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HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

INAUGURAL NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Higher Education & Refugees from Syria
Exploring Dialogue Opportunities

Thursday, July 27, 2017

German Jordanian University (GJU)

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Inaugural National Stakeholders Dialogue “Higher Education & Refugees from Syria: Exploring Dialogue Opportunities” Jordan, July 27, 2017

Report

Date: July 27, 2017

Place: Amman, Jordan

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 Jordan has organized in collaboration with the German Jordanian University (GJU), an inaugural National Stakeholder Dialogue, entitled ‘Higher Education & Refugees from Syria: Exploring Dialogue Opportunities’ on July 27, 2017 at the German Jordanian University (GJU).

This gathering was the first of a series of stakeholders dialogues bringing together representatives from ministries and higher education institutions as well as key institutional stakeholders involved in tertiary education and the Syria crisis.

The dialogue incorporated presentations from various stakeholders which reflected on a series of recent studies and surveys related to refugees and higher education and led to a discussion of the several requirements for facing the existing challenges in hosting Syrian students at Jordanian institutions.

The dialogue included

- Welcome Addresses by **Professor Salem Al-Agtash**, Dean of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research of behalf of the GJU.
- An introduction to the HOPES project and to the National Stakeholders Dialogue by HOPES project director **Dr. Carsten Walbiner**.
- **The first session** entitled “**Higher Education and Refugees from Syria: The situation in Jordan as reflected in a series of recent studies and surveys**” incorporated presentations from various speakers:
 - 1- **Professor Ahmed Al-Hawamdeh** on the study of “Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Jordan (Policies, Practices, and Perspectives)” (by *Ahmad Al-Hawamdeh and Hana A. El-Ghali on behalf of UNESCO/UNHCR, March 2017*).
 - 2- **Dr. Carsten Walbiner** “Young Syrian’s perceptions and experiences of higher education opportunities for refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey” (by *Kathleen Fincham on behalf of the British Council, May 2017*)
 - 3- **Ms. Wesam Barhoumeh** (HOPES) – presenting initial results of the perception survey conducted amongst HOPES scholarship holders in Jordan (July 2017).
 - 4- **Ms. Nora Hauptmann** (Kiron Open Higher Education for Refugees) introducing the findings relevant for Jordan form “Free Digital Learning Opportunities for Migrants and Refugees. An Analysis of Current Initiatives and Recommendations for their Further Use” (by *Elizabeth Colucci, Hanne Smidt, Axelle Devaux, Charalambos Vrasidas, Malaz Safarjalani and Jonatan Castaño Muñoz on behalf of the European Commission*) and the background of Kiron’s own experiences and (planned) activities.

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- **The second session** entitled “**Higher Education and Refugees from Syria: exploring dialogue opportunities on a national level**” incorporated
 1. An overview of the aims and activities of the **Tertiary Education Coordination Group in Jordan** jointly organised by UNHCR and UNESCO as well as an introduction into a mapping of existing initiatives by **Ms. Irene Omondi, UNHCR**, and **Mr. Eddie Dutton, UNESCO**.
 2. A discussion between the participants on possible potential measures towards sustainable solutions and the development of an initial roadmap for further development.

More information on the Brief and Programme ([Link](#))

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

- > Professor Salem Al-Agtash reminded the participants in his welcome speech that “the Syria Crisis is now internationally recognized as the largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Millions of people from Syria are of disparate needs for humanitarian assistance, of which, education represents the main challenge, opportunity, and hope for a better life”.
- > When presenting HOPES, project director Dr. Carsten Walbinder stated that foreign providers of support heavily depend on the input from inside the host countries when defining their various activities. He also stressed the need for further coordination amongst the many stakeholders operating in the region to prevent competition between institutions and to avoid seeing the Syria conflict as an isolated event. He considered that solution seeking must pursue an interdependent and comprehensive approach which requires far reaching coordination.
- > According to Professor Ahmed Al-Hawamdeh, efforts made in Jordan regarding the Syrian crisis are paying off at the level of preschools, primary and secondary education. But these efforts have not been transferred so far to the level of higher education despite the existence of various higher education institutions and vocational training centres in Jordan (10 operating public universities, 19 private universities, 41 community colleges and 43 vocational training centres) which have the sufficient capacity to host large numbers of Syrians.
 - The number of Syrian students at Jordanian universities has considerably increased between 2012 and 2016 – from 3,891 to 6,024. However, this growth does not match the demand and is still considered as comparatively low with regard to the capacities of the Jordanian universities. There is only a limited number of scholarships available in Jordan. Another problematic issue is the gender ratio: In 2015-2016, less than one third of the Syrian students enrolled at Jordanian HE institutions have been female whereas 52% of the Jordanian students are female.
 - While the total population of Syrians who reside in Jordan is 1,300,000, with over 650,000 being registered officially as refugees, the total number of the Syrians of 18-24 years of age residing in Jordan is estimated to be 156,000. However, only 7,024 of them have been enrolled during the academic year 2015/2016 in tertiary education (6,024 in universities and 1,000 in community colleges). This means that only 4.5 % of the Syrians of the age group 18-24 are enrolled in tertiary education while before 2011, the ratio stood at 26%. If that pre-war ratio would be applied to the same age group today, there should be 40,560 Syrian students in tertiary education in Jordan.

- The main barriers and obstacles that affect the Syrian refugees' enrolment in higher education institutions in Jordan range between high tuition fees and living costs, low enrolment and high drop-out rate of Syrian students at secondary school level, English language deficiencies as well as documentation issues.
 - The issue of employability after graduation has also been raised, acknowledging that prospects of Syrians at the Jordanian labour market are rather bleak and unlikely to improve.
 - Consolidation among policy makers, NGO's and institutions and further research on the needs of refugees and higher education were deemed of high importance, especially as service providers are still working with assumptions concerning refugees from before 2011.
- > The survey conducted in 2016-2017 by the British Council with 100 higher education Syrian students in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey observed interesting gender-related differences in their study motivation. Male youth sought higher education as a means to secure better employment opportunities, increased earnings, economic stability and mobility and an elevated social position within the community. Whereas female youth in Jordan often reported that they had no specific career goals in mind, yet wanted to pursue higher education for the love of knowledge and the desire to gain a sense of achievement and to be able to raise their (future) children better.
- Almost all the Syrian youth interviewed stated that they have experienced varying degrees of financial hardship and would be unable to study without financial support and scholarships which were considered rather limited. Almost unanimously, the interviewed youth asked scholarship providers to expand the overall number of scholarships available, the number of academic majors that they could pursue at all levels, the age limit (30 years) for applying and the number of institutions where they could study.
 - It has to be mentioned that other particularly vulnerable groups (youth with disabilities, LGBT youth and Palestinians from Syria) also complained that there were no special scholarships on offer for them (or at least they were unaware of these opportunities).
 - There is a need to give adequate guidance in terms of availability of scholarships, sufficient instruction in how to apply (particularly in Arabic), provide feedback on unsuccessful applications so that students could learn from the process.
 - Syrian youth in Jordan and Lebanon raised discrimination and bullying as issues affecting their experiences of higher education. In Jordan, refugee students felt maligned by their classmates (though not usually professors) for their perceived role in increasing local rents and "taking away" scholarships and jobs from locals.
 - Ranking educational opportunities in terms of desirability, the vast majority of students in all three countries put university first, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges second, and online study third. In this context, some students said that they would accept online learning only if there were no other alternatives. They felt online study might be appropriate for certificate or diploma-level studies, but not for degree-level programmes. Camp residents in Jordan had other concerns about online learning: The missing out on campus experience as going to campus gives a reprieve from the psychological imprisonment of camp life; lack of set study hours; unreliable electricity sources; poor internet connections and lack of computers, students' weak computer skills, and insufficient technical support.



Nevertheless, in many cases, it was clear that the students did not understand what online learning is and assumed that it would simply involve reading articles on the internet, and that online professors would be less competent than professors who taught at a “real university”.

- > When introducing the main findings of the **MOOCs4inclusion study** conducted between July and October 2016 by an international team of researchers on behalf of the European Commission, Ms. Nora Hauptmann of Kiron explained that the main objective of the study was to assess the extent to which MOOCs and other free digital learning (FDL) offers are effective and aiming at finding efficient ways of developing the skills needed by migrants and refugees (mainly third-country nationals in Europe) for inclusion, civic integration, re-engagement in formal or non-formal education and employment as well as potential opportunities and challenges in the FDL field.
 - It was found that “data and academic literature about FDL in a migrant/refugee education context is both recent and somewhat scarce”.
 - The starting point of a potential FDL learner was perceived to be very important, taking into account diverse profiles and learning environments. Learners perceive that they cannot wait until they have asylum, a residence permit, housing or employment to seek learning opportunities. There is also a need to assess the technology to which refugees may or may not have access at different stages of their educational journey and FDL offers should take into account specific learning needs, skills (digital literacy, language, educational background), and the learning environment.
 - Digital solutions need to be adapted to the context of unstable learning environments: lack of connectivity, lack of infrastructure, the need to provide targeted course content to students and security concerns.
 - The issue of facilitating the recognition of learning achievements and certification of skills was raised
 - In Higher Education, there is a strong movement towards utilising Bologna Tools (ECTS, learning agreements) for the FDL course content and seeking accreditation in respective European education systems.
 - In order to ensure recognition and thus build trust for online learning, several initiatives couple their FDL offers with an accredited institutional partner.
 - In the Jordanian context, “changing the online degree/course recognition culture is slow, but progress is being made”.
 - Impact assessment was perceived to be an integral part of the FDL initiatives:
 - There is an interest to share data and experiences between the different actors, donors and investors.
 - There is an acute awareness of the need to sharpen indicators for this assessment and instil a culture of evaluation from the start.
 - The main recommendations raised from this study aim at enhancing efficiency and efficacy of online learning initiatives:
 - In that perspective, the FDL initiatives should be fit-for-purpose designed considering that ‘targeted’, ‘blended’ and ‘facilitated’ approaches are seen as optimal to enhancing the success rate of any FDL initiative.
 - Recognition, quality assurance and accreditation are key necessities: Further communication with employers and (higher) education and accreditation institutions should be sought to ensure acceptance/recognition of FDL certifications.



- Ensuring sustainability through finding innovative models to cover and reduce costs as well as promoting cross-sectorial and dynamic partnerships.
 - Transparent and collective communication in order to successfully learn more and reach out to target groups as well as data collection and sharing results would avoid fragmentation of initiatives.
- > The discussion with the participants focused on the following issues:
- The importance to adapt FDL models and initiatives to the needs of the target group and providing the necessary support not available so far (stipends to cover the financial burden, hardware and study material etc.).
 - How to assess the quality of education in online learning – Monitoring and Evaluation.
 - The question of accreditation or appreciation of online programmes (within the HE system and by employers) was also a key concern, specifically recognition in Syria.
 - It has been noted that Jordan has improved in the last two years, allowing 25% of the universities curriculum to be taught through digital learning.
 - It was also found that students were sceptical because the prospects of employment for graduates of FDL education are slim. But digital learning would nevertheless allow bridging the gap between the high demand for educational opportunities for Syrian refugees and the relatively small number of available/affordable study places in the traditional HE systems. Furthermore, FDL offers could also increase the numbers of female enrolled in HE.

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

During **the final session**, participants discussed the need for further national stakeholders dialogues that would take into consideration existing initiatives and coordination efforts and tackle issues that the Tertiary Education Coordination Group is not be able to address.

- > Ms. Irene Omondi of UNHCR and Mr. Eddie Button of UNESCO reflected upon the situation in Jordan from the Tertiary Education Coordination Group (TECG)'s perspective. The TECG was established in 2015 in Jordan to enhance the coordination of its member organisations and projects (currently 17) in opening ways for granting refugee youth access to HE opportunities as well as advocating and informing the international community and the government of Jordan on emerging needs and challenges in the higher education sector.

The group perceived in a recent mapping the following observations:

- According to the available data, there are 1,163 overall newly provided tertiary education opportunities in 2017. This number does not include already exiting and on-going opportunities started in 2015 and 2016. The new opportunities comprise 657 on-campus offers accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education, and 506 online/blended learning opportunities with only partial/credit transfer/bridging/international certification. This is a drastic and partly alarming decrease in on-campus and degree-oriented scholarship offers and opportunities for refugees in Jordan while online blended programs witnessed an increase.
- According to UNHCR data 218,509 refugees are aged 18-35 years (Syrians: 192,079 and other nationality: 26,430)
- Less than 1% of refugees have access to any type of funded tertiary education in 2017.
- Only 0.3 % of refugees have access to formal MoHE accredited tertiary education.



- There is a need to perform a trend data and gap analysis between the opportunities provided and the actual demand and needs of the target group. In 2017, 24% of the opportunities provided are on campus, 15 % are blended online /learning, 51% English courses and 10% courses providing information and communication technology (ICT) skills. In terms of the intended degree, the scholarships range between 45% for diploma, 45 % for Bachelor studies and 10 % for Masters for full study programs.
- > The participants agreed that there is a need to provide further diverse opportunities according to the beneficiaries needs.
- > It was also suggested that a direct dialogue between international organisations and universities could increase the number of students and help reduce the tuition fees.
- > Various themes and needs were highlighted for future dialogues addressing Higher Education and the refugee crisis:
 - Improved collection, processing and sharing of data. (This should include further serious research to provide the necessary research-based data for the design and implementation of future activities. The available material does often lack credibility and scholarly seriousness.)
 - A closer focus on the needs, fears and expectations of the host community.
 - At the same time a stronger inclusion of the Syrian refugees in the design and implementation of activities.
 - The enhancement of adjusted digital learning offers despite all the challenges and partly even dubiety of this form of education.