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HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

In collaboration with



NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on
Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Monday, February 25, 2019

Hilton Cairo Zamalek Residences
21 Mohamed Mazhar st. | Zamalek
Cairo > Egypt

For more information:

www.hopes-madad.org | hopes@hopes-madad.org

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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE

'HE and the Syria Crisis: Blended Learning and Online Solutions'

Egypt, February 25, 2019

Report

Date: 25 February 2019

Place: Cairo, Egypt

BRIEF SUMMARY

On Monday 25 February 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 third National Stakeholder Dialogue in Egypt, entitled 'HE and the Syria Crisis: Blended Learning and Online Solutions' in collaboration with Ain Shams University at the Hilton Residence Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt.

The gathering was part of a series of stakeholder dialogues organised on a national level bringing together representatives from ministries, higher education institutions, key institutional stakeholders involved in tertiary education and the Syria crisis. The National Stakeholder Dialogues seek to provide a platform for discussion and information exchange, in order to expand the dialogue on higher education and the Syria crisis on a national level to strengthen coordination and explore new approaches benefitting all stakeholders.

As the gap between the needs of refugees and provision of higher education opportunities remains largely unfilled, despite the tremendous efforts of various stakeholders, this particular dialogue focused on blended learning, e-learning solutions and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a complementary alternative to the higher education refugee response in Egypt. The event aimed at better understanding the local context in terms of barriers, accreditation mechanisms and recognition of online study solutions as well as at exploring new prospects and approaches.

The dialogue included welcome notes by Mr. Ville Suutarinen, representative of the Delegation of the European Union to Egypt and the Madad Fund; Mr Alex Lambert, Deputy Director of the British Council Egypt as well as Dr Carsten Walbiner, HOPES Project Director.

The gathering incorporated presentations from Dr Rasha Kamal, Ministry of Higher Education; Dr Hanan El Said, Ain Shams University; Dr Maysa Hayward, Ocean County College as well as Ms Allison Church, Kiron Open Higher Education. The dialogue allowed to further identify and explore recommendations and approaches in blended learning and online solutions on a national level.

DIALOGUE REPORT

The dialogue brought together 31 representatives from the EU Delegation, the Ministry of Higher Education, higher education institutions and key institutional stakeholders involved in tertiary education and the Syria crisis.

The dialogue incorporated the following:

- Welcome addresses and introductory statements
- Introduction to the HOPES project and National Stakeholder Dialogues by **Mr Harry Haynes**, Egypt Country Manager and HEEAP Regional Manager.
- Welcome address by **Mr Ville Suutarinen**, EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the Madad Fund, the European Union Delegation to Egypt.
- An overview of the regional scope of the HOPES project and the main purpose and expectation of the NSD by the project director, **Dr Carsten Walbiner**.

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- An overview of the online education programme provided by the British Council by **Mr Alex Lambert**, Deputy Director of the British Council Egypt.
- **Panel session: Online Solutions - Overview of the current situation in Egypt, challenges and responses**

Presentation on

- a) The Egyptian context, recognition and accreditation
 - b) Online learning study findings and good practices
 - c) Online education opportunities at the higher education institutions
- **Dr Rasha Kamal**, Head of the Central Administration of the International Students, Ministry of Higher Education
 - **Dr Hanan El Said**, Director of the Electronic Blended Learning Center, Ain Shams University together with **Ms Nesma Sami**, Ain Shams University, and **Ms Fatma Zoghlof**, Ain Shams University
 - **Dr Maysa Hayward**, Assistant Vice President of International Programs and Director of Middle Eastern Studies, Ocean County College
 - **Ms Allison Church**, Director of Educational Programme MENA and Programme Coordinator PADILEIA, Kiron Open Higher Education

- **Round table session Online learning programmes Identifying opportunities in online programmes**

The session consisted of working groups and discussions facilitated by the HOPES team, which probed into the following main areas:

- Programmatic challenges and needs in Egypt
- Capacity of higher education institutions to expand programmes to refugees
- Quality and content design of online programmes in Egypt

- **Recommendations and closing remarks**

❖ **Brief outline of key issues, challenges and recommendations addressed during the two sessions:**

- > Current trends in higher education were highlighted by Dr Kamal. There are currently 1,047 Syrian undergrads enrolled in Egyptian university education.
In regard to tuition fees, there are various tuition payment schemes depending on the country in which the high school diploma was earned. If the student is a graduate of an Egyptian high school, the student pays resident fees similar to their Egyptian counterparts. If their high school degree was earned in Syria, the students pay 50% of the tuition fees. If the high school certificate was earned in the Gulf region or any other country, international fees apply.
On the postgraduate level, 50 students were enrolled in the academic year 2017/2018. This is a decrease in comparison to the figure for enrolment in the previous three academic years which stood at 250 students. One of the reasons is the increase in tuition fees - an average of USD 6,000 annually for postgraduate education - which commonly caused deferred enrolment/dropouts.
- > It was indicated by the Director of the Blended Learning Center at Ain Shams University that alternative education should be sought to assist refugees such as blended courses, which normally comprise 25-30% of study



time in class lectures and 70% through an online platform. One of the examples shared was the Ocean County partnership with Ain Shams University.

It was proposed that more blended learning programmes are needed, such as Ocean County's Community College affiliation with Egyptian universities, since there is a high demand from refugees for such mobile programmes. In reference to the Ocean County Community College programme, 11 governorates received accreditation to implement programmes offered by the college. The programme offers an entry exam as an alternative for the high school certificate and an *Accu placer* (an English and Maths placement test) to decide the developmental language and math requirements of the student. In addition, they provide staff capacity building for university staff members; junior facilitators are trained to teach the blended learning programme. They focus is on market driven disciplines such as business and technology. It also provides students with the choice of either a vocational degree within two years so that they are equipped for the labor market or a college degree if they pursue another additional two years. This flexibility allows refugees to better deal with the financial burden of education.

However, for such programmes to be implemented successfully on the ground, they should have a special operational unit inside the university for enrolment apart from the university departments similar to the Ocean County Community College. Such programmes also require accreditation from the Egyptian Supreme Council of Universities and a presidential decree for operation. However, it was suggested by the representative from Ocean County that there is a necessity to review all online and blended courses offered by Egyptian academic institutions in terms of pedagogy, course design, assessment procedures, content, media and instructional technology in order to assess their quality and compatibility with the market needs.

Further issues discussed

- > Blended and online programmes provide a means to overcome the challenges faced by refugees when applying for higher education, such as the excessive documentation required for admission, which may include missing documents or transcripts that cannot be obtained from Syria under the given circumstances. Blended programmes have their own specific entrance exams designed to measure the applicants' skills and knowledge. This is considered a gateway for refugees who either have not managed to continue their education, are unable to provide proof of previous education or have not met the regular admission requirements for universities. Additionally, it provides study pathways that are chosen based on the interest of the students and their intended career.
- > It was also put forward that blended learning with a face-to-face component is more suitable than fully online training for refugees in Egypt, who normally need and expect some type of instructional guidance during their academic studies. Blended programmes help students to increase their commitment to the course and eventually complete it successfully since it engages the students with the instructor and other course participants, while providing the flexibility in setting personalized study schedules at suitable geographical locations.
- > Credit transferability from online courses to university/further online blended courses is considered an important factor allowing students to access further and higher education.



One method of overcoming the accreditation barrier is having programmes implemented by governmental academic institutions through partnerships with other international academic entities that have a solid track record in providing quality online/blended training.

Another facilitating measure is creating a designated office/branch on the campus of the local university in charge of handling the training and programme operation of the blended/online programme similar to the partnership agreement between Ocean County Community College and Helwan University.

Some foreseeable obstacles would be the lengthy procedures required in establishing these programmes, gaining the approval of the Supreme Council of Egyptian universities and the issuance of a presidential decree required in order to operate the programme.

- > On the operational front, there is a necessity to raise awareness on the importance of such programmes. Programme administrators need to communicate with parents and community leaders to increase their understanding of the value of blended learning, especially for refugees. Mass advertising has some limitations, since governmental academic institutions advertise only in the Al Ahram National newspaper on Fridays. Social media is commonly used to complement formal advertising campaigns in order to reach a wider audience. For students, non-availability of internet services and computer devices coupled with a lack of digital competencies were highlighted as possible barriers.
- > Payment procedures and financial burdens were also discussed as most of the blended and online programmes require online payments via credit cards, which is not possible for most of the refugees who have limited access to banking services. Bank transfers could be a possible option to solve payment procedure issues. One of the major obstacles is the financial cost of online and blended programmes and the limited number of scholarships available. Some of the proposed recommendations include the provision of a payment instalment plan so that the students don't pay the bulk of tuition fees upfront. Offering English language training in parallel with their online/blended education is essential for minimizing linguistic challenges during the academic programme.
- > Training of junior facilitators and staff capacity building is essential for the success of blended and online programmes and their scalability. They are more eager to commit to such programmes in comparison to professors who are fully engaged in teaching classroom-based academic courses.

❖ Recommendations and Closing remarks:

Participants considered that bridging the gap between the labour market and course offerings is crucial for the success of online and blended programmes.

Based on the market survey conducted by Ocean County College in Egypt, there is a need for degrees in business and technology as required by jobs open to refugees.

Conclusively, international assistance in the form of scholarships will enable Syrian refugees to attend blended and online training programmes, boosting their employability in the local labour market and assisting them in building their local communities.