

Guidelines for refugee learning centres

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The community school model

Expanding access to education for refugee children and youth in Malaysia is crucial to enabling refugees to contribute to host communities; steering them away from negative coping mechanisms and exploitation; preparing them for solutions in third countries and access to decent work opportunities in Malaysia; and empowering them to rebuild their home countries when they are ready to return, thereby contributing to sustainable solutions and mitigating repeated refugee outflows.

In Malaysia, however, refugee and asylum-seeker children are not permitted to enrol in government schools. The only way they can access education is through refugee learning centres (also known as “alternative learning centres”) established by refugee communities, NGOs, and faith-based organizations.

To ensure that refugee children of all backgrounds have equal access, UNHCR recommends that refugee learning centres take a community-based approach in which refugees are consulted on and take ownership of the operation of learning centres. Refugee learning centres should provide safe spaces for children to improve their learning and develop personal capacity, while also helping build stronger refugee families and communities.

UNHCR support

UNHCR is able to provide limited financial support to refugee learning centres based on availability of funding, but primarily supports learning centres by issuing letters of appreciation, attesting that centres are serving persons of concern to UNHCR and contributing to the protection and education of refugee children.

Such letters are not issued automatically and remain fully at the discretion of UNHCR. While meeting the minimum technical requirements is important, the decision to issue any letter is also based on UNHCR’s overall assessment of the learning centre’s safeguarding practices, institutional relationship with UNHCR, demonstrated accountability, and any concerns related to protection or risk.

UNHCR retains the right to withhold or withdraw letters at any time if it determines that a centre no longer aligns with these principles or if serious concerns arise. Learning centres are encouraged to maintain transparent communication and strong safeguarding measures in order to build mutual trust and remain eligible for recognition.

Letters are issued one-time off to learning centres that meet the following minimum criteria:

- **Student enrolment:** To ensure learning centres serve persons of concern to UNHCR and maximize resources, learning centres must enrol at least 25 students, unless they are serving refugee communities in remote locations. At least half of the total students enrolled must be persons of concern to UNHCR (i.e., refugees, asylum-seekers, or stateless persons). Learning centres must accept children of concern to UNHCR regardless of gender, religion, nationality, or ethnicity.
- **Pupil-teacher ratio:** To foster attentive and safe learning environments, learning centres must maintain a pupil to teacher ratio no greater than 30:1.
- **Data submission:** Learning centres must submit student enrolment and teacher data to UNHCR once a year by the stipulated deadline each year.
- **Attendance:** Learning centres must maintain daily records of student and teacher attendance, and have a mechanism in place to address absences, including consultation with parents and relevant human resources procedures for teachers.
- **Curriculum:** Learning centres must have a well-defined curriculum, clear learning objectives, and structured assessment system for entry and academic progression.
- **Physical premises:** Learning centres must be located in a safe and secure area, with basic facilities and infrastructure, including sanitation and hygiene facilities and fire prevention and safety equipment, such as a working fire extinguisher and first aid kit. To maximize access, learning centres should not be located in close proximity to one another.
- **Child protection:** Learning centres must adopt a code of conduct signed by all teachers and staff, and must also work with UNHCR to adopt a child safeguarding policy.
- **Parents committee:** As part of a community-based approach, the learning centre must have a parents committee comprising at least three parents that meets at least twice a year. The committee can be expanded to include other community members, but must be separate from any community- or faith-based organization committee that manages the learning centre.
- **Sustainability:** To ensure continuity, learning centres must demonstrate the ability to sustain operational costs (e.g., rent, utilities, staff salaries) for a period of at least one year, and keep income and expense accounts in good order.

- **Introductory assessment:** Learning centres not already recognized by UNHCR must submit data, through KOBO form, on the learning centre, its students, and its teachers to be issued a letter. UNHCR will acknowledge receipt of the completed forms within one month, and within three months will arrange an introductory visit to assess the learning centre premises and meet the head teacher and relevant staff. If all requirements are met, including data submission, UNHCR will issue a letter within one month of the introductory visit.

UNHCR remains steadfast in its commitment to the protection of all refugees, regardless of whether a learning centre has received a letter of appreciation. Refugees enrolled in any centre remain entitled to protection assistance from UNHCR. Centres are encouraged to refer any refugee facing risk, arrest, or detention to UNHCR's team for intervention as appropriate.

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