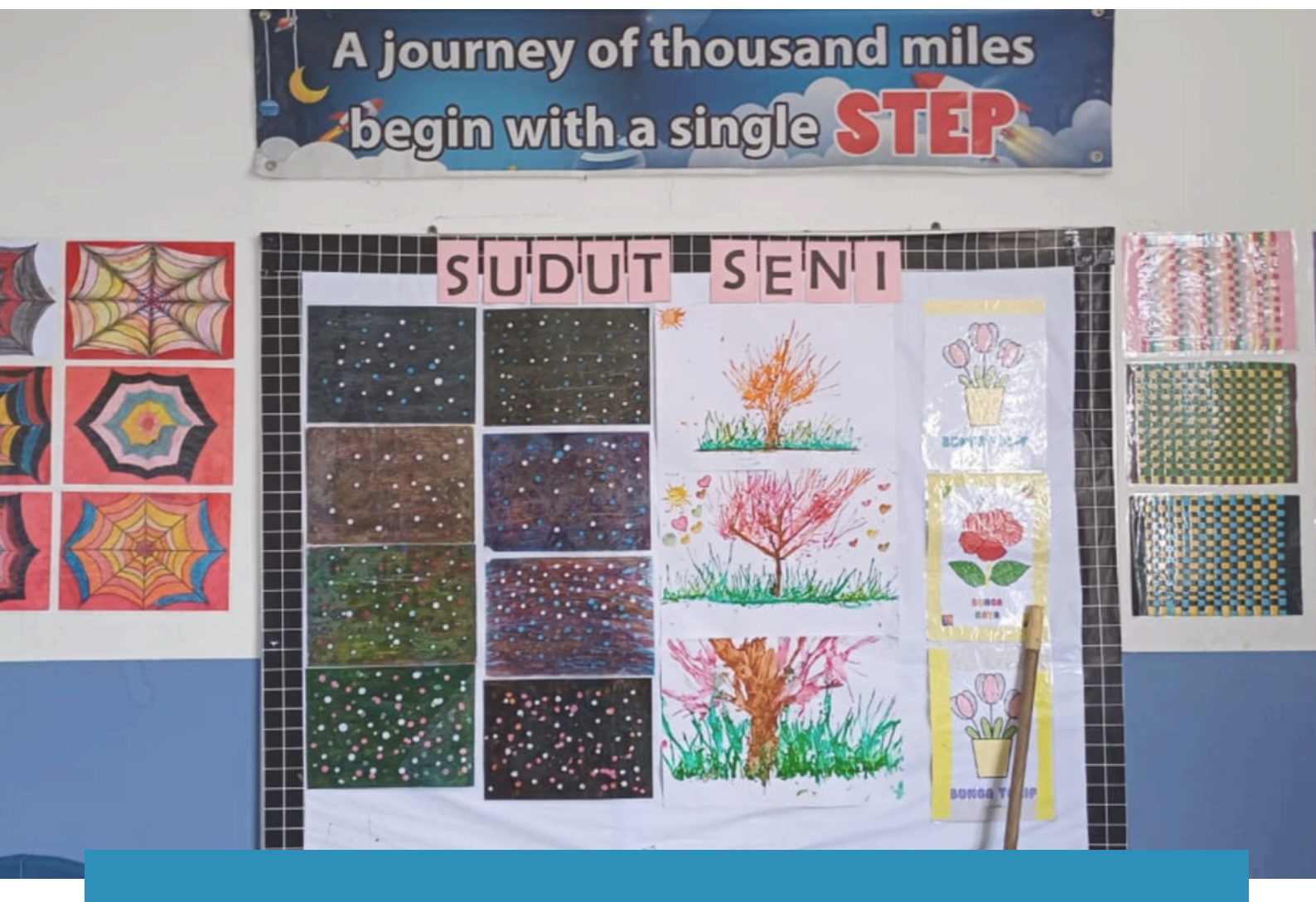




A Needs Assessment Study of Alternative Learning Centres in Peninsular Malaysia

A Report for Fugee Org
20 August 2025

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and Prema Devaraj

Cover image: Photo of Sudut Seni (Art Corner) taken at the premises of an alternative
learning centre that was interviewed

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Executive Summary

1. This report presents a summary of the core findings, analysis and recommendations of a needs assessment study commissioned by Fugee Org to understand the scope, challenges, and priorities surrounding the provision of education for children of refugees and asylum seekers in Peninsular Malaysia. The study aimed to investigate the lived realities, structural and other limitations, and educational aspirations across a diverse sample of alternative learning centres (ALCs), and identify critical gaps in, among others, infrastructure, governance, resources, and pedagogical practice.
2. Drawing from interviews with 31 ALCs across all four regions in the peninsula and 12 key informants with extensive experience in the refugee education sector, as well as a review of relevant literature, this report highlights significant systemic issues faced by these education providers. It proposes pragmatic, field-informed interventions aimed at improving the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of educational provision for refugee and asylum-seeking communities.

Legal and Policy Context

3. Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Refugees and asylum seekers are not legally recognised by the Malaysian Government — they have no legal or administrative status, and lead a highly precarious existence with very little or no access to protection under the law. They have no legal right to work, and their children have no access to formal education in the Malaysian national school system.
4. This situation leaves refugee and asylum-seeking families wholly dependent on informal, non-state educational institutions, referred to in this report as ALCs, for their children's learning. Most of these centres operate with extremely limited support, and vary considerably in terms of capacity, quality, and sustainability. They frequently struggle with a chronic lack of financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and facilities, a shortage of qualified teachers, and insufficient educational equipment and materials — all of which hinder the delivery of quality education.
5. There is no overall coordinating body or standardisation of curriculum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) — now known as the UN Refugee Agency — in Malaysia has made efforts to support this ecosystem by, for example, establishing minimum criteria for an ALC to be recognised. It has been able to provide limited financial assistance, occasional training opportunities, and other targeted initiatives to some ALCs over the years. However, the scope and consistency of this support have largely depended on UNHCR Malaysia's budget and priorities.

Demographics and Scope of Exclusion

6. This needs assessment study is grounded in the reality that Malaysia is home to some 200,260 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR Malaysia at the end of May 2025, with close to 30 per cent (approximately 59,250 individuals) of them being under the age of 18. There is also an unknown number awaiting registration. Many of the children have been born in Malaysia, or arrived at a young age, and will remain here for the discernible future — displaced, excluded from formal education, and growing up in circumstances that dramatically constrain their ability to reach their full potential.
7. UNHCR Malaysia’s enrolment data as of March 2025 indicates that only about 35 per cent of school-age refugee and asylum-seeking children it has registered are currently enrolled in ALCs. This has been the situation consistently for at least the past two decades, resulting in widespread educational exclusion that has denied countless children the fundamental right to learn and develop in safe, supportive educational environments.
8. The consequences of this exclusion are profound and long-lasting, and have dire implications for individual children, the broader refugee and asylum-seeking community, and also for Malaysia. They range from entrenched poverty, disempowerment, marginalisation and vulnerability to exploitation, to increased risks of poor mental health, child labour, early marriage, social dependency, human trafficking, and potential radicalisation. The situation calls for urgent, coordinated, and inclusive strategies to expand access to quality learning opportunities for all refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Methodology of the Needs Assessment Study

9. This study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including desk research, in-depth interviews, and stakeholder consultations.
10. Interviews were conducted with a geographically and operationally diverse sample of 31 ALCs, and with 12 key informants. The interviews with ALCs were designed to surface both statistical data and experiential insights into the infrastructure, classroom resources, student demographics, staffing, teacher training and turnover, choice of curricula, challenges faced, and priorities and aspirations of each centre. Questions posed to the key informants were tailored to each person’s expertise, and sought insights into their experiences, and perspectives on immediate and long-term improvements.

Key Findings

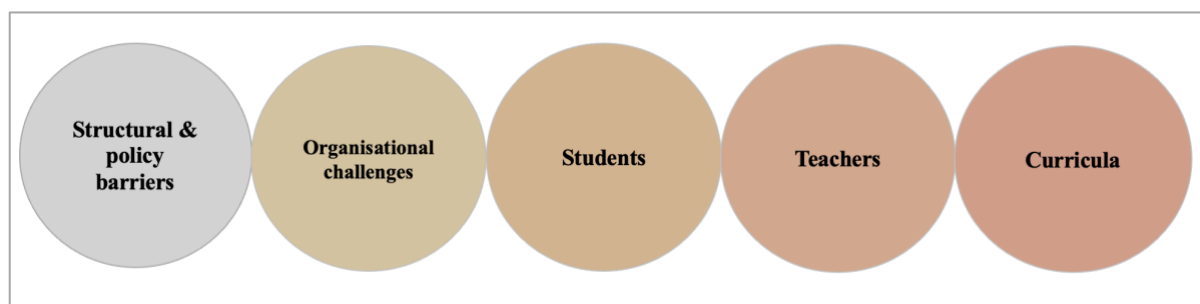


Figure 1: Areas covered under key findings

A. Structural and policy barriers

11. Gaps in laws, policies, and support structures: Reports over the years have highlighted the urgent need for inclusive laws, policies, and funding mechanisms to support education for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Without meaningful reforms — especially those within the Malaysian Government’s remit — only about 35 per cent of these children will continue to access any form of education.
12. Vulnerability due to lack of formal protection: The absence of legal or administrative status places refugee and asylum-seeking children, their parents, and the ALCs themselves at ongoing risk of targeted enforcement actions by the authorities. Recognition as an ALC by UNHCR Malaysia provides some degree of legitimacy and a sense of protection, but still does not guarantee safety. ALCs that remain unrecognised by UNHCR Malaysia may face additional challenges — including reduced trust by parents, limited interest by potential donors, and greater vulnerability to scrutiny or harassment by authorities.
13. Individual vulnerability to arrest and detention, including for children, discourages school attendance, due to fear. When children are detained — as does occur — there are immediate consequences on any possibility of an education.

B. Organisational challenges

14. Despite their commitment and critical role, many ALCs face multiple and severe challenges:
 - a. Challenges relating to leadership capacity and limited governance structures: Many ALCs are led by individuals who may have little or no exposure to education systems or organisational management, and thus may not have the requisite skills. These centres often operate with limited institutional support. The lack of accessible guidance or practical support systems makes effective administration and long-term sustainability especially difficult;

- b. Operational isolation: Most ALCs work in isolation, without meaningful connections to other centres or support networks, partly due to the overwhelming demands of daily administration; and
- c. Inadequate and/or unstable funding: chronic financial insecurity is one of the most pressing and persistent challenges faced by the majority of ALCs. This severely undermines their ability to deliver consistent, quality education; retain qualified teachers; and maintain safe and well-resourced learning environments.

C. Students

- 15. The slow pace of growth in the number of ALCs has not kept up with demand, thus limiting access to education at the primary level, and particularly at the secondary level.
- 16. Students vary widely in age, due to disrupted, traumatic life experiences and delayed access to education. Significant learning gaps can make age-appropriate placement and curricular alignment extremely difficult. Accelerated programmes offered by some ALCs to help these students to complete their education have proven beneficial.
- 17. Gender-based obstacles to schooling, including early marriage, are now less of a barrier to girls' education — likely the result of years of community-based actions by a range of actors, not least those running the ALCs.
- 18. Some students leave school after primary education due to financial pressures: boys mainly to work, and girls to take on domestic roles, sometimes in anticipation of marriage. Overall, attendance rates of those in school remain strong and the dropout rate is low, largely due to sustained efforts to raise parental awareness on the importance of education, and create engaging learning environments. Some challenges — like schooling and transport costs, and safety concerns — continue to hinder attendance for some students.

D. Teachers

- 19. Teachers form the backbone of the ALC system, yet they are often underqualified, underpaid, and overworked, partly as a result of chronic funding constraints. Many are recruited from within the refugee and asylum-seeking communities themselves, though several of them have had limited or no access to formal teacher training.

20. Training is often scarce, fragmented, irregular, poorly monitored, and lack follow-up, raising concerns about the overall effectiveness. Nevertheless, there remains a demand for training in several areas, including:
 - a. Classroom management and pedagogical techniques;
 - b. Social and emotional learning;
 - c. Strategies for working with children who may have experienced trauma; and
 - d. Approaches for engaging diverse learners and students with special educational needs.
21. In addition, there was some interest in training on self-care and mental well-being for teachers, and digital education. While not cited as top priorities, these areas remain important and merit further attention.
22. Key barriers to training attendance and effectiveness included: lack of time; inconvenient scheduling; limited capacity to absorb training; financial constraints; travel distance; lack of information about opportunities; logistical challenges; and lack of follow-up.
23. Given the limitations of current training opportunities, the development of a more systematic pathway towards professional teaching qualifications — particularly for teachers who are refugees or asylum seekers — may offer a more effective and sustainable way forward. Existing initiatives, including the approaches and experiences of organisations and institutions that are already active in providing pathways for teacher professional development, provide a solid foundation to build upon.

E. Curricula

24. There is wide variation in primary curricula, subjects, and languages across ALCs, largely due to limited funding, reliance on donated or improvised materials, and constraints in what teachers can prepare and deliver. This results in an inconsistent quality of education, and the lack of standardised monitoring or testing. One consequence is that the transition of students from primary to secondary education can become difficult, as ALCs have no common pathway or examination to confirm the students' educational standard.
25. Compared to primary ALCs, secondary ALCs are more likely to adopt formal curricula like the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) or the General Education Development (GED) pathways. However, not many students are able to attain either of these qualifications.
26. There is growing interest in non-academic pathways, including vocational training and skills development.

27. Awareness of the limited tertiary education options available is uneven among ALCs, highlighting the need for clearer guidance, potentially through a toolkit or a centralised shared resource.
28. There is increasing recognition that current ALC curricula may not adequately reflect the lived realities, cultural backgrounds, and future prospects of children of refugees and asylum seekers. This has prompted ongoing initiatives to review existing curriculum choices and explore the development of more appropriate alternatives, including the integration of digital education modules. There is therefore plenty of potential to support and help develop these initiatives.

Hopes and dreams

29. The qualitative insights from the interviews offer a sobering yet inspiring portrait of the education landscape for refugees and asylum seekers. ALC leaders shared stories of resourcefulness and resilience, as well as anxiety, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Commonly cited priorities and aspirations include:
 - a. stabilising funding streams;
 - b. upgrading classroom infrastructure and equipment;
 - c. improving educational resources and learning tools;
 - d. recruiting more qualified teachers;
 - e. having access to a standardised, suitable curriculum;
 - f. receiving training;
 - g. providing recreational and sports opportunities;
 - h. receiving recognition by UNHCR Malaysia;
 - i. seeing students gain access to pathways into higher education; and
 - j. seeing students being integrated into national schools.
30. Several ALCs also expressed a desire for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration with other centres, indicating the need for networked structures that promote mutual support. At the same time, they noted the barriers to participation in such efforts — chiefly, a lack of time, funding, and technical guidance.

Key Recommendations

31. There are six recommendations for Fugee Org, which focus on four principal areas.

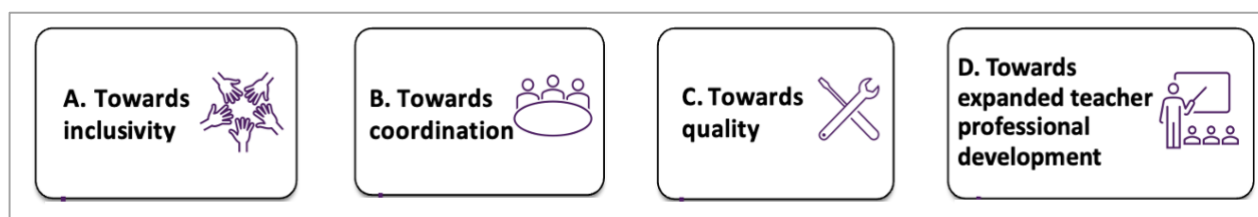


Figure 2: Focus areas in the recommendations

A. Towards inclusivity

Recommendation 1: Fugee Org should continue any advocacy that encourages the Malaysian Government to provide refugees and asylum seekers with legal status and an administrative framework.

Recommendation 2: Fugee Org should continue any advocacy that encourages the Malaysian Government to include the education of refugee and asylum-seeking children in the national education system.

32. These first two recommendations address fundamental policy changes that must be adopted if there is to be any significant improvement in inclusivity. Without such reforms, refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia will continue to face substantial barriers to accessing education, with the likely outcome being that the majority receive no schooling at all. This has been the situation for several years.
33. Continued advocacy to lobby for these changes remains absolutely vital and it is recommended Fugee Org continue to take every opportunity to do so.

Recommendation 3: Fugee Org should continue to encourage UNHCR Malaysia to expedite the registration process.

34. The interviews highlighted the situation where children and their families remain without any form of protection while awaiting the completion of the registration process by UNHCR. The fact that this process can take years leaves them in a prolonged state of heightened vulnerability, with significant implications for their daily lives — including their ability to access education.

B. Towards coordination

Recommendation 4: Fugee Org to consider the establishment of a Malaysian Refugee Education Council (MREC) or equivalent.

35. If the Malaysian Government maintains its reluctance to include children of refugees and asylum seekers in the national education system, then serious consideration must be given to the establishment of an interim overall coordinating body. This body should bring together all relevant stakeholders, including from government, corporations, UN agencies and those involved in provision of education for such children.
36. There have been similar ideas and initiatives in the past, including some facilitated by UNHCR or suggested by commentators. However, there is currently a vacuum which it would be positive to fill. Fugee Org might consider taking up a lead role in exploring this.

C. Towards quality

Recommendation 5: Fugee Org is encouraged to develop and disseminate a toolkit or equivalent resource to support existing and new ALCs.

37. This report has reaffirmed that many centres face a range of major challenges. This recommendation supports the idea of Fugee Org that the production of a toolkit covering specific topics would benefit the upgrading of the quality of education presently being offered to the children of refugees and asylum seekers.
38. A toolkit or equivalent resource made accessible to all would offer meaningful support to these ALCs, and could also prove invaluable to those considering setting up new ALCs.
39. Based on the feedback and requests shared by interviewees during this needs assessment study, it is proposed that the toolkit could focus on five areas:

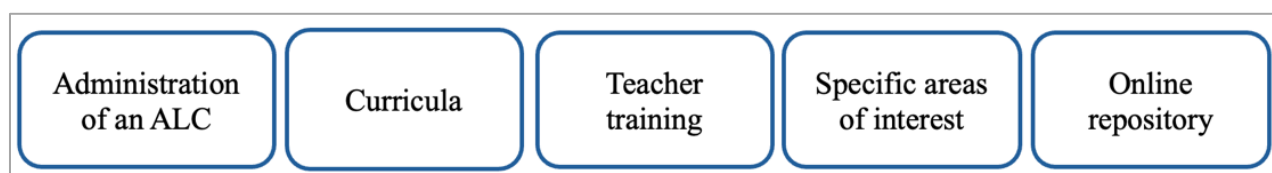


Figure 3: Proposed focus areas for the toolkit

40. Firstly, **administration of an ALC**: Tools that provide guidance on a range of management skills and operational topics, including, but not limited to:

**Administration
of an ALC**

- a. Recruiting and managing staff and teachers
 - b. Dealing with authorities
 - c. Fundraising
 - d. Child protection and safeguarding
 - e. Developing new initiatives such as setting up science labs, and digital classrooms or computer labs
 - f. Working with parents and the community
 - g. Providing orientation and background information for teachers and volunteers who are not from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds
 - h. Building networks and accessing resources and support services, such as a regularly updated online directory of potential funders, donors, and training providers; and other relevant contacts
-

41. There is also potential to expand this compilation of information into a more comprehensive and structured guide specifically aimed at those starting new ALCs. Such a guide can include a list of do's and don'ts for beginners.

42. Secondly, **curricula**: There is clearly considerable scope to review curricula and offer informed recommendations to both established and newer ALCs on what could, or should, be adopted, including the following areas highlighted by the interviewees:

Curricula

- a. Understanding options and exploring resources
 - b. Equipping teachers for practical classroom delivery
 - c. Incorporating digital learning
 - d. Exploring vocational options
-

43. In considering the issue of curricula, it is important to acknowledge that there are others actively and significantly engaged in this area. If Fugee Org is interested in pursuing this topic, a first step would be to identify who is doing what on curricula development, and to identify where Fugee Org could most effectively support, complement, or expand on what is already being done.
44. Thirdly, **teacher training**: There is significant potential for Fugee Org to identify and consolidate best-practice training modules on particular topics. These could be made available as online resources, delivered through in-person sessions, or offered in a hybrid format. These topics were of particular interest to the interviewees:

Teacher training	a. Techniques for effective classroom management
	b. Tools for developing lesson plans
	c. Strategies for engaging classroom activities and effective lesson delivery
	d. Approaches to promoting interactive learning.

45. Fourthly, **specific areas of interest**: Interviewees highlighted certain specific topics in which ALCs were interested but which they would be unable to develop on their own, such as:

Specific areas of interest	a. Social and emotional learning
	b. Special educational needs and diverse learning
	c. Teacher well-being and self-care

46. Again, others have been active in developing modules on these topics, so Fugee Org's task would be to identify if there is a good module or choice of modules already available, work towards establishing a 'best practice' resource, and then help make this accessible to as many ALCs as possible.
47. Lastly, **an online repository of information and resources**: One key component of a proposed toolkit could be the development of an online repository that compiles relevant

and current information and resources, accessible not only to teachers and administrators, but also to students. The repository could include the following:

Online repository of information and resources

- a. A centralised collection of online information and resources including teaching materials, best practices, policy updates, and support networks
-
- b. A set of online resources tailored specifically for students, offering appropriate and relevant guidance on a variety of practical topics, such as:
 - Resources on academic or career advancement
 - Guidance on tertiary education
 - Information on vocational education opportunities
-

48. To maximise the effectiveness and impact of a proposed toolkit (or equivalent resource), the following considerations should guide its design and dissemination:

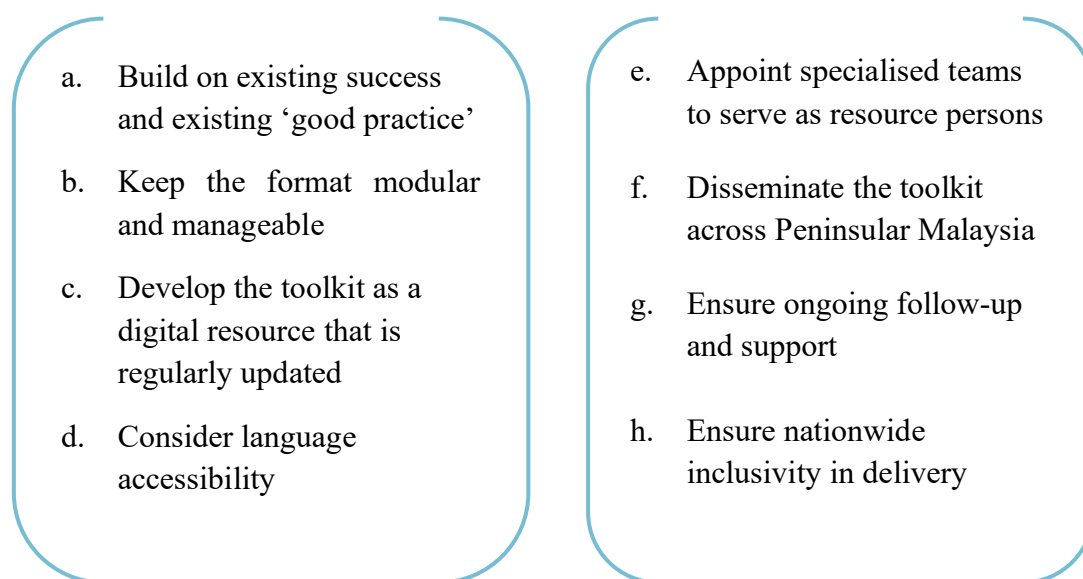


Figure 4: Key considerations for toolkit design and dissemination

D. Towards expanded teacher professional development

Recommendation 6: Fugee Org is encouraged to take the lead on the development of a more systematic and accessible pathway (or multiple pathways) for teacher professional development.

49. This recommendation focuses on supporting the development of a longer-term, systematic and accessible pathway (or multiple pathways) for existing teachers or would-be teachers to attain recognised professional teaching qualifications.
50. Fugee Org's role would be to map in greater detail the current approaches and experiences of the various organisations and institutions already active in providing pathways for teacher professional development. Based on the findings, Fugee Org could then consider consolidating these pathways as appropriate, or extending them, and then to help promote existing opportunities to those ALCs that may benefit from them.

Conclusion

51. Taken together, the six recommendations represent a response to the persistent, systemic, and complex challenges facing refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia in accessing quality education, and also those confronting ALCs in delivering such education to these children.
52. Overall, Fugee Org is well-positioned to take a leadership role in initiating and shaping practical solutions, and advancing targeted, context-driven interventions and support mechanisms. Such efforts could serve as an important catalyst for broader systemic improvements in education for children of refugees and asylum seekers.

Part 1

Introduction

1. Background

- 1.1. This report was commissioned by Fugee Org in recognition of the extensive, complex, and persistent challenges confronting refugees and asylum seekers in accessing quality education in Malaysia. These multifaceted barriers are deeply rooted in the legal and policy framework of the country, where refugees and asylum seekers lack legal status and recognition. One consequence is that refugee and asylum-seeking children are denied access to formal public education (Joseph, 2023). As a result, these children are excluded from the national school system, and their families must generally rely on informal, community-based Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs)¹ for their children's education.
- 1.2. The absence of legal status also exposes refugee and asylum seekers to a host of additional barriers. From a socioeconomic standpoint, poverty or severe financial instability often forces the families to prioritise immediate survival needs over education (Lama Al Rihani Dit Tallaj, 2024). This can result in an inability to afford school fees and other education-related expenses, irregular school attendance, children dropping out to take up informal work or household or caregiving responsibilities to support their families.
- 1.3. Other challenges include frequent disruptions to formal schooling due to displacement, leading to significant learning gaps and difficulties in maintaining academic continuity; linguistic hurdles; limited opportunities to pursue recognised educational qualifications; emotional and psychological impact of trauma; difficulty in social integration; and experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation.
- 1.4. Furthermore, ALCs often operate with extremely limited support, and under highly variable conditions in terms of resources, governance, and pedagogical quality. They frequently struggle with a chronic lack of financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and facilities, a shortage of qualified teachers, and insufficient educational equipment and materials, all of which hinder the delivery of quality education (Sinar Daily, 2024).
- 1.5. Fugee Org, a longstanding advocate for education for refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, has been actively exploring initiatives to enhance educational access and outcomes for these learners. Against this backdrop of complex challenges, a needs assessment study was identified as a critical first step in understanding the specific gaps and needs within the education ecosystem for refugees and asylum seekers. The assessment also explores whether, and how, Fugee Org might better support the sector, including the possible development of a tailored teaching and learning toolkit designed to improve classroom practices, learning outcomes, and institutional sustainability across diverse ALCs.

¹ This report uses the term 'Alternative Learning Centres' (ALC) to refer to learning centres where the majority of children are refugees or asylum seekers, irrespective of whether the centre is registered with the Government.

- 1.6. For this purpose, a project team was appointed, comprising five persons: James Lochhead, Tashia Peterson, tan beng hui, Chin Oy Sim, and Prema Devaraj. The objectives of the needs assessment study were to:
 - a. identify critical gaps in infrastructure, governance, and educational resources across a sample of 30 ALCs in Peninsular Malaysia; and
 - b. provide actionable recommendations for consideration in relation to the potential development of a teaching and learning toolkit based on the unique needs and challenges identified.
- 1.7. The project began in December 2024 with the development of data assessment tools and desk research, and concluded in August 2025 with the presentation of the findings to Fugee Org and various stakeholders, and the finalisation of the findings and recommendations.

2. Methodology

A. Introduction

- 2.1. The needs assessment study employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the scope and complexity of the educational challenges confronting refugee and asylum-seeking children in Peninsular Malaysia.
- 2.2. The findings are derived from primary data collected through in-depth interviews conducted either online or in person, analysed in conjunction with secondary data and information obtained through a review of relevant literature.
- 2.3. In addition to ALCs, interviews were also conducted with key individuals with experience and/or expertise in this sector to gain broader insights into the array of systemic challenges affecting the provision of education for these children in Peninsular Malaysia.
- 2.4. All the interviews took place from 27 February to 23 April 2025.

B. Review of secondary data

- 2.5. The project team consulted a range of documents and publications addressing the education of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia and elsewhere. Many of the issues identified in this report echo concerns documented over the past two (or more) decades, indicating enduring and systemic challenges.
- 2.6. Reports produced by United Nations agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) — now known as the UN Refugee Agency — and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) give insight into both the lived experiences of providers of education for refugee and asylum-seeking children as well as the learners themselves, and also propose strategies to address some of the key educational challenges. The 2019 UNHCR document *Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion* has been influential in guiding UNHCR initiatives, particularly in relation to targets for secondary and tertiary education. The UNICEF

document Mapping Alternative Learning Approaches, Programmes and Stakeholders in Malaysia published in 2015 is noteworthy in that it shows how many of the challenges facing education for refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia remain largely unresolved.

2.7. A number of other reports and articles that were consulted highlighted the situation and challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers generally in Malaysia as well as specifically with regard to education.

2.8. The documents and publications consulted are listed in the bibliography.

C. Interviews with ALCs

2.9. ALCs were selected to be interviewed based on the following criteria:

- a. Inclusion of ALCs that are representative of the diverse range of ALCs, especially variations in:
 - i. the location, with the aim of reflecting the overall geographic distribution of the populations of refugees and asylum seekers across Peninsular Malaysia;
 - ii. the type of organisation operating the ALC, e.g. whether the ALC is refugee-run or non-refugee-run;
 - iii. the level of education offered, i.e. primary, secondary, or both;
 - iv. the number of students; and
 - v. the ethnicities or nationalities of the students; and
- b. Inclusion of ALCs that are not (or not yet) recognised by the UNHCR Malaysia Education Unit.

2.10. Provision of pre-school education was excluded from the scope of this needs assessment study. The type of curriculum — while a critical aspect of education — was not applied as a selection criterion for interviewees due to the wide variation in curricula used across the ALCs.

2.11. ALCs were mainly selected from lists provided by the UNHCR Malaysia Education Unit, supplemented by some contacts known personally to the project team (especially for the unrecognised ALCs). Initially, 30 recognised and three unrecognised ALCs were invited to participate. As several ALCs either did not respond, or declined to be interviewed, an additional 12 ALCs were approached. Of the 45 ALCs contacted, 11 (24 per cent) did not respond. Three ALCs (7 per cent) declined for various reasons: one no longer had refugee or asylum-seeking students and was therefore interviewed as a key informant instead, another was unable to participate, and a third declined as a matter of policy.

2.12. For the eight ALCs that operate out of multiple locations (all within the same state), the interview answers were collated based on the experience of one ‘branch’, typically at the main location.

2.13. The following is an overview of the 31 ALCs interviewed based on the selection criteria set out above.

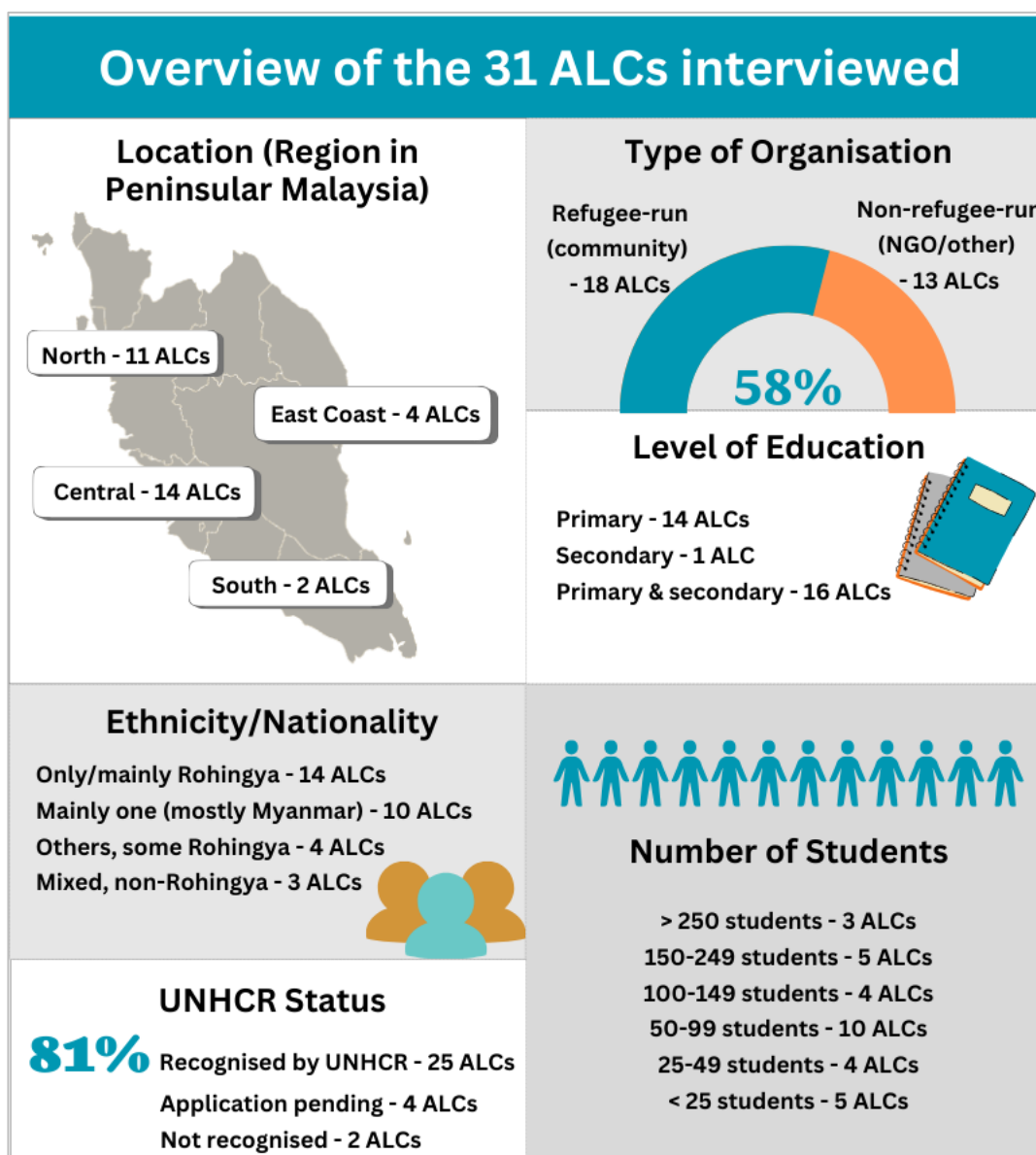


Figure 1: Overview of 31 ALCs interviewed based on selection criteria

- 2.14. Further details on the profile of the ALCs interviewed are provided in Part 4. A full list of ALCs interviewed is provided in Appendix A, with pseudonyms used to protect anonymity.
- 2.15. The majority of the interviews (25 ALCs, or 81 per cent) were conducted online, while six were held in person (19 per cent). Each interview lasted between one hour and one-and-a-half hours. Some interviews required more time to complete because they involved multiple interviewees and/or when language differences made communication slower.
- 2.16. All interviews were conducted in either English or Bahasa Malaysia, or a mix of both, depending on the preference and fluency of the interviewees.

- 2.17. The interview questions were designed to capture quantitative data on current provision of schooling, and qualitative insights into the experiences of the ALC, including their priorities and aspirations for the future. The questions served as a structured guide for the in-depth interviews. The full set of interview questions is provided in Appendix C.
- 2.18. Questions relating to existing provision centred on the type of organisation, physical infrastructure, classroom resources, profile of the students and attendance patterns, profile of the teachers, teacher training and turnover, choice of curriculum, and challenges associated with these aspects.
- 2.19. Participants were also invited to reflect on aspects of their ALC that they felt were working well. Questions relating to hopes and dreams were open-ended, and included issues such as finance and fundraising, curriculum development, digital learning, learners with special needs, social and emotional learning, and school management. Input was sought on the proposed teaching and learning toolkit.

D. Interviews with key informants

- 2.20. To supplement and complement the interviews with the 31 ALCs, 12 key informants were identified for their significant experience and expertise in education for refugees and asylum seekers in Peninsular Malaysia — either broadly or in relation to specific aspects. Their contributions were invaluable, offering critical reflections on the challenges faced, and potential strategies for improving the provision of education for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia. The interview questions posed varied depending on each informant's background and area of expertise, but were designed to elicit salient insights into their experiences and, in particular, their perspectives on what could be improved, both in the immediate future and the long term. A full list of these key informants is provided in Appendix B, with pseudonyms used to protect anonymity.

E. Stakeholder feedback on recommendations

- 2.21. After the project team completed a preliminary draft report, all interview participants were invited to attend a stakeholder feedback session. These sessions provided an opportunity for the interviewees to share their thoughts, raise additional points, and help refine and improve the draft recommendations.
- 2.22. Two online sessions were held, on 5 July and 7 July 2025. These were attended by a total of 30 participants, comprising representatives from 20 of the ALCs interviewed, and seven key informants. There was a lively discussion at both sessions, and the points raised were taken into consideration for the final revisions to this report.

3. Limitations

- 3.1. It is appreciated that the 31 ALCs interviewed could not be fully representative of all the ALCs in Malaysia. An attempt was however made to try and reflect their distribution, range and variety. Some of the limitations are that the interviews focused solely on ALCs in Peninsular Malaysia, and only on primary and secondary levels. While it is acknowledged that kindergarten is a critical start to any child's educational journey, there was a concern that including it for a study involving 30 ALCs might

dilute the data too much across the levels of education. It was therefore decided to focus on primary and secondary levels. Time constraints meant that most interviews were conducted online rather than in person, limiting opportunities for direct observation of learning environments.

- 3.2. Nevertheless, the 31 ALCs offer valuable first-hand insights, and serve as a window into the lived realities, challenges, and successes experienced by the education providers, and their priorities and aspirations.
- 3.3. It should also be noted that the actual number of ALCs operating in Malaysia is not known. Many centres may not be recognised — and thus are not monitored — by UNHCR. As such, the overall landscape is likely much larger and more diverse. These unrecognised ALCs may face even greater challenges in terms of quality, resources, and sustainability.

4. Organisation of the report

- 4.1. This report is structured to first provide some background information on the context relating to refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, and the current landscape of educational provision for their children. Subsequently, central issues and key takeaways are identified, analysis of the detailed findings derived from the interviews with 31 ALCs (provided in Appendix D) and 12 key informants, the report identifies central issues and key takeaways. These form the basis for the report's final recommendations.
- 4.2. The report is organised as follows:

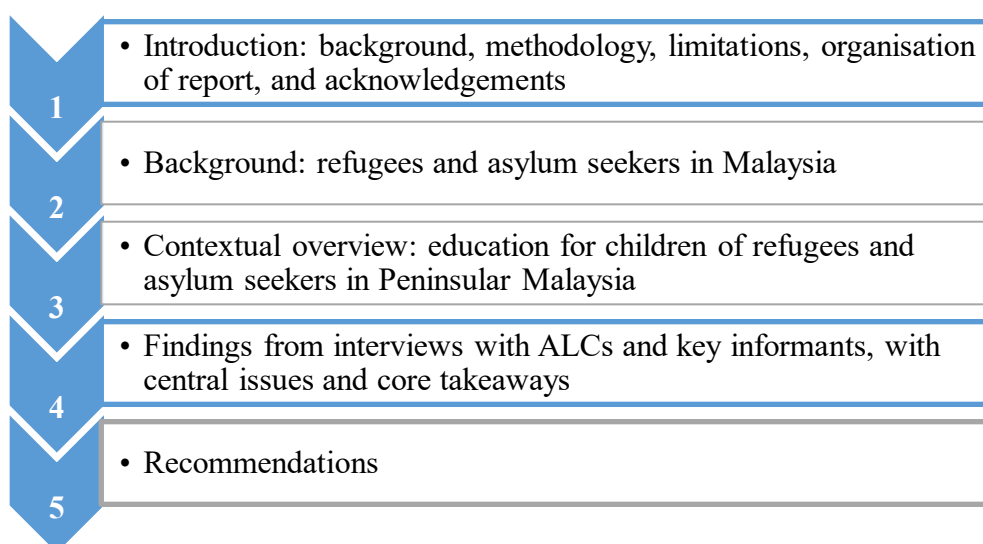


Figure 2: Structure of the report

5. Acknowledgements

- 5.1. This report is built on the contributions of numerous individuals and organisations, and we are deeply indebted to everyone who supported this project.
- 5.2. Our sincere gratitude goes to representatives of the ALCs whom we interviewed, who were immensely generous in sharing their time, insights, and experiences. We also extend our appreciation to the key informants, who similarly contributed their perspectives and expertise unstintingly, and with such thoughtfulness. We would like to express particular thanks to Fairuz Alia Jamaluddin from UNHCR's Policy & Advocacy (Education) Department, for her assistance and encouragement. We also thank all those who contributed behind the scenes, or whom we may have unintentionally neglected to mention.
- 5.3. This report has been commissioned by Fugee Org, whose vision and commitment to improving access to quality education for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia made this needs assessment study possible. We are truly grateful for their trust in the project team to undertake this work. Our thanks go especially to Lor Yew Mien for her support and guidance throughout the process.
- 5.4. We apologise for any errors, misrepresentations, or oversights in this report. Any such shortcomings are entirely the responsibility of the project team.

Part 2

Background: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Malaysia

Definition of ‘refugee’ (also applicable to ‘asylum seeker’)

A refugee is a person “forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. They are unable to return to their own country because of feared persecution as a result of who they are, what they believe in or say, or because of armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder”. Such a person may be called an asylum seeker until granted refugee status by a contracting state or by the UNHCR if they formally make a claim for asylum (UNHCR US, n.d.).

1. Legal and social realities

- 1.1. This report is grounded in the broader context of the complex challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia generally, with a particular focus on the acute difficulties experienced by their children in accessing any form of education.
- 1.2. The Malaysian Government has not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol.
- 1.3. A central issue is that refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are not legally recognised, i.e. they have no legal or administrative status in Malaysia. This stems from the longstanding position of the Malaysian Government, which has consistently viewed refugees and asylum seekers as persons ‘in transit’ en route to third countries for permanent resettlement.
- 1.4. This policy stance dates back to 1975, when the Malaysian Government invited the UNHCR to establish an office in Kuala Lumpur to manage the then-influx of persons from Vietnam seeking refuge.
- 1.5. While permitting refugees and asylum seekers to remain in Malaysia temporarily on humanitarian grounds, the Malaysian Government has effectively delegated to the UNHCR the responsibility for registering, assessing, and resettling them. The UNHCR is also implicitly responsible for the welfare of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia while they await registration, refugee status determination, and resettlement — an obligation that arguably applies to education.
- 1.6. The registration process entails the recording, verification, and updating of information on persons of concern to the UNHCR. The steps to recognition as a refugee begin with the asylum seeker submitting an application for registration, typically upon arrival. Currently, this application is made by completing an online form on the UNHCR’s Refugee Malaysia website, www.refugeemalaysia.org. All applications are subsequently processed through a stringent and internationally recognised system of verification, interview, and deliberation.

- 1.7. This process is slow. At the time of writing, there are still very many thousands of asylum seekers and their children waiting to be registered in Malaysia, leaving them in a particularly vulnerable position.
- 1.8. Applicants who undergo the refugee status determination process successfully will be issued a UNHCR card. The card serves as formal acknowledgement that the holder is under the UNHCR's protection, but does not confer these refugees with any legal status in Malaysia. However, it does in theory provide some protection against arbitrary arrest by the authorities, and it grants them access to subsidised healthcare at government health facilities.
- 1.9. With no legal or administrative status, refugees and asylum seekers lead a highly precarious existence here. They have no legal right to work, and yet must do so to survive and to provide for their families. Securing a stable income and a sustainable livelihood is an immense and persistent challenge for most refugees and asylum seekers, which adversely impacts their capacity to, among others, fund their children's education.
- 1.10. In addition, refugees and asylum seekers have very limited access to protection under the law, face significant barriers to securing appropriate housing and healthcare, and are exposed to harassment, extortion, arrest, and detention on a daily basis. They are often targeted by human traffickers and modern-day slavers, and fall victim to exploitation and abuse. All this is compounded by widespread xenophobia.
- 1.11. Crucially, for the purposes of this report, children of refugees and asylum seekers have no access to the Malaysian public school system. They are excluded from the Malaysian national education system, and are therefore wholly dependent on private and non-state providers — including NGOs, faith-based groups, community-based organisations, and individual initiatives — for learning opportunities. The consequences of this exclusion are explored in Part 3.

2. Demographics

- 2.1. The number of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia has fluctuated over time. In mid-2011, more than 94,000 refugees and asylum seekers were registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia, with at least 10,000 more not yet registered. This was more than double the number recorded in 2005 (Crisp, Obi and Umlas, 2012, p 9). According to UNHCR Malaysia's Figures at a Glance, by February 2016 the number of registered individuals had risen to approximately 158,510, and stood at some 200,260 as of the end of May 2025 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025b). This represents a more than fourfold increase in 20 years.
- 2.2. According to the same UNHCR source, a vast majority (179,020, or 89.4 per cent) of the 200,260 registered individuals are from Myanmar, a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This predominance is not new: even in mid-2011, over 90 per cent of those registered were from Myanmar, most being Chin and Rohingya (Crisp, Obi and Umlas, 2012, p 9). As of the end of May 2025, some 117,670 are Rohingyas (representing 65.7 per cent of those from Myanmar, or 58.8 per cent of

the total registered population); 29,620 are Chins; and 31,730 belong to other ethnic groups from Myanmar fleeing conflict or persecution (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025b). The remaining 21,230 refugees and asylum seekers are from a wide range of countries, including about 5,650 Pakistanis, 3,050 Yemenis, 2,780 Somalis, 2,770 Afghans, 2,520 Syrians, 1,030 Sri Lankans, 500 Palestinians, and 440 Iraqis.

- 2.3. Notably, 59,250 individuals (29.6 per cent of the total of 200,260 persons) are below the age of 18 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025b). How this demographic reality impacts the provision of, and access to, education is addressed in Part 3 of this report.

3. Urgency of educational response

- 3.1. It is critical to acknowledge that refugees and asylum seekers are in Malaysia for extended periods, often for most or all of their lives. Many children have been born here, or arrived at a young age, and will remain here for the discernible future. The assumption — or hope — that these persons are merely ‘in transit’ for a short length of time has not been borne out in fact.
- 3.2. The present situation is alarming: as at 12 June 2025, there are over 36.8 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2025b). Resettlement depends entirely on the willingness of third countries to offer places, and is thus beyond the UNHCR’s control. The number of places offered by any one country varies considerably according to a country’s domestic political pressures, international political dynamics, and global demand. At the same time, rising xenophobia pressures on national governments have further inhibited the number of resettlement offers. Less than one per cent of refugees worldwide are ever resettled (UNHCR Asia Pacific, n.d.).
- 3.3. The demographic and geopolitical realities make the need for accessible, sustainable, and inclusive education for refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia even more pressing. The challenges facing families and the informal systems that seek to educate children cannot be addressed with short-term or stopgap measures. Instead, they require concrete, sustained, well-informed, and collaborative interventions — an imperative this report seeks to highlight.

Part 3

Contextual Overview: Education for Children of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Peninsular Malaysia

1. Legal and policy exclusion

A. Exclusion from the Malaysian national education system

- 1.1. The previous section outlined the demographic profile of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, and highlighted their lack of legal or administrative status. A further circumstance facing the children of refugees and asylum seekers is that they are not included in the Malaysian national education system, which, among other things, denies them access to formal education in Malaysian public schools.
- 1.2. This section provides the context to this circumstance, outlines the present situation regarding access of children of refugees and asylum seekers to any education, and discusses the options for potential ways forward. It aims to provide the frame for Part 4 of this report, which details the present-day experiences and challenges of those operating ALCs for the children of refugees and asylum seekers. This will then lead to the recommendations of Part 5, addressing both the wider issues and the specific possibilities for supporting those running ALCs.

B. The right of every child to education

- 1.3. At the heart of this discussion lies the fundamental principle that every child, irrespective of legal status, background, or nationality, has the right to education. This right serves as a guiding standard for assessing both the current reality and the prospects for inclusive educational provision in Malaysia.
- 1.4. A child's right to education is firmly established in key international instruments and norms, as articulated by the three following examples:

a. **Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

b. Convention on the Rights of the Child

Malaysia is a State party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, having acceded to it in February 1995, albeit with reservations. Article 28 states:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education.

c. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015 including Malaysia, established 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Under SDG 4, covering education, there are seven outcome targets relating to free primary and secondary education; equal access to quality pre-primary education; affordable technical, vocational and higher education; increased number of people with relevant skills for financial success; elimination of all discrimination in education; universal literacy and numeracy; and education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

- 1.5. The assertion that every child has a right to education reflects the understanding that formal education is fundamental to a human life. Education allows all persons, from whatever backgrounds, to acquire the skills and knowledge to help them make the most of their circumstances and contribute as fully as possible to family and society. Education is recognised as a basic driver of social and economic development. The commitment of national governments, including Malaysia, to agreements such as the UN SDGs, not least SDG 4, recognises that inclusive and quality education can help reduce poverty, increase life chances, and significantly help “leave no one behind” — the main goal of the SDG agenda.
- 1.6. But, as has been noted, children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia have not benefitted from this right. This situation has been consistently raised in international for a for very many years. For example, during its 44th session, the Committee on the Rights of the Child stated the following in its concluding observations on Malaysia’s initial report on 25 June 2007:

84. The Committee notes with concern that many asylum-seeking and refugee children ... who have lived in Malaysia since 1990s, lack access to formal education.

85. With reference to articles 2, 22 and 28 of the Convention, the Committee recommends that the State party take urgent measures to ensure that asylum-seeking and refugee children have access to free and formal primary, secondary and other forms of education, and that in

particular refugee and asylum-seeking children who are engaged in informal education have access to official examinations.

- 1.7. In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Malaysia in 2024, recommended that the Malaysian Government:

37.(e) Ensure access to education, including skills training, for asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls, including by allocating adequate human, technical and financial resources to alternative learning centres.

- 1.8. Despite various international commitments, not much has changed over the last 18 years. So it is pertinent to ask: Why is it that the children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia continue to be left out? What is the likelihood that this will change?

2. Pathways towards inclusion: three possibilities for education

- 2.1. There are various ways in which inclusive and quality education can be provided for children of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 2.2. Firstly, the Malaysian Government could open up its public school system to such children.²
- 2.3. Secondly, if the Malaysian Government does not open up its public school system to include the children of refugees and asylum seekers, there are still other options available within the wider Malaysian national education system. These options are discussed further below.
- 2.4. Thirdly, if neither of the first two possibilities is to be done, there is the theoretical possibility that UNHCR itself or some other entity can provide the necessary financial and human resources to provide such education for all children of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 2.5. Each of these can now be discussed in more detail.

² There are obvious immediate challenges in integrating the present age group cohorts of refugee and asylum-seeking children, given that education levels are so diverse across these children. As a result, they would likely not seamlessly adapt to their appropriate classes or age groups in the Malaysian public school system. But this is a transition challenge.

A. The Malaysian Government's position on access to public schools

- 2.6. If the Malaysian Government opened up its public school system to include the children of refugees and asylum seekers, the issue of both inclusivity and quality education for such children would be solved. As noted, there might still be some major challenges of integration, especially initially, but the principle of access for all children would be met.
- 2.7. However, the Malaysian Government has not done so. This is because, as indicated in the previous section, it has consistently taken the position that the international community is responsible for refugees and asylum seekers and, in Malaysia, specifically the office of UNHCR. It is not seen as a responsibility of the State. As such, although refugees and asylum seekers are tolerated by the Malaysian Government on humanitarian grounds, the assumption is, and has been, that they should only be in Malaysia for the minimum amount of time it takes for UNHCR and other national governments around the globe to arrange their resettlement. Meanwhile, it is UNHCR that is responsible for their registration and protection, and for coordinating any services associated with their presence — including education.
- 2.8. This is not to say that the Malaysian Government and its agencies have not had to deal with issues arising from the presence of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. Among these are arrest and detention, human trafficking, and arrivals, especially boat arrivals. As will be seen, the Government has also engaged with issues around education. It needs to be realised that any discussion that has taken place has been in the context of its overall stance, which is that it is wary of extending any 'rights' or privileges to refugees or asylum seekers, including in relation to employment or education. This is on the basis that there are both security worries, and that any extension may encourage many more asylum seekers to seek refuge here.
- 2.9. Whatever one's opinion of this stance, the reality it brings is that there is little immediate likelihood of children of refugees and asylum seekers being welcomed into national public schools. It also inhibits other initiatives that the Malaysian Government might take, as discussed below. In addition, the stance can be seen to be contrary to UNHCR's globally preferred policy, which is one of partnership and includes the principle or hope that states should assume their share of responsibility for refugees and asylum seekers, and that persons of concern to the organisation should be granted equitable access to the services available to nationals.
- 2.10. As far back as 2012, this situation was being reported.

In Malaysia, such advocacy efforts have not yet succeeded in persuading the authorities to assume a more substantial role in relation to refugee issues, and UNHCR has consequently been obliged to assume responsibility for a wide variety of functions, including registration, status determination, documentation and detention monitoring, best interest determination for children, as well as assistance in the areas of health, education, livelihoods and the search for solutions. . . . [H]owever, there are no solutions in sight for the majority of refugees, even in the medium or longer term (Crisp, Obi and Umlas, 2012, pp 2-3).

- 2.11. The conclusion of the above paragraph indicates that any optimism has always needed to be treated with caution. This is true for any hope that the Malaysian Government might ratify the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, something unlikely to happen in present political circumstances. It also applies to any optimism over possible government interventions on more specific situations facing refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, including employment and education.
- 2.12. Further, it has also been documented that, in 2019, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented the Zero Reject Policy, designed to enhance the implementation of Education for All Policy in Malaysia.

The policy aims to ensure that no child is denied access to education, regardless of their special needs or citizenship status. However, in March 2022, the MoE announced the revision of the guideline admission procedures. It clarified that the Zero Reject Policy “does not refer to admission for undocumented children but children with special needs”.

As a result, refugee and stateless children are only allowed to obtain informal education via alternative learning centres (ALC) and other private learning institutions (SUHAKAM, 2024, p 7).

B. Alternative possibilities within the Malaysian national education system

- 2.13. If the Malaysian Government is not going to open up the public school system to the children of refugees and asylum seekers, there are still options which they can include and support within the Malaysian national education system.
- 2.14. These options — sometimes referred to as a ‘partial’ solution — could include supporting the inclusion of children of refugees and asylum seekers into private schools, perhaps through public-private partnerships, or into special schools.
- 2.15. They could also include explicit recognition that children of refugees and asylum seekers are permitted to take national examinations, and that ALCs catering to such children are allowed, and even encouraged, to use national curricula.
- 2.16. There are existing models of special schools which might be more comprehensively adapted to include children of refugees and asylum seekers. They include Sekolah Anak Malaysia, Sekolah Kurang Murid, or Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih. There are also examples of regional or global initiatives, one of which is in neighbouring Thailand.³

³ In Thailand, the Equitable Education Fund has mobilised a diversity of funding to support equitable education. This is in addition to government support for Migrant Learning Centres and commitment to 12 years of free, high-quality education for all (SUHAKAM, 2024, p 8).

Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih: Leave No Child Behind

Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih (SBJK) is the only school in the country which uses a special module prepared by the Ministry of Education to help street children study. SBJK provided access to formal education in a conducive environment for homeless or underprivileged children, and allowed them to sit for public examinations that were suitable for them according to their age and skills to read, write and count (The Star Online, 2016).

- 2.17. More recently, the Qatar Foundation has made available a significant amount of money to the Malaysian Government, to support the education of “refugee children” (UNHCR Malaysia, 2020).
- 2.18. This is a government-to-government grant, meaning that the role of UNHCR Malaysia is purely advisory. The Ministry of Education has been directly involved, and has undertaken visits to ALCs catering to refugee and asylum-seeking children as well as entered into a number of discussions with the Qatar Foundation and with other stakeholders, to agree on the best way forward.
- 2.19. According to information from UNHCR reports and some key informants, discussions have centred on three areas: the standardisation of syllabus and curriculum across all ALCs; the quality of teachers and teaching; and the sustainability of financing long-term, which might involve a student sponsorship initiative.⁴ These discussions have been going on for a few years, and there is not much indication that anything is going to happen very soon. One of the issues is likely to be the choice of curriculum, with an apparent preference from the Malaysian side for a non-Malaysian curriculum.
- 2.20. More than this, whatever is chosen, there is a major technical issue in getting to the point where each child of a refugee or asylum seeker can be placed into the relevant form or class according to age group. This will take considerable extra work at the moment, given that so many of these children have had no education at all (meaning many 10-year-olds, for example, would hardly survive in Primary 1) and so many have had uneven education of varying quality. The gap between ‘what should be’ and ‘what is’ is very large. It can only be hoped that serious efforts continue to be discussed as to how to bridge this, and establish inclusive and quality education for all.

i. Potential impact of granting protected employment status to refugees

- 2.21. One connected and potential change in Malaysian Government policy, which would positively affect options for education for refugee and asylum-seeking children, relates to employment. If the Malaysian Government were to provide a legal, protected status for refugees to work in Malaysia, this would allow refugee families access to a steady income, which would in turn allow them to invest in, for example, their children’s education. At the same time, having the possibility of protected employment might also

⁴ For example, UNHCR has reported the initiatives undertaken with the Ministry of Education in Malaysia in relation to this (UNHCR, 2019).

motivate both parents and children to invest in education as a pathway to a more secure future.

2.22. Related to this, there have been persistent announcements and rumours over very many years that some official status and protection will be given to refugees for employment. For example, in 2016, the Immigration Director-General Sakib Kusmi was reported in the local media as conveying that the Government was considering allowing UNHCR cardholders to work in the country. Home Ministry sources further revealed that a high-level government committee was in the process of discussion with relevant stakeholders to reach this objective (NST, 2016).

2.23. Or, this elaboration in the Pakatan Harapan manifesto for the 2018 election, which committed the coalition to the following:

Promise 35

Recognising that Malaysia is hosting more than 150,000 refugees, including Rohingyas and Syrians, the Pakatan Harapan Government will legitimise their status by providing them with UNHCR cards and ensuring their legal right to work. Their labour rights will be at par with locals and this initiative will reduce the country's need for foreign workers and lower the risk of refugees from becoming involved in criminal activities and underground economies. Providing them with jobs will help refugees to build new lives and without subjecting them to oppression.

2.24. More recently, the following was reported:

[Federal Territories Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa] said the government is also looking into providing social assistance to registered refugees under a new directive on managing refugees and asylum seekers [She said:] "This includes allowing them to work legally in Malaysia" (NST, 2025).

2.25. So, clearly there have been serious deliberations within government circles over the decades. However, so far, there is little evidence of any concrete progress. The Malaysian Government continues to place the de facto responsibility for the education of children of refugees and asylum seekers squarely on the shoulders of UNHCR Malaysia.

ii. **Potential impact of granting legal and protected status to all refugees and asylum seekers, including children**

2.26. A consequence of the present position, whereby refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia have no legal or administrative status, is that children too have been subject to arrest and detention and have been placed in detention camps.

2.27. As reported by the Suka Society in 2014:

In detention, children are held with adults, as there are no special facilities specifically for them. All girls (0-18 years) and boys below 12 are held in the adult women's facility. Boys between the ages of 13-18 will be held in the adult male facility. Male children above 12 who are arrested with their mothers will be separated from them in detention. Children in detention have limited access to healthcare and no access to education or play (see Suka Society website).

2.28. Ongoing lobbying to change this situation and to provide alternatives to detention for children have resulted in the Malaysian Government establishing some special centres in 2023 called Baitul Mahabbah. However, these have not dramatically changed the situation facing the children detained:

[T]hese centres still deprive children of their liberty, constituting another form of detention — despite the initiative's aim of removing children from immigration depots and provide them with more humane care. The centres continue to operate under strict immigration laws and procedures, which does not align with the commitment to provide a more conducive environment for the children (End Detention Network quoted in Malay Mail, 2024).

2.29. Access to the Malaysian education system is still unavailable. The most ideal solution remains to change the status of refugees and asylum seekers so that children and adults are protected against such detention, and have at least some possibility of accessing education.

C. UNHCR Malaysia and capacity to provide education for all

Role and constraints of UNHCR Malaysia

2.30. If UNHCR Malaysia had the financial and human resources to provide for inclusive and quality education for all children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, the problem would be solved. But it has not, has never had, and is never likely to have.

2.31. What response UNHCR has been able to make is framed in its overall approaches to 'durable solutions' for refugees. Here, the options have been consistently three-fold: safe and voluntary repatriation to the homeland; permanent resettlement to a third country; or local integration. The success of any of these would considerably help response respond to the challenge of education for the affected children. These options are considered below.

a. Safe and voluntary repatriation

- 2.32. Safe and voluntary repatriation to the homeland of the refugee or asylum seeker can happen when the situation that had forced the person to flee no longer prevails. This does happen occasionally, for example with Vietnam, or Aceh, both of which were source locations at a particular time for people fleeing to Malaysia for sanctuary.
- 2.33. However, the present circumstances from which people are fleeing and seeking refuge in countries like Malaysia do not seem to be readily resolved. The overwhelming number of persons seeking refuge over the last two decades and more have been coming from Myanmar, and there the situation continues to deteriorate.
- 2.34. ASEAN as a collective has seemed unable to make any headway on tackling the situation in Myanmar, partly as a consequence of its policy of refraining from any direct interference into each other's domestic affairs.⁵ Meanwhile, global attention has mainly been directed elsewhere, despite the major and long-standing atrocities committed by the Myanmar military and its supporters, against ethnic minorities in Myanmar. This includes documentation of potential genocide, for example against the Rohingya in Arakan state (Parmar et al. (2022), UN Human Rights Council (2019), Human Rights Watch (2022)).
- 2.35. As such, this door seems to be closed for the discernible future.

b. Resettlement

- 2.36. As already discussed, resettlement depends on external national governments offering places to refugees who are in countries like Malaysia. Over the many years, the number of such places being offered is consistently far below the numbers that would allow all refugees to be resettled.
- 2.37. For example, figures from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported that some 126,265 persons have been resettled from Malaysia between 2005 and the first quarter of 2025 (IOM Malaysia, 2025). Figures will have fluctuated year on year, but this represents an average of some 6,200 a year, at a time when actual numbers of refugees in Malaysia would be at least 15 times that, and, more recently, some 30 times that. Most recently, it was reported that 8,627 refugees were resettled from Malaysia in 2024, when at the end of the year (December 2024) there were 192,240 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR here (The Star Online, 2025).
- 2.38. In addition, the IOM recorded that 70 per cent of resettled refugees from Malaysia have gone to the USA, 14 per cent to Canada, and 12 per cent to Australia. Since the USA easily takes the highest numbers of those resettled, any changes in regime and in policy there will also affect chances of resettlement. The recent suspension of the USA's refugee resettlement programme by its President in January 2025 is clearly a case in point (The White House, 2025).

⁵ This is often referred to as the policy of 'constructive engagement'. See, for example, Masilamani and Peterson (2014).

- 2.39. Add to this the growing number of refugees worldwide,⁶ the growth of xenophobia, and the reluctance of national governments to countenance accepting large numbers of refugees, and the situation becomes even less promising.
- 2.40. The bottom line was already summed up in an earlier UNHCR document (UNHCR, 2011):

Over half of the refugees for whom UNHCR is responsible find themselves trapped in protracted situations, where they have lived for years or even decades on end. One of the most pressing tasks confronting UNHCR and the international community is to resolve such situations.

c. Local integration

- 2.41. The fact is that the vast majority of children of refugees and asylum seekers will be firmly in Malaysia for the foreseeable future. This has been the case for very many years. Therefore it is the third ‘durable solution’ option advocated by UNHCR, which is ‘local integration’, that needs to work. In the words of UNHCR (2011):

Local integration allows ordinary people displaced by conflict, violence or persecution to find a durable solution to their plight, ending a state of limbo and enabling them to move forward with their lives.

Local integration means . . .

A durable solution: A permanent, peaceful and dignified solution to protracted refugee situations.

A flexible approach: Many programmes with choices and engagement levels to suit different political and social situations and specific country needs.

Local leadership: Processes led by the government, with UNHCR and other external support. Governments can effectively manage refugee situations and engage international actors in processes through strategic planning, to enable the best outcome for host communities as well as refugees.

Burden sharing: A national or regional approach which engages the support of the international community.

Development: Allows development actors to engage in community-based support and development to benefit the host country, and enables refugees to be agents of development rather than recipients of aid.

Skill sharing: Allows refugees, many of whom are well-educated and skilled, to become self-reliant and to contribute to local economies and wider society.

⁶ According to the UNHCR (2025b), at end-2024 there were 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order; 73.5 million internally displaced people; 36.8 million refugees; 8.4 million asylum seekers; and 5.9 million other people in need of international protection. This represents a doubling of numbers in ten years (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025).

Peacebuilding: Benefits to regional peace and national security, breaking down barriers between refugees and host communities.

Source: UNHCR (2011)

- 2.42. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the hopes of local integration run up against the overall stance of the Malaysian Government. This does not mean that the Government and its agencies have not been involved in discussions and considerations of options. Some of the Ministry of Education's involvements are mentioned below. But it does mean that, generally speaking, any sympathy to help provide inclusive and quality education for the children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia runs up against the apparent firm resolve to refrain from giving refugees or asylum seekers any rights or any incentive to see themselves as an official part of this country.

3. The present situation: realities and implications

A. UNHCR's efforts and persistent challenges

- 3.1. The situation we are left with is the situation that has been persisting for decades. ALCs have been set up outside the Malaysian education system, by community-run groups, NGOs, individuals, or others. There is no overall plan. There is provision only for a minority of children, and that provision is mixed in terms of location, quality, and target group.
- 3.2. In this situation, UNHCR has done the best it can do, given limited resources and difficult circumstances. As it cannot possibly organise an entire system of schooling for all children of refugees and asylum seekers, it has taken initiatives on a number of areas, to:
- a. extend inclusivity, to encourage communities, NGOs, other organisations, philanthropists, or individuals to set up ALCs;
 - b. address issues of quality, including setting up a system of criteria which ALCs should follow and whereby they can gain UNHCR recognition; providing some training and support to those running ALCs; and helping when it can with some funding, resources, and one-off initiatives;
 - c. develop partnerships with the Malaysian Government, including the Ministry of Education, together with corporations, refugee groups, NGOs, academics and other stakeholders, to explore funding and policy issues;
 - d. accrue resources and other information for sharing with the various networks, including community-based networks;
 - e. collect and analyse the relevant data relating to education for children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia; and
 - f. continue appropriate advocacy.
- 3.3. UNHCR's capacity to do this has changed over time. Depending on its financial resources and its policies at the time, UNHCR may have had a dedicated team in its Education Unit (at one time comprising eight persons) and financial resources to

perhaps support some teacher allowances, some hardware, and some textbooks and materials for a number of schools. At no time was it able to cover all educational needs. At the moment, with financial cutbacks and other internal priorities, the Education Unit is operating as a team of one person with very limited resources.

B. Consequences for inclusivity and quality

- 3.4. There are two major consequences of the preceding background, relating to inclusivity and quality.

i. Lack of access and inclusivity

- 3.5. The first is that the majority of children of refugees and asylum seekers of any age group have had no access to schooling, and continue to have no access to schooling. This is a major reason why something significant needs to change.
- 3.6. Going back a little in time, in 2011:

The number of children receiving an education constitutes only 30 per cent of the school-age children registered with UNHCR, the vast majority of them at the primary level. This means that more than 8,700 refugee children are not accessing education (Crisp, Obi and Umlas, 2012, p 27).

- 3.7. This continued. In 2015, UNHCR reported that 26.7 per cent of children of refugees and asylum seekers were accessing some sort of education, representing 5,755 children from a possible 21,555 of school-going age. This means that a significant majority (73.3 per cent) were not (UNICEF, 2015, p 20).
- 3.8. In 2018, the situation persisted. This is a description of the situation in Penang in that year.

At end August 2018, there were eight (8) learning centres in the state registered [with UNHCR] in Penang. These catered to 899 children, of which 471 were boys and 428 were girls.

Most of the provision was for children of primary school age; there is very little pre-school provision and very little secondary provision.

This is one of the issues that needs to be addressed in having a comprehensive approach to education for refugee children in the state.

Of course, it is absolutely fundamental to understand that this figure of 899 children represents just 27% of all children who should be accessing school. In other words, the vast majority of children of refugees in Penang have no access to any education at all.

What do we think will become of them?

(UNHCR Education Factsheet Aug 2018 quoted in Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign, 2019).

3.9. Fast forward, and in a World Refugee Day statement in 2024, UNICEF stated:

Of the 41,000 refugee children of school-going age registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, none of them have access to formal education. Only 34 per cent have access to informal education through alternative learning centres. . . . Additionally, their lack of legal status also puts them at risk of arrest and detention. As of September 2023, more than 1,400 girls and boys were reportedly held in immigration detention centres in Malaysia. As a result, refugee and stateless children struggle to live dignified lives, stunting their ability to grow to their full potential. All children, regardless of status, should have the opportunity to learn in school, in safety and without fear (UNICEF, 2024).

3.10. By 2025, although there had been some extra contributions from ALCs in terms of providing pre-primary and secondary places, the overall impact on equitable, inclusive education is still limited: the majority of children still do not have access.

3.11. The most recent figures from UNHCR Malaysia are presented in the following table.

Table 1: Enrolment of refugee and asylum-seeking children in education (March 2025)

Age	Registered with UNHCR	Enrolled in refugee learning centres	Gross enrolment rate
4–6 (Pre-Primary)	13,274	3,139	24%
7–12 (Primary)	19,061	9,031	47%
13–17 (Secondary)	8,615	2,268	26%
Total	40,950	14,438	35%

Source: UNHCR Malaysia (2025a)

3.12. For the purpose of comparison, the Malaysian national enrolment rates are: pre-primary 91 per cent; primary 98 per cent, and secondary 84 per cent. For refugees globally, the rates are: pre-primary 38 per cent; primary 65 per cent; and secondary 41 per cent.

3.13. As explained earlier, all this provision is through the determined efforts of the ALCs. As of April 2025, it is reported that there are 203 ALCs known to UNHCR, of which 179 are recognised by UNHCR using the process also described earlier.

3.14. The distribution of these ALCs geographically is not planned in any way, so the possibility of access to education for children of refugees and asylum seekers differs by location in Peninsular Malaysia.

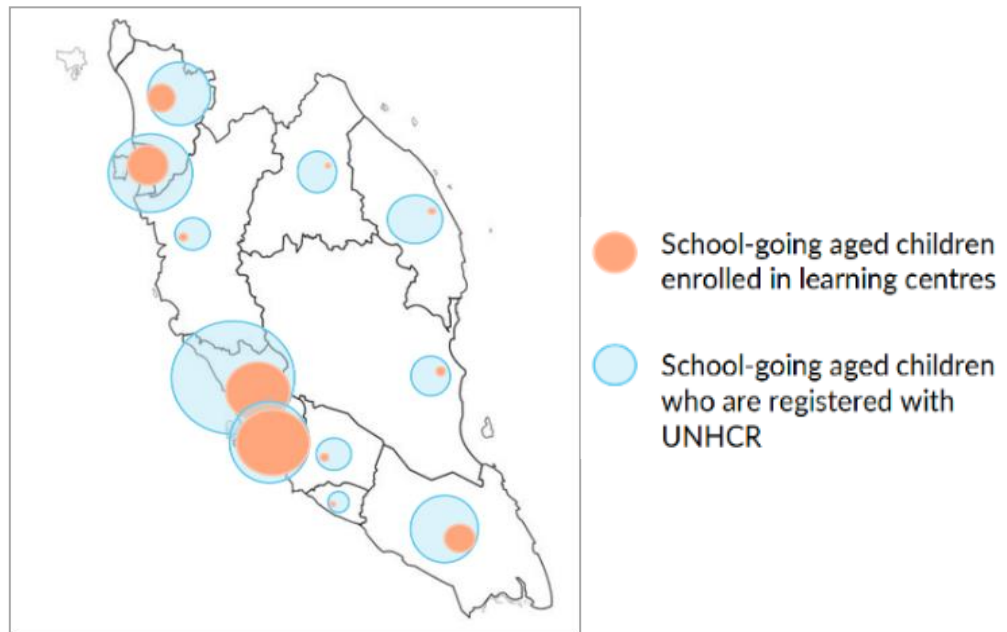


Figure 2: Refugee children and learning centre enrolment in Peninsular Malaysia

Source: UNHCR Malaysia (2025a)

The Rohingya population

- 3.15. At present, the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are Rohingya. This ethnic group has been denied citizenship rights even in their country of origin (Arakan state in Myanmar), meaning that many of them have either never had access to formal education or have a very limited experience of it. This group then poses a particular challenge in terms of education now that they are in Malaysia. However, figures supplied by UNHCR show that there are just 46 ALCs known to UNHCR that focus on provision for the children of Rohingya families, and that this number and their capacity are nowhere near enough to provide for the total number of the school-aged Rohingya population.
- 3.16. Following UNHCR statistics, there are 24,017 Rohingya of school-going age (4 to 17 years old) and a further 11,098 youths (18 to 24 years old). The enrolment rates are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Number of Rohingya aged 4 to 24 in Malaysia, by age group, sex and educational status

	Aged 4–6		Aged 7–12		Aged 1–17		Aged 18–24	
Rohingya	8,733	Male 4,533	10,764	Male 5,516	4,520	Male 2,214	11,098	Male 5,118
		Female 4,200		Female 5,248		Female 2,306		Female 5,980
Enrolled in learning centres/local institutes*	756		3,210		508		25	
Percentage	8.7%		29.8%		11.2%		0.22%	

**Does not account for those who obtained education outside of Malaysia before seeking asylum in this country.*

Source: UNHCR Malaysia (2025a)

ii. Quality of provision

- 3.17. The second consequence is that, even where children manage to get access, this may be temporary (for a year or a few years only), and the quality of provision hugely varies from ALC to ALC. A summary is contained in the following observation:

With these ‘schools’ undertaking education according to their own understanding and ability, the end result can only be and is a complete lack of standard teaching and conduct practices, unsafe facilities and children who are unable not only to achieve age-appropriate learning goals but also to integrate into the larger society (Harvest school document quoted in Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign, 2019).

- 3.18. This has also been documented by very many community-based groups, NGOs, and researchers over very many years. For example:

Official figures reported that 133 such ALCs currently operate in Peninsular Malaysia. However, this is likely an underestimate, as many of them are not formally registered. While these learning centers play a crucial role in providing education that is otherwise unavailable to [refugee and asylum-seeking] children, they face a number of challenges and limitations. These include inappropriate school locations; many [refugee and asylum-seeking] schools are commonly housed in shop lots or commercial facilities without adequate safety measures and hygiene standards. ALCs also lack funds and other recourses, which translate into a shortage of textbooks and qualified teaching staff, inadequate physical infrastructure, a high turnover of teachers, and poor compensation for school personnel (Yunus, 2023).⁷

⁷ The 133 reported ALCs are a 2021 figure. See UNHCR Malaysia (n.d.).

4. Long-term consequences of sustained educational exclusion

- 4.1. By way of conclusion to this section, it might be asked: what will be the consequence of the lack of support for the provision of education for all children of refugees and asylum seekers? As was set out in the 2019 Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign document:

It is impossible to exaggerate the consequence of ‘no education’ on the lives of a whole generation of refugees: the individual girls and boys and teenagers, and families and the community at large. The consequences of allowing a whole generation of children and teenagers to grow up in Malaysia without any education include

- consigning thousands of girls and boys to a future without prospects and without hope
 - making sure that thousands of refugee families will have little option but to continue to live in poverty
 - denying the potential of the individual women and men, girls and boys, so depriving Malaysia and others of their possible contribution
 - institutionalising the probability of human trafficking and modern-day slavery by ensuring a whole generation of children and teenagers will be vulnerable to the lies of human traffickers and the exploitation of modern-day slavers
 - encouraging the activities of recruiters for extremist groups who thrive on ignorance and desperation, which will be a consequence of no education
 - encouraging child marriage, as families have little option but to find what they see as a protected space for their daughters by marrying them young, given they have no obvious alternative
 - institutionalising the activity of begging, as many families try to exploit whatever options are available to them to earn even a meagre income. This may involve more girls than boys, since it is assumed girls elicit more sympathy from would-be givers
-

- 4.2. With all this background in mind, the next section will examine the various factors and challenges involved in the provision of education through running an ALC. This will then allow recommendations for some potential ways forward.

Part 4

Findings and Key Takeaways

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This section presents the findings and analysis derived from structured interviews conducted with 31 ALCs across Peninsular Malaysia. As detailed in Part 1, these ALCs were selected to represent a range of characteristics, including geographic location, type of organisation running the ALC, level of education provided (primary, secondary, or both), size of the student population, and ethnicities or nationalities of the refugee and asylum-seeking populations served.
- 1.2. The interviews explored five broad areas: organisational profile and capacity, students, teachers, curriculum, and hopes and dreams. While the findings pertain specifically to the 31 ALCs included in this needs assessment, they serve as a valuable microcosm, providing insights into the broader educational landscape for the families of refugees and asylum seekers in Peninsular Malaysia today.

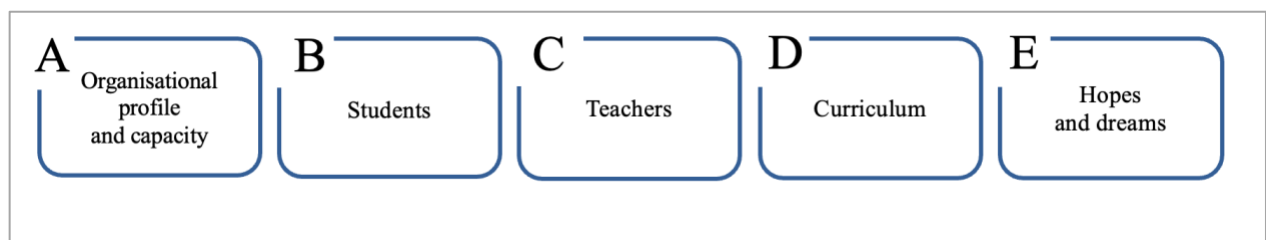


Figure 3: Breakdown of sections in Part 4 of this report

- 1.3. The analysis presented here also takes into account the contextual overviews set out in Parts 2 and 3, and learnings gained from the 12 key informant interviews.

Section A: Organisational profile and capacity

2. Profile

A. Type and status

- 2.1. Almost 60 per cent of the ALCs we surveyed are refugee-run. The remainder are operated by a range of non-refugee groups or individuals, a number of which can be described as faith-based. The organisations or people running the selected ALCs range from large NGOs to an individual from a refugee community. This has not changed much over the years.

A number of dedicated Malaysians and expatriates volunteer their time, money and efforts alongside refugee communities to find sponsors, teach, provide educational materials and sometimes even donate personal funds to help children in these informal centres (UNICEF, 2015).

- 2.2. Most (80.6 per cent, 25) of the 31 ALCs we sampled are registered with or recognised by the UNHCR,⁸ but a small number (6) have not obtained this status yet.
- 2.3. Being registered with or recognised by the UNHCR signifies that an ALC has fulfilled certain criteria as to its size and capacity to deliver a minimum standard of education. In previous years, the UNHCR's budget allowed monitoring by a dedicated team within the UNHCR's Education Unit. Under current funding constraints, however, the capacity of this unit has been greatly reduced. This has compromised its ability to monitor both existing and new ALCs, as well as impinged on its potential provision of funding, financial and training support for teachers, as well as assistance with purchases or donation of resources.
- 2.4. For those who operate ALCs, especially the smaller and/or refugee-run centres, the UNHCR registration or recognition carries significant symbolic and practical value. It comes with a 'Protection Letter' (recently renamed an 'Appreciation Letter'), which affirms that the ALC is known to and acknowledged by the UNHCR. Interviewees emphasised that this letter remains important: it provides some sense of security (further discussed below) in an otherwise precarious operating environment, and also reassures parents that the centre holds at least some degree of legitimacy and protection — even if, in reality, this may not always hold true.
- 2.5. It is unclear how many ALCs are currently waiting for UNHCR recognition. What is evident is that many centres that do not have this status are often the most isolated and vulnerable. From our interviews, at least three such ALCs were identified: two were awaiting a response from the UNHCR, while one had had its application rejected (ALC-23). The interviewee (a teacher) from one of the two centres that are waiting was extremely anxious, not knowing how much longer the process would take. He reported fearing harassment by the authorities, something that he had already experienced. While registration with or recognition by the UNHCR provides a sense of legitimacy and a sense of protection, it still does not guarantee safety.

Three months ago, the police came and checked the school. The parents are afraid the children will be arrested. Every month they contact us about the situation with our school. If we get the letter, most parents will want to send their children here. Safety is an issue. The police can come anytime and we are afraid of that. (ALC-30)

⁸ The UNHCR previously use the term 'registered' to describe an ALC that had fulfilled certain criteria set by the UNHCR. However, this term was changed to 'recognised' within the last two years.

B. Years in operation

- 2.6. Nearly 60 per cent (18) of the ALCs interviewed have been running for more than eight years. The oldest has been operating for 20 years. Almost 30 per cent (9) were established between three and eight years ago. The others are relatively new: two centres have been functioning for one to three years, and two for under a year.
- 2.7. These findings reflect the overall reality of education provision for refugees and asylum seekers in Peninsular Malaysia. Such provision has never been included in the Malaysian national education system, not least since the UNHCR started operations in Malaysia in the 1970s. This means any provision has had to be by ALCs, many of whom have been around for a long time.⁹

C. Size

- 2.8. There was considerable variation in the sizes of the ALCs surveyed. Most, however, are small in terms of the number of their classrooms and students. This holds true whether or not they are refugee-run or non-refugee-run; or whether located within or outside the Klang Valley. The latter, however, generally has smaller ALCs.
- 2.9. ‘Classrooms’ may refer to actual rooms that are partitioned, or non-partitioned but shared spaces, or any combination of these. Two ALCs (6.5 per cent) have only two classrooms each. Another 18 (almost 60 per cent) have three to five classrooms. Nine (29.0 per cent) have six to 10 classrooms, while only three ALCs (9.7 per cent) have more than 10 classrooms. The majority of ALCs interviewed have fewer than 100 students (61.3 per cent, 19), with the two smallest ones — both located outside the Klang Valley — having roughly a dozen students each. Only three (9.7 per cent) have a substantial student population, i.e. more than 250 students.
- 2.10. ALCs that are financially-challenged — and these are the majority — face capacity limitations, either in terms of number of classrooms available or the number of teachers they can employ. Consequently, such centres are small, and this limits the number of students who can enrol. There are bigger ALCs operating in the peninsular, but these were not included in the 31 we interviewed.

D. Premises

- 2.11. The type of premises an ALC occupies is linked to the challenges it faces regarding size. As highlighted in a 2015 UNICEF report, some ten years ago, ALCs were “located mostly in rented, cramped flats or shoplots frequently located on top floors, accessible only by narrow, steep flights of stairs . . .”. Our interviews reveal that the situation today appears to have barely changed. Although some of the larger, better-funded organisations running ALCs have almost state-of-the-art buildings, the vast majority do not.

⁹ During our interviews, we also learned about a few other ALCs, all smaller, which had been set up but have since closed down due to sustainability challenges.

- 2.12. The following account, shared by an ALC that operates out of multiple buildings in the same vicinity, illustrates some of the main challenges such centres face in this regard.

We would like to get better premises for our centre. We are very packed. . . . There is danger for the students because they like to run out, and the school is just next to busy roads. Even on the small lanes, cars speed by. [In one location] we are in basement. There are rats, termites, etc. in classroom, poor ventilation. Only one entrance and exit (main door), no windows or emergency exits. We were not supposed to stay here for a long time but it's been already 10 years! We need a proper environment for classrooms. One single building would be ideal, easier for management of school rules, and easier to help each other. It is very difficult to monitor and enforce rules when learning spaces are so scattered. (ALC-13)

- 2.13. Indeed, almost two-thirds (64.5 per cent, 20) of the ALCs surveyed are housed in the upper storeys of shoplots, typically on the first or second floors. The rest occupy standalone buildings or houses (six), commercial buildings (three), apartments (two) and a community centre. All but two ALCs rent their premises. Of the two exceptions, one uses the premises of a church for a nominal fee, while the other has its own property. The cost of rental ranges from as low as around RM600/month, up to RM11,000/month; the latter is for an ALC that operates branches in five locations.
- 2.14. Shoplots that are used as premises are generally not ideal learning environments for children but, for many, there is 'no choice'. They must make do with what is available. A few of the ALCs highlighted their difficulties in either securing more suitable facilities or meeting high rental obligations.

It is not easy to find a good building. From the five schools [under an umbrella organisation] ours is the most convenient location. Good strategy – because the Majlis sometimes conducts raids. It was difficult to get a state district building and they couldn't accept it but finally they accepted and we opened the refugee school here. The locals here were not happy we opened the school. (ALC-12)

Rental is year by year. Tenancy agreement might be two or three years, and amount of rental might increase after that, which is difficult for us. Last year RM3,150 cost of rental. Then, from August 2024, rent was RM5,000 per month — and even then it is discounted from what the landlord initially wanted, which was RM6,000, or please leave. We cannot find other buildings, and the students want us to continue in the same buildings so we stayed, but the rental is very high for us. (ALC-31)

- 2.15. There are consequences of having to rent the upper storeys of shoplots or buildings. One is the lack of access to those who have mobility challenges. Another is the lack of play space for the students (see also Section D below).

We stay in a big place [a complex] that is enclosed. For the students to get out it is difficult. We asked someone to come and spend time with them to play games. We need some activities, games like football, for them to go out and mix with other people, keep them away from not-so-good activities. In this community there is drugs, smoking, gambling. . . . [We would] love someone to come and organise games and activities for them. Have to go a bit further out to a field where they can play. At the moment nothing like that. (ALC-22)

[An ultimate dream would be] proper premises with playground, laboratory, standard computer lab. This can inspire students. It is very hard for kids to study well in an apartment for hours, as there is no space for them to run and play. (ALC-1)

- 2.16. Five ALCs also offer boarding for children, some of whom come from families living far away — as far as two other states, for one ALC — either in a separate building or within the same premises as their centre. For the latter, daytime classrooms are converted into bedrooms at night. For these centres, the responsibilities are wider.

Because this is a boarding school, three meals a day are needed. The boarding allows the parents to work if they can find a job. The students can go home for 1-2 weeks only after three months. If there is e.g., a one-day holiday, they still have to stay at school because their parents need to work. (ALC-31)

E. Facilities

- 2.17. The lack of funding limits the amenities and equipment an ALC can provide in the classroom, which in turn affects the quality and type of education offered. Our interviews show that although the majority of the ALCs have basic teaching facilities such as whiteboards (100 per cent, 31), tables and chairs (90.3 per cent, 28), printers and/or photocopiers (74.2 per cent, 23), and projectors (58.1 per cent, 18), very few have much else. For example, only two (6.5 per cent) have TV sets in lieu of projectors, while one has a PA system. In a rare instance, one ALC was able to afford a basic science lab and a small equipped gym.

We don't have enough resources in the classroom. (ALC-25)

Not enough resources in the classroom — as children grow, they want to learn more, new subjects. (ALC-27)

- 2.18. It should be realised that these facilities are not always in optimal condition, possibly being second-hand or rentals. This also applies to the furniture: while some reported that they do not have enough tables and chairs, others said it is not uncommon for these to be broken or in need of repairs. One ALC said it has no chairs: the students sit on the floor, and the *ustaz* (religious teacher) who ran the centre personally made all the long wooden benches that serve as tables.

- 2.19. When it comes to digital resources, approximately two-thirds (21) give their teachers access to laptops/tablets, though in some cases these must be shared. Only 42 per cent (13) of ALCs have PCs/laptops/tablets for their students to use. Many, however, said that this equipment is either old, in poor condition, or insufficient for their needs. Thus, while a handful of ALCs may offer computer studies, these are very limited in scope, typically focusing on theory with very little practical training (see also Section D below).

We need many things. If I just focus on these things, maybe I cannot continue the school. Need printer. Need laptops, only five are working but old and not working too well. Others not working because of problems, such as the chargers. (ALC-23)

- 2.20. Only 22 ALCs have Wi-Fi connectivity but, of these, a third reported that their connection is poor (8) — to the point that only a limited number of students can be online at the same time. Those who do not have Wi-Fi access largely cited cost as the primary constraint. Even the centres that are financially better off are challenged in this regard. As a key informant from a larger and well-run ALC shared:

We are limited in the number of devices and bandwidth to offer the students. (KI-12)

- 2.21. This directly restricts the potential of using digital resources as part of the education syllabus. This topic will be revisited later, in the section addressing curriculum-related issues. For the moment, it can be noted that the challenges of funding are a serious impediment to educational provision — as detailed below — with one consequence being the lack of capacity to offer digital education.

F. Income

i. Funding

- 2.22. In the absence of a national or any other coordinated system for funding educational facilities for children of refugees and asylum seekers, educational provision in Malaysia is entirely reliant on the independent and disparate efforts of ALC operators. For them, funding is central to the possibility of starting and sustaining an ALC.
- 2.23. Despite this glaring need, our interview findings echo what has been highlighted innumerable times in numerous documents and publications: funding is one of the most pressing and persistent challenges faced by the majority of ALCs.

Visits to at least eight refugee centres and interviews with several teachers and managers of CLCs revealed that most of them were severely underfunded, heavily reliant on UNHCR's assistance for teacher compensation and training, were overcrowded, lacked proper classrooms, did not have sufficiently trained teachers and students often had little or no exposure to sports or other recreational activities integral for childhood development (UNICEF, 2015).

One of the most significant barriers to education in marginalised communities is the lack of resources and infrastructure. Schools in these areas often lack basic facilities such as classrooms, textbooks, and qualified teachers. In rural areas, children may have to walk long distances to reach the nearest school, which may not even have electricity or clean water. The lack of resources makes it difficult for schools to provide a quality education, and for students to learn effectively (Kelvin, 2024, p 3).

- 2.24. More precisely, the lack of adequate funding severely undermines the capacity of ALCs to offer quality and consistent education in several critical areas.
- 2.25. First, it adversely affects their ability to afford to hire qualified teachers — or, in some cases, even just someone to teach. This obviously has a direct and major impact on the type and standard of education an ALC is able to offer.

Money would allow us to do so many things. Being able to pay teachers would be very helpful. There is no shortage of people (refugees) who can teach, but it's just we have no money. (ALC-24)

Because we collect minimum amount of school fees, teachers are low-paid. If we can pay normal teacher's salary, would be much better. Can hire better-qualified teachers. Very packed classes, no backup teachers if a teacher is absent. Need to pay extra teachers as backup, and also so that we are not so exhausted. We carried out fundraising for teachers' salaries. (ALC-13)

Thanks to Allah who helps us a lot. There is no sustainability of finances. Every year we are not sure of the next year. No one has said we offer the rent but till now we are continuing and growing. Every year there are new classes and new students. Many ask how we manage. We ask, we find, and then we spend. Sometimes my daughters who work with me as teachers are not paid. Or I give them less salary, so no problem. (ALC-3)

We need funds for transport for the children and to pay the teachers. We want to pay the teachers a proper salary. At the moment we can't afford a BM teacher. We have tried sponsorship programme, I am still writing proposal. (ALC-28)

- 2.26. Second, insufficient financial resources constrain the ability of ALCs to afford and/or maintain suitable premises and transportation services such as vans. Without these, an ALC may be forced to close or suspend classes, as many students will be absent.

Had another emergency where the hostel roof started leaking — difficult to sleep under broken roof. Expensive to repair, will cost RM30,000. Not enough chairs, tables, computers, related to lack of funds. (ALC-17)

Children cannot pay fees, families come crying. But if we do not get enough money, we cannot run the school. I try very hard to find sponsors. I do not have funds to beautify the environment — for more than three years I cannot paint the walls, which are very dirty and need to be painted, as a clean and good environment would inspire students to study well. And I can't change the roof, which is very old. (ALC-1)

Space is not a big problem. The landlord said can take another lot. I pay rent on time. So can expand the school. Also the unit in front is also empty. But I would need another 50 children to expand, and the main thing is transport [which we don't have]. (ALC-4)

- 2.27. Third, the relative lack of options (such as proper classrooms and/or spaces for teaching, and the lack of trained teachers) and funding constraints also compromise the provision for child safeguarding and child protection. One key informant observed that what is labelled a 'safe space' may, in practice, be far from safe. Without adequate training and preparation, teachers are ill-equipped to create a genuinely protective environment, thus leaving students more vulnerable.
- 2.28. As of April 2025, the UNHCR website outlined four objectives, with Objective 2 aiming to "[e]nsure that schools are safe learning environments for refugee girls and boys and young people" (UNHCR Malaysia, n.d.). This underscores the importance of providing needs-based grants for rent, renovations, materials, and more, to enable a conducive learning environment at the ALCs. It also heralds the benefits of peace-building activities — such as sports, art, music, and other extracurricular activities — which could be developed through partnerships with third parties.
- 2.29. However, the practical reality facing most ALCs makes these aspirations difficult to realise. In the area of child protection, earlier efforts and initiatives had resulted in strong participation in training workshops and discussions, some of which focused specifically on drafting and adopting a child protection policy for ALCs (Devaraj and Lochhead, 2021). Even then, competing priorities, along with insufficient time and resources, meant that few ALCs ultimately managed to adopt a policy, let alone operationalise it across all staff, students, parents, and volunteers. This experience was echoed by a key informant (KI-3) who has worked long and hard at trying to get ALCs to adopt better child protection policies and improved child safeguarding practices.

ii. School fees

- 2.30. Left to their own devices, the majority of ALCs we interviewed rely on student fees as a source of income to stay afloat. All but one reported charging student fees, but the monthly amount varies substantially, from RM20 to RM200.
- 2.31. This revenue rarely allows an ALC to cover all its operational costs, but at least provides some level of support. The final amount, however may also be tempered by other factors. For example, to help families, all ALCs have some form of a sibling discount programme, whereby if a family enrolls more than one child, the fee per child is reduced.

- 2.32. Moreover, it is not unusual for parents to delay or miss paying student fees for one or several months, depending on their financial situation, given that refugees are, at least in principle, not legally permitted to work in Malaysia. The ALC may waive the student fee in situations where parents struggle to pay.

If they don't have money, I feel bad taking RM100 from them. All poor families. I don't have to make business. But if for example there are 5 children and RM1,000 is not being paid, how to pay the teacher. So I take money from my husband to pay salaries. If more than one child then we don't take the registration fee of RM100. Annual charges once a year of RM200 for maintenance etc. But most don't pay. I buy the stationery myself. If they cannot pay, they can still come to school. (ALC-4)

Each school's fees might be too much for a household. Even RM50 per month (higher-end schools could be more is already too much for the families, burden to parents get higher. (K-16)

iii. Donations and financial aid

- 2.33. To supplement their income, a third of the interviewed ALCs have tried raising money from the public. This has met with some success, but also runs up against some obstacles. Some ALCs may not receive money as such, but donations in kind.

Getting people to donate is difficult. There is a stigma attached to refugees — people don't want to donate. Very tough. (ALC-27)

Sometimes we are blessed, many contributions of items in one month, such as toys and books. But cash contributions are rare, and we need cash, for example for fixing van for transport. (ALC-23)

- 2.34. An additional revenue source for just over a fifth (7) of ALCs is financial aid from churches or Islamic authorities. A few have also explored other strategies, such as running social enterprises or conducting fundraising drives. One organises a student camp during school holidays to offset income loss during this period, while another draws on funds from external agencies or from supporting organisations.
- 2.35. Half a dozen ALCs sampled have benefitted from grants in the past, including from the UNHCR, USAID, and Qatar Foundation. Interviewees also reported that many wanted to apply for grants but did not know how to do so, or had applied but were rejected. At least one said that, due to legalities, it could not openly canvas for money.
- 2.36. Given the current global political climate, grants are, at best, a tenuous source of funding. For example, the UNHCR used to be able to give some ALCs grants to support salaries of teachers or provide educational resources, but this is no longer the case.

Likewise, two ALCs that received USAID funding in the past have had this income slashed considerably, with one saying it is not sure how it would manage beyond May.

- 2.37. It is worth noting from the interviews that a few ALCs are faring well. Where they have been able to tap into a solid and sustainable funding stream, their ability to provide appropriate budgets for rental, staffing, and educational resources is secure.

We must maintain fundraising efforts, but we have some dedicated funders who keep renewing [their support]. (KI-11)

It is about networking and talking to the right people. Instead of us asking for money, people are now coming back to us to ask how they can help. (KI-5)

- 2.38. For the smaller, less ‘plugged-in’ ALCs, however, the imperative of sustainable funding — and the consequences of an extremely trying funding environment — cannot be overstated. In the continued absence of overarching coordination and support, particularly for smaller centres, the burden of fundraising falls on individual ALCs. This presents major obstacles. A substantial number of interviewees reported lacking the knowledge, time, or both, to pursue fundraising effectively.

We are missing the specific skills on how to fundraise. When we apply for grants we have to talk about our school, but we don’t know what the donors are searching for and specifically what they want. Also how to use the right terminology. (ALC-3)

We have no idea or time for raising funds. (ALC-31)

- 2.39. Despite this dire situation, no ALC reported having turned away students who could not afford the monthly fees. On the contrary, the ALCs accepted whatever amounts the families could pay, and those in a position to do so would try to raise additional funds to cover any shortfall.

We make it easy for those who cannot pay. We find scholarships but not that much. Thirty students [of a total of 195 students] have scholarships. (ALC-3)

G. Management

- 2.40. The interviews highlighted the different ways that ALCs may operate in terms of decision making. In our sample, there were various actors or combination of actors who are responsible for decision-making in their respective ALCs, with the principal being the person most often involved.
- 2.41. Seven ALCs have principals as their sole decision-makers. Other combinations include principals and teachers (4), principals and one other (5), and principals and several others (4). Principals in some ALCs also are part of the Management Committee (3),

i.e. their decision-making authority. There are a handful of other ALCs where principals are not the main decision-makers. In this instance, teachers are in charge and either make decisions on their own, or may work with others such as community leaders (2), NGOs (1), or parents and board members (1).

- 2.42. Other practices include having members from the same family running the ALC, with or without the involvement of others. It is possible that day-to-day operational decisions for the ALCs is separated from strategic or policy decisions, where the latter may be in the hands of a separate board, top management, or the HQ. One ALC, whose principal is now the main decision-maker, used to have a Management Committee. This, however, was disbanded when the centre was raided. Now the community is too afraid to gather again to help the learning centre.
- 2.43. Instructively, one aspect of management that several interviewees flagged is that they have had little or no experience of managing something like an ALC. Also true is the lack of resources, that adds to these challenges.

I haven't had any experience running a learning centre — this is new for us. (ALC-30)

We are busy with students 24/7, and students also have medical issues, like stomach pain, etc. — so, managing the centre itself is a challenge. (ALC-31)

Management don't give as much support as teachers need — which is why one teacher left; but it is not negligent, I have been very busy with many responsibilities I have. This has been a challenge. I know we can be run better, but we need to work on this. Also need an assistant administrator. (ALC-16)

The headmaster has to suffer and sacrifice a lot for his school. Even if sometimes we have to discuss, or something runs out (paper, or students lose books and stationery), we have to tell him and he has to figure out these problems. (ALC-19)

- 2.44. Management is also more than just administration and the managing of classes including teachers and students. It includes having a vision and direction for the ALC, and having a team to implement this. One key informant (KI-3) talked about the importance of this.

The potential implementation of any vision is compromised by constant uncertainty of an ALC's teaching staff and finances. It is very hard to plan knowing what you can rely on, and even if the leader has a vision, there may be a disconnect between them and their teachers. Often the leader(s) may have a vision, but the teachers have no idea about it or what the expectations are on them.

3. Key takeaways

- 3.1. The findings from our interviews reaffirm what has been known for years: operating an ALC in Malaysia presents significant challenges, especially for small and under-resourced centres. What education is being provided is made possible by dedicated and hard-working individuals and groups doing their best in what can only be described as a very demanding and challenging environment.
- 3.2. While many individuals and organisations engaged in establishing or operating an ALC may be doing so to meet an obvious need, they may not necessarily have the requisite management or leadership skills. As our findings show, many have to adopt a ‘make-do’ approach and ‘learn as they go’ as they navigate an extremely difficult and often unpredictable environment.
- 3.3. These challenges are often compounded in small ALCs, where very few people are fully engaged in management decisions and day-to-day administration. The range of governance structures among the ALCs that were interviewed points to how many centres are heavily reliant on a single individual. For start-ups, the absence of accessible, practical support systems can make the early stages of operation particularly onerous.
- 3.4. In addition, many ALCs generally operate in isolation, without meaningful connections to other ALCs or support networks. This is often not by choice, but a result of being overwhelmed by the daily demands of running their learning centres.
- 3.5. Underlying all of these challenges is the critical issue of funding, which is imperative to starting or running an ALC. While a few operators have, through sustained effort and time, secured sufficient funding to feel reasonably stable for the future, the reality for the majority — particularly, again, the smaller ALCs — is that funding is neither sufficient nor guaranteed. Many centres operate on a hand-to-mouth basis, and financial instability hampers not only the ability to provide quality education but also any form of long-term planning.
- 3.6. A recent UNICEF report on Malaysia’s progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 advocates not only for greater resource mobilisation to meet the educational needs of vulnerable children, but also for incentives to be expanded and barriers dismantled so that this process becomes easier. More importantly, it also draws attention to “the lack of inclusive laws and policies, curriculums, schools and communities; issues surrounding data, limited funding and governance” (UNICEF, 2023, p 79). Without significant and meaningful reforms — especially those that lie squarely within the remit of the Malaysian Government — the status quo will persist: only around 35 per cent of refugee and asylum seeker school-age children in Malaysia will access any form of education (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025a).
- 3.7. The sections that follow will explore the issues ALCs face with regard to teachers, students, and curriculum choices. They will further underscore the scale of the challenges — and the extraordinary efforts by those within ALCs to overcome them.

Section B: Students

4. Profile

A. Level of education offered

- 4.1. The largest number of refugee-school aged children in Malaysia are enrolled in ALCs that offer primary education (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025a). This may explain why in our study, all but one of the 31 ALCs offer primary classes. In our sample, however, there are slightly more ALCs that cater to both primary and secondary students (51.6 per cent, 16) versus those who solely provide primary education (45.2 per cent, 14). Only one ALC interviewed focuses solely on secondary students.
- 4.2. There is a vast difference between what ALCs are offering as education compared to what is on offer in the Malaysian public school system. This applies to many of the components of education, and includes what grades are offered. Not all ALCs offer the full range of grades (i.e. from Standard 1 to Standard 6, and Form 1 to Form 6). One primary ALC, for example, has a 12-year-old enrolled but only goes up to third grade (ALC-30).
- 4.3. A few primary centres have enrolled children as young as four to five years of age. This happens because parents have no other alternative if they have to work, and there is no one at home to look after the children.

Some send their children to school so that they are not home alone. [They] treat school as [a] childcare centre. We face this situation many times. (ALC-7)

- 4.4. The difference between local schools and ALCs is also pronounced at the secondary level, where it is not uncommon for the latter to only offer lower secondary classes. Many of these also have small student numbers. They may go no further than year 8 or like one ALC, offer just two subjects for its year 7 class.
- 4.5. Refugee-run Rohingya ALCs we interviewed appear particularly challenged. Besides two that have only just started secondary classes, one ALC in Kelantan that reports that it offers secondary education, uses the primary syllabus to teach them. Another that has both primary and secondary students places them in the same classroom but gives the latter “more work to do” (ALC-28).
- 4.6. Hours and days of schooling also vary. Where local schools largely have two half-day sessions, the majority of ALCs run for 3.5 to 4 hours a day, five days a week. There was one ALC that has a four-day week, while another very small one has classes for just two hours a day, three days a week.
- 4.7. What level of grades some ALCs offer appear largely dependent on the students or teachers they have. A few that presently provide primary education alone have plans to start secondary classes next year, mainly because their current batch of Primary 6 students want to continue studying where they are. Some provide secondary education on the same needs basis, i.e., having a class if there are students or offering one or two

subjects for those preparing for exams like the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). Needs-based provision also means that some ALCs may have offered higher levels of secondary education before but stopped when there were no students or teachers available.

- 4.8. A well-established ALC with a few branches, all located outside the Klang Valley, has responded to the demand for primary education by older children who have never been to school, through an accelerated primary programme. Through this, students above 12 years of age complete primary education within four years. In an uncommon success story for refugee ALCs, it has had one 20-year-old student taking these classes and three years later, sit for the IGCSE. The same student is now pursuing a university degree in the Philippines.

The system is laid out, we motivate them, and they need to do the rest.
(ALC-5)

- 4.9. Another ALC, according to a key informant (KI-7), also has a fast-track system in place for older students who lack primary education to prep them for secondary education.

B. Profile of students: age, ethnicity, gender

- 4.10. Like most Malaysian school-going children, the majority of refugee children start primary education at around six to seven years old. The similarities end there.
- 4.11. In the sample we studied, only a handful of ALCs have students completing sixth grade at 12 years of age. The rest have primary students who are older than this bracket, many of whom are older teenagers. At least in two ALCs, some in their early 20s have enrolled at this level. The 17 ALCs that offer secondary education have students whose ages largely range from 13 to the early 20s. One has a 24-year-old taking the IGCSE. Several said that their students were grouped “according to ability, not age”.
- 4.12. Of the 31 ALCs interviewed, 14 had “only Rohingya” or “mainly Rohingya students”; 10 had “mainly one ethnicity/nationality (not Rohingya)”, four had “mainly others and some Rohingya” students; and three had “mixed ethnicity/nationality, not Rohingya”. Six of the 14 Rohingya-majority ALCs offer solely primary education, while eight provide a mix of primary and secondary education. These ALCs servicing Rohingya students are largely located outside the Klang Valley.
- 4.13. The largest representation of refugee students from other ethnic or national groups also come from Myanmar: Kachin, Chin, Zomi, Burmese/Myanmar Muslim, Mon, Burmese Tamil/Myanmar Hindu, Shan, Matupi. There are smaller numbers of Afghan, Somalian, Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Yemeni, Syrian, Pakistani, Sudanese, and Egyptian refugees. They predominantly study in the Klang Valley.
- 4.14. Overall, there are more boys than girls in the ALCs interviewed. The gap at the primary level, however, is smaller than that for secondary education. At the primary level, 12 ALCs — regardless of size, location and ethnicities/nationalities — reported having more male students. However, eight ALCs have more girls and ten have roughly the same number of male and female primary students. In contrast, nine ALCs that provide

secondary education have more boys versus four with more girls. Only three had an approximately equal gender balance among its secondary students.

- 4.15. According to a few interviewees, the major reason why boys outnumber girls in some ALCs is because the former are privileged.

Boys have more opportunity than girls to study. If finances are no good, girls do not get sent to school. (ALC-1)

If they have two or three children, they will prioritise the boys to go to school. (ALC-17)

- 4.16. Another is because some families, particularly among the Rohingya and Myanmar Muslims, still do not send daughters for schooling once they reach puberty, although this is likely to be changing.

They are kept at home to learn how to manage a house, with a view to them getting married. (ALC-25)

- 4.17. In the case of an ALC whose male to female ratio was 30:70, there were much fewer boys because they are sent to study and board at a madrasah school. Since most parents are working and cannot manage their sons, they believe that the madrasah will instil better discipline. Another ALC said that having more male students was a relatively new development for them; they have always had more girls before.

- 4.18. Almost three-quarters of the ALCs (23) felt that this sex ratio did not change much from year to year. At the same time, the heads of two ALCs believe that active engagement with parents — e.g. talking to them about avoiding child marriage — is why they have seen more teenage girls enrolled in recent times. One other believed that there are now more girls coming to the learning centre.

That's why it is now 50/50. Not like before where girls stay home. When they come to Malaysia, they change, the culture is changing. (ALC-3)

C. Number of students and class size

- 4.19. As noted earlier, the majority of ALCs are small with fewer than 100 students. Of these, five (16.1 per cent) have under 25 students including the two smallest outfits with 11 and 12 students respectively. Of the nine that are slightly larger, i.e., with 100 or more students, only three (9.7 per cent) have a substantial student population, i.e. more than 250 students. None of them, however, goes much further than the 500-student mark.
- 4.20. The most common class size is small, i.e., under 20 students (54.8 per cent, 17). There are 13 ALCs with larger classes, each with 20 to 29 students on average. Only one ALC,

with a total of over 500 students across its different locations, runs classes that are bigger, i.e. with 30 to 39 students each.

- 4.21. As suggested previously, demand for places in learning centres for refugees and asylum seekers can depend on a number of factors, including accessibility, safety, and finances. This means that some grades, especially lower ones, can have larger classroom numbers compared to higher grades. For example, the biggest class for one ALC is grade 1, which has 31 students. Its secondary classes, however, have only 14 to 19 students each. Classroom size also depends on how much space and number of teachers an ALC has. It is not clear if the larger ALCs with small classroom sizes deliberately keep their class numbers low to facilitate better management.

D. Attendance and dropout rates

- 4.22. Generally, students in all the ALCs interviewed attend classes regularly. At least ten have a high attendance rate of 85 to 100 per cent. The lowest rate is around 70 per cent. Very few students are missing from class every day. This good attendance rate can be attributed to several approaches undertaken by the different ALCs.
- 4.23. Being vigilant about attendance such as tracking children's daily attendance in a database and keeping parents informed, having a reward system to incentivise students to attend school, following up with students if they have missed classes and requiring students to inform their teachers if they will be absent, are some examples. Other factors include having a tried and tested curriculum, and proximity or easy access to an ALC. Some ALCs offer transportation services, usually for an additional fee, to make it easier for consistent student attendance.
- 4.24. Gaining the trust of parents and making them understand the importance of educating their children is also an important factor. One of the ALCs pointed out that regular student attendance "*nampak cantik sekarang*" ("looks good now") (ALC-18) but was previously a struggle, when the teachers did not have a relationship with the parents. Reaching this point thus requires an ALC to make the effort to meet parents and build a connection with them. This point was also made by a key informant who acknowledged the importance of community liaison workers who helped raised the understanding of the importance of education among parents (KI-5).
- 4.25. The most common reason for student absenteeism is being unwell or ill. Other reasons include having no transport and/or living too far, parents needing to go outstation to attend to work matters and being unable to leave them at home alone, working part-time, and inclement weather. Sometimes during the fasting month (Ramadan), attendance is "low or not so regular" (ALC-4). Safety is also a concern: there are occasions where students do not turn up because they hear of a possible raid and, in some cases they have been stopped or detained by immigration or other authorities on their way to the ALCs.
- 4.26. There is little to distinguish the number of boys and girls who are absent. It is likely that there is a gender disparity in some households, whereby girls are more likely to be kept back to help look after siblings or do household chores, while boys, especially older ones, are sent out to earn an income.

- 4.27. The dropout rate among those interviewed is capped at around 10 per cent, and not many have had students who “drop out altogether”. In fact, almost a quarter (24.1 per cent, 7) said they did not have any student drop out last year. If and when they did drop out, reasons reported included relocation, resettlement in a different country, financial issues, health issues, transportation challenges and fear of encountering authorities.
- 4.28. Lack of parental awareness and support of children’s education in general, and girls’ education in particular, was also a reason for students dropping out, and contributed in some cases to girls being kept at home to perform household chores or prepare for early marriage. Boys who stopped schooling did so to supplement their family income or support their family in cases where their parents are unwell. Both boys and girls who leave for paid employment likely do not want to study anymore or are not doing well academically. They see “no future for them in studying” (ALC-26), or give up because “they cannot catch up” (ALC-22).
- 4.29. Although only a few ALCs raised the subject of early marriage in the discussion about girls dropping out — and even then, this was more to make the point that they had experienced this in the past — those who did cited parents and culture as the main reason for this phenomenon.

Parents usually say that they have no money to take care of their daughter, so let her husband take care [of her]. (ALC-12)

- 4.30. All these ALCs are unanimous about discouraging early marriage, and making sure their students and their parents know this.

We fight so that they remain in school. We tell the students not to marry early and if their parents insist after the girls say “no”, we tell the parents to come to speak with us. (ALC-12)

E. Enrolment capacity

- 4.31. In terms of capacity levels, almost 40 per cent (12, 38.7 per cent) of the sampled ALCs are operating at full capacity. Only seven have a waiting list, which ranges from under 10 to 150 students. Two ALCs that are full do not keep a waiting list because they do not have sufficient space to accommodate new students. Another two do not have a waiting list because one “never turns anyone away” (ALC-6), while the other “mostly accepts students who want to enrol” (ALC-8). Due to lack of infrastructure and too many students, two ALCs conduct two sessions a day.
- 4.32. There are different definitions of what constitutes ‘full capacity’. Among those that are not full, three could take in more students but do not have enough teachers. Others can only accommodate more students in certain classes; and in instances involving ALCs with several branches, these may only be full in some locations. A few also have a transportation wait list. One ALC felt that even though it could still accommodate more students, the fact that it had not obtained UNHCR recognition meant its status was insecure.

Most parents contact us saying they want their children to join [the school] but they are waiting because we do not have that letter [from the UNHCR] so it is not safe for their children to attend. (ALC-30)

- 4.33. It is not unusual for parents whose children want to enrol in an ALC that is already full, to be redirected to other ALCs. Some parents have been asked to wait, or to come back the following year.

F. From primary to secondary education

- 4.34. Students in more than four-fifths of the 31 ALCs interviewed continue to secondary learning centres when they have completed their primary education, with the numbers evenly divided between continuing at the same ALC's secondary facility or going to a different ALC. There are also cases where students carry on their secondary education up to the highest level possible at the same centre, before transferring out into another ALC.
- 4.35. Among the secondary ALCs mentioned were Dignity, IDEAS Academy, MIKS, New Life, El-Shaddai, Cahaya Surya Bakti, United Arakan Institute Malaysia, Ruth, Fugee School, and, for some from Myanmar, their respective community ALCs. However, access to some of these ALCs is limited as not every student has the financial means or a UNHCR card, which may be an entry requirement. Some ALCs are able to find sponsorship for their students but this is not easy.
- 4.36. Almost a third of the 31 ALCs reported that they have had a few students who stop schooling after completing primary education. The most common explanations for this are financial including leaving to find a job, and cost of transportation, as well as relocation or resettlement. In one case, an ALC absorbed two of its students whose English was good, as its teachers. Another felt that if its students wanted to continue studying, they can, but this ALC's focus is not on preparing them for academia. Instead, it is to prepare these children for work, "we help them to have an edge over others to get a job" (ALC-22).
- 4.37. None of the ALCs offering primary education had an 'exit exam' for students going from grade 6 (primary) to grade 7 (secondary). Instead, many centres have internally-set exams at least once or more than once, a year — which their respective students have to take at every grade before being allowed to move onto the next level. Some of the primary ALC students who want to move on to secondary education had to first take an entrance exam set by the new ALC before they could be admitted.
- 4.38. Of the 17 ALCs that offer secondary classes, very few (29.4 per cent, 5) said they offered standardised exams. Each of these have around 100 or more students (primary and secondary), i.e. are among the larger refugee learning centres interviewed. Four have students sitting for one or more external exams such as Cambridge O Level (1 ALC), General Education Development (GED) (3), or IGCSE (3), while the fifth ALC internally sets an exam that is common across all its branches.
- 4.39. Only four ALCs have had more than ten students who obtained secondary qualifications in the last five years. This ranged from 16 students in one ALC, to 73 in another. The

latter has been operating for over ten years and has students doing either the IGCSE or GED, where “almost all of them obtained secondary qualifications in the last five years” (ALC-8).

G. Beyond schooling

- 4.40. A number of ALCs in our study said that upon completing secondary education, their students either went on to look for work, started working or carried on with further studies, provided they did not relocate or resettle.
- 4.41. Only very few of the ALCs try to provide vocational pathways, i.e. training and employment in different areas — baking, hair styling, graphic design, computer and handphone repairs or car repairs — for their students. One ALC has a post-secondary programme for male students focusing on vocational training and employment in collaboration with a private educational institution, but this is not the experience of many others who find it hard to connect with affordable training centres that will accept refugee students, and provide certification for those who complete their training.
- 4.42. A few link their students to the higher education options for refugee and asylum-seeking children, which include, among others, the Fugee Org Hi-Ed programme, UNHCR Education Pathways, and the University of the People (online). Some of the institutions require enrolling students to have UNHCR cards. Fees are generally required, although one academic institution is known to offer a 50 per cent discount for UNHCR card holders.
- 4.43. Several countries are involved in the UNHCR Education Pathways programme that was introduced in 2022. The Philippines, however, is the only one that will accept students without passports (e.g., Rohingya). One ALC has successfully sent eight such students to this course, with another five due to start this year.
- 4.44. While most of the secondary ALCs do not have a programme to support further higher education for their students, just over half of those interviewed know about different scholarships and programmes that support students, including scholarships or financial support by, among others, Fugee Org and UNHCR.

5. Key takeaways

- 5.1. The number of ALCs in the peninsula appears to be growing (see SUHAKAM, 2024 and UNHCR Malaysia, 2025a). However, this progress is still very slow and does not cater to the actual number of refugee and asylum-seeking children who need access to education. This situation is of greater concern against a steady increase in the number of students at ALCs.
- 5.2. In our study, primary ALCs for refugee and asylum-seeking children were double the number of those offering secondary education. This matches the pattern at the national and global level where the majority of these children are enrolled in primary education, while numbers drop drastically at the secondary level (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025a).
- 5.3. In general, the standard of education provided is remedial at best, a consequence of the previously mentioned challenges around funding, affecting choice of teachers, building,

resources and capacity. These ALCs already have to juggle many different demands, ranging from parents who may need to be persuaded to send their sons and daughters for schooling regularly, to those who regard them as childcare centres for younger children because other options are non-existent. They also have to manage children with different learning needs including those who are older and have no primary education even though well into their teens. Against this, ensuring that quality education is provided is an even greater struggle.

- 5.4. The quality of educational provision the ALCs are able to offer — especially the smaller ALCs — varies according to a number of factors. Moreover, because there is no uniform ‘exit exam’ in any of the primary ALCs sampled, there is no way to gauge the standard of education offered. There is better ‘quality control’ in a few secondary ALCs as these follow an international curriculum. Nonetheless, they are a small minority, and have the privilege of experience and resources. For the rest of the secondary ALCs, what is on offer can be ad hoc and arbitrary.
- 5.5. Students enrolled at the refugee learning centres are of diverse ages. While some are age-appropriate for their respective grades, others are older. The latter are usually grouped by ability, not age. This age variation is more pronounced at the secondary level, where students as old as 24 years of age are registered to sit for the IGCSE exams. Many of them have endured disrupted and traumatic lives.
- 5.6. There are ALCs that try to support such students by providing them with an accelerated route to complete their education, such as foundation classes. The case cited above, of the student who participated in the accelerated primary programme of ALC-5 at the age of 20, and then went on to successfully sit for the IGCSE exams three years later, is just one example of how “refugee learners can excel with the right opportunities” (UNHCR, 2024). Without detracting from the individual efforts of such students, it is clear that institutionalising a system of accelerated learning has been very beneficial in ensuring that education remains accessible and inclusive.
- 5.7. The majority of refugee learning centres cater to students from Myanmar, who comprise the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, and of which the Rohingya are the largest ethnic group. The Kachin, Chin, Zomi, Myanmar Muslim, and other ethnic minorities from the country are also represented. Smaller numbers of Afghan, Somalian, Palestinian, Yemeni, Syrian, Pakistani, Sudanese, and Egyptian refugees and asylum seekers make up the rest of the students of ALCs. While the majority of those providing for Rohingya students are located outside the Klang Valley, the reverse is true of most of the ALCs for other ethnic groups and non-Myanmar nationalities.
- 5.8. ALCs with fewer than 100 students are the most common. Only a handful have a substantial number of students. Beyond these are a few ALCs with even larger student populations, but which were not part of our survey sample. Regardless of the size of their student population, classroom sizes are generally small, i.e. fewer than 20 students each. This is likely to be more a reflection of the capacity of an ALC — most are hampered by building space and challenges relating to teaching staff — rather than necessarily be a deliberate decision to have a classroom size that is optimal for teaching.
- 5.9. The sex ratio of the ALCs surveyed is generally in line with the national pattern, where boys outnumber girls. The disparity at the primary level is not as great as that at the

secondary level. In the former too, there are even more girls than boys in some centres, or both are present in roughly equal numbers. Early marriage, which several ALCs said had previously been an issue, appears to be less of a barrier to female education now. This is likely the result of years of community-based actions by a range of actors, not least those running the ALCs.

- 5.10. For financial reasons, there are boys and girls who stop schooling after they complete primary education, but not in great numbers. Boys leave to work to supplement the family income “when they are as tall as their fathers”, and girls leave when they reach puberty. They are then expected to help with domestic work and prepare for marriage.
- 5.11. On the whole, the attendance rate across the board is good, and there are few dropouts. Again, this is thanks to ongoing efforts that have targeted improving parental awareness on the importance of education for their children. It also helps that the children enjoy being at the learning centres. Major challenges remain, such as the cost of schooling and transportation fees, and students who fear for their safety when encountering road blocks or raids. Not all ALCs believe in pushing their students to continue studying if they are not cut out for or keen on academic pursuits. Instead, it prepares them for work.
- 5.12. Only a few secondary ALCs offer standardised exams (Cambridge O Level, GED, and IGCSE), which are very expensive to sit for. Also, not many students take these exams because they have not yet attained the academic competencies required. If they succeed against the odds, they may still not have access to higher education due to the financial cost involved. Without passports, those like the Rohingya have an added obstacle to overcome since this is an entrance requirement into many tertiary institutions. Those opting for vocational pathways may not fare any better as this also have issues relating to the acceptance of refugee students, certification, and affordability. The future of these students remains bleak, given that refugees in Malaysia do not have the right to work.

Section C: Teachers

6. Profile

- 6.1. The information presented in this section of the report discusses the profile of ALC teachers: who they are, what their status is, and what qualifications they have. It presents the challenges of salaries and issues related to recruitment and retention, as well as a range of information relating to teacher training and development.

A. Who are the teachers?

- 6.2. There is a mix of refugees and non-refugees teaching at the 31 ALCs interviewed. These teachers may be full-time or part-time, women or men, and paid or unpaid. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of ALCs have a higher number of women teachers than men, and five of them (16.1 per cent) have only women teachers.
- 6.3. Nine of the refugee-run ALCs have refugee teachers as their only paid full-time staff. Another four have paid full-timers who comprise refugees and locals. Three do not

remunerate their refugee staff. This includes one that only pays its non-refugee teachers while refugee teachers are volunteers. Here, the observation from a key informant may be pertinent.

There is a chasm between educators and persons who are teachers out of the goodness of their heart or because they are refugees and really want to help but with little idea of classroom, curriculum, and so on. (KI-8)

- 6.4. The advantage of having refugee teachers may be that they are more familiar with the backgrounds, culture and languages of their students; and better placed to working with parents and others in the community for them to better support education. This is in line with the UNHCR Malaysia's own goal of "support[ing] community-based structures in order to stimulate and increase community participation and self management" (2019), and part of a commitment to the wider empowerment of the refugee community.
- 6.5. Refugee teachers might better mediate wider advocacy goals, and if there are moves to integrate the children of refugees and asylum seekers into a more mainstream Malaysian system, having refugee teachers in place will help community-based explanation and advocacy of what is happening, to include what refugee parents and others need to do to help the process along.
- 6.6. However, where there is an intention to follow a particular curriculum, possibly taught in English, some refugee teachers may find it hard to assimilate, let alone practice, the kind of pedagogy and syllabus that may be more than a little unfamiliar. This may be overcome where refugee teachers are recruited from among students of the ALC who have already been exposed to the subjects and the teaching.

B. Recruitment

- 6.7. The recruitment of teachers, whether refugee or non-refugee, would seem to be mainly through informal, local networks or by self-referrals. Two-thirds of those interviewed recruited through spreading the word via their communities, friends, personal connections, church members and former students. Others mentioned using social media, recruiting from within their alumni, word of mouth or through recommendations.

For the [refugee] teachers, we use Facebook. for the Malaysian teachers, it is through friends and [past] volunteers. (ALC-7)

[A newly-arrived-refugee from-Myanmar said] I found out about this job [outside the Klang Valley] through the online community group site of an established KL-based refugee organisation. The headmaster of my ALC had asked this organisation to help him find teachers for the school he had just set up. (ALC-19)

We used to go around and sing [invited] at some events — choir. If they are interested in our school and are professionals and can teach science or math etc., then we recruit them. We don't go out to recruit them. They offer their services. (ALC-26)

- 6.8. For many of the smaller, less-resourced ALCs, there is very little choice as to whom is recruited. Small refugee-run ALCs may rely completely on one or two persons, possibly supplemented by persons from the community. Even larger, better-resourced ALCs may have trouble finding appropriate teaching staff.

The main challenge is full time teachers or volunteers who can come in for one or two full days, not just a few hours a day. This is to replace some of us who can't make it. The full-time teachers are overloaded and there are not enough teachers to cover four classes. As we are able to pay, we thought we would be able to find teachers but they are also not interested, and retirees say they have no time. We also need to see the refugee teachers as many can't speak English and it is difficult to find someone with experience to teach and manage the class. (ALC-22)

- 6.9. In turn, this limits possibilities.

We are wanting to expand to a three-day week but are limited by lack of teachers because we run classes during working hours. Only retirees can teach during working hours; we could get more help from teachers who are working. We have talked about evening classes but challenges with transportation. (ALC-16)

C. Salaries

- 6.10. One of the key issues relating to teachers is that of remuneration. So many ALCs simply do not have sufficient funds and therefore cannot afford to pay their teachers the salary that would be commensurate if benchmarked against a regular salary of a teacher. The fact that they cannot afford to do so results in some ALCs not being able to employ all their teachers on a full-time basis, and making do with what they can afford and/or turn to volunteers.
- 6.11. From the interviews, over half the ALCs pay teachers a monthly salary, albeit with a considerable range of between RM400 to RM4,300. Most pay between RM1,000 and RM2,000 (54.8 per cent, 17). In some instances, teachers reportedly forgo some portion of their salary if funds are insufficient, or they are paid late. Sometimes, they take on a second job to make ends meet.
- 6.12. The issue of status may affect remuneration. It was reported that sometimes, if an ALC has both refugee and non-refugee teachers, non-refugee local teachers may be paid the minimum wage of RM1,700 since this is a legal requirement, whereas non-Malaysians (notably refugees) may be paid less.

- 6.13. How much a teacher is paid ties in to the wider question of from where an ALC is able to secure funding. Without secure income streams, a teacher's pay may be affected, and would therefore impact the quality of the education being provided.

Because we collect a minimum amount of school fees, teachers are low-paid. If we can pay normal teacher's salary, it would be much better. We can hire better-qualified teachers. Now there are very packed classes, no backup teachers if a teacher is absent. (ALC-13)

- 6.14. In the past there were some possibilities of support, from the UNHCR, for example. It paid teachers from Myanmar RM500/month, but on the condition that they had UNHCR cards and the ALC had more than 50 students. These teachers were also required to go for training for a year before the UNHCR compensated them. This no longer applies. As noted previously, the funding environment for most ALCs is highly challenging. There is unlikely to be anyone doing full-time fundraising other than key persons tapping into friends and networks that they already know.
- 6.15. Some working practices may be introduced possibly as a result of financial constraints. For example, a few ALCs have a probation period for their new teachers, during which time they are under a different salary arrangement. One ALC used to pay its new teachers a daily rate while they were on probation but since this year, it has had to stop this practice due to budget cuts. The centre now fully relies on volunteers or part-timers. Two others require new staff to first volunteer for 3-6 months before accepting them as full-fledged teachers. One gets those joining for the first time to sign a form stating that they will volunteer for the first six months, after which they get a salary (RM1,000/month).
- 6.16. The consequences of any lack of ability to pay teachers properly are clear. It will affect the sort of teacher an ALC can attract and retain, translating into the sort of quality of education that can be provided in the classroom. It is a fundamental issue facing the level of provision of education for the children of refugees and asylum seekers.

D. Qualifications

- 6.17. One consequence of the lack of capacity of ALCs to pay teachers a proper salary is, unsurprisingly, a profile of teachers within the ALC ecosystem with comparative lack of qualifications. It might be noted here too that, where ALCs are using refugee teachers, many of these — perhaps especially the Rohingya — are unlikely to have had the opportunity to acquire a professional qualification.
- 6.18. Our interviews showed that, at one end of the spectrum, one-third of the ALCs do not have a single staff with a teaching certificate or diploma. At the other end, are five larger and better-resourced ALCs, each with between 60-150 students, where between three-quarters and all of their teachers have some type of qualifications.

- 6.19. At the eight other ALCs, there is a mixture of those teachers with qualifications and those without, often volunteers. For example, there was one instance where all eight full-timers at an ALC have teaching certificates or diplomas, but its 15 volunteers do not. In other cases:

Out of the 14 teachers, maybe around one or two have a certificate. Around nine have diplomas, not a teaching diploma but diplomas in other subjects. None of them are qualified teachers. It is rare for a qualified person to work full time in a CSO [civil society organisation]. (ALC-7)

30 per cent have teaching background, 70 per cent don't. (ALC-13)

I cannot run the learning centre if I focus on [only those with a teaching] diploma. (ALC-23)

- 6.20. This gives rise to the situation where ALCs make do with what they can get.

They are not trained but they can teach because they know the subject. They don't have teaching certificates. (ALC-26)

- 6.21. The question inevitably arises: What is the quality of education being delivered if a teacher is not trained to teach or does not have relevant qualifications? How does a teacher cope with issues like class management?

E. Volunteer teachers

- 6.22. Slightly fewer than half of the ALCs interviewed (45.2 per cent) use volunteer teachers. This is more common in non-refugee-run ALCs, where perhaps contacts for prospective volunteers are greater. At the same time, there are downsides to the use of such teachers.

We have to be picky when it comes to agreeing to volunteers. Some are too ad hoc, [or] just want to come one-off. We say 'No'. These are doing for themselves, it does not help the school . . . [such involvement] is disruptive. (ALC-5)

- 6.23. Others find it hard to find volunteers.

Now it is hard to find volunteers. Very few are willing. I posted many adverts on social media and shared in our network but we got very few replies. Not working out. So we decided to pay at least for part-timers to retain some teachers. At the beginning was easier. (ALC-17)

Because the newcomers [volunteers] are of different ages, we don't know where to place them. They might be older but they don't know English. Need more volunteer teachers to communicate with these students in English. Need to separate out more classes [according to level/grade]. Some in the class understand but others are struggling. But there is not enough teachers and space. (ALC-29)

- 6.24. The issues related to volunteers may be more significant where ALCs are relying on volunteers for core teaching. Where they are used to supplement the provision on offer, the use of volunteers becomes potentially more positive.

We are interested in volunteer teachers for art classes and other activities. (ALC-21)

- 6.25. Where ALCs use volunteers because they cannot afford otherwise, there are some instances of support. In one centre, "teachers get 'pocket money' if there is left-over money after paying the rental" (ALC-31), while in another their refugee teachers may receive a token "love gift" (ALC-7) from the school, but only when there is a balance of funds.

F. Teacher numbers and turnover

- 6.26. Of the ALCs surveyed, slightly more than half (54.8 per cent) had between one to six teachers while another third (35.5 per cent) have more than 10 teachers. Generally, ALCs with larger student populations have more teachers. However, any correlation between the number of teachers and the number of students may be misleading simply because of the challenging situation facing ALCs. For example, one ALC has only 12 students but 11 teachers, because each one volunteers to teach only two hours a day.
- 6.27. Overall, there is teacher turnover in most centres but this is not necessarily an issue. Around two-thirds of the ALCs accept it is a given. The reasons for teachers leaving include looking for better prospects (including better salaries), relocation within Malaysia, resettlement, or for health reasons.

Most teachers we have are passionate about teaching. We are doing for humanity cause, not for profit making purpose. We don't pay a lot so we accept them leaving, [but ask that they] just tell us in advance. (ALC-8)

We don't have issues. Trust God will provide. Whenever a teacher leaves, we have a teacher coming in. God is good and we will find ways. (ALC-6)

- 6.28. For smaller ALCs in particular, there are consequences when teachers leave. These include managing a continuity of delivery of education to the students and insufficient staff to manage a potentially changed teaching load.

Every year one teacher leaves. *Hilang satu macam hilang sepuluh* [Losing one is like losing ten [teachers]]. . . . I am supposed to focus on admin and funding but I can't as I am now busy teaching and preparing for the next day. For the time being we are not actively looking for a new teacher as it is a budget issue. (ALC-18)

We have a problem. Our salary is not that much. If they have other opportunities for higher salary they go. We train them and we give them a chance, then they go to another school for higher salary. Every year the teachers change. It is a big challenge for us. No sustainability for the students as each teacher has their own way of teaching. (ALC-3)

- 6.29. This situation has been reported in other studies. For example:

Many especially in the smaller organisations face difficulties because of this. Training and support of those working or volunteering for the organisation then becomes a challenge. Turnover of staff may preclude consistent capacity, since one is constantly having to retrain and recalibrate. Further, where the person 'lost' is a key figure in the organisation, the loss may be even more keenly felt. Training is already limited to a few people in an organisation. If the one with the most 'training' and experience is 'lost', it may take the organisation several steps backward. (Devaraj and Lochhead, 2021)

- 6.30. Additionally, from some years ago, the same experience:

The constant need for new teachers in refugee schools is problematic since teachers' salaries are quite low in comparison to the competencies required. As a consequence, some schools have a limited number of teachers and cannot ensure the replacement of teachers when they need to attend trainings or fulfil administrative tasks. . . . Teacher absenteeism also impacts the motivation of students (Rahman, 2011).

G. Teacher well-being

- 6.31. During the interviews conducted, it was apparent that many of those running the refugee learning centres and their teachers, are extremely stretched and overworked. Very few of them, however, have contemplated learning about self-care as a way to continue being effective teachers. Only one ALC was explicit about why this was important.

We need to learn, we don't know how to take care of ourselves. Easy to get burnout. Stress management also needed so that stress doesn't turn into anger when students are too noisy. . . . We control ourselves mostly but want to know how to chill down in a noisy class with students who refuse to listen. Especially for new teachers, students sometimes seem to bully them. (ALC-13)

- 6.32. Teacher well-being is an issue which deserves attention and has been raised elsewhere (see Mendenhall and Henderson, 2024). The teachers in ALCs work in difficult situations without adequate funding (salaries) or support (training) for the work they do. They play a variety of roles including but not limited to managing students in the classroom, engaging with parents or the community and sometimes also dealing with authorities. All of these will have an impact on a teacher's well-being. They deserve sufficient support to ensure burnout does not occur, the consequences of which impact on the delivery of education to students in ALCs.

H. Teacher training

- 6.33. Teacher training is an obvious way to supplement the skills and knowledge of teachers working in ALCs, which, as already suggested, is seriously lacking (Kelvin, 2024). The interviews we conducted revealed a high demand for teacher training (93.5 per cent, 29).

We want more training for sure. For me, we have to improve and be creative, understand new methods and whether or not these are good for our students. As a *sekolah NGO* [NGO school], we can freely experiment on what is a good method. New training and knowledge will help. (ALC-18)

It would be very wonderful [to have more]. (ALC-13)

Especially for new teachers, they must attend at least once or twice. (ALC-23)

i. Training topics

- 6.34. Classroom management was one of the two most popular training topics picked by the ALCs we interviewed. This is connected to pedagogy.

Teaching methods as teachers do not have a background in education. We don't know the pedagogy on how to teach, even though we might know the topic. How to *tarik perhatian mereka* [get their attention]. How to adapt and handle the students with patience, not get emotional. (ALC-18)

The reason we are conducting the class is we want the students to get something from it. I visited some refugee schools where they just open the books and teach and don't know if the kids got the lesson or not. This year emphasis is on lesson plans and teachers have to do it in advance and we check weekly. The lesson objective is important. (ALC-29)

Teaching skills, how to summarise lessons. How to teach a refugee child. As refugee students are from different races/ groups and have different mindset from other kids. We have different ways of learning. How to teach a Chin refugee kid, Burmese refugee kid — kids of different backgrounds. Forty per cent of the kids here are not with their parents. A lot of the time they can't catch up with the lessons, not because they are lazy but because of the stress and the other duties at home. (ALC-7)

- 6.35. In recent times, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a subject of much focus in educational circles. This is true too for those involved in providing education to children of refugees and asylum seekers, including the ALCs we interviewed. Among them, SEL was as popular as classroom management as a training interest.

In 2021 during lockdown, Health Equity Initiatives was running SEL training. We went for training, we got paid. We were so happy to attend those kinds of trainings. (ALC-13)

- 6.36. Many of our key informants also mentioned SEL as an essential part of thinking about syllabi for ALCs catering to the children of refugees and asylum seekers. For Equal Start, who are currently reviewing curricula and looking at recommending key components for use across all ALCs, SEL is a key component and is one reason why it may not be good enough to rely on digital education only, even where this is possible.
- 6.37. In some cases, SEL is connected more with learning how to deal with refugee and asylum-seeking children who may have experienced trauma and/or come from a difficult past as survivors of conflict situations. For some, this translates into interest in wider issues of mental health.

Bad behaviour is not normal [for] students. Because of what they saw and their current problems in the home and it reflects in the school. Need some counselling and one who can handle these students to be positive and handle their trauma. For the teachers is training — well-being and trauma care training. (ALC-3)

- 6.38. Handling diverse learners or children with learning difficulties was also raised by some.

This year I proposed to Taylors to help provide training regarding students with learning disabilities. We want this kind of training as well... [they] can't catch up with the lesson and we don't know how to handle these students. We applied many strategies but still not working. Special developmental and learning needs. (ALC-17)

Yes, every year we have 2-3 children with special needs. Some module to help teachers would be useful. (ALC-25)

We have one or two students with ADHD. They can't cope with primary level so they are in kindergarten where they function better. If we cannot cope with a student, we will tell the parents. Special needs students need special needs to help them. Having a toy library helps. (ALC-6)

- 6.39. With regard to digital education, even though this may not have emerged as a key priority for the ALCs surveyed — understandably, given all the challenges outlined above — it is still important to consider how this mode of learning can help provide inclusive and quality education.
- 6.40. Around the world, the digital revolution has opened up new possibilities including for education, which many have advocated offer serious 'solutions' to providing quality education for children, not least in marginalised communities. The arguments include that it is readily and possibly more cheaply accessible — thus no need to set up expensive physical ALCs with all the issues of teachers, transport, funding etc. — and offers curricula which are standardised and professionally curated.
- 6.41. Conversely, the challenges include issues of accessibility (internet connections may or may not be available or sustainable to those in marginalised communities and certainly cost money), cost of equipment and maintenance, and the fact that children may still need monitoring or guiding. Issues like how one provides the social aspect of education, including SEL, also arise.
- 6.42. There is considerable attention being paid to this already, not least in the project of Equal Start in Penang. It would be valuable to keep track of their progress.

ii. Training sources

- 6.43. There are a number of providers already active in the sphere of teacher training, and there are many ‘lessons’ to be learned from their experience. The interviews we conducted indicate the range offered. Under a third of the ALCs conduct their own internal training but even here it was found that almost every centre sends their teachers to external training programmes. The latter includes the UNHCR, Taylors College, Monash University, JomServe, Health Equity Initiatives, Garden International School, the Jesuit Refugee Service, and Host. These trainings may be irregular, with an assortment of subject matter.
- 6.44. Internal trainings usually cover topics like teaching methods, including creative teaching, classroom management, and lesson planning. For the external trainings, the length of the ‘course’ and the content varies, from a one-off possibly half-day training to a more sophisticated online course of several modules. The length and content of a training affects its impact, as does the capacity of the respective ALC to ensure that a teacher who has attended such a training, is able to practice what they have learned.
- 6.45. Only a very small number of ALCs said that they had the capacity to monitor and/or mentor their teachers, including via observation of classroom teaching. This ‘ongoing training’ is one of the biggest challenges facing ALCs who may be understaffed, under-resourced and with very little room to effectively introduce ‘extra’ initiatives.

iii. Barriers to training

- 6.46. When breaking down the number of trainings attended, very few teachers in the learning centres surveyed attended more than two trainings in the previous year, i.e. 2024. The picture that emerges is thus telling of an inability to partake in such opportunities. These too could be a mix of internal and/or external trainings, meaning that standards could vary depending on who was offering or running them.
- 6.47. Despite many expressing a desire for more teacher training — only two ALCs said that they did not need this — almost half of those interviewed also said that they have little room to assimilate new training. One-fifth said they could attend but with difficulty; while a small number (12.9 per cent, 4) said attendance would be dependent on timing. One centre reported the care they took to balance the need to “enrich teachers’ skills” and not wanting to burden them with more work (ALC-11). Besides a centre with three local volunteer teachers in their 70s who were “not interested”, others raised the issue of how their teachers were already stretched, some because of extra jobs they took “to make ends meet” (ALC-25).
- 6.48. Several ALCs noted that the timing of trainings was important and proposed that ideal training times include weekends, Friday afternoons, online or in-person training. Where the training costs money, this was also an impediment.

We cannot sponsor teachers to go for training. They have to pay by themselves.
(ALC-11)

The Management team hasn't really had the time . . . we have many hats and responsibilities. We want teacher training but we have been so busy. It has been hard to get them all together even for the semi-annual teachers meeting. (ALC-16)

- 6.49. In a few cases, ALCs reported that they were unaware of training possibilities.

If possible, we want to go for training. We try looking for training. No contact about any training. (ALC-30)

- 6.50. All this may contribute to the fact that access to and attendance at trainings is likely to be sporadic. Almost two-thirds of the ALCs said that very few of their teachers attended more than two trainings in the last year. It was a minority (16.1 per cent, 5) whose teachers had attended three to five trainings during the same period. The question of exactly what impact this has made, is still to be considered; more so when there is teacher turnover.

I. Working with parents

- 6.51. A further topic raised as a priority for 'learning' was programmes with parents. Although this surfaces a number of issues relating to the potential role and capacity of the ALC, it was mentioned several times by both the ALCs and key informants interviewed, as a key part of being able to deliver quality and inclusive education.
- 6.52. The main takeaway here is how many families in the refugee and asylum-seeking world either still do not value education — although indications are that this is decreasing — or more likely, are either not aware or not able to give appropriate support to their child's learning. In some instances it may be that the family's need for survival overrides the education of the child.

Biggest hurdle is getting parents to value education (and later getting them to accept children going to higher education). There is more acceptance now from parents compared to before; but still need to get them to be more open. When students are educated, parents also become more educated, better, peaceful. We share every news with the students (e.g. buying insurance) so they will tell their parents. Battle has been won vis-à-vis the Rohingya population where education is concerned, but they are still very . . . culture, you can't blame them, it is culture. (ALC-5)

To make parents understand that the teacher is not wholly responsible for the child's education. Some parents want their children to study the whole day, including religious education. Some parents are sending children for tuition — too much work for the child as the child then can't cope with school homework. Also parents are unable to help the child with homework at home. (ALC-10)

The students come from background where parents don't know about much about the importance of school, *peradaban hidup* [lifestyle] plays a big role in this. (ALC-12)

J. Teacher development

- 6.53. Given the limitations of 'trainings', which may or may not be available, useful, and put into practice, one area of 'training' that might benefit from more serious consideration is the possibility of developing more systematically, the pathway to 'teacher development'. This would focus on teacher development through providing accessible pathways to a professional qualification(s), potentially targeted especially at refugee teachers.
- 6.54. There is every opportunity to build on the efforts of organisations already engaged in providing something like this. The experience of those ALCs already explicitly engaged in 'recycling' refugee students as teachers would be one starting point. Organisations providing courses for such persons and other individuals would be another.
- 6.55. From the interviews, besides 'regular' teacher training, a handful of ALCs are upgrading the skills of their teachers by enrolling them in certified teaching courses. One such example is the University of Birmingham's Postgraduate Certificates in International Education (Malaysia) course, designed in collaboration with two philanthropic corporations and underserved schools.

[Apart from offering teachers] the skills and knowledge to make a meaningful impact in their classrooms and in their communities [. . .] a notable feature of the initiative [is] an experience-based admissions policy that enable[s] refugee teachers, whose own education has been disrupted by displacement, to access postgraduate study (University of Birmingham website, 2024).

- 6.56. One of the better-resourced ALCs in the southern region currently has two students in this course. Both are bonded to one of the two corporations that has sponsored their studies, to ensure they do not drop out, and upon completion, they are bonded with the ALC for another two years. Two other ALCs, have also sent their teachers to attend this same course. The larger of the two, i.e. with over 500 students and 44 teachers, has had teachers go to ALC-26 for training, and currently three of its teachers are undergoing a foundation course as well. In 2023, another ALC that does not have a regular training plan managed to send its teachers to something similar.

Now seven teachers are going through the GIS [Garden International School] and Taylor's College long-term teacher training (primary and kindergarten teachers). It is a one-year programme. They will get a certificate for primary and kindergarten teaching. This is conducted at night for a year. It is very good. Once a week only and free of charge. This is the first year. Taylor's college students do their teacher practice in my school and they emailed us about this offer. My teachers are like my students. I told them before they started, they have to take this seriously. In the past we do our own training. The UNHCR

training is a one-day training or a few days training yearly. Not sufficient for the teachers who need more training. (ALC-29)

- 6.57. This may also be an area where the role of digital possibilities offers potential positives. There have been many professionally-designed courses for educators on such platforms as Coursera and Teachers of Tomorrow.
- 6.58. There are challenges, of course, which include the fact that most courses are in English. This may be an impediment to some of the teachers, including refugee would-be teachers. It is also likely that many of the courses assume some familiarity with educational topics including pedagogy, which many teachers and volunteers including from the refugee communities may or may not have — many of them are likely to be ‘starting from scratch’. Nevertheless, solutions to these sorts of challenges can be found.

7. Key takeaways

- 7.1. Teachers are the bedrock of a successful delivery of quality education. Without motivated and capacitated teachers, the provision of education to the children of refugees and asylum seekers will be critically compromised.
- 7.2. In the present ecosystem that is the unregulated, informal ALCs catering to these children, the situation is by no means ideal. For many years, a number of issues have persisted relating to teachers that are of fundamental importance in the consideration of both the hope for inclusivity and also quality.
- 7.3. Key to this is the overall lack of funding that many ALCs face, and particularly affects the smaller ALCs that have very little room to manoeuvre. So many of the issues confronting ALCs providing education for the children of refugees and asylum seekers go back to funding. As a few of them said: money will not solve everything. However, it does impact on the capacity of ALCs to choose and deliver the quality of education that would be optimum.
- 7.4. So, one major ‘need’ of many ALCs is to find more funding to allow recruitment, retention, training and monitoring of teachers. Without this, it is hard to see major improvements in this area, which has such an effect on ‘quality’. In stark contrast to the situation in national schools, where teachers are both qualified and paid accordingly, many ALCs are struggling.
- 7.5. The capacity of teachers and of the ALC to deliver appropriate and quality education is important to consider. The present use of what is essentially random curricula and content needs to be tackled so that a more standard, quality-controlled curriculum is used. This is discussed further in the next section but the implications for teachers are likely to be that they have to be evermore skilled and capable of delivering classroom content and pedagogy, which for many is already a challenge.
- 7.6. The role of training is vital, but there are many caveats to report around the way it is mainly conducted, especially through one-off and unlinked trainings that may have marginal benefit. The discussion thus far reveals that there are major issues around the

regularity, access, cost, and use of trainings, extending to the relevance and appropriateness of the content and the (lack of) monitoring of what is cascaded and practised after ALC teachers take part in these. Much of this has already been reported on in great detail (see Devaraj and Lochhead, 2021; Mendenhall and Henderson, 2024).

- 7.7. Tied perhaps to the suggestion of an improved choice or delivery of curriculum, the possibility of focusing on teacher development needs to be considered. Here, emphasis is placed on the factors around recruitment and retention of refugee teachers in particular. Such teacher development would benefit from a coordinated approach. The UNHCR has been engaged in these sorts of concerns over many years, but its capacity at the moment precludes them from being able to devote the necessary time and resources. The question is who would lead on this.
- 7.8. All of these efforts, however, may come to naught if another key challenge to the wider recruitment and use of refugee teachers highlighted at the outset of this section, is left unaddressed. This is that they have no legal or administrative status, and therefore even if they were to become professionally qualified teachers, they would have no rights or protection at work, which may act as a disincentive.

Section D: Curriculum

8. Profile

A. Choice of curriculum

- 8.1. One of the issues within the alternative learning centre ecosystem is the diversity of choices of curriculum. There is no standard curriculum, either at primary or secondary level. Instead, ALCs choose their own, which might be a set curriculum or a mixture. This choice is dependent on a variety of factors, including lack of sustainable funding, wide learning gaps among students, insufficient teachers, unqualified teachers, and at the crux of it, the legal status of the refugee and asylum-seeking community, all of which have been raised in previous sections.
- 8.2. This diversity of curricula was confirmed by the responses to the interviews we conducted. Nineteen ALCs follow only one curriculum, with those providing secondary education more likely to do this. The curriculum could be the IGCSE, GED, or a curriculum based on the Malaysian or Singaporean syllabus. The remaining 12 ALCs have mixed curricula.

B. Reasons for choice made

- 8.3. It is likely that the choice of curriculum for secondary level is determined by the targeted outcome for students. With a focus on an academic path, and because the children of refugees and asylum seekers are not able to sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education), these ALCs have been forced to look elsewhere for their students to get secondary certification. IGCSE is the most popular choice: ten ALCs have opted for this, with two opting for GED. Two others follow a Malaysian or Singaporean model.

[The IGCSE curriculum] has structure and is well-developed, has content in English and is adaptable for different learning levels, has adaptable teaching resources...[it is also] internationally recognised and accepted — better educational opportunities [for the students] in the future. (ALC-17)

- 8.4. Other users of the IGCSE route state that they have done so because they believe it is the best for student learning.

I have seen students improve with this syllabus. (ALC-10)

- 8.5. Alternatively, or in addition, they may have followed advice.

We asked if our children have a chance to sit for SPM in Malaysia. They said not possible since you are refugees. They suggested we follow this [IGCSE] curriculum. Maybe have a chance to sit for IGCSE exam with the UNHCR card. (ALC-17)

- 8.6. Tied to that is the perception of some interviewees that since they are preparing students for relocation, the students need to be ready for their potential new context and education system.

[From experience we can see that] with IGCSE, students that resettle in the US or Australia are able to catch up with the curriculum. . . . Our main job, although we cannot provide proper 100 per cent, is to prepare them to resettle in a third country. (ALC-7)

- 8.7. This reason also applies to those who chose the GED curriculum.

- 8.8. It can be noted that even where students are successfully prepared for the end examination, the pathway to tertiary education may still be uncertain. As noted in Part 3, there has been some work done by the UNHCR, Fugee Org, and others in creating and making available places for refugees in tertiary courses, but there has been limited headway. Many (smaller) ALCs may be unaware of the opportunities, and may also be unaware of transition initiatives like the CERTE (Connecting and Equipping Refugees for Tertiary Education) course. This area is something that might be profitably given some attention in the future and will be mentioned again in the next recommendations.

- 8.9. Unsurprisingly, there are different responses to secondary choices than just preparing students for an academic qualification possibly linked to resettlement.

The percentage of relocation is [extremely small] — most will settle here, and need education and knowledge. How to do it if they feel education is not important? He [the founder] knows uneducated children grow up to be ignorant adults and don't know how to behave well in society. (ALC-2)

- 8.10. For some, the choice of curriculum may not be so straightforward.

[For primary] Oxford and Cambridge are too ‘international’ for the students, hard for them to follow so we chose to use [the] Singapore [syllabus for] Math and UK for Science. We cater using what’s easiest for the students. . . . The Malaysian curriculum is more Malay than English, not ideal. (ALC-5)

- 8.11. The difficulty of choice may also be compounded by those trying to provide beyond an academic path.

Our focus is not about preparing them for academics. We are preparing them for work. We don’t teach history or geography — occasionally only. We teach languages and math. The main focus is we help them to have an edge over others to get a job. In our mind, we do have some students who can be potential teachers, and prepare some of them for vocational school if they are good with their hands. (ALC-22)

Of course, I want all my students to achieve academically and have the skill to survive in the real world. If they keep going and work in a restaurant with minimum wage, they won’t break out of this poverty cycle. I want them to have a proper career. (ALC-29)

- 8.12. It is of considerable interest that some of the larger organisations have diverted significant time and resources into providing alternatives to academic secondary education. A big part of provision by centres like Dignity and El Shaddai is now focused on vocational training and exposure to non-academic activities and skills. This ideally would be an offer across the board for children of refugees and asylum seekers, but for the moment remains out of reach for the majority simply because of the resources needed to make this happen.

If possible, students should come to school until they are 17 years old. Then they have the option whether they want to work or further their studies. It is a waste of time if they are staying at home at 15 years old. Maybe we can create a skill-based programme, like sewing, farming, cooking — vocational kind of training. But at the moment it is kind of far off. Students are poor and we have to upgrade the school. (ALC-2)

- 8.13. For those providing primary education, there may be other influences.

We switched to the Marshall Cavendish education books based on the Cambridge syllabus because the parents asked. We were told this is good for [the students]. But I later realised it was too hard for them . . . three subjects, 16 books in total is very hard. If your language base is strong, then you can learn from these books. The children here cannot. So I changed back to the original Oxford books, which were better. (ALC-4)

Parents want their children to learn Burmese instead of Bahasa Malaysia [Malay language]. (ALC-10)

Before, when we went to UNHCR meetings, we saw other centres using Cambridge. All recommended we switch. (ALC-8)

- 8.14. Besides these are challenges related to the cost of curricula and the accessibility and/or suitability of the materials for students. For example, it was reported that the IGCSE path is expensive while the GED curriculum is considered “cheaper and easier”. There is a cost element to obtaining actual textbooks or workbooks, online digital resources and teacher guidebooks and resource kits, especially for IGCSE-related material. Cambridge materials are updated every three to four years, a further cost consideration for any ALC opting for this.
- 8.15. Most especially for those ALCs that do not have funds, the choice is often not about a potentially expensive ‘set’ curriculum but about making do with what they have. This might include using what materials may be sponsored, or donated, and/or what teachers they have, and/or what they have access to.
- 8.16. Only a handful of ALCs were able to afford providing each of their students with actual textbooks or workbooks. The most common teaching material in classrooms is photocopies of textbooks and workbooks (83.9 per cent, 26).

We can’t buy original textbooks. We don’t have extra funding to buy. . . . So we got online documents like in PDF, [download] and print this on our own. We use it in our teaching. We also get teaching materials and workbooks free from the telegram channel. (ALC-14)

C. Variety of subjects

- 8.17. All this results in the mixing and adapting of curriculum. It may also lead to a mixing and adaptation of subjects. Some design their own curriculum from “different places with the help and advice of people”, or borrow lesson plans and tests from other ALCs and add “random things taken, for example, from books recently obtained from Myanmar” (ALC-9). One learning centre draws on the Yemeni or Egyptian syllabus to frame the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies chosen as relevant to its students.
- 8.18. ALCs that employ the Malaysian curriculum have either lengthened the learning duration for a particular module or “downgraded [this] a bit for Rohingya students, meaning [that what the] foundation class [may be] using [are materials] meant for kindergarten as well” (ALC-25).

Ustaz [The religious teacher] is teaching English using the syllabus from Myanmar. No problem. That is more appropriate for them. But he has to translate letter by letter as they are not good in Malay or English. . . . We also have to follow Cambridge curriculum but since we do not have these books, we buy Malaysian school syllabus books and try to teach following the Cambridge curriculum. We have to fill in the gaps. (ALC-2)

- 8.19. Among some ALCs, there is interest in digital education and computer science, with several of them offering this or indicating interest to teach it. However, as noted elsewhere in this report, there are limiting factors including cost and teacher ability or availability. The possibilities of an ALC benefitting from digital education is either severely limited or completely out of reach due to cost factors associated with the provision of electronic tablets and other equipment, the subscription for internet access and possible costs of online resources. Even for those able to offer some online teaching, the choice of resource and subject varies, depending on what the ALC is aware of and can afford.
- 8.20. All the ALCs interviewed provide English and Mathematics, and all but two, Science. There is a range of subjects taught beyond these as well: Global Perspectives, Social Studies, Social Science, General Knowledge, and Civics, as well as History, Geography, Music and Art. Nevertheless, the offer of these subjects is dependent on having a teacher able and willing to teach, which is not the case across all learning centres. There are also instances where a subject is offered because there is an available teacher, but when that teacher leaves, the subject is dropped.
- 8.21. Despite the recent attention that SEL has been attracting, only one ALC said that it included teaching SEL in its syllabus. Others stated that they realise its relevance but have little or no understanding or capacity to include it in their curriculum.

Heard of it but don't do anything. Really don't have the tools or training. With Birmingham we took SEL classes but not that much and just as a study, and not learning any tools. Of course, would be useful to have this. (ALC-3)

- 8.22. Physical education (PE) was also recognised as a subject that should ideally be offered, but the practical realities usually precluded this. Most ALCs lack the space and if at all, the students use common areas that double up as the ALC's hall or classrooms. Other challenges include not having enough teachers for this, and teachers who object to the distance and heat involved in taking them to nearby parks.
- 8.23. There is a further and crucial aspect of safety and security that relates to their lack of legal or administrative status. Without these, the children are vulnerable to harassment and, worse still, arrest and detention. Many reported discriminatory attitudes Malaysians may have towards refugees in general, which also limits their access to public spaces. For instance, one ALC said that it wanted to use a nearby field for its PE classes but was told it needed to apply for permission. Another has PE class only every

other week at the local field. PE class cannot be conducted there weekly because the ALC does not feel welcomed by the locals in the area. The same ALC shared:

To help improve matters, every time we use the *padang* [field], I tell the students to go around the field to pick up the rubbish. This is to show locals what refugee children are capable of [that they are not ‘bad’]. I also organise sport friendlies with other local schools so the students can interact with each other. Last year, the friendly match was netball and basketball. (ALC-12)

- 8.24. Notably, the lack of a standard curriculum, and the diversity of subjects and levels to which they are taught, may mean that there is no uniform monitoring of quality and no standard testing at the end of the primary level. It also may mean that any student needing to relocate, seeking to attend a different ALC, or going on to a secondary level, may be confronted with adjustment difficulties. Some secondary centres face challenges recruiting the ‘right’ students, while others offer transition classes or a transition year to help ensure there is a chance that necessary competencies are reached.

D. Language chosen

- 8.25. English is the language of choice for many ALCs surveyed, almost half using it as the main language of instruction. There is an understanding that fluency in English is important for resettlement as well as for improving employment prospects. One ALC motivates its students to study by telling them:

If you know English you can work in an air-con restaurant, otherwise you work in a coffee shop. (ALC-22)

- 8.26. However, this is challenging for many students, and also for teachers who are not well-versed in English. It can limit the communication between teachers (especially non refugee ones) and students, as well as the learning process of the student. The delivery of lessons in English by teachers who are not fluent in English may entail complicated translation arrangements.

Teach in English and Myanmar to help explain things. She doesn’t speak Myanmar language, so when needed, the Rohingya students who speak Myanmar language will help translate from English to Myanmar. It might be like that for a month [when there are new students], then it is OK. (ALC-21)

- 8.27. In 14 ALCs in the Klang Valley, English is the main language of instruction in the classroom. In nine other centres, mostly located outside the Klang Valley, it is used as well, but to varying extents alongside other languages to facilitate learning of particular subjects.
- 8.28. Malay is currently taught in 13 ALCs (42.0 per cent). For some, this is because they follow the Malaysian curriculum, while others offer it as a subject.

One Rohingya-run ALC used to teach in English before but the students had difficulty with that so they now learn in Malay. (ALC-2)

The books are in Malay. The students speak Malay, people think they are Malays, and understand English. They have English tuition after school from teachers within their own community. (ALC-18)

- 8.29. There is also a recognition that “Bahasa [Malay language] is a must” (ALC-5) to better communicate with locals.

Must make sure that Rohingyas are educated, then they can be strong and fend for their lives. Because of racism . . . the fact you cannot communicate in local dialect, or proper Malay, cannot master the English language, this is a big no. . . . We have to do more, give skills to express themselves clearly and well. (ALC-2)

- 8.30. Understanding the importance of learning Malay to better communicate with the local host community is seen as necessary for parents as well.

Need to have meetings with parents to manage expectations. For example, English is being taught because refugees think it is important for them to have if they are going to resettle in a third country. Some parents are not happy that Malay is being taught. (ALC-10)

All Malaysians talk English. If they use Malay, we try to talk Malay to communicate. Because of that this summer classes are open for the refugee community to learn Malay and Chinese/Mandarin to help communication. (ALC-3)

- 8.31. Several ALCs are offering the language spoken by the majority of their students as a subject. For example, teaching Dari, Urdu and different languages of Myanmar (e.g. Burmese, Zomi).

Most of the time [we use] Burmese. Now with the Cambridge curriculum we mix Burmese and English. We want [the students] to improve their English. We try and talk to them. . . . If possible, we want an English teacher to help us. (ALC-30)

- 8.32. The choice of language has implications for teacher capacity. Not all ALCs have teachers proficient in English and/or in Malay. The correlation between delivering a curriculum or a subject adequately and the teacher’s ability to do so is clear. The only practical response available to an ALC may again be to ‘mix and match’, but this affects the continuity of the education offered, and the level to which it can be taught.

- 8.33. It is also a reason why there are present initiatives looking at trying to define a ‘standard’ curriculum for primary ALCs, one that pays attention to the many constraints on teaching within so many of these learning centres, and the relevance of the present set curriculum to the children of refugees and asylum seekers. Equal Start, for example, is engaged in doing just this.

There is considerable emphasis on coming up with a suitable curriculum which will allow each student to progress at their own pace and which will result in each student being able to self-learn . . . addressing the questions around what we assume children should know at the different levels: L1 to L6, for example, and what we or they know about the children. (KI-5)

9. Key takeaways

- 9.1. There is considerable diversity across ALCs offering primary education with regard to curriculum, subjects and languages use in the classroom. Although this is sometimes down to different perceptions of what is best for the children or to meet the expectations of parents, a significant factor is the lack of funding. For many ALCs, this makes purchase of expensive curriculum materials difficult, and many rely instead on randomly donated materials, together with what their teachers know and can prepare.
- 9.2. The result is an absence of standardised education, monitoring, and testing. The quality of the education again suffers, as ALCs do the best they can with the (limited) resources they have.
- 9.3. Secondary provision is more likely to follow a set curriculum — IGCSE, GED, or Singapore — where an ALC prepares its students for an external academic exam. Intake into this level, however, may be a little challenging given that there is no standard pathway or exam that allows centres offering secondary education to be assured that new students come with a desired standard.
- 9.4. Information about tertiary opportunities may be a little mixed. Not all secondary level providers knew of all the possibilities for their students, assuming they pass their secondary level exams. This is something that can be tackled by a toolkit or equivalent.
- 9.5. There is growing realisation that the curriculum being used by ALCs may not be completely appropriate to the children of refugees and asylum seekers. There are ongoing initiatives to review curricula with the hope of finding something better, to be used across the ALC world. This should be more sensitive to the lived realities and potential futures of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. Further, there are also many initiatives delivering vocational pathways as an alternative to more academic education. This is something that is likely to be further developed as time goes on.

Section E: Hopes and dreams

10. Voices from the field

10.1. The qualitative insights from the interviews offer a sobering yet inspiring portrait of the education landscape for refugees and asylum seekers. ALC leaders shared stories of resourcefulness and resilience, as well as anxiety, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Commonly cited priorities and aspirations include:

- a. stabilising funding streams;
- b. upgrading classroom infrastructure and equipment;
- c. improving educational resources and learning tools;
- d. recruiting more qualified teachers;
- e. having access to a standardised, suitable curriculum;
- f. receiving training;
- g. providing recreational and sports opportunities;
- h. receiving recognition by UNHCR Malaysia;
- i. seeing students gain access to pathways into higher education; and
- j. seeing students being integrated into national schools.

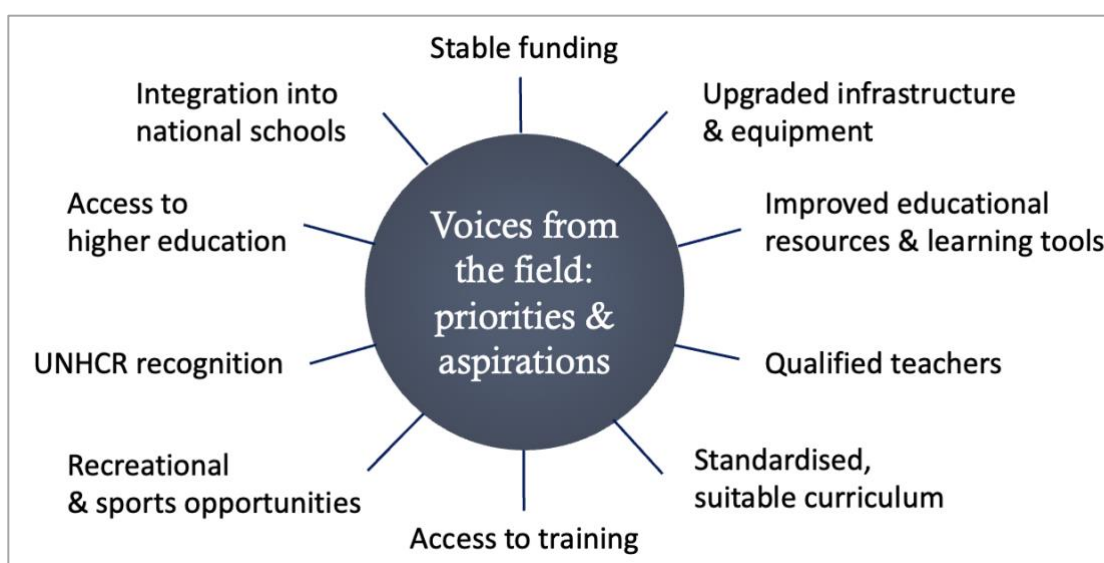


Figure 4: Priority areas and aspirations identified by interviewees

10.2. Several ALCs also expressed a desire for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration with other centres, indicating the need for networked structures that promote mutual support. At the same time, they noted the barriers to participation in such efforts — chiefly, a lack of time, funding, and technical guidance.

Part 5

Recommendations

1. Overview: six recommendations under four principal areas

- 1.1. The six recommendations for Fugee Org presented below follow from the discussions in the previous pages of this report. They focus on four principal areas:
- Continued advocacy for inclusivity;
 - Consideration to establish an interim body for the overall coordination of initiatives relating to the education of children of refugees and asylum seekers;
 - Development and dissemination of a toolkit or equivalent resource; and
 - Exploration of pathways for teacher professional development.

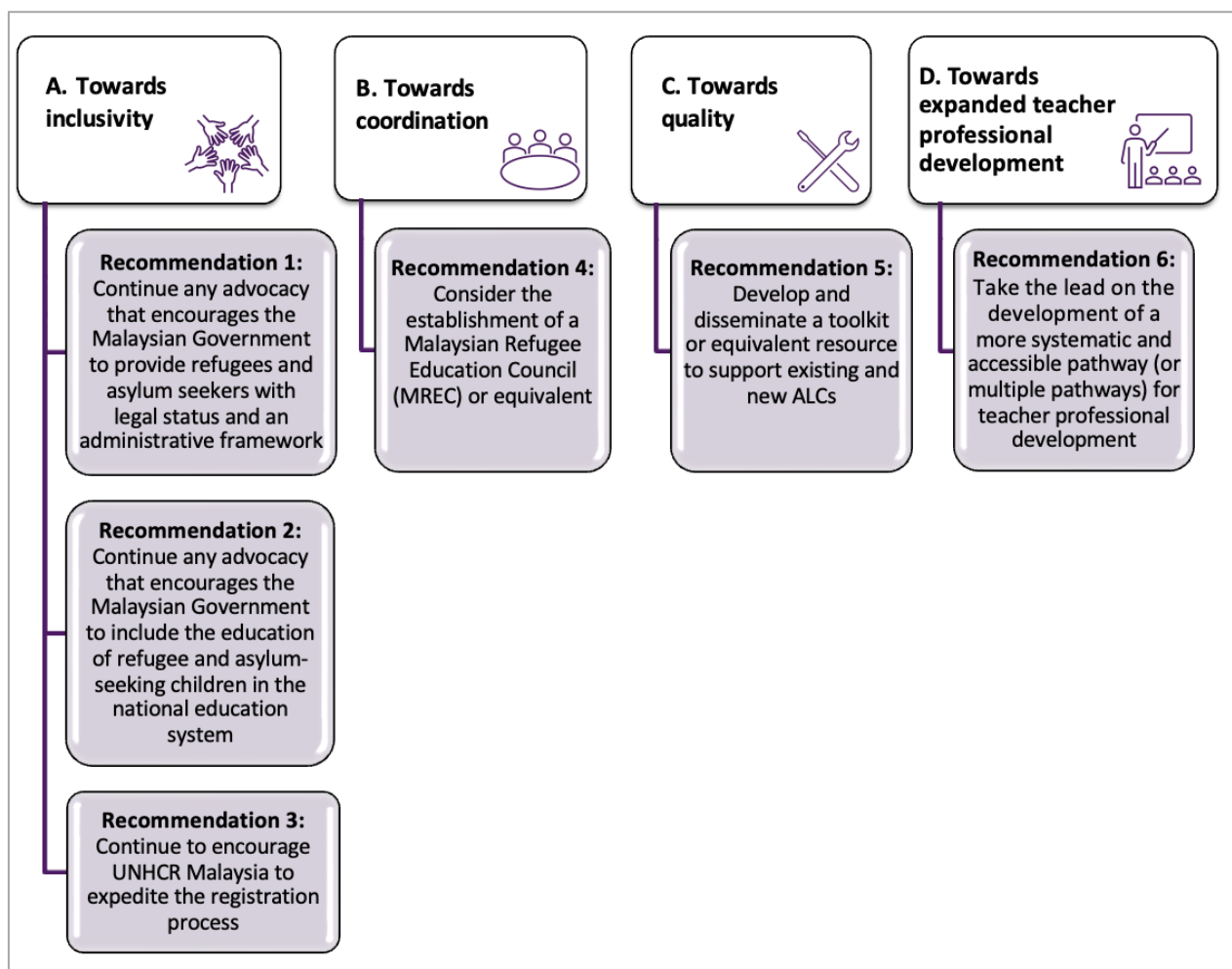


Figure 5: Overview of recommendations in Part 5

2. Towards inclusivity

Recommendation 1: Fugee Org should continue any advocacy that encourages the Malaysian Government to provide refugees and asylum seekers with legal status and an administrative framework.

Recommendation 2: Fugee Org should continue any advocacy that encourages the Malaysian Government to include the education of refugee and asylum-seeking children in the national education system.

- 2.1. These first two recommendations address fundamental policy changes that must be adopted if there is to any significant improvement in inclusivity.
- 2.2. Without such reforms, refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia will continue to face substantial barriers to accessing education, with the likely outcome being that the majority receive no schooling at all. This has been the situation for several years. The individual and social costs have been amply documented: the situation serves the interests of neither Malaysia nor these children, their families, and their communities.
- 2.3. Continued advocacy to lobby for these changes remains absolutely vital and it is recommended Fugee Org continue to take every opportunity to do so.

Recommendation 3: Fugee Org should continue to encourage UNHCR Malaysia to expedite the registration process.

- 2.4. This recommendation arises directly from the experiences described in this report, which highlight how many children and their families remain without any form of protection while awaiting the completion of the registration process by UNHCR. The fact that this process can take years leaves individuals and families in a prolonged state of heightened vulnerability, with significant implications for their daily lives — including their ability to access education.

3. Towards coordination

Recommendation 4: Fugee Org to consider the establishment of a Malaysian Refugee Education Council (MREC) or equivalent.

- 3.1. If the Malaysian Government maintains its reluctance to include children of refugees and asylum seekers in the national education system, then serious consideration must be given to the establishment of an interim overall coordinating body. This body should bring together all relevant stakeholders, including from government, corporations, UN agencies and those involved in provision of education for the children of refugees and asylum seekers.

- 3.2. While this would be a major, challenging undertaking, it is recommended as essential to enable a more systematic and sustained approach to improving both the inclusivity and quality of education for refugee and asylum-seeking children. There have been similar ideas and initiatives in the past, including some facilitated by UNHCR or suggested by commentators.¹⁰ However, there is currently a vacuum which it would be positive to fill. Fugee Org might consider taking up a lead role in exploring this.

4. Towards quality

Recommendation 5: Fugee Org is encouraged to develop and disseminate a toolkit or equivalent resource to support existing and new ALCs.

- 4.1. This recommendation supports the idea of Fugee Org, that the production of a toolkit covering specific topics would be of benefit to the upgrading of the quality of education presently being offered to the children of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 4.2. This report has reaffirmed that, despite their immense efforts to provide learning opportunities for the children of refugees and asylum seekers, many centres face a range of major challenges. These include the consequences of inadequate funding, limited classroom resources, uncertain management experience, and constraints in hiring qualified teachers. Many ALCs also lack the capacity to provide adequate training and support to their teachers or to develop effective classroom techniques. A significant number operate on a hand-to-mouth basis, and in relative isolation.
- 4.3. A toolkit or equivalent resource made accessible to all would offer meaningful support to the ALCs, and could also prove invaluable to those considering setting up new ALCs.

A. Topics for a toolkit

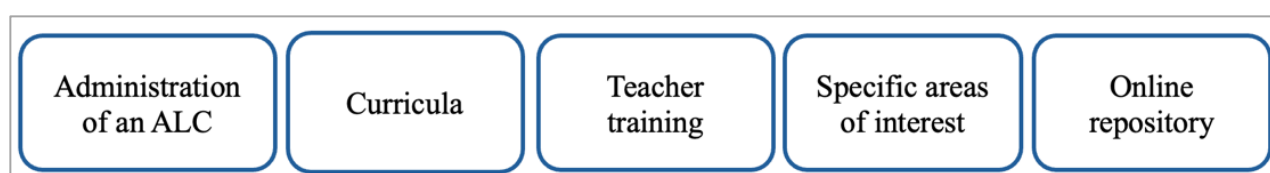


Figure 6: Proposed focus areas for the toolkit

- 4.4. Based on the feedback and requests shared by interviewees during this needs assessment study, it is proposed that the toolkit could focus on the following five areas:

i. Administration of an ALC

- 4.5. Feedback from many of those interviewed highlighted a possible lack of organisational experience among those managing an ALC. There was definite interest in tools that provide guidance on a range of management skills and operational topics, including, but not limited to those outlined below.

¹⁰ The UNHCR has instituted, for example, the Refugee Education Working Group, but its membership and scope of work have been limited. For others suggesting the idea, see, for example, Noraini and Subramaniam (2024).

a. Recruiting and managing staff and teachers

Checklists outlining best practices in human resource management, including guidelines for good governance and positive staff relations.

b. Dealing with authorities

How to approach different authorities, including municipal councils, enforcement agencies, political representatives, and local leaders.

c. Fundraising

Guidance on available fundraising resources and strategies, including various fundraising models and potential target donors. Tips on writing proposals and crafting effective messaging should also be included.

d. Child protection and safeguarding

Guidelines for adopting and implementing appropriate child protection policies and child safeguarding practices, with explanations of what these entail and how to integrate them into an ALC's daily operations.

e. Developing new initiatives

Guidance on how to establish new initiatives such as setting up science labs, and digital classrooms or computer labs.

f. Working with parents and the community

Practical tips on how to engage effectively with parents and the wider community. This should include how to establish and conduct parent-teacher meetings, support parents in better understanding the value of education for their children, and engage local community leaders to build trust and garner support for the ALC and the education it provides.

g. Providing orientation and background information

Materials for teachers and volunteers who are not from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds, aimed at helping them understand the context and lived experiences of families of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. This is particularly important, as some individuals working or volunteering in ALCs may not fully understand what it means to be a refugee or asylum seeker in the Malaysian context.

h. Building networks and accessing resources

Information on helpful resources and support services available to ALCs, such as a regularly updated online directory of potential funders, donors, and training providers; and other relevant contacts.

- 4.6. In developing content on ALC management, there is also potential to expand this compilation of information into a more comprehensive and structured guide specifically aimed at those starting new ALCs. Such a guide can include a list of do's and don'ts for beginners, key management principles, guidance for curriculum selection with recommended resources, advice on how to build professional networks and collaborative relationships, and lessons learned from established centres.

ii. Curricula

- 4.7. The consequences of the wide range of curricula currently in use — particularly at the primary level, but also at the secondary level — have been discussed in the earlier Section D of Part 4. There is clearly considerable scope to review curricula and offer informed recommendations to both established and newer ALCs on what could, or should, be adopted. Interviewees highlighted the following four areas as needing particular attention:

Curricula

a. Understanding options and exploring resources

A key area of support involves helping ALCs better understand the options available for curricula, along with their respective advantages and limitations, such as affordability, accessibility of resources, ease of use, and suitability of language. It might also consider, whether they adequately reflect the lived realities, cultural backgrounds, and future prospects of children of refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, appropriate supporting materials tailored to various curricula, and guidance on sources for supplementary resources would be of help. Assistance in identifying textbook suppliers, potential sponsors, or opportunities for acquiring second-hand books would also be of practical benefit.

b. Equipping teachers for practical classroom delivery

There was a clear demand for guidance and resources on classroom management and pedagogical strategies, including tools for lesson planning, lesson delivery, and interactive learning, particularly for teachers without teaching qualifications, or with minimal training. These resources should ensure that lessons are relevant and responsive to the lived experiences of children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

c. Incorporating digital learning

While this report has noted that not all ALCs are currently equipped to access or integrate digital learning effectively, its potential remains highly relevant. Identifying appropriate platforms, tools, and resources — and sharing these widely — should be considered as part of the toolkit.

d. Exploring vocational options

Moving away from an emphasis only on academic learning to include vocational options is already a trend with the bigger ALCs and was mentioned as desirable by several smaller ones.

- 4.8. In considering the issue of curricula, it is important to acknowledge that there are others actively and significantly engaged in this area. If Fugee Org is interested in pursuing this topic, a first step would be to identify who is doing what on curricula development, and to identify where Fugee Org could most effectively support, complement, or expand on what is already being done.

iii. Teacher training

- 4.9. The interviews revealed considerable demand for teacher training, as discussed in Section C of Part 4 of this report. While there are existing training providers, the opportunities currently available may be scarce or sporadic, fragmented, random or inconsistent in content, or lacking follow-up, raising concerns about their overall effectiveness. Training sessions may also be inaccessible to many teachers due to barriers such as lack of time, inconvenient scheduling, cost, and distance.
- 4.10. There therefore appears to be significant potential for Fugee Org to identify and consolidate best-practice training modules on particular topics. These could be made available as online resources, delivered through in-person sessions, or offered in a hybrid format.
- 4.11. Interviewees highlighted the following topics as being of particular interest:

Teacher training	a. Techniques for effective classroom management
	b. Tools for developing lesson plans
	c. Strategies for engaging classroom activities and effective lesson delivery
	d. Approaches to promoting interactive learning

iv. Specific areas of interest

- 4.12. Interviewees highlighted certain specific topics in which ALCs were interested but which they would be unable to develop on their own. Again, others have been active in developing modules on these topics, so Fugee Org's task would be to identify if there is a good module or choice of modules already available, work towards establishing a 'best practice' resource, and then help make this accessible to as many ALCs as possible.

4.13. Three possible subject areas identified from the interviews are:

Specific areas
of interest

a) Social and emotional learning

While the interviewees have a growing awareness of the concept of social and emotional learning and its importance, many reported lacking the tools or training to implement it effectively.

b) Special educational needs and diverse learning

Several ALCs indicated that they currently have children with special educational needs, and expressed a desire for practical guidance and resources to help them identify and support these students effectively. This includes addressing the issue of trauma, including introducing trauma based learning approaches. It also includes addressing those with diverse learning needs who may require differentiated approaches in the classroom.

c) Teacher well-being and self-care

Given that teachers are the foundation of educational provision for refugee and asylum-seeking children, ensuring their mental and emotional well-being is critical. This module could include practical strategies for safeguarding mental health, dealing with stress and managing anger; and include information on online resources and professional counselling support.

v. Online repository of information and resources

4.14. Many ALCs reported that they continue to operate in relative isolation, often without easy access to tools, support materials, or up-to-date information. One key component of the proposed toolkit could be the development of an online repository that compiles relevant and current information and resources, accessible not only to teachers and administrators, but also to students. The repository could include the following:

Online
repository of
information and
resources

a) A centralised collection of online information and resources pertaining to ALCs and education of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. This may include teaching materials, best practices, policy updates, and support networks.

b) A set of online resources tailored specifically for students, offering appropriate and relevant guidance on a variety of practical topics. This could include:

- Resources on academic or career advancement, including how to write a curriculum vitae, submitting applications, and preparing for interviews;
- Guidance on tertiary education, including a list of institutions where refugee and asylum-seeking students may be eligible to study, along with details about scholarships, grants, sponsorships, and internships;
- Information on vocational education, including links to internships, training programmes, and placement opportunities.

B. Suggestions for toolkit development and dissemination

- 4.15. To maximise the effectiveness and impact of a proposed toolkit (or equivalent resource), the following considerations should guide its design and dissemination:

a. Build on existing success	There is plenty of already available ‘good practice’ to be found within the ALC community or elsewhere. Consultation of such ‘good practice’ would help identify the most appropriate and helpful way of presenting the topic(s), consolidating ‘best practice’, extending them, and, most especially, developing them into a more inclusive and widely accessible resource reaching as many ALCs across Peninsular Malaysia as possible.
b. Keep the format modular and manageable	The toolkit should be designed in modular, bite-sized components, rather than as a single, comprehensive manual. This approach would make it easier for ALCs to select, access, and engage with topics most relevant to their context, without being overwhelmed by excessive material.
c. Develop the toolkit as a digital resource	Avoid hardcopy printing, especially of the entire publication. Instead, the toolkit should be an online resource and made available in downloadable formats (e.g. PDF), allowing users to print only the sections they need. Ideally, the toolkit should function as a regularly updated digital resource to ensure ongoing relevance and accessibility.
d. Consider language accessibility	While English or Malay may serve as the primary languages for the toolkit, certain resources may benefit from translation into other languages used by specific refugee and asylum-seeking communities, to ensure broader comprehension and usability.
e. Appoint specialised teams	Regardless of the toolkit’s final form, it is strongly proposed that Fugee Org establish dedicated teams, each focusing on specific components of the toolkit. It is proposed that the composition of these teams be carefully considered. Multiple teams may be appropriate — for example, one group for research and design of toolkit components, and another for delivery and engagement. Each component of the toolkit will require specific expertise and experience, and no single individual is likely to be able to cover all areas effectively. For instance, modules focusing on parental or community engagement demand different skills than those focusing on classroom-based teaching. It is therefore important to involve suitable resource persons for each component of the toolkit.
f. Dissemination across Peninsular Malaysia	The implementation teams would play a proactive role in ensuring that the toolkit is effectively disseminated to ALCs across the country. Dissemination would likely involve a series of workshops conducted at the state level — or, at a minimum, at the regional level. This approach would provide all interested ALCs with the opportunity to understand how the toolkit applies to their context, and to benefit from its content.

g. Ensure ongoing follow-up and support	These Fugee Org teams should also take responsibility for follow-up, maintaining direct contact with ALCs through ongoing monitoring and support, including site visits. Follow-up is often absent in many training initiatives, which are frequently limited to one-off events. Ensuring that training content is implemented in practice, and that challenges faced by individual ALCs can be raised and addressed, is essential to maximising the toolkit's effectiveness and relevance.
h. Ensure nationwide inclusivity in delivery	It is strongly urged that dissemination of the toolkit should not be concentrated merely in the Klang Valley. To ensure equitable access and impact, delivery efforts must extend across Peninsular Malaysia. This can be achieved by working collaboratively with organisations and individuals involved with refugee and asylum-seeking communities, including, where possible, refugee- or asylum seeker-led organisations based in various states. Such collaboration will not only support the effective and sustainable implementation of the toolkit but also contribute to building longer-term partnerships that can address broader educational and community development challenges.

5. Towards expanded teacher professional development

Recommendation 6: Fugee Org is encouraged to take the lead on the development of a more systematic and accessible pathway (or multiple pathways) for teacher professional development.

- 5.1. The final area of recommendation picks up on the discussion of Section C of Part 4 and focuses on supporting the development of a longer-term, systematic and accessible pathway (or multiple pathways) for existing teachers or would-be teachers to attain recognised professional teaching qualifications. Unlike short-term training, whose overall effectiveness remains uncertain, this approach emphasises a more sustained, methodical professional development and formal accreditation pathway for teachers. Particular attention should be given to supporting existing or potential teachers from within the refugee and asylum-seeking communities, and in smaller ALCs who often face the greatest barriers to access and support, yet are central to the delivery of education in their communities.
- 5.2. Fugee Org's role would be to map in greater detail the current approaches and experiences of the various organisations and institutions already active in providing pathways for teacher professional development. Based on the findings, Fugee Org could then consider consolidating these pathways as appropriate, or extending them, and then to help promote existing opportunities to those ALCs that may benefit from them.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. Taken together, the six recommendations represent a response to the persistent, systemic, and complex challenges facing refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia in accessing quality education, and also those confronting ALCs in delivering education to such children.
- 6.2. It is realised that the first three recommendations are not within the control of Fugee Org, but the changes of policy and practice within the Malaysian Government and within UNHCR Malaysia are absolutely necessary if all children of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are to be able to access education. So on-going advocacy remains highly relevant.
- 6.3. Meantime, the more specific recommendations on which Fugee Org may consider taking the lead may yet yield significant and substantial improvements to the quality of education being provided. These include the development of a well-designed, accessible toolkit and the exploration of teacher professional development pathways for those providing education for children of refugees and asylum seekers. The development of these, supported by meaningful consultation and inclusive dissemination, offer both immediate and long-term benefits for ALCs across Peninsular Malaysia.
- 6.4. If Fugee Org were also to explore the possibilities of establishing a MREC or equivalent coordinating body, this would then offer the opportunity both to directly engage with the Government and UN agencies by involving their representatives in such a body, as well as being able to extend any work on the toolkit and development pathways into a more collaborative and coordinated national framework.
- 6.5. Overall, Fugee Org is well-positioned to take a leadership role in initiating and shaping practical solutions, and advancing targeted, context-driven interventions and support mechanisms. Such efforts could serve as an important catalyst for broader systemic improvements in education for children of refugees and asylum seekers.

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Appendix A: List of ALCs interviewed

Interviewee	Refugee/Non-Refugee-Run	UNHCR Registered/Recognised Centre	Location	Primary/Secondary/Mixed	Number of students
ALC-1	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	125
ALC-2	Refugee-run	Yes	East Coast	Primary and secondary	49
ALC-3	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	195
ALC-4	Non-refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	16
ALC-5	Non-refugee-run	Yes	South	Primary and secondary	200
ALC-6	Non-refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary	70+
ALC-7	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary	223
ALC-8	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	584
ALC-9	Refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary	75
ALC-10	Refugee-run	No	North	Primary	38
ALC-11	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	251
ALC-12	Non-refugee-run	Yes	East Coast	Primary	61
ALC-13	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	510
ALC-14	Refugee-run	Pending	East Coast	Primary	52
ALC-15	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary	140
ALC-16	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	12
ALC-17	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	150
ALC-18	Non-refugee-run	Yes	South	Primary	43
ALC-19	Refugee-run	Pending	East Coast	Primary	11
ALC-20	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	95
ALC-21	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	42
ALC-22	Non-refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary	70-80

ALC-23	Refugee-run	No	Central	Primary	20
ALC-24	Refugee-run	Pending	North	Primary	51
ALC-25	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	71
ALC-26	Non-refugee-run	Yes	Central	Secondary	70
ALC-27	Non-refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	150
ALC-28	Refugee-run	Yes	North	Primary and secondary	52
ALC-29	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary	142
ALC-30	Refugee-run	Pending	North	Primary	16
ALC-31	Refugee-run	Yes	Central	Primary and secondary	100

Appendix B: List of Key Informants interviewed

Interviewees	Sex	Occupation /experience
KI-1	Female	Education Unit with UNHCR.
KI-2	Female	Formerly with UNHCR, currently with a Muslim development and humanitarian organisation.
KI-3	Female	Teacher with an educationalist background and on a PhD programme looking at issues around refugee education.
KI-4	Female	Early childhood learning specialist and researcher attached to a local university.
KI-5	Male & Female	Runs ALCs and spearheaded a programme to introduce digital education to refugee and asylum seeking children.
KI-6	Male	Postgraduate candidate on refugee education in Malaysia with a focus was on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).
KI-7	Male	Director of an inclusive international secondary school.
KI-8	Male	Principal of an ALC in Kuala Lumpur.
KI-9	Female	CEO and special projects lead for a non-governmental organisation providing education for urban poor children in Kuala Lumpur.
KI-10	Male	Runs an ALC in the East Coast.
KI-11	Female	Executive Director of an ALC in Selangor.
KI-12	Female (3 persons) & Male	Founder, Programs Director, Education Strategy Director, and Head of Education of an ALC in Kuala Lumpur.

Appendix C: Questionnaire for ALCs

Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs) Needs Assessment Project by Fugee Org

Interview Questions

1. Email
2. Name of ALC and person being interviewed
3. Mode of interview
Online
In person
Other:
4. Date and time interview started and ended:
5. Online interview: Verbal agreement has been given (request for the signed form to be sent via email / whatsapp).
In person: The consent form has been signed
Yes
No
Other:

A. Organisation (10 questions) <aim: profile of the ALC>

- A1. What sort of school/organisation are you?
A1.1 Refugee-run
A1.2 Non-refugee-run
A1.3 Other (please elaborate):
- A2. Are you a UNHCR-recognised/registered centre?
A2.1 Yes
A2.2 No
A2.3 Pending
A2.4 Other (please elaborate):
- A3. What state are you located?
- A4. How long have you been operating?
A4.1 Less than a year
A4.2 1-3 years
A4.3 More than 3 but less than 8 years
A4.4 More than 8 years
A4.5 Other (please elaborate):
- A5. What sort of building do you occupy? (tick all that apply)
A5.1 Standalone building
A5.2 Shop-lot
A5.3 Community centre
A5.4 Religious premises
A5.5 Other (please elaborate):

A6. Rented/borrowed/owned premises?

A6.1 Rented

A6.2 Borrowed

A6.3 Owned

A6.4 Other (please elaborate):

A7. How many classrooms do you have?

A7.1 1-2

A7.2 3-5

A7.3 6-10

A7.4 Over 10

A7.8 Other (please elaborate):

A8. What kind of teaching facilities do you have?

A8.1 Tables and chairs

A8.2 Whiteboard (how many)

A8.3 Projector (how many)

A8.4 Laptop/tablet for teacher (how many?)

A8.5 Laptops/tablets for students (how many?)

A8.6 Printer/photocopier

A8.7 Good Wi-Fi/internet access

A8.7 Poor Wi-Fi/internet access

A8.8 Other (please elaborate):

A9. What are your sources of funding? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

A9.1 Organisational funds

A9.2 Public donations

A9.3 Fees from parents

A9.4 Grants

A9.5 Other (please elaborate):

A10. Who makes the decisions for your centre? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

A10.1 Board

A10.2 Management Committee

A10.3 Principal

A10.4 Principal and teachers

A10.5 Principal, teachers, parents

A10.6 Other (please elaborate):

B. Students (27 questions) <aim: profile of students and challenges>

B1. Do you offer primary and/or secondary?

B1.1 Primary

B1.2 Secondary

B1.3 Primary and secondary

B1.4 Other (please elaborate):

B2. How many students do you have?

B2.1 Under 25

B2.2 25-49

B2.3 50-99

B2.4 100-149

B2.5 150-249

B2.6 250-999

B2.7 Over 1000

B2.8 Other (please elaborate):

B3. What is the age range of your students?

B3.1 Primary

B3.1.1 7-12 years old

B3.1.2 Other (please elaborate):

B3.2 Secondary

B3.2.1 12-17 years old

B3.2.2 Other (please elaborate):

B4. What is the overall breakdown by sex?

B4.1 Primary (Girls; Boys; Others)

B4.2 Secondary (Girls; Boys; Others)

B5. Does the overall breakdown change from year to year?

B5.1 Yes (if yes, go to B5.1.1)

B5.2 No

B5.3 Other (please elaborate):

B5.1.1 What accounts for this variation?

B5.1.1b Do not know, it's like that

Other

B6. What is the ethnicity/nationality of your students?

B6.1 Only Rohingya

B6.2 Mainly Rohingya and some others (please elaborate):

B6.3 Mainly others and some Rohingya (please elaborate):

B6.4 Mainly one ethnicity/nationality (not Rohingya)(please elaborate):

B6.5 Mixed ethnicity/nationality (not Rohingya)(please elaborate):

B6.6 Other (please elaborate):

B7. On average, how many students are there in a class?

B7.1 Under 20

B7.2 20-29

B7.3 30-39

B7.4 Over 40

B7.5 Other (please elaborate):

B8. Do the majority of your students attend classes regularly? (please estimate % or numbers)

B8.1 Yes

B8.2 No

B8.3 Not sure

B8.4 Other (please elaborate):

B9. How many students might miss classes on any given day?

B9.1 Girls (number/percentage):

B9.2 Boys (number/percentage):

B9.3 Other (please elaborate):

B10. What are the most common reasons for missing class?

B10.1 Girls

- B10.1.1 Illness
- B10.1.2 Family decision
- B10.1.3 Transport difficulty
- B10.1.4 Safety/security issue (fear)
- B10.1.5 Not interested
- B10.1.6 Don't know
- B10.1.7 Other (please elaborate):

B10.2 Boys

- B10.2.1 Illness
- B10.2.2 Family decision
- B10.2.3 Transport difficulty
- B10.2.4 Safety/security issue (fear)
- B10.2.5 Not interested
- B10.2.6 Don't know
- B10.2.7 Other (please elaborate):

B11. Do many of your students drop out altogether?

B11.1 Yes

B11.2 No

B11.3 Other (please elaborate):

B12. Roughly how many have dropped out in the past year?

Answer (please elaborate): _____

B13. What are the main reasons for your drop-out rate? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

B13a Girls

- B13.1.1 Can't afford it
- B13.1.2 Transport problem
- B13.1.3 Moved school
- B13.1.4 Moved location within Malaysia
- B13.1.5 Resettled
- B13.1.6 To help with family work
- B13.1.7 To get married
- B13.1.8 No longer interested
- B13.1.9 Don't know
- B13.1.10 Other (please elaborate):

B13b Boys

- B13.2.1 Can't afford it
- B13.2.2 Transport problem
- B13.2.3 Moved school
- B13.2.4 Moved location within Malaysia
- B13.2.5 Resettled
- B13.2.6 To help with family work
- B13.2.7 To get married
- B13.2.8 No longer interested
- B13.2.9 Don't know
- B13.2.10 Other (please elaborate):

B14. Is your school full at the moment?

B14.1 Yes

B14.2 No

B14.3 Other (please elaborate):

B15. Do you currently have a waiting list?

B15.1 Yes

B15.2 No (go to Q17)

B15.3 Other (please elaborate):

B16. How long is your waiting list?

B16.1 Under 10 children

B16.2 10-19

B16.3 20-29

B16.4 30-49

B16.5 50-74

B16.6 75-99

B16.7 More than 100

B16.8 Other (please elaborate):

B17. What do you tell parents who want to enrol their child but your centre is already full?

B17.2 Never had this experience before

B17.3 Other (please elaborate):

For primary schools only

B18. What do your students do after they finish their primary education?

B18.1 Continue to our secondary school

B18.2 Continue to other secondary schools

B18.3 Discontinue studying

B18.4 I don't know

B18.5 Other (please elaborate):

B19. Do you have an exit exam and if yes, what is it?

Yes

No

Other

For secondary schools only

B20. Do you offer standardised educational exams?

B20.1 Yes (please specify which one(s) e.g. GSCE):

B20.2 No

B20.3 Other (please elaborate):

B21. In the last five years, how many of your students obtained their secondary qualifications? (please estimate % or numbers)

B21.1 Under 10

B21.2 11-20

B21.3 21-30

B21.4 31-40

B21.5 41-50

B21.6 Above 50, less than 100

B21.7 Above 100

B21.8 Other (please elaborate):

B22. What do your secondary students do after they complete their secondary education?

B22.1 Go on to further study

B22.2 Looking for a job

B22.3 Start working

B22.4 Stay home

B22.5 Not sure

B22.6 Other (please elaborate):

B23. Do you have a programme to support further higher education for your secondary students?

B23.1 Yes (please elaborate):

B23.2 No

B23.3 Other (please elaborate):

B24. Do you have a programme or partnerships for other post-secondary pathways (e.g. vocational training, employment)?

B24.1 Yes (please elaborate):

B24.2 No

B24.3 Other (please elaborate):

B25. Are you aware of higher education options for refugees in Malaysia?

B25.1 Yes (specify which ones):

B25.2 No

B25.3 Other (please elaborate):

B26. Are you aware of programmes that support students, and scholarship opportunities?

B26.1 Yes (specify which ones):

B26.2 No

B26.3 Other (please elaborate):

B27. If you answered 'yes' to either B24 or B25, do you share the information you have with your students?

B27.1 Yes

B27.2 No

B27.3 Other (please elaborate):

C. Teachers (15 questions) <profile of teachers and challenges>

C1. How many teachers do you have?

C1.1 1-3

C1.2 4-6

C1.3 7-10

C1.4 Over 10

C1.5 Other (please elaborate):

C2. Who are your paid teachers and how many? Femal / male teachers

C2.1 Refugees

C2.2 Malaysians (not retired)

C2.3 Malaysians (retired)

C2.4 Non-Malaysians (retired)

C2.5 Non-Malaysians (not retired)

C2.6 Other (please elaborate):

C3. Would you be able to tell us how much do your teachers get paid?

C4. Who are your UNpaid teachers and how many? Female / male teachers

C4.1 Refugees

C4.2 Malaysians (not retired)

C4.3 Malaysians (retired)

C4.4 Non-Malaysians (retired)

C4.5 Non-Malaysians (not retired)

C4.6 Other (please elaborate):

C5. How do you recruit your teachers? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

C5.1 Word of mouth

C5.2 Internal network

C5.3 Recommendation

C5.4 Advertising/social media

C5.5 Other (please elaborate):

C6. How many teachers have a teaching certificate or diploma (# or %)?

C6.1 None

C6.2 1 to 10 per cent

C6.3 11 to 25 per cent

C6.4 Over 25 per cent (please specify):

C6.5 Other (please elaborate):

Teacher training

C7. Training frequency for your teachers?

C7.1 Regularly (planned and executed)

C7.2 Irregularly (planned/unplanned and executed haphazardly)

C7.3 None (zero planned, zero training)

C7.4 Other (please elaborate):

C8. On average, how many trainings did each teacher attend last year (indicate #)?

C8.1 0-2

C8.2 3-5

C8.3 6-10

C8.4 Other (please elaborate):

C9. Are these training internal (i.e. run by someone within your centre) or provided by external persons (i.e. run by someone outside your centre)?

C9.1 Internal

C9.2 External

C9.3 Both

C9.4 No trainings provided

C9.5 Other (please elaborate):

C10. Would you want more training?

C10.1 Yes

C10.2 No [Go to C10]

C10.3 Maybe

C10.4 Other (please elaborate):

C11. Would your teachers be able to attend (more) training?

C11.1 Yes

C11.2 No

C11.3 With difficulty

C11.4 Other (please elaborate):

C12. What topics would you prioritise? (in order of importance):

C12.1 Classroom management (creating inclusive learning environment, managing student behaviour, etc.)

C12.2 Instructional technology (online teaching skills, digital resources, etc.)

C12.3 Social emotional learning (SEL) (communication skills, self-awareness, etc.)

C12.4 Self-care

C12.5 Other (please elaborate):

Teacher turnover

C13. Do you have an issue with teacher turnover?

C13.1 Yes

C13.2 No

C13.3 Other (please elaborate):

C14. How many teachers left last year (# or %)?

C14.1 Low (1 to 33 per cent)

C14.2 Medium (34-66 per cent)

C14.3 High (over 66 per cent)

C14.4 None

C14.5 Other (please elaborate):

C15. Was last year's turnover usual?

C15.1 Yes, usual

C15.2 Higher than usual

C15.3 Lower than usual

C15.4 Other (please elaborate):

D. Curriculum (5 questions) <aim: type of curriculum and form of materials>

D1. What curriculum do you follow? (tick all that apply)

D1.1 Malaysian

D1.2 Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE)

D1.3 General Educational Development (GED)

D1.4 Self-designed

D1.5 Mixed

D1.6 Other (please elaborate):

D2. Why did you choose this curriculum? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

D2.1 Parents want it

D2.2 UNHCR advised us

D2.3 Preparing student for life in Malaysia

D2.4 Preparing student for life in country of resettlement

D2.5 It is the best curriculum

D2.6 It is affordable and accessible

D2.7 This is what the organisation decided

D2.8 Do not know

D2.9 Other (please elaborate):

D3. What is the main language in the classroom?

D4. What textbooks or teaching materials do you use? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

D4.1 Actual textbooks

- D4.2 Actual workbooks
- D4.3 Digital/online resources
- D4.4 Photocopied materials (including textbooks and workbooks)
- D4.5 Printouts/photocopies of downloaded materials
- D4.6 Other (please elaborate):

D5. What subjects do you offer?

- D5.1 English
- D5.2 Math
- D5.3 Science
- D5.4 History
- D5.5 Geography
- D5.6 General knowledge
- D5.7 Computers and tech
- D5.8 Malay
- D5.9 Other (please elaborate):

E: Dreams and Challenges (5 questions) <aim: aspirations and needs>

E1. What is currently working well for your centre?

- E1.1 Demand for our services
- E1.2 A pool of dedicated volunteers
- E1.3 Knowledge and experience with running a refugee learning centre
- E1.4 Financial stability
- E1.5 A strong and supportive governance board
- E1.6 Other (please elaborate):

E2. What are the main challenges you face? (tick all that apply, in order of importance)

- E2.1 Not enough resources in the classroom
- E2.2 Not enough good teachers
- E2.3 Unsupportive parents
- E2.4 Inadequate infrastructure (e.g. building)
- E2.5 Inadequate funds
- E2.6 Lack of experience running a learning centre
- E2.7 Societal challenges
- E2.8 Student learning gaps
- E2.9 Other (please elaborate):

E3. Does your centre do anything special about:

- E3.1 Curriculum development
- E3.2 Digital learning
- E3.3 Special needs
- E3.4 Social Emotional Learning
- E3.5 Managing a learning centre
- E3.6 Fundraising
- E3.7 Other (please elaborate):

E4. Fugee is wondering what they can do to help in the future. If they came up with a toolkit or equivalent on the following, would it be helpful to you?

What is your ultimate dream for your LC?

- E4.1 More resources in the classroom
- E4.2 More good teachers

- E4.3 Parents who are more supportive
- E4.4 Better infrastructure (e.g. building)
- E4.5 More funds
- E4.6 Greater opportunities to learn from those with more experience
- E4.7 More supportive societal context
- E4.8 Less student learning gaps
- E4.9 Other (please elaborate):

E5. Is there anything you would like to ask us?

Thank you very much for your time and insights

Appendix D: Data from ALC Interviews

The sections below follow the sections of the questionnaire, and the paragraphs are largely numbered based on the corresponding interview question.

Section A: Organisation (Profile of the ALCs)

Type of ALC

A1. Almost 60 per cent (18) of these ALCs are refugee-run; the remainder (13) are run by non-refugees, of which a number are faith-based.¹ Some ALCs provide religious instruction, but none are ‘religious’ or *tahfiz* schools as such.²

Status of UNHCR recognition

A2. An overwhelming majority are recognised by UNHCR (80.6 per cent, 25), while around 6.5 per cent (2) are not, and another 12.9 per cent (4) are pending i.e. applied but had not heard back from UNHCR. Of the two not recognised by UNHCR, one had been rejected,³ and the other one has not applied yet since they formed only recently.⁴

Location

A3. The largest number of ALCs are in the Central Region (45.2 per cent, 14) all of which are in Selangor, Federal Territory KL; 35.5 per cent in the Northern Region (8 Penang, 2 Perak, 1 Kedah); 12.9 per cent in the East Coast Region (2 Pahang, 1 Terengganu, 1 Kelantan); and 6.5 per cent in the Southern Region (2 Johor).

Years in operation

A4. Eighteen (58 per cent) of those interviewed have been operating for more than eight years (the longest-running is 20 years);⁵ followed by those who have been operating between less than eight but more than three years (29 per cent, 9).⁶ Two centres were 1-3 years old (6.5 per cent) and two more, less than a year old (6.5 per cent).⁷

Premises

A5. The majority (61.3 per cent, 19)⁸ of the ALCs interviewed are run out of the upper storeys (first or second floors) of shop-lots. The rest occupy standalone buildings or houses (16.1 per

¹ ALC-6 ALC-26, ALC-29, ALC-13, ALC-22.

² ALC-1, ALC-10, ALC-4, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-18, ALC-17, ALC-2, ALC-3, ALC-17.

³ ALC-23.

⁴ ALC-10.

⁵ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-31, ALC-1, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-11, ALC-26, ALC-15, ALC-29, ALC-22, ALC-4, ALC-2, ALC-6 ALC-16, ALC-9, ALC-7. ALC-7 is 20 years old.

⁶ ALC-23, ALC-3, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-25, ALC-17, ALC-18, ALC-12, ALC-24.

⁷ The two newest are ALC-10, ALC-19. ALC-14 and ALC-30 are under four years old.

⁸ ALC-19, ALC-5, ALC-23, ALC-31, ALC-3, ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-25, ALC-30, ALC-11, ALC-15, ALC-29, ALC-22, ALC-10, ALC-18, ALC-6, ALC-7, ALC-8.

cent, 5),⁹ commercial buildings (2),¹⁰ apartments (2)¹¹ and a community centre (1).¹² One ALC with hostel facilities rents shop-lots and houses in the same housing area,¹³ while another operates out of several shop-lots and a religious premise, i.e. premises that are scattered but all within walking distance of each other.¹⁴

A5. Of these, eight ALCs operate out of more than one location — the highest number of locations being nine.¹⁵ All of these, however, are in the same state. One ALC also offers online classes.¹⁶

A5. A few also offer boarding for children whose families live far away — in one instance, as far as in two other states¹⁷ — or whose parents need to go to work. Accommodation is in a separate building or within the same premises as their centre. In the case of the latter, daytime classrooms are converted into bedrooms at night.¹⁸

A6. All but two ALCs rent their premises.¹⁹ Rental ranges from as low as around RM600/month to RM11,000/month.²⁰ Of the two that do not rent, one uses the premises of a church for a nominal amount,²¹ and the other is self-owned.²²

Size

A7. Most centres are small. Two (6.5 per cent) have only two ‘classrooms’ each,²³ while another 18 (58.1 per cent) 17 (54.8 per cent) have 3-5 ‘classrooms’. ‘Classrooms’ are defined as partitioned spaces or actual rooms or a combination of both. Nine have 6-10 ‘classrooms’.²⁴ The three (under 10 per cent) largest ALCs surveyed have more than 10 ‘classrooms’ in their centre.²⁵ Two ALCs that have above five classrooms, run out of multiple buildings that are located in the same vicinity.²⁶

Facilities

A8. The majority of the ALCs have basic learning facilities such as whiteboards (100 per cent, 31), tables and chairs (90.3 per cent, 28), printers and/or photocopiers (74.2 per cent, 23), and

⁹ ALC-16, ALC-14, ALC-2, ALC-9, ALC-17.

¹⁰ ALC-12, ALC-4.

¹¹ ALC-1, ALC-21.

¹² ALC-24.

¹³ ALC-26.

¹⁴ ALC-13.

¹⁵ ALC-31 (9). Other multi-location ALCs are ALC-8 (5), ALC-7 (2), ALC-13 (3), ALC-11 (2), ALC-5 (5), ALC-27 (2), ALC-18 (3).

¹⁶ ALC-8.

¹⁷ ALC-17.

¹⁸ ALC-31, ALC-17, ALC-30, ALC-26, ALC-2.

¹⁹ ALC-16 centre is owned by its advisor, ALC-23 premises is in church in shop-lot.

²⁰ From those who shared this information, ALC-21 has the lowest rent, and ALC-8 the highest. The latter, however, is the amount to rent premises in five locations.

²¹ ALC-23.

²² ALC-16.

²³ ALC-23, ALC-21.

²⁴ ALC-7, ALC-20, ALC-31, ALC-1, ALC-26, ALC-17, ALC-5, ALC-3. ALC-13.

²⁵ ALC-11, ALC-8, ALC-29.

²⁶ ALC-26 (6), ALC-29 (2).

projectors (58.1 per cent, 18). Two (6.5 per cent) have TV sets,²⁷ and one has TV monitors,²⁸ both in lieu of projectors. One also had a PA system.²⁹ The condition of these facilities varied, with some being second-hand purchases or rentals. Several said they do not have enough tables and chairs, or that these were broken or in need of repairs.³⁰ One ALC in Kelantan said it had no chairs — the students sat on the floor — and the *ustaz* who ran the school made all the long wooden benches that serve as their tables.³¹

A8. Approximately two-thirds (21) give their teachers access to laptops/tablets, though in some cases, these have to be shared. Only 42 per cent (13) of ALCs have PCs/laptops/tablets for their students to use. Many, however, said that these equipments are either old, in poor condition, or insufficient for their needs.³²

A8. Twenty-three ALCs have Wi-Fi connection, but of this, a third said their connection is poor (8), to the point that only a limited number of students at one centre, can be online at the same time.³³ Those who do not have Wi-Fi largely cited cost as an issue,³⁴ though one did say they do not need this service.³⁵ Several without Wi-Fi use hotspots instead.³⁶

A8. One ALC has a basic science lab — many more would like the same but cannot afford this³⁷ — and a small equipped gym, which particularly benefits its Rohingya girl students.³⁸ At least four have small libraries,³⁹ and in addition to a regular book library, one also has a toy library.⁴⁰

Income

A9. The most common source of funding is school fees (71 per cent, 22 ALCs), followed by public donations (32.3 per cent, 10). With the exception of one school, which does not impose any fees,⁴¹ this ranges from RM20/month to RM200/month.

A9. To encourage parents, all schools appear to have some form of a sibling discount programme, whereby if a family has more than one or more children enrolled, it pays less per child. Despite this, it is not unusual for parents to skip paying school fees for one or several months, especially when they have no income.⁴² Consequently, there is never enough to cover the rental cost of an ALC, or teachers' salaries.

²⁷ ALC-19, ALC-16.

²⁸ ALC-20.

²⁹ ALC-12.

³⁰ For example, ALC-17, ALC-23, ALC-4.

³¹ ALC-2.

³² ALC-4, ALC-21, ALC-1, ALC-7, ALC-23, ALC-8, ALC-14, ALC-3.

³³ See ALC-12.

³⁴ ALC-2, ALC-22, ALC-23, ALC-15.

³⁵ ALC-15 “not interested”.

³⁶ ALC-9 and ALC-10.

³⁷ ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-25, ALC-17 ALC-18, ALC-6.

³⁸ ALC-5.

³⁹ ALC-6 ALC-16, ALC-1, ALC-12.

⁴⁰ ALC-6.

⁴¹ ALC-18. Due to increasing difficulties with providing free education, this ALC may soon introduce fees.

⁴² ALC-1, ALC-2, ALC-14, ALC-21, ALC-29, ALC-30.

A9. To supplement their income, 22.6 per cent of the ALCs surveyed have also received financial aid from the church (6)⁴³ or Islamic authorities (1).⁴⁴ Four run social enterprises⁴⁵ or conduct fundraising drives (4),⁴⁶ and one has run a summer camp over the holidays to earn more.⁴⁷ Only one (3.2 per cent) has access to organisational funds.⁴⁸ At least eight of the ALCs interviewed have received grants in the past, including from UNHCR, USAID and the Qatar Foundation.⁴⁹ A few wanted to or had applied for grants, but either did not know how to do so or failed in their applications.⁵⁰ At least one felt that due to legalities, it could not openly canvas for money.⁵¹

A9. Given the current global political climate, grants as a source of funding is tenuous at best. For example, UNHCR grants that supported salaries of teachers in a number of ALCs in the past or enabled schools to obtain tablets, has now considerably dwindled. These centres are more likely to get one-off amounts now.⁵² Likewise, two ALCs that received USAID in the past have had their income slashed considerably, with one interviewee saying she was not sure how they would manage beyond May.⁵³

A9. Despite this dire situation, no ALC reported having turned away students who cannot afford their monthly fees. On the contrary, they accept whatever parents can pay, and those in a position to do so, try to raise additional funds to cover any shortfall. “We make it easy for those who cannot pay. We find scholarships but not that much. Thirty students [here] have scholarships.”⁵⁴

Management

A10. There are a number of actors or combination of actors who are responsible for decision-making in their respective ALCs, the principal being the most common denominator. Seven ALCs have principals as their sole decision-makers.⁵⁵ Other combinations include principals and teachers (4),⁵⁶ principals and one other (5),⁵⁷ and principals and several others (4).⁵⁸

⁴³ ALC-13, ALC-26, ALC-29, ALC-22, ALC-6, ALC-7. ALC-23, ALC-15 and ALC-16 also receive church support in other ways including in-kind donations.

⁴⁴ ALC-12.

⁴⁵ ALC-6 ALC-20, ALC-5 (fridge magnets, trinkets), ALC-13 (tempeh).

⁴⁶ ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-6 ALC-18.

⁴⁷ ALC-3.

⁴⁸ ALC-25.

⁴⁹ ALC-5, ALC-11, ALC-15, ALC-18, ALC-28, ALC-8, ALC-4 ALC-7.

⁵⁰ ALC-13, ALC-11, ALC-31, ALC-3.

⁵¹ ALC-8.

⁵² ALC-28, ALC-12, ALC-15. ALC-28 and ALC-15 said this was RM5,000.

⁵³ ALC-5.

⁵⁴ ALC-3.

⁵⁵ ALC-23, ALC-6 ALC-21, ALC-4, ALC-3, ALC-2, ALC-19. The budget of ALC-6 is approved by its Board, teachers at ALC-4 can give suggestions but ultimately, the principals decide.

⁵⁶ ALC-1, ALC-29, ALC-24. ALC-13.

⁵⁷ ALC-5, ALC-15, ALC-11, ALC-18, ALC-25 (E.g., principal and founder member; principal and board; principal and HQ; principal and General Manager Officer at HQ; principal for day-to-day running and HQ for main decisions).

⁵⁸ ALC-12, ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-9 (E.g., principal, teachers, board but main HQ manages direction; principal, 3 teachers, 1 committee member; principal, teacher wife, teacher coordinator of community association; principal, husband, and sometimes two male parents, one of whom is community leader).

Principals in some ALCS also are part of the Management Committee (3), i.e. their decision-making authority.⁵⁹

A10. There are a handful of other ALCs where principals are not the main decision-makers. In this instance, teachers are in charge and either make decisions on their own,⁶⁰ or may work with others such as community leaders (2),⁶¹ NGOs (1),⁶² or parents and board members (1).⁶³ In one ALC, decisions are made by a Management Committee comprising a few founders, and in another, its Committee comprises six members, including the manager of the ALC.⁶⁴

A10. Several have members from the same family running the show, with or without the involvement of others.⁶⁵ Half a dozen separated day-to-day decision-making for the ALCs from strategic or policy decisions, where the former may be in the hands of a separate board, top management, or the HQ.⁶⁶

A10. One ALC, whose principal is now the main decision-maker, used to have a Management Committee, which comprised members of the Rohingya community. This, however, was disbanded when the centre was raided. Now the community is too afraid to gather again to help the school.⁶⁷

Section B: Students

Level of education offered

B1. There are slightly more ALCs that cater to both primary and secondary students (51.6 per cent, 16) versus those who solely provide primary education (45.2 per cent, 14). Just one focuses on secondary students and offers those who successfully complete this level of education, with the option of taking up seminary studies.⁶⁸

B1. Some ALCs that offer only primary education currently have plans to start offering secondary education next year, given their current batch of Primary 6 students want to continue studying where they are.⁶⁹ This pattern of catering to the needs of students enrolled i.e. opening up new grades so they can continue with their studies, is not unusual amongst the ALCs.⁷⁰

⁵⁹ ALC-10, ALC-17, ALC-8 (E.g., principal, teachers, two foreign resource persons; chair, principal and teachers; founder, operations manager, principals of five centres and two online schools).

⁶⁰ ALC-7 and ALC-16 (E.g., Board is the main decision-maker, all of its members are teachers; all members of the Management Team are teachers).

⁶¹ ALC-14 and ALC-30 (E.g., community leaders, teachers; teacher and one leader i.e. a parent who founded the centre).

⁶² ALC-27.

⁶³ ALC-20.

⁶⁴ ALC-22, and ALC-26.

⁶⁵ ALC-31, ALC-1. ALC-9, ALC-20, ALC-5, ALC-3 (E.g., principal, wife, one other; two sisters; principal, husband, two others; principal, wife and sometimes parents make day-to-day decisions; founder and principal are related; principal and daughters).

⁶⁶ ALC-15, ALC-11, ALC-18, ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-25.

⁶⁷ ALC-2.

⁶⁸ ALC-26.

⁶⁹ ALC-6 ALC-29.

⁷⁰ See also ALC-19, ALC-31, ALC-17.

B1. The standard of both primary and secondary education is rather varied. Those who offer this on a needs basis provide very basic secondary education, and to a very small number of students, i.e. going no further than Year 8. One offers just two subjects for its Year 7 class,⁷¹ while another places primary and secondary students in the same classroom but gives the secondary students “more work to do”.⁷² Needs-based provision means that some of these ALCs may have offered higher levels of secondary education before but stopped when there are no students or teachers available.⁷³

Number of students

B2. The majority of learning centres have less than 100 students (61.3 per cent, 19). Of these, ten schools (32.3 per cent) fall into the 50-99 students cohort;⁷⁴ five (16.1 per cent) have under 25 students — with the two smallest schools having 11 and 12 students respectively, both of which are outside the Klang Valley⁷⁵ — and another four (12.9 per cent) have between 25-49 students.⁷⁶ Of those with 100 or more students, five (16.1 per cent) have 150-249 students;⁷⁷ four (12.9 per cent) 100-149 students;⁷⁸ and only three (9.7 per cent) have a substantial student population, i.e. more than 250 students.⁷⁹

B2. Two Myanmar ALCs noted a recent rise in their student numbers, likely due to the civil war there since 2021, and the enforcement of a compulsory conscription law in 2024. According to one, there has been a “large increase” with its student population growing from 400+ in 2022 to 700 in 2024.⁸⁰

Age of students

B3.1 Like most Malaysian children, the majority of refugee children start primary education at around 6-7 years old. The similarities end there. For instance, only a handful of ALCs have students completing sixth grade at 12 years of age.⁸¹ However, one with a 12 year old enrolled only goes up to third grade, while another whose oldest student is 11, is in fourth grade.⁸²

B3.1 For various reasons mentioned earlier, the rest have primary students who are older than this bracket, many who are older teenagers, but two ALCs also have those in their early 20s enrolled at this level.⁸³ One offers such students an accelerated option so that they can complete studying a six-year programme in half the time.⁸⁴ These usually turn up saying they have

⁷¹ ALC-16.

⁷² ALC-28.

⁷³ ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-6. ALC-29 used to run a secondary school before the Covid-19 pandemic but subsequently handed the running of this to a couple.

⁷⁴ 50-99: ALC-24 (51 including kindergarten), ALC-25 (71), ALC-20 (95), ALC-28 (52), ALC-26 (70), ALC-12 (61), ALC-14 (52), ALC-9 (75); ALC-6 (70+); ALC-22 (70-80)

⁷⁵ Less than 25: ALC-19 and ALC-16 respectively. The ALC with 12 students only operates for two hours a day, three days a week. The other three are ALC-4 (16), ALC-30 (16) and ALC-23 (20).

⁷⁶ 25-49: ALC-21 (42), ALC-18 (43), ALC-10 (38); ALC-2 (49).

⁷⁷ 150-249: ALC-5 (200), ALC-3 (195), ALC-17 (150), ALC-27 (100 main centre Kindergarten, Primary, Secondary + 50 smaller centre Kindergarten, Primary), ALC-7 (223, including 9 secondary).

⁷⁸ 100-149: ALC-31 (101), ALC-15 (140), ALC-29 (142), ALC-1 (125 p, 14-15 secondary).

⁷⁹ More than 250: ALC-11 (251), ALC-8 (504), ALC-13 (510).

⁸⁰ ALC-13.

⁸¹ ALC-23, ALC-19, ALC-28, ALC-4, ALC-25.

⁸² ALC-30 and ALC-19 respectively.

⁸³ ALC-26, ALC-5.

⁸⁴ ALC-5.

secondary school or tertiary qualifications, but upon checking are assessed as being at grade 3 level.

B3.1 Two centres catering to primary students have children as young as 4-5 years of age, enrolled.⁸⁵ In this instance, they appear to accept these children because parents have no other alternative if they have to work, and there is no one at home to look after the children. “Some send their children to school so that they are not home alone. [They] treat school as [a] childcare centre. We face this situation many times.”⁸⁶

B3.2 The 17 ALCs that offer secondary education have students whose ages largely range from 13 to the early 20s. One has a 24-year-old taking the IGCSE. Several said that their students were grouped according to ability, not age. For instance, one secondary ALC that only offers grade 7 have students aged 14 and above;⁸⁷ another has up to grade 8, but students can be as old as 18 years of age. An ALC catering to Rohingya students outside the Klang Valley reported that it has nine secondary students, aged 13-14 years, but rather than being in grades 7 or 8, they are being taught a primary syllabus since they do not have basic Math, English, or Malay.⁸⁸

Girl vs boy students

B4.1+4.2 Overall, boys outnumbered girls in the ALCs interviewed. The gap at the primary level, however, is smaller than that for secondary education. In the former, 12 ALCs — regardless of size, location and ethnicities/nationalities — reported having more male students.⁸⁹ The number of those with more girls is not too far behind (8),⁹⁰ while there are ten ALCs with roughly the same number of male and female primary students (10).⁹¹

B4.1+4.2 In contrast, nine ALCs that provided secondary education had more boys⁹² versus four with more girls.⁹³ Only three had an approximately equal gender balance among its secondary students.⁹⁴

B4.1+4.2 A major reason why there are more boys than girls in some schools is because the former are privileged: “Boys have more opportunity than girls to study. If finances are no good, girls do not get sent to school.”⁹⁵ Another is because some families, particularly among the Rohingyas and Myanmar Muslims, do not send daughters to school once they reach puberty. “They are kept at home to learn how to manage a house, with a view to getting married.”⁹⁶

B4.1+4.2 There are other reasons too. In the case of an ALC whose male to female ratio was 30:70, there were much fewer boys because they are sent to study and board at a madrasah school. Since most parents are working and cannot manage their sons, they believe that the

⁸⁵ ALC-9, ALC-24.

⁸⁶ ALC-7. See also ALC-10.

⁸⁷ ALC-1.

⁸⁸ ALC-2.

⁸⁹ ALC-5, ALC-19, ALC-24, ALC-12, ALC-17, ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-7, ALC-11, ALC-29, ALC-1, ALC-2.

⁹⁰ ALC-31, ALC-20, ALC-8, ALC-4.

⁹¹ ALC-3, ALC-31, ALC-25, ALC-20, ALC-28, ALC-27, ALC-18, ALC-10, ALC-15, ALC-6.

⁹² ALC-5, ALC-25, ALC-26, ALC-17, ALC-13, ALC-11, ALC-1, ALC-2.

⁹³ ALC-31, ALC-20, ALC-8, ALC-4.

⁹⁴ ALC-27, ALC-28, ALC-16.

⁹⁵ ALC-1. See also ALC-17 “if they have 2 or 3 children, they will prioritise the boys to go to school”.

⁹⁶ ALC-25. See also ALC-5, ALC-24, ALC-22.

madrasah will instil better discipline.⁹⁷ Another ALC said that having more male students was a relatively new development for them; they have always had more girls before.

Sex ratio

B5. Almost three-quarters of the ALCS (23) felt that this sex ratio did not change much from year to year. The remainder (3) who answered ‘Yes’ said this was due to reasons such as relocation to a new school or resettlement to another country, and financial constraints.⁹⁸ The heads of two schools believed that active engagement with parents — e.g. talking to them about avoiding child marriage — is why they have seen more teenage girls enrolled in recent times.⁹⁹ [See also B12 and B13]. One other believed that there are now more girls coming to school. “That’s why it is now 50/50. Not like before where girls stay home. When they come to Malaysia, they change, the culture is changing”.¹⁰⁰

Ethnicity

B6. As explained in the Methodology section, the selection of ALCs in this needs assessment survey was purposive and meant to reflect the composition, size and distribution of refugees. In the end, of the 31 we interviewed, 14 had “only Rohingya” or “mainly Rohingya students”; 10 had “mainly one ethnicity/nationality (mostly from Myanmar)”, four had “mainly others and some Rohingya” students; and three had “mixed nationalities, not Rohingya”. The ALCs with Rohingya or mainly Rohingya students were mostly outside the Klang Valley.

B6. The largest representation of refugees from the “other ethnicities/nationalities” category also comes from Myanmar: Chin, Zomi, Burmese/Myanmar Muslim, Mon, Burmese Tamil/Myanmar Hindu, Shan, Matupi. There are smaller numbers of Afghan, Somalian, Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Yemeni, Syrian, Pakistani, Sudanese, and Egyptian refugees.

B6. Of the 14 Rohingya-majority schools (i.e. 3 “only Rohingya” and 11 “mainly Rohingya”), six are solely primary schools while eight provide a mix of primary and secondary education. It should be noted that of the latter category, two just started accepting secondary students recently,¹⁰¹ while another two are either only running lower secondary classes or using a primary curriculum with these students.¹⁰²

B6. These ALCs servicing Rohingya students are largely located outside the Klang Valley (Northern Region 8, Central Region 2, East Coast Region 2, Southern Region 2). They are a mix of Rohingya-run (3 primary, 3 primary and secondary)¹⁰³ and non-Rohingya-run outfits (3 primary, 5 primary and secondary).¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ ALC-21.

⁹⁸ ALC-23, ALC-1, ALC-14.

⁹⁹ ALC-9, ALC-28. ALC-3 has also seen a rise in the attendance of primary girls.

¹⁰⁰ ALC-3.

¹⁰¹ ALC-27, ALC-25.

¹⁰² ALC-21, ALC-2.

¹⁰³ Primary Rohingya-run: ALC-10, ALC-24, ALC-9; and Primary Secondary Rohingya-run: ALC-2, ALC-17, ALC-21.

¹⁰⁴ Primary non-Rohingya-run: ALC-15, ALC-12, ALC-18; and Primary Secondary non-Rohingya-run: ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-25, ALC-11, ALC-5.

Class size

B7. The most common class size is under 20 students (54.8 per cent, 17). Four ALCs in this category, all non-Rohingya, were very small (under 25 primary students).¹⁰⁵ The small class size is therefore unsurprising. Four others whose student population are larger (100- 200) also have classes with no more than 20 students.¹⁰⁶ The other ALCs with small classes have between 25-99 students.¹⁰⁷

B7. Thirteen ALCs had slightly larger classes, each with 20-29 students on average.¹⁰⁸ Only one ALC, with a total of over 500 students across its different locations, runs large classes i.e. with 30-39 students each.

B7. It is not clear if the larger ALCs with small classrooms deliberately keep their class numbers low. But it is also the case that demand for these schools can be quite diverse depending on, for instance, the interest in and quality of education provided, or accessibility (location, finances, safety) concerns. This means that some grades, especially lower ones, can have more students in a class compared to higher grades. For example, the biggest class for one ALC is grade 1, which has 31 students. Its secondary classes, however, have only 14-19 students each.¹⁰⁹ Classroom size also depends on how much space and number of teachers a school has.

Attendance

B8. All the ALCs interviewed reported that mainly, students attend classes regularly. At least ten have a high attendance rate of 85-100 per cent.¹¹⁰ The lowest rate is around 70 per cent.¹¹¹

B8. There are several possible explanations for this result. One, the centres are well-established and/or reputable, meaning that parents trust them with their children. Gaining the trust of parents and making them understand the importance of educating their children was mentioned by at least two ALCs, which have Rohingya-majority students.¹¹²

B8. One of these pointed out that regular student attendance “*nampak cantik sekarang* (looks good now)” but was a struggle before when the teachers did not have a relationship with the parents.¹¹³ Reaching this point thus requires an ALC to make the effort to meet parents and build a connection with them.

B8. Another concurred that when it first set up, it was harder to impress the importance of schooling upon the parents. Five years on, when parents can now see the difference in their children, they are no longer reluctant to send them to school — “*mereka percaya sekarang* (they trust [us] now)”. The attendance rate at this ALC this year has been further boosted

¹⁰⁵ ALC-19, ALC-23, ALC-16, ALC-4.

¹⁰⁶ ALC-1, ALC-5, ALC-7, ALC-17. The rest are ALCs that have between 25-99 students (ALC-10, ALC-30; ALC-31, ALC-14, ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-18, ALC-6 ALC-24).

¹⁰⁷ ALC-10, ALC-30 (above 25-49); ALC-31, ALC-14, ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-18, ALC-6 ALC-24 (50-99).

¹⁰⁸ ALC-8, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-27, ALC-11, ALC-26, ALC-15 140, ALC-29, ALC-22, ALC-2, ALC-12, ALC-9, ALC-25.

¹⁰⁹ ALC-3.

¹¹⁰ ALC-3, ALC-26, ALC-27, ALC-13, ALC-30, ALC-7, ALC-29, ALC-15, ALC-1, ALC-6.

¹¹¹ ALC-12, ALC-22.

¹¹² ALC-12, ALC-18.

¹¹³ ALC-18.

following the graduation of its first batch of sixth graders. The ceremony for this occasion, coupled with the photos shared on social media, all helped with raising the profile of this ALC among the community.¹¹⁴

B8. Related to being more established, some ALCs have a tried-and-tested curriculum in place, which in turn attracts keener interest from and participation of students. Two such ALCs, in particular, said that their students are “very happy” to come to school to the point that they do not even want holidays, as this meant staying home which they found to be boring.¹¹⁵

B8. Proximity or easy access to the ALC is also a reason for regularly good attendance. For example, schools which children can walk to from home, or parents can drop off, or where transportation services are available. For this reason, several ALCs offer transportation services, usually for an additional fee. One whose teachers use their cars to ferry children between their homes and the ALC noted, “if not, [the students] will still come to school but their attendance will be inconsistent”.¹¹⁶ Those with boarding facilities also register very high attendance rates because students live-in and have no choice but to turn up in class. The only exception is when they are sick.

B8. Several ALCs shared why they have good attendance rates. One said it “is because we are very strict on attendance [...] We actually pressurise students, teachers and parents” [to ensure attendance].” Teachers record daily attendance in a database that allows for tracking and parents will then receive a message stating the time their child has come to school.¹¹⁷ Another recently introduced a reward system to incentivise students to attend school and has already seen an improvement.¹¹⁸ One more checks in and calls up a student if they have missed school for two days, while another requires them to inform their teacher if they are not coming to class.¹¹⁹

B8. In general, this — being unwell or ill — is the most common reason for student absentees. Sometimes, the ALCs have experienced a fairly large proportion of students who are all missing at the same time due to having a common sickness, e.g. the flu.¹²⁰ They also skip school if they have no transport and/or live too far, parents need to go outstation to attend to work matters and cannot leave them at home alone, or due to bad weather. Three ALCs interviewed added that during Ramadhan, attendance was “low or not so regular”.¹²¹ There are occasions too where students do not turn up because they have been stopped or detained on their way to school by immigration or other authorities, or if their parents get news of an impending raid and they fear sending their children to school.¹²²

Absent students

B9. The answers to the question of how many students miss class on any given day largely mirrored the previous question on attendance, confirming that among those who responded to this question, very few students miss classes every day. If they do, this is due to reasons noted

¹¹⁴ ALC-12.

¹¹⁵ ALC-28, ALC-5, ALC-16.

¹¹⁶ ALC-18.

¹¹⁷ ALC-8.

¹¹⁸ ALC-6.

¹¹⁹ ALC-4, ALC-15.

¹²⁰ ALC-6, ALC-7, ALC-16.

¹²¹ ALC-4. See also ALC-12, ALC-2.

¹²² ALC-8, ALC-15, ALC-2.

above (see B8), i.e. sickness, transportation, etc. At least one ALC also pointed out that absentees varied across grades, with the younger ones more prone to not coming to school.¹²³

B9. In two ALCs, this rate is random.¹²⁴ Three, however, said only 1-2 students are missing every week,¹²⁵ while several noted 1-2 or “a few” students are absent daily,¹²⁶ at most around five students.¹²⁷ For those with ‘higher’ rates of absenteeism, three have more than 5-10 absentees each day,¹²⁸ and two have around 25-30 students missing. However, this represented a five per cent rate in one school and a 10-15 per cent rate in another.¹²⁹

Girls vs boys being absent

B10. For the most part, there appears to be little difference accounting for why boys and girls miss class.¹³⁰ Eighty per cent (24) of those interviewed said that like girls, illness is the main reason why boys do not turn up to class. Similarly, safety concerns applied equally to boys and girls (13.3 per cent, 4). There was also little to distinguish the number of boys and girls who do not come to school because of transport difficulties (girls 10, boys 11) or for family reasons (9 girls, 8 boys).

B10. Boys also miss class because they are unable to wake up in the morning and miss the school bus, either because they are playing video games or working till late.¹³¹

B10. Delving deeper into the family-related explanations for missing class reveals a gender disparity where if missing, girls are more likely to be kept back to help look after siblings or do household chores,¹³² while boys, especially those older, are sent out to earn an income.¹³³ In addition to care work, some girls also stay home to babysit and help supplement the family income.¹³⁴ One ALC noted that its older students with part-time night jobs, may also be absent once a week because of work.¹³⁵

B10. A large ALC that had more girl students than boys, said that girls “very seldom skip school” unless it is due to reasons related to their health or being raided or detained by immigration authorities.¹³⁶

¹²³ ALC-6.

¹²⁴ ALC-27, ALC-22.

¹²⁵ ALC-19, ALC-16.

¹²⁶ (1-2) ALC-3, ALC-21, ALC-13, ALC-29, ALC-23. ALC-15 said “maybe about three” missing every day, ALC-10 said a few.

¹²⁷ ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-14, ALC-9, ALC-2. ALC-18 (5-10 weekly).

¹²⁸ ALC-6 (7-8), ALC-17 (10). For ALC-25, the figure ranged from 5 to 10 children daily.

¹²⁹ ALC-8 and ALC-11.

¹³⁰ At least three schools, ALC-19, ALC-4, and ALC-25, said that boys and girls missed classes for the same reasons.

¹³¹ ALC-11, ALC-20, ALC-7.

¹³² ALC-20, ALC-17, ALC-7, ALC-2, ALC-11.

¹³³ ALC-28, ALC-17.

¹³⁴ ALC-7, ALC-13.

¹³⁵ ALC-13.

¹³⁶ ALC-8.

Drop out rates and reasons

B11+B12. Of the surveyed ALCs that responded,¹³⁷ all but three have not had many students who “drop out altogether”. In fact, a quarter of them (7) said they did not have any student drop out in the previous year.¹³⁸ A few ALCs reported that they each have a negligible number of students who left,¹³⁹ and several more said this rate was under 10 per cent.¹⁴⁰ Even among those with higher rates of students missing class, this was largely capped at around 10 per cent.¹⁴¹

B11+B12. The exceptions were three ALCs, one that reported a 15 per cent drop out rate (around 20 students) per year;¹⁴² another at 20 per cent (around 30 students);¹⁴³ and the third, at 25 per cent (3 students).¹⁴⁴ This was due to a range of factors: relocation, resettlement, health issues, safety concerns, restricted mobility. Lack of awareness and support of children’s education in general, and girls’ education in particular, was also a reason for its drop out rate, and contributed to girls being kept at home to perform household chores or prepared for early marriage.¹⁴⁵

B11+B12. Five ALCs did not specify their drop-out rate but two reported that these are tied to parents who either removed or simply did not think it important to send their younger children (primary 1 or primary 2) to school.¹⁴⁶

B11+B12. Relocation (i.e. students who transfer to a different ALC or move to another location within Malaysia)¹⁴⁷ and resettlement (i.e. students whose families are relocated to new countries)¹⁴⁸ are common reasons why children stop going to school. There are also others who stop going to school altogether due to financial reasons,¹⁴⁹ transportation challenges,¹⁵⁰ and fear of encountering the authorities.¹⁵¹ Sometimes, these reasons can also be very personal, for instance, a parent who may not like a teacher or a parent who wanted their sibling to be hired as a teacher in the same school.¹⁵²

¹³⁷ The three non-responses were ALC-19 and ALC-10 which were too new to have drop outs, ALC-13 did not respond to this question.

¹³⁸ ALC-4, ALC-8, ALC-23, ALC-31, ALC-29, ALC-14, ALC-18.

¹³⁹ This was under 5 per cent: ALC-20 (1 per cent), ALC-28 (2.9 per cent), ALC-2 (4.1 per cent).

¹⁴⁰ ALC-12 (5.7 per cent), ALC-15 (5.71 per cent), ALC-27 (7 per cent), ALC-24 (7.8 per cent), ALC-25 (8.5 per cent), ALC-7 (9 per cent).

¹⁴¹ ALC-26 (10 per cent), ALC-11 (10 per cent), ALC-22 (10.7 per cent), ALC-9 (10.7 per cent), ALC-30 (11.1 per cent).

¹⁴² ALC-1

¹⁴³ ALC-17.

¹⁴⁴ ALC-16.

¹⁴⁵ ALC-17.

¹⁴⁶ ALC-6, ALC-21. The other three schools are ALC-5, ALC-13, and ALC-3.

¹⁴⁷ ALC-28, ALC-27, ALC-15, ALC-16, ALC-9, ALC-25, ALC-17, ALC-22, ALC-30, ALC-3, ALC-7, ALC-11, ALC-14, ALC-21, ALC-23, ALC-2, ALC-4.

¹⁴⁸ ALC-27, ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-15, ALC-9, ALC-25, ALC-3, ALC-17, ALC-22, ALC-7, ALC-8, ALC-11, ALC-13, ALC-21, ALC-23, ALC-31.

¹⁴⁹ ALC-1, ALC-28, ALC-9, ALC-2, ALC-13.

¹⁵⁰ ALC-6, ALC-27, ALC-28, ALC-3.

¹⁵¹ ALC-17, ALC-15.

¹⁵² ALC-10.

Girls vs boys dropping out

B13. If at all, girls drop out for the same reason that they miss class: to help their families with care work.¹⁵³ Likewise with boys who stop schooling. Those as young as 14 or 15, drop out to help supplement their family income or support their family in cases where their parents are unwell.¹⁵⁴ It appears less common for girls to drop out for paid work. Only two ALCs said their female students fell into this category, but in one of them, these were in fact young adults, aged 18 to 20.¹⁵⁵

B13. Both boys and girls who leave for paid employment likely do not want to study anymore or are not doing well at school.¹⁵⁶ They see “no future for them in studying”,¹⁵⁷ or give up because “they cannot catch up”.¹⁵⁸

B13. Those interviewed also felt that parents have a large part to play in their children’s education, especially whether or not their children are in school.¹⁵⁹ Lacking in awareness of the importance of education, for example, they expect sons to go out to make a living as soon as they can, and daughters to help with domestic work.¹⁶⁰

B13. Some families remove their daughters from school at puberty, largely in anticipation of marrying them off after they have learnt how to perform care work.¹⁶¹ In one case, the idea of keeping them ‘safe’ until such time,¹⁶² led to one parent removing their daughter from school, believing that she was involved with a male student.¹⁶³

B13. Although only a few ALCs raised the subject of early marriage in the discussion about girls dropping out — and even then, this was more to make the point that they had experienced this in the past — they cited parents and culture as the main reason for this phenomenon.¹⁶⁴ “Parents usually say that they have no money to take care of their daughter, so let her husband take care”.¹⁶⁵

B13. All these ALCs are unanimous about discouraging early marriage. “We fight so that they remain in school. We tell the students not to marry early and if their parents insist after the girls say ‘no’, we tell the parents to come to speak with us”.¹⁶⁶ The principal of this school has previously reported cases of forced marriage to UNHCR, and once managed to delay an impending child marriage till the student was 18 years old.¹⁶⁷

¹⁵³ ALC-20, ALC-17, ALC-25.

¹⁵⁴ ALC-26, ALC-12, ALC-28, ALC-11, ALC-7, ALC-16, ALC-9, ALC-25, ALC-5, ALC-24, ALC-22, ALC-12, ALC-28.

¹⁵⁵ ALC-26. The other ALC is ALC-13.

¹⁵⁶ ALC-20, ALC-26, ALC-22.

¹⁵⁷ ALC-26.

¹⁵⁸ ALC-22.

¹⁵⁹ ALC-22, ALC-18, ALC-7.

¹⁶⁰ ALC-26, ALC-17.

¹⁶¹ ALC-25.

¹⁶² ALC-11.

¹⁶³ ALC-18.

¹⁶⁴ ALC-17.

¹⁶⁵ ALC-12. See also ALC-24, ALC-18.

¹⁶⁶ ALC-12. Same with ALC-18.

¹⁶⁷ ALC-12.

Enrolment capacity and waiting lists

B14. In terms of capacity levels, there were more ALCs that are not full (19, 61.3 per cent)¹⁶⁸ compared to those that are (12, 38.7 per cent).¹⁶⁹

B15+16. Of those that are operating at maximum capacity, only seven have a waiting list. Their numbers range from under ten students to 150 students.¹⁷⁰ Two other ALCs that are full do not keep a waiting list because they do not have sufficient space to accommodate new students.¹⁷¹ At least two ALCs ran two sessions to meet with demand of students.¹⁷²

B15+16. Among those that are not full, three could take in more students but do not have enough teachers.¹⁷³ In some cases, an ALC can only accommodate more students in certain classes;¹⁷⁴ in instances involving ALCs with several branches, they may only be full in some locations.¹⁷⁵ There are also two that have a transportation wait list.¹⁷⁶ Of two ALCs that do not have a waiting list, one “never turns anyone away”,¹⁷⁷ and the other “mostly accepts” students who want to enrol”.¹⁷⁸

B15+16. One ALC felt that even though it could still accommodate more students, the fact that it had not obtained UNHCR recognition meant its status was insecure. “Most parents contact us saying they want their children to join [the school] but they are waiting because we do not have that letter [from UNHCR] so it is not safe for their children to attend...”¹⁷⁹

B17. It is not unusual for parents whose children want to enrol in an ALC that is already full, to be redirected to other schools.¹⁸⁰ One ALC said that it tries hard not to reject potential students, but if it had to, it would guide them to join a community school.¹⁸¹ Two said that in addition asking parents to go to a different school, they also asked them to wait,¹⁸² or to come back the following year.¹⁸³

¹⁶⁸ Not full: ALC-19, ALC-8, ALC-23, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-30, ALC-11, ALC-22, ALC-4, ALC-10, ALC-2, ALC-17, ALC-18, ALC-12, ALC-6 ALC-16, ALC-24, ALC-9, ALC-7.

¹⁶⁹ Full: ALC-5. ALC-13, ALC-31, ALC-1, LM, ALC-3, NL, ST, ALC-25, ALC-26, ALC-15, ALC-29.

¹⁷⁰ ALC-5 (150 students), ALC-29 (37), ALC-25 (20-30), ALC-13 (location A 6 + location B 15-20), ALC-26 (20) ALC-31 (15+), ALC-27 (less than 10).

¹⁷¹ ALC-3, ALC-14.

¹⁷² ALC-20, ALC-27.

¹⁷³ ALC-16, ALC-12, ALC-30.

¹⁷⁴ ALC-18. ALC-21 only has room for more primary students.

¹⁷⁵ ALC-8. According to its principal, one branch can still take more students, but another is “overloaded”.

¹⁷⁶ ALC-4, ALC-12.

¹⁷⁷ ALC-6.

¹⁷⁸ ALC-8. Its only caveat is that it needs a week or so to prepare necessary materials for the new students.

¹⁷⁹ ALC-30.

¹⁸⁰ ALC-20, ALC-31, ALC-25, ALC-8, ALC-26, ALC-11, ALC-27, ALC-15, ALC-29, ALC-1, ALC-22.

¹⁸¹ ALC-26.

¹⁸² ALC-11, ALC-1.

¹⁸³ ALC-3, ALC-13.

From primary to secondary education

B18. Students in more than four-fifths of the ALCs move on to secondary schools when they have completed their primary education, with the numbers evenly divided between continuing at the same ALC's secondary facility¹⁸⁴ or going to a different school.¹⁸⁵

B18. Of these, there are a few whose students have opted for either one or stopped schooling altogether.¹⁸⁶ There are also cases where students continue their secondary education up to the highest level possible at the same centre, before transferring out into another ALC.¹⁸⁷

B18. Among the secondary school destinations mentioned were Dignity, IDEAS Academy, MIKS, New Life, El-Shaddai, Cahaya Surya Bakti, United Arakan Institute Malaysia, Ruth, Fugee School, and for some from Myanmar, their respective community schools.¹⁸⁸ However, access to some of these ALCs is limited as not every student has the financial means or a UNHCR card, which is an entry requirement.¹⁸⁹

B18. One ALC with Christian-links sends on its primary 6 students to a private home school under a church, which offers the students secondary education at a discounted rate. The ALC currently has seven students there, of which two are sponsored.¹⁹⁰

B18. Nine ALCs reported that they have had a few students who stop schooling after completing primary education.¹⁹¹ Financial reasons including leaving to find a job, and cost of transportation, as well as relocation or resettlement, are the most common explanations for this.¹⁹²

B18. One absorbed two of its students whose English was good and who had completed grade 6, as its teachers.¹⁹³ Another felt that if its students wanted to continue studying, they can, but this ALC's "focus is not on preparing them for academia". Instead, it is to prepare these children for work, "we help them to have an edge over others to get a job".¹⁹⁴

Primary exit exams

B19. None of the ALCs offering primary education had an 'exit exam' for students going from grade 6 to grade 7 (secondary).¹⁹⁵

B19. Many of the ALCs (16) that said they had an 'exit exam' were in fact referring to internally-set exams — at least once or more than once a year — which their respective students

¹⁸⁴ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-31, ALC-1, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-25, ALC-11, ALC-4, ALC-17, ALC-9.

¹⁸⁵ ALC-8, ALC-1, ALC-14, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-15, ALC-29, ALC-22, ALC-4, ALC-18, ALC-12, ALC-6, ALC-7.

¹⁸⁶ For example, ALC-8 and ALC-6. Students in both discontinue after primary due to financial constraints. ALC-4, ALC-1, ALC-21 did not report students discontinuing upon completion at the primary level.

¹⁸⁷ ALC-4, ALC-1, ALC-31.

¹⁸⁸ ALC-6 ALC-1, ALC-15, ALC-7, ALC-18, ALC-21, ALC-8.

¹⁸⁹ ALC-1.

¹⁹⁰ ALC-29. Additional information obtained via personal communication via whatsapp, 27 May 2025.

¹⁹¹ ALC-8, ALC-25, ALC-22, ALC-17, ALC-18, ALC-12, ALC-9, ALC-6, ALC-7.

¹⁹² ALC-6 ALC-3, ALC-23, ALC-7, ALC-13, ALC-17, ALC-12.

¹⁹³ ALC-6.

¹⁹⁴ ALC-22.

¹⁹⁵ Seven ALCs did not answer this question (ALC-15, ALC-28, ALC-10, ALC-9, ALC-23, ALC-13, ALC-17), and two had not reached the stage of having 'exit exams' yet (ALC-30, ALC-19).

had to take to at every grade before being allowed to move onto the next level.¹⁹⁶ Five other ALCs said outright that they had no ‘exit exam’. Like the other ALCs, however, these held regular exams that were usually set by their teachers.¹⁹⁷ In one of these, the school would retain students that fail the primary 6 exam and place them in “*kelas pemulihan* (remove class)”.¹⁹⁸

B19. Two whose students went on to other ALCs said that while they themselves did not have exit exams as such, some of the centres their students went to for secondary education required them to first pass an entrance exam before they could be admitted.¹⁹⁹

Standardised secondary exams

B20. Among the 17 ALCs that offer secondary classes, only five (29.4 per cent) said they offered standardised exams.²⁰⁰ Each of these have around 100 or more students (primary and secondary), i.e. are among the larger refugee learning centres. Four have students sitting for external exams such O levels (1),²⁰¹ GED (3),²⁰² Cambridge (1),²⁰³ or IGCSE (3),²⁰⁴ while the fifth internally sets an exam that is common across all its branches.²⁰⁵ Three secondary ALCs only offer their own exams.²⁰⁶ The remaining nine either just started out,²⁰⁷ did not offer upper secondary classes,²⁰⁸ or did not answer this question.²⁰⁹

Secondary qualifications

B21. Only four ALCs have had more than ten students who obtained secondary qualifications in the last five years.²¹⁰ This ranged from 16 students in one ALC, to 73 in another. The latter has been operating for over ten years and has students doing either the IGCSE or GED, and said that “almost all of them obtained secondary qualifications in the last five years”.²¹¹ Another two also had students who completed secondary education in the past, but their numbers were very small.²¹²

B21. Two ALCs did not provide specific numbers about their secondary graduate students. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that each has done well and produced students with secondary qualifications.

¹⁹⁶ ALC-3, ALC-16, ALC-24, ALC-20, ALC-4, ALC-21, ALC-18, ALC-14, ALC-29, ALC-1, ALC-2, ALC-6 ALC-5, ALC-12, ALC-11, ALC-31.

¹⁹⁷ ALC-22, ALC-25, ALC-8, ALC-27, ALC-7.

¹⁹⁸ ALC-25.

¹⁹⁹ ALC-31, ALC-29.

²⁰⁰ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-11.

²⁰¹ ALC-13.

²⁰² ALC-20, ALC-11 (for upper secondary), ALC-8.

²⁰³ ALC-11 (lower secondary).

²⁰⁴ ALC-5, ALC-13, ALC-11 (upper secondary).

²⁰⁵ ALC-8.

²⁰⁶ ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-26.

²⁰⁷ ALC-27.

²⁰⁸ ALC-3, ALC-4, ALC-1.

²⁰⁹ ALC-16, ALC-25, ALC-21, ALC-17, ALC-2.

²¹⁰ ALC-11 (16), ALC-13 (21), ALC-17 (50), ALC-8 (73).

²¹¹ ALC-8. See also personal communication dated 29 May 2025.

²¹² ALC-16 (1), ALC-20 (6).

B21. One of these ALCs provides only secondary education and reports that it has a “90 per cent” success rate.²¹³ The second has offered secondary classes since 2017, and had its first ten students sit for the IGCSE during the Covid-19 pandemic. It currently has around eight students in the Education Pathways university programme, and numerous other students who completed their secondary education are already working.²¹⁴

Beyond secondary school

B22. Eight ALCs were able to say what their students who completed secondary school went on to do: further study,²¹⁵ looking for employment,²¹⁶ starting work.²¹⁷ This is provided they did not relocate or resettle.

Academic pathways

B23. Of the 17 secondary ALCs, only 12 shared their views on this question of whether or not they had a programme to support further higher education for their students. All but one of these do not have such a programme.²¹⁸

B23. The sole ALC that differed offers its students access to the UNHCR Education Pathways programme that was introduced in 2022. Under this, the ALC has already sent eight Rohingya students to the Philippines — there are more countries that are part of this programme but the Philippines is the only one that will accept those without passports — and another five are due to leave this year.²¹⁹

Vocational pathways

B24. The same ALC also offers non-academically inclined students a chance to be part of its post-secondary programme that focuses on vocational training and employment. This programme is offered to male students and done in collaboration with a private educational institution.²²⁰

B24. Another two connect their students with secondary qualifications to relevant vocational schools depending on their interest e.g. hair styling, baking, graphic design. Both of these, however, have to help their students with raising funds for these courses. One of them has a separate community group for this purpose,²²¹ while the other provides this support as a loan, which it expects the student to repay once they are working. This way, they “save it for the next student”.²²²

B24. The previously-mentioned ALC that deliberately equips its students with life skills rather than academic knowledge, said it was still trying to identify a vocational training programme for its students since private centres were too expensive and government ones are not open to

²¹³ ALC-26.

²¹⁴ ALC-5.

²¹⁵ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-31, ALC-20, ALC-11.

²¹⁶ ALC-5, ALC-31, ALC-21, ALC-11, ALC-26.

²¹⁷ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-31, ALC-20, ALC-17.

²¹⁸ ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-31, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-28, ALC-20, ALC-11, ALC-26, ALC-4, ALC-16.

²¹⁹ ALC-5.

²²⁰ ALC-5.

²²¹ ALC-8.

²²² ALC-29.

refugees. It is in the process of identifying an NGO to help in this regard, e.g. run courses to repair computers, handphones, cars.²²³ At least one other ALC that was planning to develop this alternative pathway for its students concurred that it had to do this also current training providers do not accept refugee children.²²⁴

B24. One more ALC did not know of any vocational pathway but said it receives ad-hoc information about classes on baking, computing and coffee-making, which it shares with its students.²²⁵ The remaining secondary ALCs either did not have such a programme either or they did not reply to this question.

Awareness of higher education options

B25. Eight secondary ALCs (47.1 per cent) are aware about higher education options for refugee children in Malaysia,²²⁶ which include, among others, Fugee Org Hi-Ed programme, UNHCR Education Pathways, and University of the People (online). Some of the institutions require students to have UNHCR cards to enrol.²²⁷

Awareness of scholarships and support for students

B26. Eight of these ALCs know about scholarships and programmes that support students.²²⁸ Four are familiar with scholarships by Fugee Org.²²⁹ Students from one other ALC have received financial support from another academic institution in the past, and this ALC is also aware that a third academic institution also offers scholarships.²³⁰ UNHCR itself has a scholarship programme that enables refugee students with UNHCR cards to study at one particular academic institution.²³¹ Another institution offers a 50 per cent discount for UNHCR card holders.

B27. In general, the ALCs that have a programme for post-secondary pathways or are aware of higher education options for refugee children here share the information with their students.²³²

²²³ ALC-22.

²²⁴ ALC-11.

²²⁵ ALC-13.

²²⁶ ALC-5, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-11, ALC-13, ALC-29.

²²⁷ ALC-13, ALC-21, ALC-29.

²²⁸ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-11, ALC-13.

²²⁹ ALC-3, ALC-20, ALC-11, ALC-13.

²³⁰ ALC-8.

²³¹ ALC-21.

²³² ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-21, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-11.

Section C: Teachers

Teacher numbers

C1. ALCs with over ten teachers were the most prevalent in this study (35.5 per cent, 11).²³³ This was followed by those with 1-3 teachers (29.0 per cent, 9),²³⁴ then those with 4-6 teachers (25.8 per cent, 8).²³⁵ The remaining three ALCs have 7-10 teachers (9.7 per cent).²³⁶

C1. In the main, schools with a larger student population have more teachers. The number of teachers, however, does not always reflect the number of students in a school. For example, one ALC has only 12 students but 11 teachers, because each one volunteers to teach only two hours a day.²³⁷

Refugee v non-refugee teachers, paid v unpaid

C2. The ALCs interviewed have a mix of refugee and non-refugee teachers (i.e. Malaysians, and non-Malaysians, usually retirees, professionals, and students). These teachers are both paid and unpaid. Paid teachers largely work full-time — only four ALCs also have paid part-time teachers.²³⁸

C2. Among the refugee-run schools, nine have refugee teachers as their only paid full-time staff.²³⁹ Another four have paid full-timers who comprise refugees and locals.²⁴⁰ Three do not remunerate their refugee staff. This includes one that only pays its non-refugee teachers while refugee teachers are volunteers.²⁴¹

C2. A few non-refugee run schools have refugee teachers who are former students.²⁴² In one such ALC, an alumni who is the centre's manager, sits on the management committee as well.²⁴³ In a Johor-based ALC, four former students currently work as part of its latest initiative to educate village madrasah refugee children in English,²⁴⁴ while an ALC in Perak has a former student who has US citizenship, volunteering as a teacher.²⁴⁵

Salary

C3. There is quite a range in the salary scale of ALC teachers. At the low end are ALCs that pay their staff between RM400 to RM800 a month.²⁴⁶ In one of these, a teacher who deputises for the principal in her absence gets a monthly salary of RM1,200 (while the others are paid

²³³ ALC-11, ALC-7, ALC-17, ALC-29, ALC-16, ALC-3, ALC-1, ALC-31, ALC-13, ALC-8, ALC-26.

²³⁴ ALC-9, ALC-24, ALC-18, ALC-2, ALC-30, ALC-21, ALC-14, ALC-23, ALC-19.

²³⁵ ALC-25, ALC-15, ALC-22, ALC-4, ALC-10, ALC-6, ALC-12, ALC-28.

²³⁶ ALC-5, ALC-20, ALC-27.

²³⁷ ALC-16.

²³⁸ ALC-19, ALC-20, ALC-30, ALC-17.

²³⁹ ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-30, ALC-9, RC, ALC-17, ALC-10, ALC-1.

²⁴⁰ ALC-19, ALC-3, ALC-29, ALC-2, ALC-8.

²⁴¹ ALC-7. The other two are ALC-23, ALC-31.

²⁴² In addition to the following examples, see also ALC-6 that was mentioned previously, ALC-18, and ALC-29.

²⁴³ ALC-26.

²⁴⁴ ALC-5.

²⁴⁵ ALC-16.

²⁴⁶ ALC-4, ALC-8, ALC-9, ALC-24, ALC-28.

RM800).²⁴⁷ A principal at another ALC gives his only other paid teacher RM400 each month, but provides a RM100-RM150 bonus as well, albeit rarely.²⁴⁸

C3. As already noted, there are those whose teachers are volunteers. In one such ALC, “teachers get ‘pocket money’ if there is left-over money after paying the rental,”²⁴⁹ while in another their refugee teachers may receive a token “love gift” from the school, but only when there is a balance of funds.²⁵⁰

C3. At over half the ALCs (54.8 per cent, 17), teachers have a monthly salary of between RM1,000 and RM2,000, with one paying up to RM3,000 depending on experience.²⁵¹ Otherwise, most in this bracket earn around RM1,500/month as a full-time teacher,²⁵² which one interviewee describes as “not a salary, more of a love gift”.²⁵³ Recognising that this amount is inadequate, at least one ALC is trying to ensure that the refugee teachers in its school are paid the revised minimum wage of RM1,700 but acknowledges that this will take some time to change.²⁵⁴

C3. Two ALCs have a significantly higher salary scheme than the rest. The first, a non-refugee ALC run, pays its teachers between RM2,500 to RM4,300, plus EPF.²⁵⁵ The second, a refugee ALC, has two local teachers who are paid RM3,000 each per month by an external organisation, and NGO, to support the founder principal, an *ustaz*, in his efforts to educate Rohingya children.²⁵⁶

C3. There is variation in how salaries are determined. In several ALCs, a teacher’s salary depends on one’s qualifications, experience or workload.²⁵⁷ Two ALCs that are part of the same organisation but located in different states outside the Klang Valley, receive the same salary.²⁵⁸ But their counterparts in the Klang Valley get a slightly higher salary presumably adjusted to the higher cost of living.

C3. Sometimes, if a school has both refugee and non-refugee teachers, there are differences in their salary rates as well. At one such ALC, locals are paid the minimum wage of RM1,700 since this is a legal requirement; non-Malaysians are paid less (RM1,300) because “they do not have the expertise”.²⁵⁹ Another ALC pays its local teacher RM2,000/month while the others are paid less (RM1,500 and below), also depending on their qualifications.²⁶⁰

C3. A few ALCs have a probation period for their new teachers, during which time they are under a different salary arrangement. One ALC used to pay its new teachers a daily rate while they were on probation but since this year, it has had to stop this practice due to budget cuts.

²⁴⁷ ALC-4.

²⁴⁸ ALC-24.

²⁴⁹ ALC-31.

²⁵⁰ ALC-7.

²⁵¹ ALC-27.

²⁵² ALC-17, ALC-30, ALC-19, ALC-15, ALC-13, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-7.

²⁵³ ALC-15.

²⁵⁴ ALC-13.

²⁵⁵ ALC-20.

²⁵⁶ ALC-2.

²⁵⁷ ALC-3, ALC-29, ALC-27, ALC-8, ALC-6.

²⁵⁸ ALC-11, ALC-12.

²⁵⁹ ALC-6.

²⁶⁰ ALC-29.

Instead the school now fully relies on volunteers or part-timers.²⁶¹ Two others require new staff to first volunteer for 3-6 months before being accepted as full-fledged teachers. One gets those joining for the first time to sign a form stating that they will volunteer for the first six months, after which they get a salary (RM1,000/month).²⁶²

C3. Although the majority of ALCs have financial constraints, some are worse off than others. In these cases, the priority of those managing is first paying the monthly rental fees and utility bills. In the event that there is a shortage of funds, it is not uncommon for teachers to forgo some portion of their salary or be paid later.²⁶³ In one example, an ALC's teacher salary "is different every month because the school fees collected is different every month..." so after paying for the essentials, a teacher might get between RM1,000 and RM2,000.²⁶⁴

Volunteers

C4. On the whole, only seven refugee-run ALCs (i.e. just over one-third of all the refugee-run schools surveyed) have volunteers working with them.²⁶⁵ The remaining 11 do not.²⁶⁶ Among non-refugee ALCs, the numbers are more evenly spread with an almost equal distribution of those with volunteers (8),²⁶⁷ and those without (5).²⁶⁸

C4. These volunteers are both locals and non-locals. Some are retirees, others are working professionals, including teachers, or studying. One of the refugee-run ALCs has the largest number of refugee volunteers, i.e. 14, all of whom are full-time teachers. In addition, it has another 16-20 volunteers coming once or twice a week to help out.²⁶⁹

C4. A few ALCs do not have volunteers on a sustained basis because these are international or exchange students who leave when they complete their studies or programme in Malaysia, or local students who can only join for the duration of their semester break, i.e. for two weeks.²⁷⁰

C4. While a number of ALC volunteers are teachers, there are also those who "help the permanent teachers with everything going on in the school,"²⁷¹ or assist at one-off events like sports day or extra-curricular activities like crafts or debates.²⁷²

C4. Schools do not have volunteers either because they prefer not to engage with any or because they cannot attract them.

²⁶¹ ALC-6.

²⁶² ALC-10. The other ALC is ALC-28.

²⁶³ ALC-5.

²⁶⁴ ALC-21.

²⁶⁵ ALC-13, ALC-23, ALC-31, ALC-1, ALC-29, ALC-7, ALC-9.

²⁶⁶ ALC-19, ALC-8, ALC-14, ALC-21, ALC-3, ALC-28, ALC-30, ALC-10, ALC-2, ALC-17, ALC-24.

²⁶⁷ ALC-16, ALC-6 ALC-12, ALC-22, ALC-26, ALC-11 (secondary), ALC-25, ALC-18.

²⁶⁸ ALC-4, ALC-15, ALC-27, ALC-20, ALC-5.

²⁶⁹ ALC-7.

²⁷⁰ E.g. ALC-25 where interning university students usually stay for only 1-2 weeks, and ALC-18 and ALC-13, which also do not have sustained volunteers.

²⁷¹ ALC-25.

²⁷² ALC-12, ALC-18, ALC-23.

We have to be picky when it comes to agreeing to volunteers. Some are too ad hoc [or] just want to come one-off. We say ‘No’. These are doing for themselves, doesn’t help the school . . . [such involvement] is disruptive.²⁷³

Now it is hard to find volunteers. Very few are willing. I posted many adverts on social media and shared in our network but we got very few replies. Not working out. So we decided to pay at least for part-timers to retain some teachers. At the beginning was easier.²⁷⁴

Women v men teachers

C2+C4. The overwhelming majority of ALCs have a higher number of women teachers, who are both paid and unpaid.²⁷⁵ Out of these ALCs, five — which are of different sizes and servicing students of different ethnicities/nationalities — currently have women only teachers.²⁷⁶ A few have women teaching in far greater numbers than men, including a large ALC that has 62 female versus one male teacher.²⁷⁷ In contrast, just one ALC has only male teachers but this involves a tiny team of two.²⁷⁸

C2+C4. In their quest to secure teaching staff with limited resources, not many ALCs appear to be in a position to mind that their teachers are predominantly women. A few, however, did say that they would prefer more men on board. One ALC used to have a single male teacher before, and even though he had a PhD and was “very nice”, “some parents complained that he spoke too loudly” so he eventually left. Now that ALC only has women teaching.²⁷⁹ Another that also has no men teachers, is trying to get a male volunteer as it wants “someone to bond with the boys”.²⁸⁰

Recruitment

C5. The ALCs interviewed recruit teachers in a number of ways. Some adopt only one approach, others, a combination of approaches.

C5. The most common method of teacher recruitment is via internal networks (67.7 per cent, 21),²⁸¹ including “asking around” among their respective communities, friends, personal

²⁷³ ALC-5.

²⁷⁴ ALC-17. See also ALC-22.

²⁷⁵ ALC-19, ALC-8, ALC-13, ALC-23, ALC-1, ALC-3, ALC-20, ALC-27, ALC-30, ALC-15, ALC-22, ALC-4, ALC-18, ALC-12, ALC-9, ALC-11, ALC-7.

²⁷⁶ ALC-19, ALC-23, ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-18.

²⁷⁷ ALC-8. The others are ALC-3, ALC-11.

²⁷⁸ ALC-24.

²⁷⁹ ALC-4.

²⁸⁰ ALC-18.

²⁸¹ ALC-9, ALC-22, ALC-30, ALC-19, ALC-29, ALC-7, ALC-6, ALC-12, ALC-23, ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-8, ALC-24, ALC-18, ALC-15, ALC-16, ALC-11, ALC-10, ALC-17, ALC-1, ALC-26.

connections, church members, and former students.²⁸² Of these, one ALC said that it only recruits “from the church to serve the community”.²⁸³

C5. In addition to relying on internal networks, nine ALCs which use multiple approaches usually adopt one or more of the following recruitment methods: job advertisements in recruitment platforms, community groups or social media, word of mouth, and recommendations.²⁸⁴

For the [refugee] teachers, we use facebook. for the Malaysian teachers, it is through friends and [past] volunteers . . . ²⁸⁵

[A newly-arrived-refugee from-Myanmar said] I found out about this job [outside the Klang Valley] through the online community group site of an established KL-based refugee organisation. The headmaster of my ALC had asked this organisation to help him find teachers for the school he had just set-up.²⁸⁶

C5. Other methods include recruiting from within their alumni,²⁸⁷ as mentioned previously, or graduate students or volunteers from other ALCs,²⁸⁸ printing flyers for distribution among contacts,²⁸⁹ and advertising through word of mouth. With regards to the last, three ALCs have received job applications this way.²⁹⁰ Two others have been sent unsolicited CVs from hopeful job seekers,²⁹¹ and another that did not specifically advertise, has also been contacted by potential volunteers. “Maybe they read about us and then contacted us”,²⁹² which may be the case in this instance as this ALC has a fairly visible online presence.

C5. A few mentioned their hiring procedure upon receiving applications from potential teachers (e.g. checking CVs of applicants, interviewing, shortlisting, conducting a trial class),²⁹³ but two ALCs do not take in new teachers unless they have been recommended.²⁹⁴

²⁸² ALC-22, ALC-30, ALC-19, ALC-29, ALC-7, ALC-6 ALC-12, ALC-23, ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-8, ALC-18, ALC-26.

²⁸³ ALC-6.

²⁸⁴ ALC-14, ALC-17, ALC-16, ALC-13, ALC-11, ALC-10, ALC-19, ALC-7, ALC-12.

²⁸⁵ ALC-7.

²⁸⁶ ALC-19.

²⁸⁷ ALC-6 ALC-26, ALC-18, ALC-29, ALC-5, ALC-16.

²⁸⁸ At ALC-31, some teachers are former students of ALC-26. Dignity and El Shaddai have also provided volunteer teachers in a few of the ALCs interviewed.

²⁸⁹ ALC-16.

²⁹⁰ ALC-27, ALC-4, ALC-20.

²⁹¹ ALC-1, ALC-13.

²⁹² ALC-31.

²⁹³ ALC-8, ALC-3, ALC-15, ALC-1, ALC-16, ALC-10.

²⁹⁴ ALC-6 ALC-15.

Qualifications

C6. The qualifications of teachers varies within and between the ALCs interviewed. As one respondent put it, “It is rare for a qualified person to work full time” in organisations like theirs, i.e. a community-based ALC.²⁹⁵

C6. At one end of the spectrum are 11 ALCs that do not have any staff with a teaching certificate or diploma (35.5 per cent).²⁹⁶ “We do our best”,²⁹⁷ sums up the experience of those in this category. At the other end, are five ALCs, each with between 60-150 students, where three-quarters or all of their teachers have the pre-requisite qualifications.²⁹⁸ A quarter or more teachers at eight other ALCs (25.8 per cent) possess relevant certification.²⁹⁹ There was also an instance where all eight full-timers at one more ALC have teaching certificates or diplomas, but its 15 volunteers do not.³⁰⁰

C6. The principal at a small ALC said, “I cannot run the centre if I focus on [only those with a teaching] diploma.”³⁰¹ Hence, sometimes, in lieu of hiring those with prerequisite paper qualifications, schools may opt for those with teaching experience,³⁰² or those studying for an undergraduate or graduate degree in a non-teaching field,³⁰³ or a combination of these.³⁰⁴ In one other ALC, many of its teachers have MA degrees but come without teacher training.³⁰⁵

C6. If there are teachers with degrees in other fields, some ALCs will match them to related subjects that are taught in its school. Hence, “If they studied English, they can teach English. If they studied medicine, they teach science.”³⁰⁶ Even so, there is at least one ALC where “Teachers are not trained to do IGESC. Many have MAs but without teacher training or pedagogy”,³⁰⁷ and another where “None of the teachers have a teaching certificate or teaching experience.”³⁰⁸

C6. The head of an ALC in the Klang Valley said that he welcomed “whoever wants to come and help”. Consequently, he has “quite a few volunteer teachers — from my friends, church members”.

²⁹⁵ ALC-7.

²⁹⁶ ALC-3, ALC-9, ALC-10, ALC-15, ALC-18, ALC-21, ALC-22, ALC-26, ALC-30, ALC-2, ALC-8.

²⁹⁷ ALC-30.

²⁹⁸ ALC-1, ALC-25 and ALC-12 (100 per cent), ALC-6 (80.0 per cent), ALC-17 (77.0 per cent).

²⁹⁹ ALC-4 (25.0 per cent), ALC-14 (66.7 per cent), ALC-11 (50.0 per cent), ALC-16 (27.3 per cent), ALC-23 (33.3 per cent), ALC-27 (50.0 per cent), ALC-28 (50.0 per cent), ALC-31 (34.7 per cent). One other ALC had almost a quarter (23.5 per cent) of its teachers holding a teaching certificate.

³⁰⁰ ALC-31.

³⁰¹ ALC-23.

³⁰² ALC-10, ALC-16

³⁰³ ALC-5, ALC-4, ALC-19, ALC-18, ALC-26, ALC-28.

³⁰⁴ ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-20, ALC-19, ALC-11, ALC-27.

³⁰⁵ ALC-5.

³⁰⁶ ALC-3.

³⁰⁷ ALC-5.

³⁰⁸ ALC-15.

For English language, if you have a heart to teach, you can teach . . . even if you are not a teacher. Math and other subjects need a bit of skill and strategy to teach [so needs more specialised knowledge] . . . Some have been teaching for more than 10 years – maybe once or twice a week.³⁰⁹

C6. A few schools have among their teaching staff, either those who used to teach,³¹⁰ or are still teaching.³¹¹ One has a volunteer who has a degree and used to teach in Singapore, and currently serves as its academic teacher.³¹²

Training regularity

C7. There are an equal number of ALCs that regularly plan and execute trainings (12)³¹³ versus those that do not (12).³¹⁴

C7. Two others expressed that even though they send teachers to regular trainings, access to such such opportunities is uneven. One ALC head said that “only I will go”,³¹⁵ while another has not sent some teaching staff for training because “they are already qualified teachers”.³¹⁶ Other ALCs also experience this situation of uneven participation in teacher trainings. For example, another that said its staff “attend these trainings frequently” prioritises new teachers over old teachers.³¹⁷ One more explained that it is also a matter of who is free to go,³¹⁸ and sometimes, someone may sign up for a training but at the last minute has to withdraw.³¹⁹ There is also the issue of duration — one ALC said it could only attended one training a year provided it was short³²⁰ — and cost:

We cannot sponsor teachers to go for training. They have to pay by themselves.³²¹

C7. One interviewee said its teachers have had “hardly any training in the last three years”, even though management recognised that this was a need that needed to be addressed.

³⁰⁹ ALC-29.

³¹⁰ ALC-24, ALC-14, ALC-6 ALC-16, ALC-23.

³¹¹ ALC-19, ALC-29, ALC-2, ALC-6 ALC-16, ALC-29, ALC-22.

³¹² ALC-6.

³¹³ ALC-5, ALC-25, ALC-20, ALC-8, ALC-28, ALC-17, ALC-29, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-1, ALC-6 ALC-3.

³¹⁴ ALC-2, ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-16, ALC-18, ALC-22, ALC-23, ALC-31, ALC-21.

³¹⁵ ALC-9.

³¹⁶ ALC-27.

³¹⁷ ALC-7.

³¹⁸ ALC-31.

³¹⁹ ALC-4.

³²⁰ ALC-25.

³²¹ ALC-11.

[The Management team] hasn't really had the time . . . we have many hats and responsibilities. We want teacher training but we have been so busy. It has been hard to get them all together even for the semi-annual teachers meeting.³²²

C7. Teachers at a small ALC with no training plan, did not attend any training last year. One teacher, however, has done so previously. Its principal explained the randomness:

In the past, I asked friends [for help], some who work with big schools, and one of them helped a lot. But training is not planned. We still want and need training . . . am looking to see how to manage.³²³

C7. Four also said that they have not planned this, nor have they ever had any trainings before.³²⁴ One school attributed this to, "No time and no access",³²⁵ a view which was echoed by two others:

[Can't remember . . .] Last training was before the MCO [in 2020], something UNHCR did.³²⁶

If possible, we want to go for training. We try looking for training. No contact about any training.³²⁷

C7. The fourth said that it does not send its current set of teachers for training because, they "teach based on their field or professional knowledge... They know how to prepare the materials."³²⁸

C7. Instead, this ALC offers those from other community ALCs, the chance to participate in a teacher training programme that it is currently running for the third time. This began after UNHCR stopped funding the salaries of community ALC teachers in 2015. It is a year long course and involves a one-off RM100 registration fee. Up to 30 can participate, and the current batch will graduate in July.

C7. Under this, the school currently supports students from eight other refugee learning centres to gain teaching skills via weekly trainings. If these students are keen to go further with teaching subsequently, this ALC will send them to other courses. Students from at least two ALCs interviewed in this project have benefited from this opportunity.³²⁹

³²² ALC-16.

³²³ ALC-23.

³²⁴ ALC-26, ALC-15, ALC-24, ALC-30.

³²⁵ ALC-24.

³²⁶ ALC-15.

³²⁷ ALC-30.

³²⁸ ALC-26.

³²⁹ ALC-31, ALC-13.

C7. Another two ALCs that are very new, i.e. under a year old, said that their teachers are currently undergoing a series of structured trainings conducted by external sources. Up to the time of being interviewed, the first ALC has undergone two out of six planned trainings.³³⁰ The second has just completed a programme on classroom management for its three full-time refugee teachers, and has a follow-up training planned in three months time.³³¹ It is not clear if both these ALCs will continue with these trainings in the long run.

Training: average frequency/teacher

C8. When the number of trainings an ALC has participated in is broken down further, the picture that emerges is telling: very few teachers in the ALCs surveyed attended more than two trainings last year. These too could be a mix of internal and/or external trainings, meaning that standards could also vary depending on who was offering or running them.

C8. The majority of ALCs said that on average, each of their teachers attended very few trainings last year i.e. not more than two (61.3 per cent, 19).³³² This includes seven ALCs who failed to send any of their teachers for trainings during this period — four of which previously already indicated that their teachers have never been to any trainings, plus three others that did not do so in 2024.³³³

C8. Only five ALCs have teachers who attended an average of 3-5 trainings in the same period (16.1 per cent).³³⁴ Of the remainder, one estimated that its teachers had been to around 13-25 such trainings, but only 1-2 of these were run externally.³³⁵ Another conducts monthly trainings for its teaching staff, i.e. 12 times last year.³³⁶ Two were too new to be included in this count,³³⁷ and the answers of three were inconclusive.³³⁸

Training source

C9. Almost every ALC sends their teachers to external training programmes.³³⁹ A number of them also conduct their own trainings.³⁴⁰

C9. The most sought-after teacher training programme appears to be that offered by UNHCR. Teachers from at least ten ALCs have participated in its programmes,³⁴¹ which is currently offered once a year, usually over a weekend in Kuala Lumpur. Different topics are offered and

³³⁰ ALC-10

³³¹ ALC-19, ALC-10.

³³² ALC-3, ALC-4, ALC-8, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-14, ALC-20, ALC-21, ALC-22, ALC-25, ALC-27, ALC-31, ALC-26, ALC-15, ALC-30, ALC-24, ALC-23, ALC-18 and ALC-16.

³³³ The first four are ALC-26, ALC-15, ALC-30, ALC-24; the other three are ALC-23, ALC-18 and ALC-16.

³³⁴ ALC-6, ALC-7, ALC-9, ALC-17, ALC-28.

³³⁵ ALC-1.

³³⁶ ALC-29.

³³⁷ ALC-19, ALC-10.

³³⁸ ALC-13, ALC-5, ALC-2.

³³⁹ ALC-31, ALC-8, ALC-28, ALC-27, ALC-2, ALC-4, ALC-22, ALC-13, ALC-23, ALC-14, ALC-20, ALC-21, ALC-9, ALC-25, ALC-12.

³⁴⁰ ALC-5, ALC-17, ALC-1, ALC-7, ALC-3, ALC-11, ALC-6, ALC-4, ALC-29.

³⁴¹ ALC-1, ALC-3, ALC-22, ALC-23, ALC-2, ALC-21, ALC-31, ALC-7, ALC-4, ALC-18.

teachers sign up for what they are interested in. Some have attended this programme at least once a year,³⁴² or more often if they can.³⁴³

C9. Even so, given the cost of travel, most of the ALCs that take up this opportunity are based in the Klang Valley.³⁴⁴ A representative of a school outside the Klang Valley and who travelled to Kuala Lumpur for a one-day UNHCR training this year, shared that others from his school wanted to attend this also but were unable to: “We do not go often or have many opportunities for training. We are very interested. We want training right now”.³⁴⁵ Two more ALCs wanted to participate in the same programme but missed the registration deadline as they only got to know about this too late. Both schools are outside the Klang Valley.³⁴⁶

C9. During the Covid-19 pandemic, UNHCR offered this programme online, which enabled those outside the Klang Valley greater access.³⁴⁷ However, one KL-based ALC said that it had difficulty tracking which of its teachers attends these classes if they were held online and preferred that they be held in-person.³⁴⁸

C9. While the UNHCR training appears to be useful especially for ALCs that are smaller and/or do not have other training options,³⁴⁹ one interviewee whose ALC is well-established and conducts its own teacher training on a regular basis, and another ALC that has other external training avenues for its teachers, believed that going to a one- or two-day training held a few times yearly, was insufficient for effective learning to take place.³⁵⁰

C9. A few ALCs have access to other external providers of teacher training. One such service, Jom Serve, focuses on Rohingya refugees in Penang. This is an NGO that dedicates itself to this community, and besides education, also offers links to essential services, community support, and friendship.³⁵¹ It is currently supporting the teaching needs of three such refugee learning centres in this assessment, including one of the aforementioned newer ALCs, for which it is running a systematic six-part teacher training programme.³⁵²

C9. In Kelantan, a small ALC participated at a training on sexual and gender-based violence, organised by another NGO, Host, which sponsors two of the ALC’s non-refugee teachers. Most likely though, this opportunity was possible due to the connection between the NGO and the ALC.³⁵³ For the last three years, another ALC in Terengganu has sent its teachers for a training in Kuantan on “good touch and bad touch”, organised by an international NGO.³⁵⁴

C9. There is an ALC in the Klang Valley that has seven teachers currently undergoing a one-year training programme for primary and kindergarten teachers. Run by Garden International

³⁴² ALC-3, ALC-21.

³⁴³ ALC-31 teachers have attended only one UNHCR training this year, but in the past the ALC has sent them 2-3 times a year.

³⁴⁴ The two exceptions are ALC-2, and ALC-18, but both failed to get into the programme this year as they were too late with their registration.

³⁴⁵ ALC-14.

³⁴⁶ ALC-2, ALC-18.

³⁴⁷ See e.g., ALC-18.

³⁴⁸ ALC-6.

³⁴⁹ ALC-16, ALC-21, Chin.

³⁵⁰ ALC-5, ALC-29.

³⁵¹ <https://www.jomserve.com/>.

³⁵² ALC-10. The other two are ALC-27 and ALC-28.

³⁵³ ALC-2.

³⁵⁴ ALC-12.

School and Taylor's College, they will each receive a certificate upon completion. Those behind this initiative contacted the said ALC via email, and Taylor's College students are running teaching practicum at this ALC.

It is very good . . . [nightly] once a week only and free of charge. This is the first year.³⁵⁵

C9. Unlike some ALCs whose teachers have little choice of training opportunities, teachers at at least two schools have benefitted from several external trainings offered by different organisations.

C9. The first has managed to send its teachers to several external trainings run by organisations such as Garden International School and Taylor's College. Additionally, they have attended programmes by Monash University Malaysia, and JRS Malaysia.³⁵⁶ The latter is part of a global network and started a branch in Malaysia in 2023. Amongst others, "JRS Malaysia provides targeted training for teachers at refugee-led learning centres, equipping them with the necessary skills to enhance their teaching and better support their students." It also offers certified English language courses, digital skills training, and pathways to internships.³⁵⁷

C9. The second ALC has access to trainings by a church organisation that brings in teachers from Australia, and its teachers have also attended a training by Health Equity Initiatives, a local NGO that supports refugees, on social and emotional learning, as well as by ALC-26.³⁵⁸

C9. Of the nine ALCs that run their own internal training programme, two which are also branches of an ALC that has a nationwide presence, said that their HQ runs teacher trainings at least once or twice a year.³⁵⁹ One of them explained that if needed, she could also request her school board members who are former academics, to provide additional training.³⁶⁰ Likewise, another two ALCs tap into their respective community networks where some members are based overseas. In one, such a member has run weekly online trainings for the ALC's teachers for the last two years.³⁶¹

C9. Internal trainings usually cover topics like teaching methods,³⁶² including creative teaching,³⁶³ classroom management,³⁶⁴ and lesson planning.³⁶⁵ Two ALCs addressed gender-related issues such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment,³⁶⁶ and one also raised humanitarian issues.³⁶⁷

³⁵⁵ ALC-29.

³⁵⁶ ALC-17.

³⁵⁷ <https://jrs.net/en/country/malaysia/>.

³⁵⁸ ALC-13.

³⁵⁹ ALC-11, ALC-12.

³⁶⁰ ALC-12.

³⁶¹ ALC-13. See also ALC-7.

³⁶² ALC-11.

³⁶³ ALC-6.

³⁶⁴ ALC-6 ALC-3, ALC-1.

³⁶⁵ ALC-6.

³⁶⁶ ALC-2, ALC-18.

³⁶⁷ ALC-18.

C9. In addition to these internal trainings, three other ALC heads said that they monitor and/or mentor their teachers, including via observation of classroom teaching.³⁶⁸ One regularly checks on her teachers' work and talks to them every 1-2 months. She sees this as "on-going training".³⁶⁹ Another concurred:

Everyday is training on the job for the teachers – how to talk to the children, how to teach and care for small children. I teach them myself.³⁷⁰

C9. A different ALC has refresher courses online but mostly on systems standardisation and management, and for new teachers, orientation on its administrative system.³⁷¹

Training for sustainability

C9. Importantly, besides regular teacher training, a handful of ALCs are upgrading the skills of their teachers by enrolling them in certified teaching courses.

C9. One such example is the University of Birmingham's Postgraduate Certificates in International Education (Malaysia) course, designed in collaboration with two philanthropic corporations and underserved schools. Apart from offering teachers "the skills and knowledge to make a meaningful impact in their classrooms and in their communities. A notable feature of the initiative [is] an experience-based admissions policy that enable[s] refugee teachers, whose own education has been disrupted by displacement, to access postgraduate study."³⁷²

C9. One of the better-resourced ALCs in the southern region currently has two students in this course. Both are bonded to one of the two corporation's that has sponsored their studies, to ensure they do not drop out, and upon completion, they are bonded with the ALC for another two years.³⁷³

C9. Two other ALCs, have also sent their teachers to attend this same course.³⁷⁴ The larger of the two, i.e. with over 500 students and 44 teachers, has had teachers go to ALC-26 for training, and currently three of its teachers are undergoing a foundation course as well.³⁷⁵ One-and-a-half-years ago, another ALC that does not have a regular training plan managed to send its teachers to something similar:

³⁶⁸ ALC-11.

³⁶⁹ ALC-27.

³⁷⁰ ALC-4.

³⁷¹ ALC-8.

³⁷² "The blended programme comprise[s] face-to-face teaching, physical and remote classroom observation, and online learning." <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2024/university-of-birmingham-and-ytl-foundation-celebrate-pioneering-class-of-2024>.

³⁷³ ALC-5.

³⁷⁴ ALC-13, ALC-27.

³⁷⁵ ALC-13.

Three management teachers took a three-month foundation course . . . learnt how to teach students in all environments. Excellent foundation course to help them become better teachers, and they got a certificate after completing the course.³⁷⁶

C9. The one ALC that focuses on providing secondary education and offers teacher training to refugee teachers, has also enrolled seven senior students in a diploma teacher training course.³⁷⁷

C10. There is little doubt that among the 31 ALCs interviewed, there is demand for more teacher training. Only two schools said that they do not need this, including one that feels its “teachers are not very happy when we call them for trainings because it means coming on Saturday and Sunday”,³⁷⁸ while a third ALC was ambivalent.³⁷⁹

C10. Among those who said yes and elaborated on their answers was a non-refugee run school for Rohingya children in the East Coast Region:

We want more training for sure. For me, we have to improve and be creative, understand new methods and whether or not these are good for our students. As a *sekolah* NGO [NGO school], we can freely experiment on what is a good method. New training and knowledge will help.³⁸⁰

C10. Other responses ranged from, “Would be very wonderful [to have more]”³⁸¹ and “Excited to attend”,³⁸² to ‘yes’, “Especially for new teachers, they must attend at least once of twice”,³⁸³ and “Provided it is relevant”³⁸⁴ and “Appropriate to the needs of teachers”.³⁸⁵

C11. Despite this demand, out of the 28 ALCs that said ‘yes’ to having more teachers’ training, only 16 (51.6 per cent) felt that their teachers would be able to attend this. Another seven (22.6 per cent) said yes, but with difficulty;³⁸⁶ while another four (12.9 per cent) said this was time dependent.³⁸⁷ One ALC said ‘no’ because it did not have time.³⁸⁸ Three others did not indicate their preference.³⁸⁹

C11. In fact, even among those who answered ‘yes’, only two were unconditional about this matter.

³⁷⁶ ALC-16.

³⁷⁷ ALC-26.

³⁷⁸ ALC-8. The other ALC was ALC-26, which has said that its teachers do not require training.

³⁷⁹ ALC-5. See also elaboration on the toolkit below.

³⁸⁰ ALC-18.

³⁸¹ ALC-13.

³⁸² ALC-17.

³⁸³ ALC-23.

³⁸⁴ ALC-6.

³⁸⁵ ALC-19.

³⁸⁶ ALC-8, ALC-9, ALC-12, ALC-15, ALC-18, ALC-25, ALC-28.

³⁸⁷ ALC-22, ALC-27, ALC-29, ALC-31.

³⁸⁸ ALC-24.

³⁸⁹ ALC-5, ALC-2, ALC-26.

Yes, have time to go.³⁹⁰

Some [teachers] are very eager . . . ” and “They should! Must upgrade skills constantly. But not sure if the teachers [would be] happy or not.³⁹¹

C11. The rest were qualified ‘yeses’, many related to time constraints. Some wanted these trainings only if they were held on weekends,³⁹² two said only if these were on a Saturday,³⁹³ and another proposed Friday afternoon as the school only runs for half a day then.³⁹⁴ Two ALCs were fine with online training, but the one located in Ipoh also said that if not online, they preferred not to have to travel to Kuala Lumpur for the training.³⁹⁵ One more said that its teachers are motivated to go to in-person teacher trainings, less so online ones.³⁹⁶

C11. Two more said they could manage provided the training is planned ahead of time.

Usually [trainings] only take 1-3 days [so] we ask them to attend. But if it is for a month, we will have to adjust the teaching schedule to allow them to attend the training.³⁹⁷

C11. In addition to managing time constraints, another ALC was also careful about balancing the need to “enrich teachers’ skills” and not wanting to burden them with more work.³⁹⁸

C11. These explanations were mirrored among the ALCs that said it would be difficult taking on more training even though they wanted this. Besides one school that said its three local volunteer teachers in their 70s were “not interested”, others raised the issue how their teachers were already stretched, some because of extra jobs they took “to make ends meet”,³⁹⁹ so the timing of these trainings was important.

Priority training topics

C12. Classroom management and social and emotional learning (SEL) were the two most popular training topics selected.

C12. The first included learning how to “control the classroom”, and enhance lesson planning and teaching skills. A few interviewees wanted to equip teachers with better ways of dealing

³⁹⁰ ALC-14.

³⁹¹ ALC-13.

³⁹² ALC-1, ALC-3, ALC-21, ALC-17.

³⁹³ ALC-6 ALC-19.

³⁹⁴ ALC-10.

³⁹⁵ ALC-16. The other school was ALC-23.

³⁹⁶ ALC-1.

³⁹⁷ ALC-7. See also ALC-20.

³⁹⁸ ALC-11.

³⁹⁹ ALC-25. See also ALC-27, ALC-29, ALC-12, ALC-18.

with “naughty children”.⁴⁰⁰ Others identified “creative ways of teaching so teachers don’t get into a rut”,⁴⁰¹ and more basic matters like summarising lessons,⁴⁰² teaching English as a second language,⁴⁰³ and in the case of a school that has no science lab, how to teach science.⁴⁰⁴

Teaching methods as teachers do not have a background in education. We don’t know the pedagogy on how to teach, even though we might know the topic. How to tarik perhatian mereka (get their attention). How to adapt and handle the students with patience /not get emotional.⁴⁰⁵

Syllabus, pedagogy. Syllabus that someone has used before, so that we can teach the student better and faster... Pedagogy would be good also, about how to teach.⁴⁰⁶

The reason we are conducting the class is we want the students to get something from it. I visited some refugee schools where they just open the books and teach and don’t know if the kids got the lesson or not. This year emphasis is on lesson plans and teachers have to do it in advance and we check weekly. The lesson objective is important.⁴⁰⁷

C12. With refugee children who may have experienced trauma in the past, and/or come from a difficult past as survivors of conflict situations, a few raised the importance of becoming more proficient in how to motivate them.

How to teach a refugee child. As refugee students are from different races/groups and have different mindset from other children. We have different ways of learning. How to teach a Chin refugee kid, Burmese refugee child – children of different backgrounds. Forty per cent of the children here are not with their parents. A lot of the time they can’t catch up with the lessons, not because they are lazy but because of the stress and the other duties at home.⁴⁰⁸

C12. Related to this and how “children come from different backgrounds and different family matters”⁴⁰⁹ is the need for teachers to have a better grasp of SEL. Several ALCs were already familiar with and/or have attended trainings on the subject.⁴¹⁰ However, at least one of them

⁴⁰⁰ ALC-16, ALC-19, ALC-22, ALC-17.

⁴⁰¹ ALC-16.

⁴⁰² ALC-3.

⁴⁰³ ALC-17.

⁴⁰⁴ ALC-21.

⁴⁰⁵ ALC-18.

⁴⁰⁶ ALC-22.

⁴⁰⁷ ALC-29.

⁴⁰⁸ ALC-7.

⁴⁰⁹ ALC-29.

⁴¹⁰ ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-12, ALC-13, ALC-18, ALC-29.

also said that, “It is low priority. We don’t see *di mana nak apply benda tu* (where to apply this)”.⁴¹¹ Another ALC said it already had counselling services if this was needed.⁴¹²

C12. Others, however, spoke about wanting to have better communication skills, not just to manage children who are “less sociable these days and only have computer friends”,⁴¹³ as one interviewee put it, but also to learn how to “handle diverse learners”,⁴¹⁴ and get students to “share feelings” and “be positive”.⁴¹⁵ As well, they want to know how to “handle their trauma”,⁴¹⁶ and manage the mental health of children, particularly those with special needs or learning challenges.⁴¹⁷ As few also mentioned the importance of having knowledge about child protection, “bad touch, good touch”.⁴¹⁸

This year I proposed to Taylors to help provide training regarding students with learning disabilities. We want this kind of training as well . . . [they] can’t catch up with the lesson and we don’t know how to handle these students. We applied many strategies but still not working. Special developmental and learning needs.⁴¹⁹

C12. Although some ALCs indicated they are keen to gain skills in instructional technology, this appeared to be much less of a priority for them as seen in the lack of specifics in what they actually want taught.⁴²⁰ At least two interviewees said that such training would good but “frankly, the students are better than us [in IT]”.⁴²¹ Another ALC, which also said that this was an important topic already has a teacher with an IT degree and she acts as their source of new knowledge where this matter is concerned. This ALC is the only one that mentioned using an online learning platform in its classes.⁴²²

C12. A few made it clear why training in instructional technology was not a priority.

This training is not so needed because we are running physical classes . . . We used Zoom a lot during lockdown, but no more now. Sometimes teachers do extra classes on Zoom.⁴²³

Online teaching skills not needed after Covid. The challenge is not on us but the students as they don’t have the gadgets or internet access.⁴²⁴

⁴¹¹ ALC-18.

⁴¹² ALC-26.

⁴¹³ ALC-4.

⁴¹⁴ ALC-17.

⁴¹⁵ ALC-19, ALC-3.

⁴¹⁶ ALC-3. See also ALC-21.

⁴¹⁷ ALC-17, ALC-31.

⁴¹⁸ ALC-23, ALC-16, ALC-17, ALC-12.

⁴¹⁹ ALC-17.

⁴²⁰ ALC-6 ALC-10, ALC-12, ALC-20, ALC-16, ALC-23, ALC-28, ALC-30, ALC-17, ALC-31, ALC-25.

⁴²¹ ALC-29, ALC-6.

⁴²² ALC-12.

⁴²³ ALC-13.

⁴²⁴ ALC-18.

. . . digital aspect not so important. The students don't have handphones. If they did, I can send them English lessons from youtube. I know where to get the lessons but they don't have handphones.⁴²⁵

C12. During the interviews conducted, it was apparent that many of those running the refugee learning centres and their teachers, are extremely stretched and overworked. Very few of them, however, have contemplated learning about self care as a way to continue being effective teachers. Only one ALC was explicit about why this was important:

We need to learn, we don't know how to take care of ourselves. Easy to get burnout. Stress management also needed so that stress doesn't turn into anger when students are too noisy . . . We control ourselves mostly but want to know how to chill down in a noisy class with students who refuse to listen. Especially for new teachers, students sometimes seem to bully them.⁴²⁶

C12. The only other training topic raised as a priority was a programme for parents.⁴²⁷

Teacher turnover

C13. There are twice as many ALCs that do not have an issue with teacher turnover (58.1 per cent, 21)⁴²⁸ compared to those that do (32.3 per cent, 10).⁴²⁹

C13. Among those whose teachers leave, better prospects including higher salaries,⁴³⁰ resettlement or relocation,⁴³¹ or health concerns,⁴³² are the usual motivating factors. Teacher retention is an issue for one ALC that engages part-timers — “they keep leaving”;⁴³³ while another faces the same challenge because its teachers include international students who do not stay beyond the end of their course.⁴³⁴ One other interviewee said that in their ALC, this departure of teachers is seasonal, i.e. it does not happen all the time,⁴³⁵ while another said that in its experience, this only happened in the beginning when the school was first starting out.⁴³⁶

C13. The consequences of teachers leaving, however, are real.

⁴²⁵ ALC-22.

⁴²⁶ ALC-13.

⁴²⁷ ALC-10.

⁴²⁸ ALC-2, ALC-4, ALC-5, ALC-6, ALC-7, ALC-8, ALC-10, ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-15, ALC-19, ALC-21, ALC-24, ALC-25, ALC-26, ALC-28, ALC-29, ALC-31, ALC-1, ALC-11, ALC-27.

⁴²⁹ ALC-3, ALC-9, ALC-12, ALC-16, ALC-18, ALC-20, ALC-23, ALC-30, ALC-17.

⁴³⁰ ALC-12, ALC-2, ALC-3, ALC-8, ALC-28.

⁴³¹ ALC-22, ALC-23, ALC-7, ALC-8, ALC-29.

⁴³² ALC-16.

⁴³³ ALC-17.

⁴³⁴ ALC-3.

⁴³⁵ ALC-20.

⁴³⁶ ALC-27.

Every year the teachers change. It is a big challenge for us. No sustainability for the students as each teacher has their own way of teaching . . . We have a problem. Our salary is not that much. If they have other opportunities for higher salary they go. We train them and we give them a chance, then they go to another school for higher salary.⁴³⁷

C13+C14. Smaller ALCs appear to be hit hard if they lose teachers. One, which used to have four teachers but now only has three including the principal, surmised:

Every year one teacher leaves. *Hilang satu macam hilang sepuluh* (Losing one is like losing ten [teachers]) . . . I am supposed to focus on admin and funding but I can't as I am now busy teaching and preparing for the next day. For the time being we are not actively looking for a new teacher as it is a budget issue.⁴³⁸

C13+C14. In general, the rest of the ALCs reported having no problems with teachers leaving, meaning either none or only a few left, or if they did, this was not of concern.

They are happy, they come home tired but they are happy. When they first arrive, we give them a pep talk, these children are not your ordinary children.⁴³⁹

C13+C14. In one instance, a non-refugee run learning centre had four out of its five staff leave (i.e. 80 per cent) last year. This, however, was not a norm — in 2023, only one teacher resigned — and arose because of differences between the then principal and staff. The same ALC reported that replacing those who left was not an issue:

“We don’t have issues. Trust God will provide. Whenever a teacher leaves, we have a teaching coming in. God is good and we will find ways.”⁴⁴⁰

C13+C14. In another unusual development, another ALC lost around 35 per cent of its teachers in 2024 due to resettlement, but said that it was happy for these teachers because this is the goal of refugees.⁴⁴¹

C13+C14. One ALC that lost two out of four teachers last year, i.e. 50 per cent, did not think of this as a problem because for her, “It is normal, they are students [and are expected to leave].”⁴⁴²

⁴³⁷ ALC-3.

⁴³⁸ ALC-18.

⁴³⁹ ALC-5.

⁴⁴⁰ ALC-6.

⁴⁴¹ ALC-8.

⁴⁴² ALC-4.

C13+C14. A few ALCs qualified their response of it being alright for teachers to go, so long as they give the school ample notice so replacements can be found.⁴⁴³

Most teachers we have are passionate about teaching. We are doing for humanity cause, not for profit making purpose. We don't pay a lot so we accept them leaving [but ask that they] just tell us in advance.⁴⁴⁴

We have a system - if you want to leave, give 2-3 months' notice so we can prepare. Not so difficult to fill vacancies last year and this year because conscription law in Myanmar due to military coup. But prior to that, lots of chaos, because difficult to fill vacancies, hardly anyone came to us looking for teacher jobs.⁴⁴⁵

C15. Of the 18 ALCs that responded to the question of whether the teacher turnover in 2024 was usual, 16 said that this was the case.

Section D: Curriculum

D1. Nineteen ALCs follow only one curriculum,⁴⁴⁶ whether this is the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), General Education Development (GED), Malaysian or Singaporean syllabus.

D1. The rest, i.e. 12 ALCs, have curricula that is mixed.⁴⁴⁷ Three of these have such a selection because they use different syllabus for their primary and secondary students.⁴⁴⁸ In a few instances when the main syllabus an ALC follows does not cover a particular subject(s), it turns to other syllabus for this purpose, usually from their home country. For example, to teach Arabic and Islamic studies, one school uses the Yemeni or Egyptian syllabus, which it is more familiar with.⁴⁴⁹

D1. One more, which has only two teachers, designed its own curriculum. According to the principal, the way this happened was: "Mix-up, I take from different places with the help and advice of people [with more experience]."⁴⁵⁰ Another ALC borrowed and used the lesson plans and tests of a large and established refugee school, but now also "adds random things taken, for example, from books recently obtained from Myanmar".⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴³ ALC-26, ALC-13, ALC-8.

⁴⁴⁴ ALC-8.

⁴⁴⁵ ALC-13.

⁴⁴⁶ ALC-12, ALC-15, ALC-18, ALC-19, ALC-22, ALC-25, ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-8, ALC-23, ALC-27, ALC-30, ALC-17, ALC-3, ALC-13, ALC-20, ALC-29, ALC-6.

⁴⁴⁷ ALC-2, ALC-5, ALC-9, ALC-14, ALC-16, ALC-21, ALC-26, ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-11, ALC-10, ALC-24.

ALC-2, ALC-5, ALC-9, ALC-10, ALC-11, ALC-14, ALC-16, ALC-21, ALC-26, ALC-28, ALC-31.

⁴⁴⁸ ALC-5, ALC-11, ALC-21.

⁴⁴⁹ ALC-3.

⁴⁵⁰ ALC-24.

⁴⁵¹ ALC-9.

D1. Regardless of curriculum selected, there is some degree of adaptation that takes place before usage due to the challenging circumstances an ALC may operate under. This is particularly the case for those with Rohingya students.

D1. For example, one that employs the Malaysian curriculum said that it “downgraded [this] a bit for [its] Rohingya students, meaning [that what the] foundation class [may be] using [are materials] meant for kindergarten as well.”⁴⁵² Another which also follows the Malaysian curriculum lengthens the learning duration so that if local students take one month to complete a module, the ALC teaches its refugee students the same over two months.⁴⁵³

D1. Similarly, another school with Rohingya students uses the “local syllabus for Malaysian primary schools but adapts this for the level the students are at — we take the topics that work.”⁴⁵⁴ In one more instance, a very small school in Kelantan:

*Ustaz is teaching English using the syllabus from Myanmar. No problem. That is more appropriate for them. But he has to translate letter by letter as they are not good in Malay or English . . . We also have to follow Cambridge but since we do not have these books, we buy Malaysian school syllabus books and try to teach following the Cambridge curriculum. We have to fill in the gaps.*⁴⁵⁵

D1. Of those that adhere to one curriculum, a third of the ALCs surveyed (32.3 per cent, 10) only use the IGCSE curriculum,⁴⁵⁶ another six solely use the Malaysian curriculum,⁴⁵⁷ while two adopt just the GED.⁴⁵⁸ One ALC is dedicated to following the Singapore model.⁴⁵⁹

Reasons for choosing a curriculum

D2. There are several explanations for the choice of curricula each ALC has, the two most common ones being “it is the best” out there (30.0 per cent, 9),⁴⁶⁰ and it “is what the organisation decided” (26.7 per cent, 8).⁴⁶¹

D2. For many, the choice of curricula is carefully considered, including whether or not an ALC thinks their students can benefit and improve through this selection.

⁴⁵² ALC-25.

⁴⁵³ ALC-12.

⁴⁵⁴ ALC-18.

⁴⁵⁵ ALC-2.

⁴⁵⁶ ALC-17, ALC-30, ALC-27, ALC-23, ALC-13, ALC-8, ALC-7, ALC-4, ALC-3, ALC-1.

⁴⁵⁷ ALC-15, ALC-12, ALC-18, ALC-19, ALC-22, ALC-25.

⁴⁵⁸ ALC-20, ALC-29.

⁴⁵⁹ ALC-6.

⁴⁶⁰ ALC-1, ALC-5, ALC-10, ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-23, ALC-7, ALC-8, ALC-31.

⁴⁶¹ ALC-3, ALC-12, ALC-21, ALC-27, ALC-29, ALC-16, ALC-31, ALC-7.

[For primary] Oxford and Cambridge are too “international” for the students, hard for them to follow so we chose to use [the] Singapore [syllabus for] Math and UK for Science. We cater using what’s easiest for the students . . . The Malaysian curriculum is more Malay than English, not ideal.⁴⁶²

[Under the NGO that partially funds this ALC] we were asked to teach English, Science, Math and Global Perspectives. After a few months we realised, why don’t we teach Malay. We added this [into the syllabus] because we found the students cannot communicate with the local community and they don’t know when they will be relocated.⁴⁶³

[The IGCSE curriculum] has structure and is well-developed, has content in English and is adaptable for different learning levels, has adaptable teaching resources . . . [it is also] internationally recognised and accepted — better educational opportunities [for the students] in the future.⁴⁶⁴

D2. To be sure, those that have chosen the IGCSE path do so because they believe it is the best for student learning: “I have seen students improve with this syllabus”.⁴⁶⁵ Also, its users say “it is of a better standard” than what they previously had.⁴⁶⁶ It is “good for the students who want to get up to secondary education”.⁴⁶⁷

D2. Another reason for picking IGCSE is to prepare the students for relocation. One ALC expressed that when the children and their families relocate — even if this may take 10 years to happen — they will not have such a hard time adjusting to their new context: “We want to make it easier for them to ease into the Cambridge curriculum there.”⁴⁶⁸ Another added:

[From experience we can see that] with IGCSE, students that resettle in the US or Australia are able to catch up with the curriculum . . . our main job, although we cannot provide proper 100 per cent, is to prepare them to resettle in a third country.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶² ALC-5.

⁴⁶³ ALC-2.

⁴⁶⁴ ALC-17.

⁴⁶⁵ ALC-10.

⁴⁶⁶ ALC-23. See also ALC-1.

⁴⁶⁷ ALC-13.

⁴⁶⁸ ALC-8.

⁴⁶⁹ ALC-7.

D2. In two instances, schools switched to the Cambridge curriculum because either parents⁴⁷⁰ or students wanted it.

We listened to a request from the students, and started with six of them. Then we continued with it. At first we didn't have much resources, and we could teach five subjects – like English as second language, maths, physics, chemistry.⁴⁷¹

D2. It is also possible that some ALCs changed syllabus because they followed what they believed to be the new norm: “We have been using since 2020... Most ALCs are using Cambridge.”⁴⁷² Likewise, the principal of an ALC with around 500 students said:

Before, when we went to UNHCR meetings, we saw other centres using Cambridge. All recommended we switch.⁴⁷³

One ALC that started out with GED because “back in 2018, 2019, everyone was doing GED”, also changed to IGCSE when the principal saw that other refugee schools were using this curriculum. She believes that this is the best curriculum now.⁴⁷⁴

D2. One of the newest schools interviewed is already contemplating turning from its current Malaysian curriculum to Cambridge because another ALC that is helping them get started, has recommended this.

They told us that they first used Malaysian textbooks, then Singapore, then now Cambridge. So I am thinking to change too but not sure what to do yet. I don't know why they recommended Cambridge, but I see the teachers and students from this school can speak English very well. So Cambridge is not difficult for them in KL.⁴⁷⁵

D2. Another ALC in Perak gave up using the textbooks it brought from Myanmar, and adopted the Cambridge curriculum this year because it believed this was what was needed for it to obtain an acknowledgement letter from UNHCR.

⁴⁷⁰ ALC-4.

⁴⁷¹ ALC-13.

⁴⁷² ALC-31.

⁴⁷³ ALC-8.

⁴⁷⁴ ALC-23.

⁴⁷⁵ ALC-19.

We contacted UNHCR for the letter and they said that you have to separate your school and your home. Need to change your curriculum . . . They said we have to follow international textbooks and so we try to get this one. Our community leader searched and got us this one. We told UNHCR that we have changed the curriculum but we haven't heard from them since.⁴⁷⁶

D2. Elsewhere, one more ALC changed to the Cambridge track not because the Singaporean curriculum it used at the time was inferior — “we found this... relevant for [our] students — they have to use a lot more of their brain, and solve problems in multiple ways” — but because it believed IGESC to be the only choice for its students to get secondary certification needed for tertiary education.⁴⁷⁷

D2. More important, perhaps, this decision was made because as refugees, these “students cannot sit for SPM”.⁴⁷⁸ Hence, another school that is switching its curriculum, from Malaysian to Cambridge, is also doing so for the same reason, i.e. they heard from the Ministry of Education that refugee children cannot sit for SPM as private candidates.⁴⁷⁹ One other had already made this change based on the recommendation of another ALC that was helping it with its curriculum and providing educational support:

We asked if our children have a chance to sit for SPM in Malaysia. They said not possible since you are refugees. They suggested we follow this [IGCSE] curriculum. Maybe have a chance to sit for IGCSE exam with the UNHCR card.⁴⁸⁰

D2. Going down the IGESC path is expensive. Taking the exam costs around RM1,000 per subject, and a student can sit for five or six subjects. Even with the 40 per cent discount for those who have the UN card,⁴⁸¹ it is still substantial for families that barely make ends meet.

D2. Despite this, the prevailing view for some seems to be that “quality of education is always more important than cost”.⁴⁸² Further, the solution to the cost involved seems to be asking parents to save up, or the ALCs themselves “look for help” for their students.⁴⁸³ One believes that the larger ALCs like Dignity could afford this exam fees because they receive corporate and government funding.⁴⁸⁴ The rest, however, struggle.

D2. When asked if the IGCSE was costly, the response of one ALC, which uses the IGCSE, suggests a perceived lack of choice:

⁴⁷⁶ ALC-30.

⁴⁷⁷ ALC-13.

⁴⁷⁸ ALC-13.

⁴⁷⁹ ALC-11.

⁴⁸⁰ ALC-17.

⁴⁸¹ ALC-13.

⁴⁸² ALC-1.

⁴⁸³ ALC-13,

⁴⁸⁴ ALC-6.

Exams have always been expensive. So I cannot say following Cambridge is more expensive. GED costs USD100 — students have to take these exams because of resettlement.⁴⁸⁵

D2. It is worth pointing out that at least one ALC following the GED curriculum said it switched to this because it was “cheaper and easier” and was “recognised in the American education system”.⁴⁸⁶ Another used the GED syllabus since 90 per cent of its students are looking to be settled in the US, and it was preparing them for resettlement there.⁴⁸⁷

D2. Those consciously choosing to go against the IGCSE trend are few. One such exception is an ALC that uses the Singapore My Pal syllabus. Initially, its principal also contemplated changing to the Cambridge pathway but upon working with the students, she decided that “this is not something for them”, because in reality “90 per cent of them won’t go for tertiary education”.⁴⁸⁸

We give the students whatever helps them have a better future. We are not so stressed and the children are not so stressed. Students who want to pursue higher education are recommended to IDEAS (which offers IGCSE) or some other school. We are not saying we are slack on academic, but it isn’t our priority.⁴⁸⁹

D2. The impact of external actors on decisions these ALCs take in relation to their choice of curriculum cannot be taken lightly. Besides the earlier mentioned ALC that took on the IGCSE syllabus because it believed this to be a UNHCR requirement, at least one other school interviewed said that it stopped using the Malaysian curriculum “because UNHCR did not provide us [anymore] with Longman textbooks.”⁴⁹⁰

D2. Another, a refugee-run school, which benefits from an NGO paying the salary of its two teachers — they form a three person teaching staff along with the founder principal — follows a curriculum the NGO picked. The ALC, however, has had a better outcome — even though this could also have turned out differently.

⁴⁸⁵ ALC-8.

⁴⁸⁶ ALC-29. The other school is ALC-20.

⁴⁸⁷ ALC-20.

⁴⁸⁸ ALC-6.

⁴⁸⁹ ALC-6.

⁴⁹⁰ ALC-13.

After a while of using that [curriculum], we found the students were having difficulties understanding. The teachers were also struggling because the NGO provided us with the books for free but these were not Cambridge books but Malaysian books. So we told [the NGO] and they said we don't have to follow per se, and that it was up to us to teach according to the needs of the children. Only then we slowed down. Because these students are starting off from a different point . . . the children need more basic lessons.⁴⁹¹

D2. Accessibility and/or suitability of materials for the curriculum ALCs use is also important.

We switched to the Marshall Cavendish education books based on the Cambridge syllabus because the parents asked. We were told this is good for [the students]. But I later realised it was too hard for them . . . three subjects, 16 books in total is very hard. If your language base is strong then you can learn from these books. The children here cannot. So I changed back to the original Oxford books, which were better.⁴⁹²

D2. Some combine teaching materials because certain curriculum works better for particular subjects. Choices are thus based on an understanding that not one size fits all. For example, one ALC uses Oxford for English and Math, but retains the Myanmar curriculum for the remaining subjects.⁴⁹³ Another that has a mixed Cambridge, Malaysian, and Singaporean syllabus, picked the last for Math because “[for high school students] this has greater variety and makes them think more. They also contain lessons on mental math, which is a little bit difficult but we try.” The same ALC recognised that Cambridge is difficult for some students so it does not use this with them.⁴⁹⁴

D2. In sharp contrast to so many other ALCs, one non-refugee run school was fortunate because someone sponsored their Singapore syllabus from the very beginning. This is the same school which later found a volunteer familiar with this syllabus, who has taken charge of their academic curriculum development.

We don't just want to change it [like that]. I am not a teacher. It is already there and we might as well use it. When the volunteer came, it gelled nicely.⁴⁹⁵

D2. In some cases, choices of curriculum are fuelled by having to make do with a situation. The principal of the two-teacher set-up mentioned before devised its own syllabus due to limited choices. “It was the only way I knew.”⁴⁹⁶ Another ALC that was recommended to create

⁴⁹¹ ALC-2.

⁴⁹² ALC-4.

⁴⁹³ ALC-14. See also ALC-21, ALC-26, ALC-28.

⁴⁹⁴ ALC-21.

⁴⁹⁵ ALC-6.

⁴⁹⁶ ALC-24.

their own modules but had no guidance, “just took the KSSR [Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah, Primary School Standard Curriculum of Malaysia] syllabus”.⁴⁹⁷

D2. There was also an interviewee teaching at a new ALC — she herself is a recent refugee and has an MA in English from her home country — who said she uses the Malaysian curriculum because previous teachers had purchased these books so they decided to continue to use it.⁴⁹⁸ Another ALC that did not have a syllabus prior to adopting Cambridge said its teachers “just come with books they want to use — Australian, local, Singapore.”⁴⁹⁹ Yet one more said that because its CEO wanted the school to be recognised by the government, it made the decision to use the local curriculum because this was a way to get this recognition. It also helped that the ALC found this syllabus to be more accessible, especially since its teachers are local.⁵⁰⁰

Language of instruction

D3. English is the language of choice among many of the ALCs in the Klang Valley, with one ALC going so far as to say, “English is a priority because that is the base for learning how to think.”⁵⁰¹ Since one aspiration is for students to be well-equipped for when they are relocated, the choice of teaching in English is also understandable.

D3. In 14 of these schools — of which half are primary (7),⁵⁰² and half are mixed primary and secondary (7)⁵⁰³ — it is the main language of instruction in the classroom. In nine other schools,⁵⁰⁴ mostly located outside the Klang Valley, it is used as well, but in varying degrees, with other languages to facilitate learning of particular subjects. These languages include Malay, Rohingya, Burmese/Myanmar, Chin.

Most of the time [we use] Burmese. Now with the Cambridge curriculum we mix Burmese and English. We want [the students] to improve their English. We try and talk to them... If possible, we want an English teacher to help us.⁵⁰⁵

D3. Four schools use Malay as its main medium of instruction. As a result, one noted, “One Rohingya-run ALC used to teach in English before but the students had difficulty with that so they now learn in Malay.”⁵⁰⁶ Another teaches its students in Malay but they then take community-based English tuition classes after school.⁵⁰⁷

⁴⁹⁷ ALC-18.

⁴⁹⁸ ALC-19.

⁴⁹⁹ ALC-29.

⁵⁰⁰ ALC-12.

⁵⁰¹ ALC-6.

⁵⁰² ALC-29, ALC-23, ALC-22, ALC-15, ALC-12, ALC-6 ALC-3.

⁵⁰³ ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-7, ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-16, ALC-20.

⁵⁰⁴ ALC-10, ALC-14, ALC-19, ALC-21, ALC-24, ALC-27, ALC-30, ALC-17, ALC-31.

⁵⁰⁵ ALC-30.

⁵⁰⁶ ALC-2.

⁵⁰⁷ ALC-18.

Teaching materials

D4. The ALCs surveyed use a range of materials to teach including actual or photocopies of student textbooks and workbooks, and digital or online resources, some of which are also downloaded to use as printouts or photocopies. Each school used these in different combinations depending on the respective needs of their students. Just two have tablets for their students, obtained some years ago via the Qatar Foundation.⁵⁰⁸

D4. The most common teaching material in classrooms is photocopies of textbooks and workbooks (83.9 per cent, 26).⁵⁰⁹ This choice is primarily governed by cost — in which case the schools will just buy one or a few copies for the teachers to reproduce⁵¹⁰ — or pragmatism (“We found that students who have the books don’t even look at it so we decided only to give them worksheets or work off the projector”).⁵¹¹ In one case, it was because the textbooks were out of print.⁵¹²

D4. Only a handful of ALCs gave their students actual textbooks or workbooks, but combined these with other materials including photocopies and online resources.⁵¹³ Of these, just two relied solely on actual textbooks and workbooks.⁵¹⁴ Two other schools that received free workbooks have been unable to use these as they are of a level that is too high for the Rohingya students being taught:

Mostly, the students are not up to the level of the books, they need more basic materials. So for English, *ustaz* uses his own workbooks and photocopies these.⁵¹⁵

D4. Online materials are also popular,⁵¹⁶ especially when print material may be expensive.

We can’t buy original textbooks. We don’t have extra funding to buy . . . So we got online documents like pdf, [download] and print this on our own. We use it in our teaching. We also get teaching materials and workbooks free from the telegram channel.⁵¹⁷

⁵⁰⁸ ALC-5R, ALC-12.

⁵⁰⁹ ALC-8, ALC-24, ALC-25, ALC-31, ALC-30, ALC-9, ALC-27, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-1, ALC-26, ALC-5, ALC-2, ALC-4, ALC-14, ALC-6 ALC-18, ALC-19, ALC-11, ALC-7, ALC-17, ALC-3, ALC-16, ALC-23, ALC-13, ALC-20.

⁵¹⁰ ALC-7, ALC-9, ALC-13, ALC-16, ALC-18, ALC-25, ALC-31.

⁵¹¹ ALC-6.

⁵¹² ALC-16.

⁵¹³ ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-15, ALC-23.

⁵¹⁴ ALC-22, ALC-10.

⁵¹⁵ ALC-2. See also ALC-12.

⁵¹⁶ ALC-1, ALC-5, ALC-7, ALC-12, ALC-13, ALC-14, ALC-18, ALC-19, ALC-20, ALC-23, ALC-26, ALC-28, ALC-17.

⁵¹⁷ ALC-14.

D4. It is also a good source of some materials like exam papers from past years,⁵¹⁸ and serve as supplements to existing print material, including videos. For one ALC, there is also an added incentive as it finds its content “more interesting and sometimes [they] get it for free.”⁵¹⁹

D4. Two schools are using international online education resources with their students, specifically Coursera and Khan Academy, for free.⁵²⁰ The latter is used by both schools — including to help teach English, Math and Science — but the former, only by one ALC.⁵²¹

D4. A few said they wanted to have teacher guidebooks and resource kits as well but these are also expensive particularly if they are IGCSE-related.⁵²² One ALC, however, has paid for the Cambridge online licence.

The Cambridge website sells the complete package of subjects. USD1,600 for primary, secondary materials for all subjects, all grades. We use photocopies of the online textbook which comes in a PDF. This is easy for teachers to [search for] something, and is cheaper than hard copy books. Good value because they also provide teacher guidebooks.⁵²³

D4. Two others have soft copies of the Cambridge textbooks or workbooks. The ALC that paid for the physical books has access to online digital resources.⁵²⁴ The other has an old soft copy but since Cambridge materials are updated every three to four years, it has no access to the latest versions on offer.⁵²⁵

Subjects

D5. The three most common subjects taught across all the ALCs interviewed in this project are English, Math (both 100 per cent, i.e. 31 ALCs) and Science (93.5 per cent, 29).

D5. Malay is currently taught in 13 schools (42.0 per cent).⁵²⁶ Some of these ALCs follow the Malaysian curriculum.⁵²⁷ The others that do not use this curriculum,⁵²⁸ offer this as a subject — “Bahasa is a must”⁵²⁹ — especially so that the students are able to better communicate with locals. As the interviewee in Kelantan explained:

⁵¹⁸ ALC-3, ALC-13.

⁵¹⁹ ALC-18.

⁵²⁰ ALC-26, ALC-28.

⁵²¹ ALC-26.

⁵²² ALC-3, ALC-7, ALC-13.

⁵²³ ALC-8.

⁵²⁴ ALC-17.

⁵²⁵ ALC-29.

⁵²⁶ ALC-23, ALC-28, ALC-5, ALC-24, ALC-26, ALC-17, ALC-18, ALC-10, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-27, ALC-2, ALC-22.

⁵²⁷ ALC-18, ALC-10, ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-22.

⁵²⁸ ALC-28, ALC-5, ALC-24, ALC-26, ALC-17, ALC-27, ALC-2, ALC-23.

⁵²⁹ ALC-5.

Must make sure that Rohingyas are educated, then they can be strong and fend for their lives. Because of racism . . . the fact you cannot communicate in local dialect, or proper BM, cannot master the English language, this is a big no . . . We have to do more more, give skills to express themselves clearly and well.⁵³⁰

D5. Several ALCs want to offer Malay as a language but have not been able to find a teacher.⁵³¹ This includes three schools that used to offer this subject but had to stop when their teachers left and have not been replaced: “I tried to get a Bahasa Malaysia teacher but they only stayed for six months. They wanted RM2,000 a month [].”⁵³²

D5. Equally important for some of these ALCs, especially the non-Rohingya ones, is offering the language spoken by the majority of their students as a subject. For example, teaching Dari, Urdu and different languages of Myanmar (e.g. Burmese, Zomi).⁵³³ One school also taught its students about their own ethnic culture.⁵³⁴

D5. Three ALCs teach Mandarin, ostensibly to give students an advantage when they seek employment; while one has plans to introduce the subject this year.

I chose Mandarin because when they finish school, if they know English and Mandarin it is easy to survive in the world – more job opportunities. We can help them learn a language. Malay they can pick up in the workplace – I don’t worry about Malay. But if they know three languages is better.⁵³⁵

D5. Another popular subject is computer studies. Although only eight ALCs currently have this as a subject,⁵³⁶ ten more indicated that they too want to offer this to their students but lack resources.⁵³⁷

D5. As it stands, even among the eight, there are varying levels of knowledge and skills taught under this subject. One ALC, for example, focuses more on theory since it has only one computer that the teacher uses for demonstration. Meaning, the students have little or no hands-on training.⁵³⁸ Likewise, five of those who want to offer computer studies have no or insufficient computers;⁵³⁹ and of these, two have computer labs but with outdated equipment.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁰ ALC-2.

⁵³¹ ALC-13, ALC-30.

⁵³² ALC-28. The other two are ALC-6, ALC-7.

⁵³³ ALC-1, ALC-3, ALC-6 ALC-8, ALC-9, ALC-19, ALC-21, ALC-28, ALC-30, ALC-31, ALC-14.

⁵³⁴ ALC-7.

⁵³⁵ ALC-29. See also ALC-26, ALC-19.

⁵³⁶ ALC-5, ALC-8, ALC-1, ALC-4, ALC-25, ALC-23, ALC-3, ALC-26.

⁵³⁷ ALC-6, ALC-10, ALC-13, ALC-7, ALC-18, ALC-21, ALC-22, ALC-17, ALC-30, ALC-31.

⁵³⁸ ALC-4.

⁵³⁹ These are ALC-25, ALC-13, ALC-31, ALC-17 and ALC-30, the last has only one computer.

⁵⁴⁰ ALC-31, ALC-17.

D5. Fifteen ALCs also have (or wishes to have in one case) religious studies and instruction — ten of them Islamic,⁵⁴¹ and five Christian.⁵⁴² One of the Christian schools teaches the children about Jesus at its daily assembly;⁵⁴³ another offers a weekly chapel.⁵⁴⁴ An ALC that caters mainly to Rohingya children listed among its hopes of an ideal refugee school, being able to employ “a guru Quran/Islam”.⁵⁴⁵

D5. Other subjects taught include Global Perspectives,⁵⁴⁶ Social Studies,⁵⁴⁷ Social Science,⁵⁴⁸ General Knowledge,⁵⁴⁹ and Civics,⁵⁵⁰ as well as history,⁵⁵¹ geography,⁵⁵² music⁵⁵³ and art.⁵⁵⁴

D5. Only one ALC said that it included teaching SEL into its syllabus. This is taught to all its primary students, from primary 1 to primary 6, though those teaching lower primary classes engage more in creative art to talk about this subject. Of all the ALCs, this one has also had the most exposure to SEL and recognise it as a need that is worth exploring.

We saw the SEL syllabus that Dignity has. Also for the last 2 years a counselling clinic sent their interns and counsellors as part of their CSR work to train the students in SEL. This year we are doing this ourselves, having already seen them do it previously. I am a trained counsellor and the other teacher with early childhood training also has done a lot of emotional training.⁵⁵⁵

D5. Only a few mentioned that they offer Physical Education as a subject, even though clearly, some students enjoy this very much.⁵⁵⁶ As noted earlier, just one school has a gymnasium and even though this is small, it is a space for its Rohingya girl students to exercise without feeling self-conscious.⁵⁵⁷ The rest of the ALCs have very little room for exercising — if at all, the students use common areas that double up as the school hall or classroom⁵⁵⁸ — and hence some resort to taking them to the local parks for their lessons.

D5. In this regard, there are some challenges, not least being teachers who object to the distance and heat involved.⁵⁵⁹ There is also a school that wants to offer this subject but does not have

⁵⁴¹ Quranic (ALC-1, ALC-10); Islamiah (ALC-4); Islamic Studies (ALC-11, ALC-12, ALC-18, ALC-17, ALC-2, ALC-3).

⁵⁴² ALC-6 ALC-26, ALC-29, ALC-13, ALC-22.

⁵⁴³ ALC-29.

⁵⁴⁴ ALC-6.

⁵⁴⁵ ALC-25.

⁵⁴⁶ ALC-13, ALC-17.

⁵⁴⁷ ALC-8, ALC-20, ALC-23.

⁵⁴⁸ ALC-31.

⁵⁴⁹ ALC-8, ALC-23.

⁵⁵⁰ ALC-17, ALC-23.

⁵⁵¹ ALC-23, ALC-20, ALC-17, ALC-7 (only primary 5 and primary 6), ALC-21 (as a way to teach English).

⁵⁵² ALC-3, ALC-28, ALC-31, ALC-7 (only primary 5 and primary 6), ALC-21 (as a way to teach English).

⁵⁵³ ALC-26, ALC-29.

⁵⁵⁴ ALC-22, ALC-6 ALC-23.

⁵⁵⁵ ALC-6.

⁵⁵⁶ Three schools indicated they have PE for the students: ALC-6 ALC-13, and ALC-5. When the team visited a few of the ALCs, students could also be seen playing games like badminton and football within the narrow confines of the building housing their schools. For example, ALC-23, ALC-12.

⁵⁵⁷ ALC-5.

⁵⁵⁸ ALC-6 ALC-18.

⁵⁵⁹ ALC-5.

enough teachers for this.⁵⁶⁰ A major barrier also lies in the discriminatory attitudes that Malaysians may have towards refugees in general, such that this limits their access to public spaces. For instance, one school that wanted to use a nearby field for its PE classes was told it needed to apply for permission before it could do so.⁵⁶¹ Another has PE class every other week at the local field. It cannot have PE weekly because they do not feel welcomed by the locals in the area.

To help improve matters, every time we use the padang (field), I tell the students to go around the field to pick up the rubbish. This is to show locals what refugee children are capable of [that they are not 'bad']. I also organise sport friendlies with other local schools so the students can interact with each other. Last year, the friendly match was netball and basketball.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶⁰ ALC-16.

⁵⁶¹ ALC-26.

⁵⁶² ALC-12.

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