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HOPES

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

INAUGURAL NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Higher Education & Refugees from Syria
Exploring Dialogue Opportunities

Monday, March 13, 2017

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Inaugural National Stakeholders Dialogues “Higher Education & Refugees from Syria: Exploring Dialogue Opportunities” Report

Date: March 13, 2017

Location: Erbil, KRI

Within the context of the project **HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians)** funded by the European Union’s Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the ‘Madad Fund’ and implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) together with the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic across Egypt, Northern Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, the in-country team of KRI organized an inaugural National Stakeholders Dialogue on March 13, 2017 bringing together representatives from ministries and higher education institutions as well as key institutional stakeholders involved in tertiary education and the Syria crisis.

This gathering was the first of a series of stakeholders dialogues which seek to provide a platform for discussion and information exchange, leading to greater coordination of initiatives for hosting Syrian students on a national level.

The inaugural national stakeholders dialogue entitled “Higher Education & Refugees from Syria: Exploring Dialogue Opportunities” was dedicated to a needs analysis, an overview of the situation in the country and an exploration of further approaches on the national level. It aimed at the development of mechanisms to better meet the needs of the respective students and of the hosting higher education institutions and to guarantee the greatest possible impact and sustainability.

The dialogue included

- Welcome Addresses by **Mr. Salman Turki**, HOPES Education Project Manager in KRI
- An introduction to the HOPES project and the National Stakeholders Dialogue by HOPES project director **Dr. Carsten Walbiner**,
- The first session entitled “**Higher Education and Refugees from Syria: Overview of the situation, challenges and various responses – mapping of results**” which incorporated presentations from :
 - 1- **Dr. Amanj Saeed** (Ministry of Higher Education)
 - 2- **Ms. Vaman Ameen and Ms. Zhela Rashid**, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- The second session entitled “**Higher Education and Refugees from Syria: exploring dialogue opportunities on a national level**” was moderated by Mr. Nazar Jamil from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and was dedicated to a discussion between the participants on possible measures for sustainable solutions and an initial roadmap for further activities.

More information on the Brief and Programme (Link)

Brief outline of key issues, challenges and recommendations addressed during the first and second session

> **The first session** focused on presenting an overview of the situation and highlighting the outstanding problems faced by key stakeholders in dealing with refugees and higher education in KRI.

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- > According to the Ministry of Higher Education, the limited capacity of the higher education system in KRI prevents the enrolment of thousands of students from Syria and the local community as well. Despite that, the Ministry adapted the admission policies to facilitate and ease the access of as many Syrian students as possible into higher education. There are currently fifteen public universities in addition to around ten private universities. The Ministry provided access to Syrian students to these universities through the central admission or through the support of scholarship providers.
- > The Ministry's plan is to engage more Syrian refugee graduates in professional trainings, including medical trainings for recent graduates and providing subsidized courses in Kurdish language to Syrian students, given that most of the academic curricula is being taught in Kurdish and especially that Kurdish Syrians often speak a different variation of that language.
- > The Ministry also expressed its high esteem of the cooperation with HOPES and other institutions and is looking forward to further consolidate that through future opportunities and initiatives.
- > The discussion between participants focused on the main challenges and key issues faced with regard to refugee access to higher education:
 - Scholarship provision: The demand for scholarships exceeds by far the capacity of the institutions to provide support and opportunities. The number of applicants is measured in thousands, compared to the approximately 200 scholarships provided per year since 2015.
 - Student counselling and the need for further professional trainings to academic counsellors.
 - Enrolment of students in higher education institutions is still lengthy and bureaucratic process.
 - Dropout rates of students and the ways to mitigate this challenge. The latter reflects the fluctuating circumstances and instability of the situation of the students.
 - Duplication with other scholarship providers, which is by far the most pronounced problem, as students could be receiving several scholarships at the same time and potentially blocking the chances of others during the seven weeks of admission.
 - Equalization of high school certificates.
 - Outstanding issues with equalizations due to the lack of coordination with Syrian accreditation and equalization departments at the Ministry of Education.
 - Admission requirements at universities and the need for harmonization across the private and public institutions.
 - Restricted availability of study places at universities and the limited capacity in comparison to the big demand from the Syrian community in KRI.
 - The Grade Point Average (GPA) as a criterion for admission and the significant difference in the measurement of academic achievements between Syria and Iraq.



- > The need to identify the number of available seats per field of study before the implementation of any program was deemed necessary for a better adjustment of the programs and an appropriate management of expectations.
- > Moreover, the participants highlighted the general importance of collaboration amongst key stakeholders and the need for better coordination amongst scholarship providers.
- > **The second session** addressed the issue of vocational and skills training in KRI. This relatively new trend in higher education in KRI has not received yet the required support by the higher education institutions, partly due to the authentication process of the academic transcripts. This problem has surfaced when students with vocational qualifications from Syria were not able to enrol in universities' programs because their qualifications were not recognized.
- > The governmental ministries, especially the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, participated with representatives from four vocational centres. One of the topics addressed was the governmental response to the need of setting up proficiency centres and the necessity to open the dialogue between ministries, youth centres, vocational centres and international donors. In reaction to the gap between the market demand and the trainings, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has launched several skill trainings targeting vulnerable groups, including IDPs, Syrian refugees and the host community. The discussion became more technical when referring to issues like the existing cooperation among governmental bodies, the collaboration with international non-governmental organizations and the mechanism of systemization of the current curriculum. It was found that the main obstacle for achieving better results is the absence of a coordinating body that synergizes the efforts, training contents, mechanisms, and academic courses among vocational and skills training providers.
- > HOPES was praised as a unique program tailoring educational services to the needs of refugees. The Call for Proposals was a topic that received immense interest from participants, who expressed interest in applying for the short projects. It was furthermore discussed what a scholarship should cover beside the tuition fees, namely monthly living allowances, counselling for students and seminars and other extracurricular offers.
- > UNHCR emphasized the necessity of harmonizing the database of accepted students for all available scholarships in KRI.
- > Mention was also made of the need for more collaboration between SPARK, UNHCR, HOPES and the Ministry of Higher Education as the host of all Steering Committee meetings.
- > The participants agreed on the importance of a follow up dialogue to clearly identify the gaps in the vocational sector, to create synergies between training providers, to update and systemize curricula and to provide more resources for teacher training. The next Dialogue was suggested to take place in spring 2018.