



Interrupted Pathways: Refugee Youth Transitions across Post-Secondary Education, Work, and Service Navigation in Metro Vancouver

1. Background and Rationale

This concept note proposes a focused, community-engaged study of refugee youth with **interrupted university experiences** who are now rebuilding their educational and social pathways in Metro Vancouver. The study aligns strongly with the **UnborderED Knowledge / Savoirs sans frontières** partnership, particularly **Cluster 2**, which examines displaced students' lived experiences of equitable and inequitable access, participation, retention, completion, and transition to employment in post-secondary contexts. The partnership specifically emphasizes participatory, community-engaged research and the translation of findings into practical tools, policy guidance, and knowledge mobilization outputs beyond academia.

This proposed project also aligns well with **ISSofBC's strategic interest in specialized populations**, particularly youth, and with its role as a major refugee-serving organization with strong operational knowledge of settlement, transition, and service navigation. ISSofBC has committed, through the broader UnborderED partnership, to hosting postdoctoral researchers, supporting implementation of local research projects, and contributing to knowledge mobilization products that are useful to both practice and policy audiences.

The focus on refugee youth with interrupted university pathways addresses an important gap. Many displaced young people arrive in Canada having already begun university or other post-secondary studies, only to experience disruption due to conflict, forced migration, documentation loss, financial precarity, language barriers, family obligations, or changing immigration circumstances. Their challenge is not simply “accessing education,” but **reconstructing a viable pathway** across several interconnected systems at once: post-secondary education, work, settlement services, employment supports, and everyday belonging.

Displaced students often face structural barriers to educational access and success, including financial constraints, limited knowledge of institutional systems, family responsibilities, discrimination, and reduced social capital. The proposal also explicitly identifies the importance

of examining not only access, but retention, completion, bridging to employment, and full participation in institutional life. This makes refugee youth with interrupted university experiences an especially strong focal group for Cluster 2: they sit at the nexus of **education, labour market participation, and institutional support systems**.

This project therefore asks a practical and timely question: **what enables refugee youth with disrupted post-secondary trajectories to rebuild meaningful pathways toward education, work, and belonging?** By centering youth voices while also engaging service providers and institutional actors, the study would generate actionable findings for ISSofBC, post-secondary institutions, and community partners.

2. Purpose

The overall purpose of the project is to understand how refugee youth with interrupted university experiences navigate the relationship between post-secondary re-entry, work, settlement and employment services, and belonging in Metro Vancouver, and to identify practical strategies that improve transition pathways.

3. Research Questions

The project would be guided by the following questions:

1. Interrupted pathways and re-entry

How do refugee youth describe the interruption of their university or post-secondary studies, and what pathways do they pursue after arrival in Canada?

2. Education, work, and decision-making

How do financial pressure, family obligation, immigration realities, and labour market conditions shape decisions between returning to study, pursuing short-term training, or entering work?

3. Service navigation and institutional support

How do refugee youth navigate settlement, employment, and education-related services, and where do they encounter gaps, duplication, or barriers between systems?

4. Belonging and future orientation

How do experiences of educational disruption, work, and service encounters affect refugee youth's sense of belonging, identity, aspiration, and confidence in their futures?

4. Methods

This project is designed to be feasible within a **one-year postdoctoral appointment** and within modest research resources beyond salary. It would use a **qualitative, community-engaged**

design consistent with the partnership's emphasis on participatory and equity-centered methods.

Proposed sample

The study would focus on refugee youth and young adults in Metro Vancouver who:

- arrived in Canada within the past several years;
- had begun university or equivalent post-secondary study before displacement or migration interruption; and
- are currently trying to re-enter education, enrolled in education, paused from study, or shifted primarily into work or training.

A small comparative sample across these different pathways would help illuminate how choices and constraints unfold over time.

Data collection

The project could include three data streams:

- a) Semi-structured interviews with refugee youth**
Approximately 15–20 in-depth interviews with refugee youth or young adults to document educational disruption, transition decisions, work experiences, service navigation, and belonging.
- b) Key informant interviews**
Approximately 8–10 interviews with ISSofBC staff, employment and settlement practitioners, and post-secondary or community-based actors who support newcomer or refugee youth transitions.
- c) Validation / knowledge-sharing session**
One small roundtable, workshop, or feedback session to test emerging findings with participants and/or stakeholders and refine recommendations.

Analytical approach

Analysis would focus on identifying:

- common transition pathways after interrupted studies;
- key decision points between education, work, and services;
- institutional gaps and enabling supports;
- differences by gender, age, family responsibility, and stage of transition; and
- practical intervention points for service and policy improvement.

The study would use a trauma-informed, equity-centered approach that recognizes the lived experience of forced migration as a form of expertise, consistent with the fellowship design and broader UnborderED principles.

5. Deliverables

This project is intended to generate outputs that are useful to both academic and non-academic audiences. Consistent with the postdoctoral role description, the broader partnership, and Cluster 2's emphasis on knowledge mobilization, proposed deliverables include:

- a) **Conceptual / pathway map**
A clear visual or narrative map showing how refugee youth move across interrupted education, settlement services, employment pressures, and post-secondary re-entry.
- b) **Practice brief for ISSofBC and sector partners**
A concise operational brief identifying key barriers, promising practices, and recommended supports for refugee youth with interrupted university experiences.
- c) **Policy brief**
A short policy-facing brief for post-secondary and settlement stakeholders on improving educational re-entry and transition supports for displaced youth.
- d) **Academic output**
One journal article or article-ready manuscript on interrupted educational trajectories, transition systems, and belonging among refugee youth.
- e) **Knowledge mobilization presentation**
A presentation or workshop for ISSofBC staff, partners, or advisory bodies to translate findings into practice.

6. Anticipated Contribution

This project would make a strong contribution at the intersection of refugee youth studies, settlement research, and post-secondary access. Substantively, it would deepen understanding of how displaced young people rebuild futures after educational interruption. Practically, it would identify where current systems help or hinder those transitions. Strategically, it would provide ISSofBC and UnborderED with an applied, do-able, and policy-relevant project that bridges research, service delivery, and knowledge mobilization.

In short, the study would move beyond a narrow question of educational access to examine the broader **transition ecosystem** linking post-secondary opportunity, work, services, and belonging for refugee youth in Metro Vancouver.