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Higher Education & the Syria Crisis:
A look back and a view towards the future

Thursday 26 September 2019

HOTEL CROWNE PLAZA

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HE and the Syria Crisis: A look back and a view towards the future

Lebanon, September 26, 2019

Report

Date: 26 September 2019

Place: Beirut, Lebanon

BRIEF SUMMARY

On Thursday 26 September 2019, the HOPES project 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), the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic, organised its fourth National Stakeholders Dialogue, entitled '**Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A look back and a view towards the future**' at the Crowne Plaza Hotel Beirut, Lebanon.

This gathering is part of the fourth and final series of National Stakeholders Dialogues organised on a national level bringing together representatives from ministries, higher education institutions, and other key institutional stakeholders as well as students to take stock and evaluate engagements and achievements in this sector and to explore further approaches and imminent priorities based on the needs of all the involved stakeholders.

The National Stakeholders Dialogues provide a platform for discussion and information exchange on higher education and the Syria crisis, to strengthen coordination on a national level and explore new approaches benefitting all stakeholders.

Following welcome notes by Ms. Nayla Abi Nasr, HOPES Country Manager and Regional Communication and Network Manager as well as by Mr. Jose Luis Vinuesa-Santamaria, Head of the Economy and Local Development Section at the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, the dialogue incorporated reflections on the major developments and achievements on a national level in the higher education sector related to the Syria Crisis. The gathering also allowed to deepen the reflection on lessons learned and recommendations to improve response mechanisms and interventions in the future.

DIALOGUE REPORT

The dialogue brought together 44 representatives from the EU Delegation, higher education institutions, students, organisations and key stakeholders involved in the tertiary education sector related to the Syria crisis.

The gathering was organised as follows:

- **Welcome and introductions.**
- **Session 1: Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A closer look back**
Reflection on the major developments on a national level during the last three years and status quo from different perspectives
- **Session 2: Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A view towards the future**
 - > Overview of recommendations raised during previous dialogues and regional conferences
 - > Round table Discussion on lessons learned and recommendations to improve response mechanisms and interventions
 - > Identification of priorities to be taken into consideration for the future

Recommendations & Closing: Concluding remarks

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❖ Welcome Addresses and Introductory statements

Welcoming remarks were given by **Ms. Nayla Abi Nasr**, HOPES Country manager and Regional Communication and Network Manager and **Mr. Jose Luis Vinuesa-Santamaria**, Head of the Economy and Local Development Section at the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon.

Ms. Abi Nasr welcomed the participants and presented the latest achievements of the HOPES project on a regional and national level throughout the past three years, emphasising the true spirit of partnerships and collaboration instigated with key institutions in the country. She underlined the importance of the diversification of actions and the coordination amongst scholarship providers and higher education institutions allowing to fill the gaps in the higher education sector and to support the students throughout the pathways of their studies.

She considered that the active engagement of students and partners in all the previous stakeholders' dialogues allowed further exchange and learning as well as the exploration of coordinated approaches and recommendations that generate a better response to the needs of both refugees and host communities.

In his welcoming words, Mr. Vinuesa-Santamaria highlighted the fact that the HOPES project is one of the diverse EU funded programs, with a special emphasis on coping with the consequences of the Syrian crisis in the region making no distinctions between refugees and local populations, both struggling because of the regional context.

He considered that higher education, as a field, was not benefiting from any specific form of cooperation before the Syrian crisis because the focus was brought on economic and trade issues. The situation of youth in the region has become one of the EU's cooperation concern and objective, and more specifically Higher Education has now been recognized as a priority sector benefiting from an increased support. Both the EU Madad funded programs such as SPARK and HOPES support youth participation and development by providing pathways from secondary to higher education.

For the next phase, Mr. Vinuesa reported that the EU delegation to Lebanon is looking to tackle these challenges by ensuring further coordination between academic structures, improving Higher Education systems and ensuring that programmes provide clear student career perspectives as well as promoting and providing Higher Education perspectives for refugees and young people in the local communities

In order to do so, the EUD is looking to build up on the HOPES and SPARK projects' lessons learned and will focus on linking more with national authorities. In this perspective, he considered that the HOPES National Stakeholders Dialogues are important tools facilitating communication at a local level and between local institutions, to improve local coordination between organizations and academic institutions, working for the same objectives.

❖ Brief outline of key issues and recommendations addressed during the first session "Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A closer look back"

The following session addressed the major developments related to higher education and the Syria crisis in Lebanon from different perspectives: higher education institutions, international and national non-governmental organisations and projects and students.

The following key points and observations were put forward:

- > Most of the achievements are related to the increase in scholarships provision especially considering that before 2015, there was a lack in education opportunities for both refugees from Syria and host community students.

- > Since 2016 and through a great range of initiatives undertaken by various stakeholders, many of the challenges identified at the time regarding access to higher education were tackled, including:
 - Residency issues,



- The legal enrolment of Syrian students into universities,
 - The facilitation of application procedures,
 - The provision of needed documents for equivalency and certificates,
 - The transfer of credits between two different educational systems,
 - The provision of preparatory, capacity building and language courses
 - Finding solutions and approaches to reducing students dropouts.
- > Particular attention was paid to the integration of marginalized students from the host community, providing psychological support as well as supporting artistic fields and research-based projects.
- > A great focus was made by programmes on finding solutions to the language needs of students as well as on developing and promoting online and blended learning solutions including discussions on recognition and accreditation issues. The example of the pilot blended-learning MOOC for teachers developed by the Center for Lebanese Studies within a project funded by the HOPES project was given and considered as great achievement, since it helped teachers creating more interactive learning in their classrooms. The collaboration with universities was essential to succeed.
- > On a national level, new regulations were discussed to allow the provision of up to 40 % online courses of a blended degree programme. In this perspective, it was reported that the lack of scholarships at the first year level is very challenging for students and explains the high dropout rate. However, the main challenge for online learning remains recognition. Coordination at every level between universities and ministries should be enhanced, and students should be encouraged and trained to be online-learners.
- > Coordination on a national level has been enhanced since various coordination mechanisms, partnerships and collaborations between organisations and higher education institutions were established. The collaboration between the main scholarships providers in Lebanon through the Higher Education in Emergencies Roundtable launched by UNHCR and UNESCO in 2016 as well as the HOPES' national stakeholders dialogue were considered as a success for further coordination of interventions and improving collaboration with HE institutions, ministries and involved stakeholders.
- > Drawing from their own experience, teachers and students expressed how the support provided by programs and scholarships benefited both the refugee students as well as the youth from the host community and helped them to develop their language skills and complete their higher education studies.
- > The speakers highlighted the importance of a multi-faceted approach that would take into consideration the student learning pathways from secondary to tertiary education and the need to better integrate pre-secondary and secondary education as well as build pathways to higher education.
- > A great number of initiatives and achievements in the higher education sector related to the Syria Crisis were made in a very short period of time. The development of future interventions must focus on building bridges between study opportunity provision and the labour market. In this perspective, there is a need for better preparing students to access the labour market through orientation, internship, counselling and career guidance.
- > Further collaboration is necessary on a governmental level to ground the interventions into policy by institutions and policy-makers.



❖ Brief outline of key issues and recommendations addressed during the second session “Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A view towards the future”

The second session included an overview presented by Mrs. Rania Helou of all the key points and recommendations raised during the previous 15 National Stakeholders Dialogues held since 2017 and the two regional conferences organised by the HOPES project in collaboration with the EU DGEAC in Beirut in 2017 and Amman in 2019.

Based on the findings and key recommendations raised, participants were invited to four round tables to discuss lessons learned, identify tangible recommendations and key priorities for the future.

- **Round table 1:** Scholarships: Access, Recognition of Qualifications, Criteria of selection, legal residencies, student pathway.
- **Round table 2:** Blended learning and Online learning solutions
- **Round table 3:** Language needs of students
- **Round table 4:** Response Mechanisms, coordination of interventions on a national level

Feedback from the round table discussions: Group Findings and recommendations

The following key points and recommendations were presented:

Round table 1: Scholarship provision

- > In terms of scholarship provision and eligibility criteria, it is essential not to restrict scholarships to certain majors or study fields.
- > The need was stressed to increase the age limit and to provide scholarship opportunities to students above 30 years old.
- > The need for further streamlining of vulnerability and financial criteria to make sure that the most vulnerable students are getting the needed help was highlighted.
- > Application procedures should be further simplified and facilitated.
- > The development and provision of orientation and preparatory programs for students is primordial.

Round table 2: Blended learning and Online learning solutions

Online learning content:

- > Analysing the labour market and conducting regular needs assessments of the labour market before defining and adapt the content of programmes accordingly.
- > Developing more online soft skills courses such as time management, communication skills etc..
- > Developing phone compatible content, with lighter versions easily downloadable
- > Offering free and non-credit content to allow students to develop their personal knowledge
- > Providing more proactive content that would strengthen the activities with community peers, further contact with professors
- > Integrating cultural content to further preserve culture and history though online learning.

Mechanisms of delivery:

- > Providing digital and computer skills to students to facilitate the use of online learning
- > Encouraging professors to be online learning facilitators and helping students to become independent users
- > Using online learning for exam evaluations to help for recognition and transferability of credits
- > Developing study centres in different regions to ensure accessibility while providing offline materials and further commitment of students to the course.



Accreditation, recognition and transferability of credits:

- > Developing further collaboration between policy-makers and higher education institutions in relation to the development, recognition and accreditation of blended and online programmes is crucial to their success.
- > Ensuring the legal recognition in Lebanon and in the countries of origin by supporting higher education institutions in convincing the related ministries of the quality, usefulness and necessity of online learning
- > Designing online exams that can be taken on campus universities is important to help recognizing and legitimizing prior learning and online learning.

Round table 3: Language needs of students

- > There is a need for further teachers' training and preparation of teachers
- > The provision of English courses should not be academic but rather specific to the study majors (English for special purposes)
- > Non-academic English certificates should be developed by adapting English courses to the market's jobs
- > Enhancing oral practice by tackling the psychological barriers of students to speak English is important. Teachers could receive intense training in psychology to help student express themselves in English.
- > Following up and ensuring continuity after the end of the languages courses is crucial to give the students possibilities to practice the language

Round table 4: Response Mechanisms, coordination of interventions on a national level

- > There is a real need to develop a mechanism for coordination both at the national level (Ministries) and at the international level (international organizations, universities, NGOs and social society organizations) to work towards coordination and a coherent approach to accessing Higher Education and quality vocational training for Lebanese and refugees from Syria.
- > In this regard, the HOPES' National Stakeholder Dialogues were an extremely productive space of coordination. To advance to the next level, all the stakeholders should be involved in the coordination process especially relevant Ministries and policy makers as well as every level of education sectors (secondary and higher education, formal and non-formal vocational training).
- > Quality assurance should be ensured for both vocational and non-formal vocational training.
- > Stakeholders should advocate for Higher Education being every option possible (vocational training, academic education, etc.). However, it was cautioned that multiplying the involved stakeholders could be counterproductive by creating further delays and a lack of coordination.
- > The need was stressed to adopt a multi-sectorial approach, covering the entire student pathway and to develop a multi-sectorial stakeholder network for responsibility sharing in the provision of educational opportunities to both Lebanese and refugees from Syria.