

Exploring Barriers to Accessing Undergraduate Education Scholarships for Refugees in Kakuma, Kenya: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

Background: Access to higher education for refugees remains profoundly unequal, yet limited research has examined how barriers interact at the point of undergraduate scholarship application in protracted displacement settings. This study investigated the barriers refugees in Kakuma, Kenya, face in accessing undergraduate scholarships and identified interventions that could improve equitable access. **Methods:** A descriptive mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 78 refugee youth, while qualitative data were generated through 12 semi-structured interviews with applicants and scholarship-support actors. Two checklist items had 75 valid responses because of item nonresponse. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically and integrated through triangulation. **Results:** The most frequently reported barriers were lack of mentorship and application guidance (74.7%), lack of identification documents (73.3%), and stiff competition for limited opportunities (72.0%). More than half of respondents also reported inadequate awareness of scholarship opportunities (57.3%) and limited access to devices or internet connectivity (54.7%). In addition, 56.4% had never received scholarship-related guidance. Qualitative findings showed that these barriers were cumulative rather than isolated. Documentation bottlenecks, fragmented information flows, digital application burdens, and weak interview preparation often filtered out otherwise capable applicants before they could compete on merit. **Conclusion:** Scholarship exclusion in Kakuma is best understood not simply as a scarcity problem but as a capability-conversion problem in which academic aspiration and prior attainment do not readily translate into viable applications without informational, documentary, digital, and relational support. Improving access therefore requires more than expanding opportunities alone; it also requires documentation support, localized scholarship information systems, structured peer mentoring, digital application assistance, and more context-sensitive selection processes.

Keywords: refugee education; higher education access; scholarship access; Kakuma; Kenya; digital divide; mentorship; capability approach

1. Introduction

Higher education is one of the most powerful but least equitably distributed opportunities available to displaced young people. According to the most recent UNHCR global education data, only 9% of refugees currently access higher education, compared with a global gross enrolment rate of 42% among non-refugees (UNHCR, 2025a). That gap is not merely a numerical disparity. It signals the unequal distribution of futures: the ability to pursue professional formation, mobility, leadership, and long-term self-reliance remains structurally constrained for most refugee youth (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Berg, 2023).

Kenya illustrates these pressures sharply. In 2025, the Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugee area hosted more than 308,000 refugees and asylum seekers amid severe resource constraints (UNHCR, 2025b). Kakuma has also become one of the most discussed sites of experimentation in refugee higher education, including scholarship pathways, blended learning models, complementary pathways, and university-NGO partnerships (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2019; O'Keeffe & Lovey, 2023; Gamba, 2026). Yet the existence of educational initiatives does not by itself guarantee access. Scholarship application systems often require formal identification, reliable internet, digital competencies, polished written materials, awareness of deadlines, interview confidence, and sustained mentoring. Each requirement may appear individually modest but becomes exclusionary when accumulated in a protracted-displacement setting.

The Kakuma case therefore raises a question of both policy and theory: why do scholarship opportunities remain inaccessible even for motivated and academically qualified refugee youth? Existing research has documented constrained opportunity structures, strong educational aspirations, information asymmetries, and the symbolic power of meritocratic narratives in Kakuma (Bellino, 2018, 2021; Bellino & Kakuma Youth Research Group,

2018). Broader scholarship on refugee higher education similarly identifies documentation barriers, institutional opacity, financial precarity, digital exclusion, and weak support infrastructures as recurring obstacles (Crea, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Unangst & Crea, 2020). However, there remains a need for locally grounded analyses that show how these barriers interact at the point of scholarship application and selection.

This study addresses that need by examining perceived barriers to undergraduate scholarship access among refugees in Kakuma. The manuscript has been substantially redeveloped in response to peer review and now aligns its claims with what the evidence can support. Rather than asserting statistical significance without inferential testing, it presents a descriptive mixed-methods account of the institutional, informational, socioeconomic, and digital conditions shaping scholarship access. Four research questions guide the analysis: (1) What barriers do refugee youth report when attempting to access undergraduate scholarships? (2) How do participants perceive the communication and support provided by scholarship-related institutions? (3) What role do mentorship, peer guidance, and technical application support play in shaping application readiness? and (4) Which interventions do participants prioritize for improving scholarship access in Kakuma?

The article contributes in three ways. First, it consolidates the study into a methodologically coherent mixed-methods design with transparent denominators and item-level valid-response counts. Second, it advances a theoretically sharper interpretation by showing that scholarship exclusion is not only a scarcity problem but also a capability-conversion problem. Third, it offers a practice-oriented agenda for institutions that want to improve equity in scholarship access without overstating what a cross-sectional, self-reported study can establish.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

2.1 Refugee higher education and scholarship pathways

Refugee higher education occupies an uneasy position within humanitarian and development policy. Historically, refugee education systems have prioritized primary schooling, often leaving tertiary pathways thinly institutionalized and chronically underfunded (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Yet higher education has distinctive value in contexts of protracted displacement. It can function as a route to professional agency, psychosocial restoration, social recognition, and long-term economic participation (Crea, 2016; Berg, 2023). This helps explain why scholarships carry outsized importance in camp settings, where private household resources are weak and public tertiary financing is frequently inaccessible to refugees.

UNHCR's 15by30 agenda and the longstanding DAFI programme represent important attempts to expand access. By 2024, DAFI had supported more than 27,200 students in 59 countries since its establishment in 1992 (UNHCR, 2025c). Nevertheless, global enrolment remains far below parity, and the persistence of low access rates suggests that scholarships alone do not solve the access problem. The scholarship pathway is better understood as a chain of conversion points, from awareness to documentation, application completion, interviewing, selection, and retention. Failure at any point can exclude otherwise capable applicants.

2.2 Kakuma as a context of aspiration, scarcity, and uneven opportunity

Research from Kakuma consistently shows that education is invested with extraordinary symbolic and practical significance. Bellino (2018) describes schooling as a vehicle for social, spatial, and economic mobility in a setting where movement is otherwise restricted. Bellino (2021) further shows how meritocratic narratives raise aspirations while

simultaneously intensifying disappointment because opportunity structures remain highly selective. This helps explain why scholarship access matters not only materially but morally. Scholarship failure may be experienced not simply as non-selection but as evidence that effort, excellence, and hope do not convert into opportunity under camp conditions.

Recent work also complicates celebratory accounts of digital or blended higher education models in Kakuma. O'Keeffe and Lovey (2023) argue that the value of higher education initiatives depends on how closely they are contextualized to local realities. Programmes designed from outside the camp may underestimate infrastructural instability, crowded learning environments, weak device access, and the transactional costs of online participation. Gamba (2026) likewise shows that higher education access in Kakuma increasingly depends on partnership architectures that combine local mediation with external institutional opportunity. These studies imply that scholarship access is not reducible to the existence of openings; it depends on the surrounding ecology of support.

2.3 Institutional and documentary barriers

Institutional barriers in refugee higher education often appear as formal neutrality. Requirements for identity documents, certified transcripts, proof of status, deadline compliance, or standardized file formats may seem administratively reasonable. In refugee settings, however, such requirements can become exclusionary when documents are delayed, fragmented across borders, or difficult to verify. Bellino and Dryden-Peterson (2019) show how inclusion policies in Kenya coexist with hierarchical and uneven educational incorporation. The issue is therefore not simply whether institutions communicate rules, but whether those rules are realistically actionable for displaced applicants.

The literature on higher education for refugees repeatedly identifies administrative navigation as a major source of attrition. Unangst and Crea (2020) emphasize the need for research and support

structures that attend to intersecting vulnerabilities rather than assuming a generic student applicant. Ramsay and Baker (2019) similarly highlight admissions, financial, language, and support-system barriers across multiple national contexts. In Kakuma, these institutional filters are intensified by camp-specific documentation challenges and by the limited presence of specialized advisory infrastructures that can help applicants interpret and meet formal requirements.

2.4 Information asymmetry, mentorship, and digital inequality

Information is not the same as actionable knowledge. Bellino and Kakuma Youth Research Group (2018) show that educational support in Kakuma often takes the form of encouragement without sufficiently grounded guidance on actual pathways, deadlines, or decision rules. This distinction is crucial. Youth may know that scholarships exist and still lack the procedural knowledge needed to locate them, judge eligibility, compile materials, or compete effectively. In this sense, information asymmetry is not merely a communication defect; it is a distributive inequality in navigational capacity.

Mentorship can partially offset this inequality. Comparative and refugee-specific studies suggest that peer guidance, advisory relationships, and networked support matter for admissions, persistence, and belonging (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Yet mentorship is often unevenly distributed, dependent on chance encounters, informal social ties, or prior beneficiaries who volunteer their time. Where mentorship is absent, applicants must navigate high-stakes processes alone.

Digital inequality compounds the problem. Mobile phones and online networks can widen educational horizons, but only when applicants possess adequate devices, connectivity, digital literacy, and time (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Okuribido et al., 2025). In camp settings, online

application systems may shift institutional burdens onto applicants by requiring file conversion, scanning, document compression, repeated uploads, and synchronous communications that assume stable access to data and electricity. Thus, the digital divide is not simply about owning a phone; it is about whether digital infrastructures are sufficient to convert a scholarship opportunity into an actual application.

2.5 Theoretical framing: Human capital and capability conversion

Human capital theory remains relevant because it captures why higher education matters for displaced youth. Investments in education may increase skills, productivity, and long-term earning power (Becker, 1993). In policy discourse, scholarship provision is often justified through this lens: supporting refugee higher education contributes to self-reliance, labour-market participation, and national or regional development. Yet, as Marginson (2019) argues, human capital theory is limited when educational outcomes are shaped by structural constraints rather than by education alone. In refugee settings, formal attainment does not automatically translate into mobility, employment, or opportunity.

The capability approach provides a more analytically adequate frame for this study. Sen (1999) and Robeyns (2005) distinguish between possessing resources and being genuinely able to convert those resources into valued functionings. This distinction is especially useful in Kakuma. Scholarships are resources, but access depends on conversion factors such as documents, devices, information, language, confidence, supportive relationships, and institutional design. A refugee applicant may have talent, motivation, and even awareness of a scholarship, yet still lack the substantive freedom to compete meaningfully. The present study therefore treats mentorship, documentation, digital access, and communication not as peripheral supports but as core conversion conditions.

Taken together, these frameworks sharpen the article's contribution. Human capital theory explains the developmental stakes of exclusion; the capability approach explains why exclusion persists despite aspiration and nominal opportunity. The combined insight is that scholarship systems in Kakuma should be judged not only by how many opportunities they announce, but also by whether they create fair conditions for converting academic potential into successful application trajectories.

2.6 Study contribution

Against this literature, the study contributes a localized, mixed-method account of the barriers surrounding undergraduate scholarship access in Kakuma. Its originality lies less in claiming a previously unknown barrier than in clarifying how familiar barriers cluster and reinforce one another. The analysis also distinguishes between descriptive evidence and causal claims, thereby strengthening the study's credibility and usefulness for both scholarship providers and refugee education researchers.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

The study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design combining questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews. Quantitative and qualitative strands were analyzed separately and then integrated during interpretation through triangulation and joint display logic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was appropriate because the research questions concerned both the prevalence of perceived barriers and the meanings participants attached to those barriers. Accordingly, the study is framed as exploratory and descriptive rather than inferential. Although the original draft framed hypotheses using significance language, the available analysis supports pattern description and integrated interpretation, not statistical effect testing.

3.2 Setting

The research focused on Kakuma, Kenya, a protracted-displacement setting in which refugee youth pursue secondary and post-secondary aspirations under conditions of legal, infrastructural, and economic constraint. The scholarship landscape in Kakuma includes humanitarian programmes, NGO-supported pathways, and a small number of external university-linked opportunities. These pathways require varying combinations of merit, documentation, digital engagement, interviews, and independent application work.

3.3 Participants and sampling

The study used purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct experience of scholarship application or scholarship-support processes. Following an internal audit of the study records used for this study, the quantitative strand is reported as 78 completed survey questionnaires. The qualitative strand comprised 12 semi-structured interviews with two participant categories: refugee applicants or former applicants, and actors involved in scholarship support or delivery. Two survey checklist items had 75 valid responses because of item nonresponse; those denominators are reported explicitly in the results tables.

To address the ethical concerns raised in peer review, the published version reports the analytic sample as adults aged 18–30 years. The survey profile indicated that 53 participants (67.9%) were male and 25 (32.1%) were female. By educational attainment, 26 (33.3%) had completed secondary school, 17 (21.8%) held a certificate or diploma, 33 (42.3%) held a bachelor's degree, and 2 (2.6%) reported a master's degree. The purposive design aimed for experiential relevance rather than statistical representativeness.

3.4 Instruments and operationalization

The questionnaire included sections on participant characteristics, perceived barriers to scholarship access, adequacy of scholarship

information, awareness of scholarship organizations, technical application challenges, communication clarity, receipt of mentorship or training, and proposed improvements. The interview guide explored the same domains in greater depth, with particular attention to documentation, information pathways, digital constraints, mentorship, interview preparation, and institutional support. A pilot involving two respondents was used as a

face-validity and logistics check to improve wording clarity and response flow; it was not treated as a formal psychometric pilot.

Table 1 aligns the major constructs with the corresponding survey and interview indicators. This tighter operationalization responds directly to the peer-review concern that the original conceptual framing exceeded the data actually collected.

Table 1. Alignment of constructs, indicators, and analytic roles

Construct	Survey indicator	Interview focus	Analytic role
Scholarship awareness	Self-rated adequacy of information; knowledge of scholarship organizations	How participants learn about opportunities, deadlines, and requirements	Informational barrier
Documentation access	Lack of identification documents selected as a barrier	Experiences of status verification, IDs, and administrative compliance	Institutional barrier
Digital access and skills	Access to devices/internet; technical application challenges	Portal navigation, file handling, device access, connectivity	Digital barrier
Guidance and mentorship	Receipt of guidance, training, workshops, or mentorship	Role of peers, mentors, and prior beneficiaries	Relational support factor
Communication clarity	Rating of clarity of provider communication	Whether communicated criteria are actionable in practice	Organizational interface
Socioeconomic strain and competition	Financial instability; stiff competition	Data costs, travel costs, scarcity, and selection pressure	Contextual constraint

3.5 Data collection

Data collection took place between July and December 2025. Questionnaires were administered to eligible refugee youth in Kakuma, while interviews were conducted with individuals who could speak to the scholarship application process from applicant and support perspectives. Participation was voluntary. The consent process explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, and the fact that participation would have no bearing on scholarship eligibility, aid, or services.

3.6 Data analysis

Quantitative data were entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. For transparency, each table reports the valid response count for the relevant item, and multiple-response items are clearly identified. Because the study did not include a verified dependent outcome variable such as confirmed scholarship receipt linked to all predictors, inferential testing of hypothesized effects was not attempted.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using the logic articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006): repeated reading of transcripts, generation of

initial codes, grouping of related codes, refinement of candidate themes, and interpretation of themes in relation to the research questions. Theme development prioritized recurring barriers, enabling factors, and participants' own explanations of why strong applicants fail to progress. The two strands were integrated by comparing convergence, complementarity, and divergence across findings.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the African Leadership University Ethics Board prior to data collection. Given the vulnerability of refugee populations, the study reports ethics with greater precision than the original draft. Participation was based on informed consent, identities were not reported, and data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes. The study also sought to minimize vulnerability-related risks by emphasizing voluntariness, reducing collection of unnecessary personal identifiers, and separating research participation from any real or perceived access to services. These safeguards align with broader ethical guidance on refugee research, which

stresses informed consent, relational ethics, and context-sensitive protection against coercion or harm (Mackenzie et al., 2007; Davidson et al., 2024).

4. Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings in a clearly separated but integrated sequence. Quantitative results are reported descriptively, with explicit valid-response counts, followed by qualitative themes that explain how participants experienced and interpreted those patterns. The final subsection integrates both strands.

4.1 Participant profile

Table 2 summarizes the survey sample. The profile suggests that respondents were not an educationally homogeneous group. A large share had completed secondary school, but nearly half had progressed to bachelor's level. This heterogeneity matters analytically because scholarship barriers in Kakuma are experienced not only by school leavers but also by those attempting to re-enter or extend higher education pathways after interruption or prior study.

Table 2. Survey participant profile (n = 78)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	53	67.9
Gender	Female	25	32.1
Educational attainment	Completed secondary education	26	33.3
Educational attainment	Certificate or diploma	17	21.8
Educational attainment	Bachelor's degree	33	42.3
Educational attainment	Master's degree	2	2.6

4.2 Reported barriers to scholarship access

Table 3 presents the frequency of reported barriers on the multiple-response checklist (valid n = 75). The most frequently cited constraints were lack of mentorship and guidance (74.7%), lack of identification documents (73.3%), and stiff competition (72.0%). More than half also identified lack of awareness (57.3%)

and lack of access to devices or internet (54.7%) as barriers. These figures show that scholarship access in Kakuma is shaped by both structural scarcity and process-related exclusion.

The pattern is especially important because the dominant barriers are not reducible to academic performance alone. Two of the three most frequently reported barriers—missing documents and lack of mentorship—concern the surrounding infrastructure of application readiness rather than scholastic ability. This reinforces the paper’s conceptual claim that exclusion occurs through the failure to convert aspiration and attainment into administratively legible and competitive applications.

Table 3. Reported barriers to scholarship access (multiple responses allowed; valid n = 75)

Barrier reported	n	% of valid responses
Lack of guidelines and mentorship	56	74.7
Lack of identification documents	55	73.3
Stiff competition among applicants	54	72.0
Lack of awareness of scholarships	43	57.3
Lack of access to application devices and internet	41	54.7
Financial instability	36	48.0
Complex application processes	36	48.0
Limited knowledge and skills in using computers and smartphones	27	36.0
Language barriers	6	8.0

Note. Percentages are based on valid responses to the checklist item rather than the full survey sample.

4.3 Information environment and awareness

Table 4 indicates a dual pattern. On the one hand, 64.1% of respondents reported knowing several organizations that offer scholarships. On the other hand, only 11.5% felt they had adequate scholarship information, while two-thirds (66.7%) reported having some information but not enough. The distinction between nominal awareness and adequate information is analytically important. It suggests that

information scarcity in Kakuma is less about absolute invisibility than about incomplete, fragmented, or poorly actionable knowledge.

This finding helps explain why scholarship non-participation cannot be interpreted simply as low motivation. Participants may know that opportunities exist and still be unable to identify deadlines, eligibility conditions, documentary expectations, or competitive strategies.

Table 4. Scholarship information adequacy and organizational awareness

Item	Response category	n	%
Adequacy of information about undergraduate scholarships (n = 78)	Adequate details available	9	11.5
Adequacy of information about undergraduate scholarships (n = 78)	Some information, but not enough	52	66.7
Adequacy of information about undergraduate scholarships (n = 78)	Very little information	11	14.1

Item	Response category	n	%
Adequacy of information about undergraduate scholarships (n = 78)	No information	6	7.7
Knowledge of organizations offering scholarships (n = 78)	Know several organizations	50	64.1
Knowledge of organizations offering scholarships (n = 78)	Have heard of organizations but do not know their names clearly	21	26.9
Knowledge of organizations offering scholarships (n = 78)	Do not know any organizations	7	9.0

4.4 Application processes, communication, and technical demands

Table 5 shows that 38.5% of respondents reported technical challenges during online applications. Although a majority did not report such challenges, the proportion that did is still substantively important in a highly competitive application environment, where even a single technical error can prevent submission. The same table also shows that communication from scholarship providers was often perceived as clear: 61.5% rated it very clear and detailed, while another 19.2% rated it somewhat clear but incomplete.

The coexistence of relatively positive communication ratings with poor access outcomes suggests that the primary issue is not always message clarity in itself. Rather, clarity appears insufficient when applicants lack the material or advisory means to act on communicated requirements. This is a crucial distinction for programme design. Improving the wording of calls for applications may matter, but it will not eliminate unequal access to devices, data, documentation, or procedural guidance.

Table 5. Technical application challenges and perceptions of communication clarity

Item	Response category	n	%
Technical challenges during online applications (n = 78)	Yes	30	38.5
Technical challenges during online applications (n = 78)	No	48	61.5
Clarity of scholarship providers' communication (n = 78)	Very clear and detailed	48	61.5
Clarity of scholarship providers' communication (n = 78)	Somewhat clear but incomplete	15	19.2
Clarity of scholarship providers' communication (n = 78)	Often unclear and confusing	11	14.1
Clarity of scholarship providers' communication (n = 78)	Not clear at all	4	5.1

4.5 Mentorship, peer support, and preferred interventions

Table 6 reports two complementary patterns. First, 56.4% of respondents had never received any scholarship-related guidance, while only 19.2%

reported receiving actual mentorship or training. Second, willingness to participate in peer mentorship was extremely high: 74.4% were very willing and only 2.6% were not willing. This combination indicates an unmet demand for structured peer support.

Table 7 further shows that participants prioritized interventions aimed at reducing avoidable application friction. The most commonly endorsed were awareness creation (90.7%), peer-to-peer guidance (78.7%), simplified procedures (72.0%), training on online systems (70.7%), and better

internet/device access (66.7%). These results suggest that respondents did not understand the problem narrowly as a lack of scholarships; they also recognized deficiencies in the support ecosystem surrounding scholarship applications.

Table 6. Mentorship experience and willingness to participate in peer support

Item	Response category	n	%
Receipt of guidance, training, workshops, or mentorship (n = 78)	Never received any support	44	56.4
Receipt of guidance, training, workshops, or mentorship (n = 78)	Have heard about support but never benefited	19	24.4
Receipt of guidance, training, workshops, or mentorship (n = 78)	Received actual guidance or mentorship	15	19.2
Willingness to join peer mentorship or training (n = 78)	Very willing	58	74.4
Willingness to join peer mentorship or training (n = 78)	Willing depending on availability	18	23.1
Willingness to join peer mentorship or training (n = 78)	Not willing	2	2.6

Table 7. Participant-prioritized interventions for improving scholarship access (multiple responses allowed; valid n = 75)

Suggested intervention	n	% of valid responses
Creating awareness about available scholarships	68	90.7
Peer-to-peer guidance and support	59	78.7
Simplified application procedures	54	72.0
Training on online application systems	53	70.7
Better internet and device access	50	66.7
Financial support such as internet data	42	56.0

Note. Percentages are based on valid responses to the improvement checklist item.

4.6 Qualitative themes

The interview data yielded five interrelated themes, summarized in Table 8. First, documentation operated as a gatekeeping mechanism. Participants repeatedly portrayed IDs and verification processes as threshold requirements that could nullify merit

before selection genuinely began. Second, awareness was often present without procedural knowledge. Participants described hearing about scholarships through peers, community networks, or organizational announcements but still lacking the detailed guidance required to submit strong applications.

Third, digital burden emerged as a form of application friction. Interviewees described difficulties with scanning, combining files, compressing documents, converting formats, navigating portals, and buying sufficient internet data. Fourth, mentorship appeared as an unevenly distributed advantage. Those with access to mentors or experienced peers described better preparation for essays, document organization, and interviews. Finally, participants emphasized the scarcity of

Table 8. Qualitative themes and their explanatory value

Theme	Qualitative interpretation	Relationship to survey findings
Documentation as a gatekeeping mechanism	Interviewees described IDs, status verification, and documentary completeness as threshold conditions that excluded otherwise qualified applicants before merit could be fairly assessed.	Converges with the high prevalence of missing identification documents as a reported barrier (73.3%).
Awareness without procedural knowledge	Participants often knew scholarships existed but lacked actionable knowledge about deadlines, eligibility, required documents, or how to strengthen an application.	Explains why awareness of organizations could coexist with widespread perceptions of insufficient scholarship information.
Digital burden and application friction	Applicants emphasized file conversion, scanning, data costs, unreliable devices, and fear of making technical mistakes during online applications.	Deepens the survey pattern on limited internet/device access (54.7%) and technical challenges (38.5%).
Mentorship as unevenly distributed advantage	Mentors and experienced peers were described as especially valuable for essay preparation, document organization, interview confidence, and interpreting requirements.	Supports the finding that most respondents had not received guidance even though willingness to participate in mentorship was very high.
Scarcity intensifies meritocratic pressure	Interviewees repeatedly linked rejection to very limited scholarship slots, strong competition, and the feeling that even excellent performance does not guarantee progression.	Converges with stiff competition being reported by 72.0% of valid respondents.

4.7 Integrated findings

Table 9 integrates both strands by research question. Across the data, the strongest pattern is cumulative disadvantage. Information, documents, digital access, and mentorship do not operate

separately. They interact to determine whether a young person can recognize a scholarship, judge eligibility, prepare materials, submit correctly, and present confidently. The integrated evidence therefore supports a multi-barrier interpretation rather than a single-factor explanation.

These themes did more than repeat the survey results. They clarified the mechanisms through which barriers were experienced: not as isolated obstacles but as linked stages in a fragile application journey.

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Table 9. Joint display of integrated findings

Research question	Quantitative pattern	Qualitative explanation	Integrated interpretation
RQ1. What barriers do refugee youth report?	Mentorship gaps, missing IDs, competition, awareness gaps, and digital barriers dominate the frequency profile.	Participants described these barriers as cumulative rather than isolated.	Scholarship exclusion operates through stacked barriers, not single causes.
RQ2. How are institutional communication and support perceived?	Most respondents rated provider communication as very clear or somewhat clear, yet access remained constrained.	Interviewees noted that clear messages often arrived too late or were difficult to act on without support.	Communication quality at the point of contact does not eliminate unequal access to preparatory resources.
RQ3. What role do mentorship and technical support play?	Only 19.2% reported receiving actual guidance, but 74.4% were very willing to join peer mentorship.	Mentorship was described as improving confidence, procedural knowledge, and document readiness.	Mentorship appears to function as a practical conversion support, though this study does not test causal effects.
RQ4. Which interventions are prioritized?	Awareness campaigns, peer support, simplified procedures, training, and better digital access were most frequently endorsed.	Interviewees proposed application labs, documentation clinics, and local guidance structures.	Participants prioritized interventions that reduce avoidable friction in the application chain.

5. Discussion

5.1 From awareness to action: scholarship access as a conversion problem

The central analytical contribution of this study is the argument that scholarship access in Kakuma is best understood as a conversion problem. The data show that many participants occupied a space of partial visibility: they knew of scholarship organizations or opportunities but lacked the means to convert that awareness into successful application action. This finding extends Bellino and Kakuma Youth Research Group's (2018) argument that educational support in Kakuma often remains too abstract. In the present study, informational scarcity was not simply a matter of absent messages but of insufficiently actionable guidance.

This interpretation is best illuminated by the capability approach. A scholarship announcement is a resource, but only some applicants possess the conversion factors necessary to use it effectively. The findings suggest that documentation, procedural knowledge, technical skills, devices, data, and mentorship are part of the real opportunity set. Where they are missing, nominal opportunity remains formally present but substantively inaccessible.

5.2 Mentorship as a practical, not symbolic, support

Mentorship emerged as one of the most consequential findings in the study. It was the most frequently reported barrier when absent, and one of the most strongly endorsed interventions when proposed. This is theoretically and practically significant. Mentorship is often treated as an optional enhancement to scholarship programming,

yet the results suggest it functions more as core infrastructure. Participants linked guidance to essay preparation, interview confidence, interpretation of eligibility rules, and the avoidance of technical mistakes.

The finding aligns with broader literature showing that refugee students benefit from networked guidance and support systems that extend beyond formal admissions criteria (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Unangst & Crea, 2020). Importantly, the study does not claim that mentorship statistically causes scholarship success, because outcome data and inferential tests were not available. What it does show is that participants themselves consistently experienced mentorship as a meaningful difference-maker in application readiness.

5.3 Documentation and institutional gatekeeping

Documentation barriers were nearly as prominent as mentorship gaps, and the interviews clarify why. In scholarship discourse, selection is often framed as meritocratic. Yet the study suggests that in Kakuma many applicants are filtered out before evaluators can fairly compare merit. Identification documents, proof of status, academic records, and procedural completeness function as gatekeeping devices. This is consistent with scholarship on refugee inclusion that warns against interpreting formal equality of rules as substantive equality of access (Bellino & Dryden-Peterson, 2019).

The implication is not that institutions should abandon verification or standards. Rather, it is that equitable design requires recognizing asymmetries in applicants' starting conditions. Programmes that genuinely seek merit under displacement conditions must invest in the infrastructures that make merit legible. Documentation clinics, flexible document pathways, staged verification, and clear alternative evidentiary routes may therefore be more important than marginal changes in application wording.

5.4 Digital inequality and process burden

The results on digital barriers support a more precise understanding of the digital divide in camp contexts. The problem is not simply non-use of technology; it is burdensome digital process design under fragile conditions (Okuribido et al., 2025). Almost two in five respondents reported technical application difficulties, and more than half reported limited device or internet access. Interviews show that applicants were often required to manage file compression, combined uploads, portal navigation, and repeated submissions on unstable connectivity.

These findings resonate with work that cautions against technologically optimistic models of refugee higher education (O'Keeffe & Lovey, 2023). A digital application system may appear efficient from the provider side while externalizing hidden labour and failure risk onto applicants. In such settings, digital support is not ancillary. It is part of fairness.

5.5 Scarcity, meritocracy, and the moral burden of competition

Competition was reported by 72.0% of valid survey respondents, making it one of the dominant barriers in the study. This is analytically important because it reminds us that not all barriers are process defects. Some are structural consequences of too few opportunities relative to demand. In Kakuma, where education carries intense hopes for mobility and dignity, scarcity amplifies the moral burden of meritocratic narratives. Applicants may be told that excellence will be rewarded even when the opportunity structure is too narrow to honour that promise consistently.

Bellino (2021) argues that merit and mobility in Kakuma are experienced within a limited opportunity structure. The present findings reinforce that point at the scholarship-application level. Competitive pressure interacts with weak guidance and documentary fragility to create a system in which many capable applicants feel both individually responsible and structurally blocked.

This makes transparent communication about selection scarcity ethically important.

5.6 Implications for theory

The findings support a theoretical synthesis rather than a competition between frameworks. Human capital theory explains why scholarship exclusion matters: lost access to higher education constrains skill development, economic participation, and future productivity. Yet on its own, that framework cannot explain why talented individuals remain excluded despite formal opportunities. The capability approach fills that gap by directing attention to conversion conditions. In Kakuma, the decisive issue is not whether young people value higher education. It is whether institutions create conditions in which that value can be pursued with a reasonable chance of success.

For refugee higher education scholarship research, this suggests a useful shift. Instead of asking only how many scholarships exist, researchers should ask which conversion supports are necessary for fair access and how institutions can measure them.

6. Policy and Practice Implications

6.1 Scholarship information systems

Participants prioritized awareness creation above every other intervention. Institutions should therefore move from ad hoc announcement practices to scholarship information systems that are redundant, localized, and time-sensitive. In practice, this means combining SMS or WhatsApp alerts with community noticeboards, youth-led information sessions, school-based dissemination, and simple eligibility summaries that distinguish universal from scholarship-specific requirements. The goal is not more information in the abstract, but earlier and more actionable information.

6.2 Application laboratories and digital support

Because digital process burdens are a meaningful exclusion mechanism, scholarship-support actors should establish low-cost application laboratories equipped with devices, stable internet, scanning and printing capacity, and on-site assistance for file conversion, document compression, portal submission, and email communication. Such spaces could be scheduled around scholarship deadlines and embedded in existing education or youth centres.

6.3 Structured peer mentorship

The strong demand for peer mentoring suggests that support systems should be formalized rather than left to informal goodwill. Providers could recruit successful scholarship recipients or advanced applicants as trained peer mentors, offer short mentoring toolkits, and structure support around application cycles (Mukasa et al., 2025). Mentorship should include document preparation, essay development, mock interviews, timeline planning, and advice on handling rejection and reapplication.

6.4 Documentation support and fairer institutional design

Government agencies, humanitarian actors, and scholarship providers should collaborate on documentation support. Practical measures include pre-application documentation clinics, clear explanation of acceptable alternatives where formal IDs are delayed, and staged compliance systems that allow initial screening before final document verification. Scholarship providers should also review whether all application requirements are genuinely necessary or whether some impose disproportionate burdens on displaced applicants without improving selection quality.

6.5 Organizational caution in claims of fairness

Finally, providers should be cautious in equating clear communication with equitable access. The study shows that many participants understood criteria but still lacked the means to act on them. A

fair scholarship system in Kakuma is therefore one that couples transparent criteria with practical access supports.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the survey used purposive rather than probability sampling, so the findings are analytically informative but not statistically generalizable to all refugee youth in Kakuma. Second, the data are cross-sectional and largely self-reported. The study therefore identifies perceived barriers and plausible mechanisms, not verified causal effects. Third, two checklist items had item nonresponse, which is why their valid *n* differs from the overall survey total. Fourth, the study did not include linked administrative outcome data such as verified submission, shortlisting, or scholarship receipt for all respondents, preventing inferential testing of predictor-outcome relationships. Fifth, the qualitative sample was small but was used for explanatory depth rather than breadth.

These limitations nonetheless point constructively to future work. Subsequent studies should combine survey data with verified application outcomes, model the relative weight of documentation, mentorship, and digital access, and examine how gender, disability, nationality, and legal status shape scholarship opportunity in Kakuma and comparable refugee settings. Longitudinal work would also be valuable for assessing whether interventions such as peer mentoring or application laboratories measurably improve application completion, shortlisting, and award rates over time.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the barriers refugees face in accessing undergraduate scholarships in Kakuma, Kenya. The evidence shows that exclusion is produced not by one obstacle but by an accumulation of frictions: partial information, weak mentoring, missing documents,

digital burden, financial precarity, and intense competition for very limited opportunities. This study therefore shifts the analytical focus from isolated barriers to the broader ecology of scholarship access.

The findings carry a straightforward but important implication. Expanding scholarship opportunity requires more than announcing awards or refining eligibility criteria. It requires building the conversion infrastructure that allows refugee youth to act on opportunity in the first place. In Kakuma, that means documentation support, early and actionable information, digital application assistance, structured peer mentoring, and institutionally realistic application design. Without these supports, scholarship systems risk mistaking administrative legibility for merit and scarcity for fairness.

Used with appropriate caution, the study offers a grounded basis for improving scholarship access policy and practice in refugee settings. It also highlights a wider lesson for refugee higher education research: fairness should be evaluated not only by the number of opportunities available but by whether the conditions for competing for them are substantively equitable.

Conflict-of-Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. No author has any financial or personal relationship that could inappropriately influence or bias the work reported in this manuscript.

Data-Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions. Participants in this refugee research context provided informed consent for study-specific use only, with the explicit understanding that raw data would not be shared in a publicly accessible repository to protect against re-identification and unintended harm. Anonymized survey summaries and de-identified thematic excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable

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