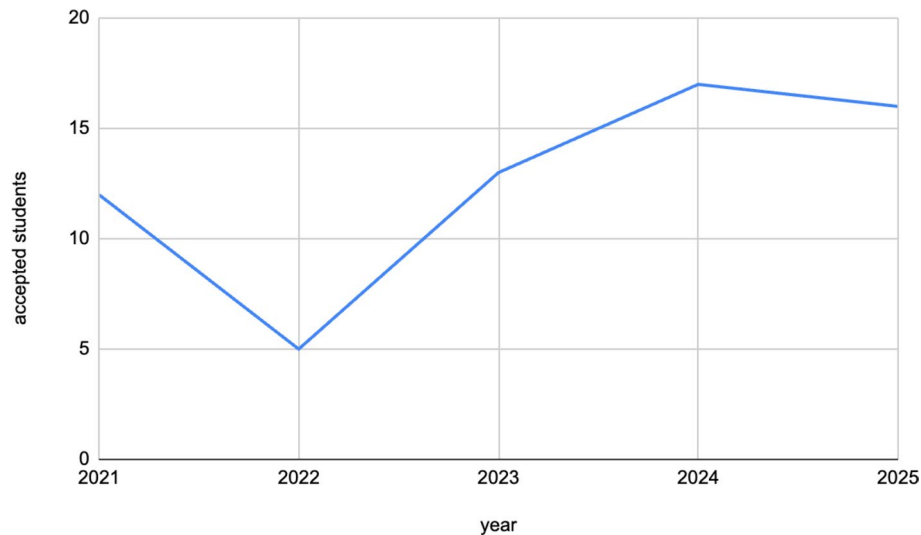


Fig. 6 Universities with students coming from Elimisha Kakuma.
Source: <https://www.elimishakakuma.org/>



Fig. 7 Elimisha Kakuma partners.
Source: <https://www.elimishakakuma.org/>

The creation of alliances between diverse actors is essential to provide refugees with comprehensive support in accessing higher education [17]. The Elimisha Kakuma staff is fully aware of this, and since the foundation of the association, they have actively sought to foster partnerships at the international level (Fig. 7). These are mostly informal relationships, strengthened through invitations to visit the association's headquarters in Kakuma. The only exception is represented by Virginia Tech,¹³ an American university with whom Elimisha Kakuma formalised their collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in November 2023. The agreement was established in partnership with the Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies (CRMDS)¹⁴ at Virginia Tech, an interdisciplinary hub dedicated to advancing research, teaching, and outreach

¹³The official name is "Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University", a public university founded in 1872 in Blacksburg, Virginia, USA. Today, it's a comprehensive university with more than 38,000 students. Source: <https://www.vt.edu/about/facts-about-virginia-tech.html>

¹⁴The Center, established in 2020, is funded, among the others, by the Cranwell Family Foundation. Source: <https://liberalarts.vt.edu/research-centers/center-for-refugee-migrant-and-displacement-studies.html>

on issues related to forced migration and displacement. This collaboration reflects a shared commitment to enhancing access to higher education for displaced learners. The two parties aim to promote educational equity through joint engagement in activities such as research, programme development, teaching, and student support. By fostering knowledge exchange and institutional cooperation, the partnership between Elimisha Kakuma and Virginia Tech (through the CRMDS) represents a meaningful step toward more inclusive and globally connected higher education systems. The partnership was further strengthened by a visit to the camp in April 2024 by the current Director of the Centre, Prof. Brett Shadle, and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Prof. Laura Belmonte. Following the visit, the Dean played a key role in securing the commitment of two additional college deans at Virginia Tech to provide scholarships for two Elimisha Kakuma students .

Another interesting partnership is represented by the HALI access network,¹⁵ a community of non-profit organisations across Africa committed to increasing access to international higher education for High-Achieving, Low-Income (HALI) students. Established in 2016, the network brings together over 30 member organisations from more than 10 African countries, all working to promote equity and inclusion in global education. HALI members provide mentoring, academic preparation, and university application support to talented students from under-resourced backgrounds, helping them gain admission to world-class institutions around the world. Elimisha Kakuma is an active member of the HALI Access Network and shares its mission of creating educational opportunities for marginalised learners.

Among the partners, Kenya Scholar Access Program (KENSAP)¹⁶ is a non-profit organisation founded in 2004 with the aim of assisting bright, financially disadvantaged Kenyan students to gain admission to elite universities in the United States. KENSAP provides intensive academic preparation, application support, and mentorship to students, many of whom go on to study at institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and MIT. Over the years, KENSAP has helped more than 250 students secure full scholarships at top-tier universities, empowering them to pursue academic and professional success and contribute to the development of their communities. Elimisha Kakuma has benefited from the expertise and experience of KENSAP, which has served as a key source of inspiration in designing its own support model for refugee learners.

The connection with UNHCR is due to one of Elimisha Kakuma founders, Mary Maker,¹⁷ who was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR¹⁸ in 2023.

Duolingo¹⁹ is a leading digital language-learning platform, widely known for its accessible and engaging approach to language education. Beyond its commercial reach, Duolingo is committed to promoting education as a human right and has developed targeted initiatives to support refugee learners around the world. Among these efforts is the Duolingo English Test (DET) Access Programme, which offers fee waivers to displaced and marginalised students, enabling them to certify their English proficiency for university admissions and scholarship opportunities. Duolingo also partners with organisations

¹⁵ Source: <https://haliaccess.org/>

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.kensap.org/>

¹⁷ Source: <https://marymaker.org/>

¹⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/our-partners/prominent-supporters/goodwill-ambassadors>

¹⁹ Source: <https://blog.duolingo.com/how-duolingo-supports-refugees/>

on the ground to ensure that refugee students receive the support they need to prepare for and complete the test successfully: Elimisha Kakuma is among the organisations collaborating with Duolingo in this effort.

The GoAbroad Foundation²⁰ is a non-profit organisation committed to supporting sustainable development and educational initiatives around the world. Through its network and fundraising efforts, the Foundation provides financial and strategic support to grassroots projects that promote access to education and community empowerment. Among its partners is Elimisha Kakuma, for whom the GoAbroad Foundation actively raises funds.

The PIE (Professionals in International Education)²¹ is a leading media platform that provides news, analysis, and insight into the global education industry. It connects professionals across the international education sector through its publications, events, and networking opportunities. In support of Elimisha Kakuma, The PIE selected the organisation as a featured beneficiary for one year, encouraging conference attendees and partners to contribute through targeted donation campaigns held at their events.

Among the partners, there is also the Global Mentorship Initiative (GMI),²² a non-profit organisation that provides guidance and professional development support to university students from underserved communities across the globe. Its structured mentorship programmes are designed to equip students with the skills and confidence needed to transition successfully from education to employment. For Elimisha Kakuma students, GMI offers tailored mentorship opportunities starting in their third year of study. At this stage, each student is matched with an individual mentor who supports them in exploring internship options, refining their CVs, and preparing for the job market.

Obviously, for a small NGO that was founded and grew up in a refugee camp, fundraising is an essential aspect. Elimisha Kakuma invests part of its energy in building relationships with potential donors (Fig. 8). It is important to present not only numbers and data, but also the people behind these results: visiting the refugee camp and seeing the daily difficulties refugees face in accessing higher education immediately highlights the importance of funding. In this spirit, the Cranwell Family Foundation²³ has shown a deep and personal engagement with Elimisha's mission. In April 2024, the Foundation's Executive Director and two members of the Cranwell family travelled to Kakuma to visit

OUR DONORS



Fig. 8 Elimisha Kakuma donors.

Source: <https://www.elimishakakuma.org/>

²⁰ Source: <https://www.goabroad.org/>

²¹ Source: <https://thepienews.com/about-the-pie/>

²² Source: <https://globalmentorship.org/about/>

²³ The Cranwell Family Foundation is a private philanthropic organisation based in the United States, committed to advancing educational access and social justice. Source: <https://www.cranwellfamilyfoundation.org/>

the organisation and meet the students. This visit was not only a gesture of solidarity but a moment of direct connection with the community Elimisha serves.

The diverse network of donors who share the commitment to educational equity for displaced learners include the GoAbroad Foundation,²⁴ which has provided long-standing support for grassroots educational initiatives; the Mastercard Foundation,²⁵ known for its transformative investments in youth empowerment across Africa; Rotary International,²⁶ whose global network has contributed to strengthening the programmes; Tamarack,²⁷ a foundation that supports community-led change; and Choose Love,²⁸ an organisation dedicated to supporting refugees around the world.

6 The role of universities in supporting refugees

“And that’s like the moment the direction of my life really changed because finding Elemisha wasn’t just about opportunity: it’s about waking up and stepping out of my bubble and realizing I wanted to be part of something bigger.” (N., student currently in the USA, thanks to Elimisha Kakuma).

Despite a growing global interest in diversity and inclusion, the structures and systems within many host universities remain insufficiently tailored to the distinct needs of refugee students. While displaced learners have begun to access higher education in greater numbers,²⁹ institutional practices often remain geared toward more traditional international student profiles, thereby overlooking the unique challenges refugee students face before, during, and after their studies [33].

These barriers arise early, often at the admissions stage.³⁰ Application processes in many countries require extensive documentation, personal statements, and access to digital platforms that presuppose stable internet, adequate devices, and familiarity with academic conventions. For students based in under-resourced contexts such as camps, these requirements can be prohibitive. Many lack laptops or reliable connectivity and have had limited or no exposure to writing academic essays. Moreover, questions relating to nationality or legal status are frequently ill-suited to the complexity of statelessness or protracted asylum, making forms difficult to complete. In this context, flexibility around documentation, deadlines, and verification procedures is crucial. Refugee students may be unable to provide traditional transcripts when required, and rigid systems risk excluding applicants with strong potential. Institutions must therefore adapt their processes to accommodate alternative forms of evidence.

Financial barriers compound these obstacles. Beyond tuition, displaced students must often cover application fees, visa charges, airfare, basic living expenses, and equipment

²⁴ Source: <https://www.goabroad.org/>

²⁵ Source: <https://mastercardfdn.org/en/>

²⁶ Source: <https://www.rotary.org/en>

²⁷ Source: <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>

²⁸ Source: <https://chooselove.org/>

²⁹ “In 2019 UNHCR and partners set the goal to achieve 15% enrolment of refugee youth in higher education by 2030—the 15by30 target. At that time, the estimated global refugee enrolment in higher education stood at 1%. Today, that figure has risen to 7%, approaching the halfway point towards achieving 15by30.”

Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-expanding-higher-education-skills-and-self-reliance-refugees>

³⁰ Source: Elimisha Kakuma-Virginia Tech Research Group 2025, “Access to Higher Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp”, https://liberalarts.vt.edu/content/dam/liberalarts_vt_edu/research-centers/center-for-refugee%2c-migrant%2c-and-displacement-studies/Access-to-Higher-Education-in-Kakuma.pdf

such as laptops or appropriate clothing for colder climates. Even generous scholarships frequently omit these indirect costs. Students themselves emphasised that financial pressures persist after admission: families may assume that a scholarship guarantees financial security and begin to request support, adding emotional and economic strain. Expanding full-cost scholarships and cultivating dedicated funding partnerships would help address these hidden barriers. As one student observed, access to non-federal scholarships, which are not restricted by immigration status, can be decisive.

Once enrolled, refugee students are frequently categorised simply as international students, a classification that fails to recognise their distinct circumstances [33]. Unlike many international students, refugees may have no home to return to, face long-term uncertainty regarding immigration status, and cope with interrupted schooling or trauma [22]. Although support services may be available, they often remain difficult to access due to limited awareness, insufficient guidance, or feelings of apprehension. As one student noted, “Nothing is built with refugee students in mind. You just feel lost, and even when help is right there, no one shows you how to use it.”

Social and academic integration is further shaped by confidence, prior preparation, and cultural familiarity. Students spoke of experiencing impostor syndrome, hesitancy to seek help, and difficulties understanding academic expectations. One recalled struggling during their first semester because the professor assumed a level of high school preparation they had not received. Such accounts underscore the need for universities to avoid presuming a level playing field and instead offer support that enables students to “catch up” without stigma.

Universities must therefore move beyond providing services in principle to ensuring they are genuinely accessible in practice. This may include appointing dedicated refugee liaisons trained in the specific dynamics of displacement, and developing tailored structures for legal advice, work rights, and psychological support [59]. Students also highlighted the importance of flexible employment opportunities that allow them to support themselves without compromising academic success.

Recognition is also key. Formally acknowledging refugees as a distinct constituency within inclusive programming, while allowing students to disclose their status only if they choose, can strengthen representation and belonging. A co-founder of Elimisha Kakuma explained that the term “refugee” itself carries both lived meaning and social weight. Sensitive engagement with this identity is particularly crucial in classroom discussions on migration or global conflict, as staff may not know that refugee students are present unless they self-identify.

Career development emerged as another priority. Students suggested implementing a structured sequence of support across the academic years: consultations with an immigration advisor in the first year; guidance on post-study work options in the second; and internship preparation in the third. Careers offices must consider the complex legal realities refugees face and provide tailored advice that extends beyond standard international student pathways.

In parallel, universities should expand spaces and opportunities for displaced learners to access higher education. Refugees are not merely recipients of assistance; they are high-potential contributors who often generate significant academic and social impact. As Dryden-Peterson and Horst [14] argue, higher education can play a transformative

role in enabling displaced individuals to exercise leadership within and beyond their communities.

Institutions cannot, however, advance this agenda alone. Participation in collaborative network, such as UNICORE in Italy, allows universities to share resources, knowledge, and pathways while building relationships with refugee-led organisations. According to Elimisha Kakuma's experience, such networks have directly facilitated enrolment through trusted connections between applicants and admissions staff. In-person engagement, including campus visits to camps or refugee hubs, further strengthens mutual understanding and trust.

Finally, universities must cultivate a broader culture of inclusion [32]. This involves embedding refugee perspectives into curricula, inviting refugee speakers, and designing programming that reflects diverse narratives. It also requires reinforcing support after arrival: peer mentoring, housing assistance, and summer resources for those unable to travel reinforce continuity and stability.

In sum, effectively supporting refugee students demands far more than scholarships. It requires rethinking admissions, funding models, academic environments, legal support, and cultural practices. It also depends on meaningful collaboration with refugee-led organisations and a willingness to listen, learn, and adapt. As global displacement continues to rise, the imperative is clear: higher education institutions must evolve into spaces that provide not only access, but also genuine belonging, opportunity, and hope.

7 Strengths of Elimisha Kakuma

"You're being seen by people who already lived in that situation. And it reminds us that our stories matter". (N., student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma)

From the interviews, it seems clear that the main strength of Elimisha Kakuma lies in its identity as a refugee-led organisation. Unlike many educational pathways designed externally and imposed from above, Elimisha was born within the community and responds authentically to its needs, limitations and potential. This bottom-up perspective informs every decision made by the organisation, ensuring that its interventions are grounded in the lived realities of camp life.

Thanks to this direct understanding of the context, Elimisha has developed an educational programme that incorporates essential elements often overlooked by external initiatives. For instance, students are compensated for their participation, acknowledging that many of them serve as the primary breadwinners for their families. The organisation also provides daily meals and actively involves students' families in the educational process through regular meetings designed to foster understanding, trust and shared responsibility.

As part of the curriculum, each student is required to carry out a community service project, reflecting the core belief that education is not merely a personal achievement but a tool to strengthen the collective fabric of the community. This community-based approach is also evident in the trust Elimisha has built over time: people believe in the organisation because it stands with them emotionally, financially and structurally, particularly during times of difficulty. This commitment is expressed not only in services



Fig. 9 Word Cloud based on the question “three words to describe Elimisha Kakuma”

but in presence: Elimisha does not operate from a distant office, but reaches the field, checks in with students, and remains physically and emotionally close.

The organisation offers strong academic training, including public speaking and academic writing, and ensures each student is assigned a personal tutor, a university student themselves, who is approachable and available through informal channels like WhatsApp. These tutors provide mentorship that is both structured and deeply personal, encouraging resilience, motivation, and self-worth. Students consistently describe the mentoring as one of the most transformative experiences: “You’re not just being taught, you’re being seen.”

Elimisha also prepares students for transition abroad through intense orientation sessions, ensuring that when they arrive, particularly in the US, they are already familiar with what to expect. This level of preparation helps students avoid cultural shock and integrate more easily into new environments. Many of them report that, thanks to Elimisha, nothing felt unfamiliar or surprising upon arrival.

Another standout feature is the peer support and camaraderie that Elimisha fosters. Students describe the relationships formed during their time in the programme as akin to family, built through months of hard work, mutual support, and shared aspirations.

Technological inclusion is another important strength. Elimisha provides access to a tech hub where community members can apply for scholarships or take online courses, expanding their opportunities in tangible ways. The organisation also understands structural barriers such as poor internet connectivity or the bureaucratic hurdles involved in securing refugee status or academic documentation. For students from countries not automatically recognised by Kenya, Elimisha not only accepts them into the programme but supports them in navigating the legal processes required to access scholarships and higher education.

When asked to give three words to describe Elimisha Kakuma, the majority of respondents chose words as *community, hope, supportive, family* (Fig. 9)

Elimisha’s strength ultimately lies in its ability to combine professional competence across all dimensions, from programme coordination to content development, with an unwavering commitment to authenticity and compassion. Students feel that the organisation allows them to be seen fully, without needing to hide their past or trauma in

order to move forward. As one student put it, “It’s the first place I felt like I didn’t have to erase where I came from in order to move forward.”

In conclusion, Elimisha distinguishes itself through its unique ability to combine deep community roots with a strategic, participatory and human-centred educational vision. It is this integration of lived experience, genuine community engagement, professional competence and holistic student support that makes the Elimisha model not only effective but truly transformative.

8 Challenges faced by Elimisha Kakuma

“Whatever I end up doing, I hope it helps build systems where people, especially those in places like Kakuma can access education and opportunities and even capital, not just surviving” (N., student currently in the USA thanks to Elimisha Kakuma).

The challenges faced by Elimisha Kakuma are both systemic, rooted in the legal-political context of refugee status, and structural, linked to limited organisational capacity and resources. As highlighted in the literature, programmes in protracted displacement must contend with fragmented institutions, scarce funding, and unequal power relations between humanitarian actors, states, and donors [13]. Elimisha operates within this environment.

A central concern is the risk of brain drain. While international study opportunities can lead to long-term migration, restricting students to the camp equally prevents them from using their skills. With no easy solutions, Elimisha prioritises education and personal development over mobility outcomes it cannot control, reflecting broader rights-based debates in refugee education [14].

Internally, the organisation relies almost entirely on volunteers. This provides remarkable commitment, such as Virginia Tech students tutoring without compensation, but also raises questions about sustainability and the emotional load placed on unpaid staff, especially those juggling full-time jobs.

Funding remains the most pressing limitation and exposes the programme to dependency dynamics common in donor-supported mobility pathways. Donor agendas often influence who is selected, which forms of mobility are enabled, and how responsibilities are distributed between institutions in the Global North and South [27, 34]. These patterns can create opportunities but also reproduce structural inequalities and reliance on external resources [8].

Despite strong outcomes, Elimisha can support only around 15 students per year out of hundreds of qualified applicants, mostly because of limited scholarships. This scarcity heightens emotional pressure: students work intensely with no guarantee of admission or full financial aid, which is essential for most of them.

Everyday conditions in Kakuma further complicate academic life. Extreme heat, unreliable electricity, and unstable Wi-Fi hinder study routines. Students also face bureaucratic and legal barriers, including complex documentation processes and delays in securing refugee status.

Another issue is the narrow geographic focus of opportunities, often centred on countries with restrictive visa systems. Students advocate for expanding options within

Africa, for instance through MasterCard Foundation programmes in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa.

Beyond structural barriers, students carry a significant emotional burden. The need to constantly demonstrate resilience and gratitude can mask personal struggles, echoing research on displaced learners' pressure to perform strength to remain eligible for support [54].

A dedicated team on the ground, at least five full-time staff, would greatly improve student support, programme coordination, and partnerships with universities and donors.

In sum, Elimisha operates within complex external constraints and internal limitations: funding shortages, volunteer dependence, and insufficient infrastructure. Yet it has demonstrated clear impact and strong potential. With targeted investment, stronger regional partnerships, and sustained commitment to holistic education, this potential could be significantly expanded.

9 Conclusions

This paper has analysed the example of Elimisha Kakuma as a best-practice model of NGO-university collaboration, highlighting the strengths and challenges of this initiative, and identifying effective strategies and scalable solutions for improving refugee access to higher education worldwide. The interviews with students, staff and university representatives have provided valuable perspectives on the effectiveness of university-NGO partnerships.

Indeed, scaling the programme is a major ambition. Elimisha currently serves 16 students per cohort, a small fraction of the demand in a camp of over 300,000 residents representing more than ten nationalities. The team is acutely aware of the importance of ensuring inclusivity, and works actively to reach out to all communities within the camp to ensure equitable access to the application process. However, without increased funding and a larger facility, the number of students served remains limited. Expanding to 30 or more students per year would require a significant enhancement of physical infrastructure and programme capacity.

Looking beyond Kakuma, Elimisha's vision includes replicating its model in other refugee camps worldwide. The founders recognise the broader potential of what has been built: a scalable, community-driven, refugee-led initiative that not only prepares students for university but also equips them with the tools to succeed beyond it. Creating a *rippling effect* by adapting this model to other contexts could have a transformative impact across displaced communities globally. After all, this is precisely the driving force behind the birth of Elimisha Kakuma: the founders were given an opportunity, and not only did they seize it and make the most of it, they chose to create that same opportunity for others who would come after them.

To strengthen its contribution to refugee higher education, the findings of this study suggest a series of actor-specific priorities. Universities should work towards adapting their admissions procedures by offering more flexible documentation requirements and contextualised evaluations, while also establishing clearer support structures that respond to the academic, legal, and psychological needs of refugee students. They would further benefit from developing structured academic and career guidance across the full duration of the degree, strengthening links with refugee-led organisations, and ensuring that scholarships cover both tuition and essential living costs.

Donors and philanthropic foundations have an equally important role to play. Long-term investment in core operating capacity is essential for allowing organisations like Elimisha to stabilise staffing, expand their facilities, and plan the growth of future cohorts. Funding should also include support for infrastructural improvements within camps, such as reliable study spaces, electricity, and connectivity, as well as non-tuition costs that frequently constitute decisive barriers for refugee learners. Multi-year commitments would enable Elimisha to develop sustainable programming and explore replication in new contexts.

Host governments, finally, can contribute by simplifying documentation procedures, reducing administrative delays, and ensuring clearer legal frameworks regarding study and work rights. Strengthening coordination with NGOs and universities, and integrating refugee higher education into national strategies, would help create more coherent pathways for learners. Improvements in camp-level infrastructure, including transport, connectivity, and safe learning environments, would further support academic engagement.

With sustained investment and coordinated action across these stakeholders, Elimisha Kakuma can continue not only to unlock educational opportunity, but also to redefine what is possible for refugee-led change in the global education landscape.

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Data availability

The datasets analysed in this study are not publicly available in order to protect the privacy and identity of the refugees involved. However, they can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, after removal of all names and other sensitive information.

Declarations**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The ethical approval requirement is waived under the University of Padua's Research Integrity Code (attached), applicable to this research activity according to Article 2.3. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, understanding its purpose and their rights.

Consent for publication

Not applicable, since the study does not include any identifiable images or personal data.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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