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Connected learning: a refugee assessment

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Connected learning offers the opportunity to expand access to higher education for refugees, benefiting both individuals and communities.

Since 2013, non-governmental organisation Kepler and Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) have been providing a US-accredited undergraduate degree programme for refugees and Rwandan nationals. The first campus was opened in Kigali in 2013, followed in 2015 by a second campus in Kiziba refugee camp in western Rwanda. Students follow a 'blended' model that combines online learning from SNHU curricula with face-to-face instruction and academic support provided by Kepler.

For refugee students like us (who are SNHU graduates of the Kepler Kiziba programme), going to university is not just a pathway to hope and dignity; it can also have a positive impact for our communities. When someone gets a job, they support their families and others to be self-reliant. With current advances in technology there is a

great opportunity for humanitarian agencies to help expand access for refugees. Based on the Kepler/SNHU programme in Rwanda we offer the following recommendations:

Make higher education more inclusive:

Programmes should demonstrate strong commitment to ensuring access for women and vulnerable people from both refugee and host communities. For example, at the Kiziba campus, a women's leadership programme offering preparatory classes supports female applicants to improve their skills and encourages them to apply to the degree programme. Interventions like this and an equity-based approach to admissions have achieved a 50:50 student gender balance on both campuses. Connected learning programmes have the opportunity to be more inclusive than more traditional



Students on the Kepler Kiziba programme, Rwanda.

scholarship programmes: for example, only 31% of UNHCR DAFI scholarship recipients in Rwanda in 2017 were female.¹

Offer accredited degrees: Students who complete the Kepler/SNHU programme earn a fully US-accredited undergraduate degree. The US accreditation ensures the degree will be recognised in many countries and enables students to continue with further education. If programmes do not result in a degree, it is difficult for them to compete in both local and global job markets.

Consider employment outcomes: The programme focuses on skills for job readiness, in particular on the development of skills in using popular software and online professional tools. In the Kiziba programme, students are required to complete internships – either with companies in Rwanda or for international companies via remote working – in order to gain professional skills and experience. They thereby also gain specific professional competencies relating to communication, leadership and teamwork. A careers department team at Kepler builds relationships with local employers and helps

students to find and apply for vacancies. As a result, 90% of students find full-time employment within six months of graduation. Of course, refugee employment is more feasible in countries like Rwanda – where refugees have freedom of movement and the right to work in the formal sector – than in others. However, programmes in host countries where refugees do not have these rights should enable students to develop skills for self-employment (including online or remote-based employment) or that will enable them to find work in their countries of origin.

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www.kepler.org/kepler-kiziba
<https://gem.snhu.edu/>

1. UNHCR's DAFI programme is one of two scholarship programmes in Rwanda specifically for refugees. See UNHCR (2018) The Other One Per Cent – Refugee Students in Higher Education: DAFI Annual Report 2017
bit.ly/DAFI-AnnualReport-2017