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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education – Language for Resilience

CONSOLIDATED REPORT

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National Stakeholders Dialogues
"Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience"
CONSOLIDATED REPORT: Egypt, Jordan, KRI, Lebanon, Turkey

Summary

The report covers
> the background to the series of National Stakeholder dialogues on language needs of Syrians for higher education held between November 2018 and March 2019.
> a brief explanation of what 'Language for Resilience' means in this context.
> an outline of the common structure of the dialogues.
> a comparative review of the discussions and findings, and recommendations made at each of the dialogues. These are grouped into five broad headings: Awareness raising/outreach activities; e-learning; delivery mechanisms; course design (which incorporates many of the previous headings); and teacher training.
> common conclusions drawn from the review, and a series of recommendations provided, drawn from the group discussions and reports. These recommendations are proposed to inform ongoing delivery of the HOPES English language programme, as well as planning for future language development initiatives for young Syrians in neighbouring countries. The recommendations are appropriate to all the contexts, though the methods of implementation may vary between countries.

Background and Introduction

Background

Eight years into the Syrian crisis, millions of Syrians have fled their country finding refuge in the neighbouring countries. Amongst them, only a small number of post-secondary age students are currently enrolled in a university programme, and the majority of those are struggling to adapt to the academic system of the host countries. Various measures have been taken by local, regional and international stakeholders in the countries affected by the crisis to provide educational opportunities and tangible solutions to the challenges faced by both the students from Syria and the hosting communities.

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), the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic, in 2017, organised a series of National Stakeholders Dialogues across Egypt, Northern Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, bringing together representatives from ministries and higher education institutions as well as key institutional stakeholders involved in tertiary education and the Syria crisis.

These first gatherings presented an overview of the situation, mapping of challenges and responses as well as an exploration of further approaches on the national level. The dialogues, and a number of research studies, found that the lack of appropriate language skills and specifically in the language(s) of instruction in higher education constitutes one of the main obstacles constraining the enrolment of Syrian refugees in higher education institutions in these countries, and, even when enrolled, constrained the successful completion of their studies.

The need for higher-level foreign language courses (English, Turkish, French, etc.), with a focus on each student's selected field of study (for example sciences, social sciences, and humanities), and including online language support was agreed as a top priority during the two-day conference on Higher Education and Refugees in the Mediterranean region held in Beirut Lebanon in September 2017. This event was organised by the HOPES project in partnership with the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC).

Within this context, the HOPES project undertook a second series of National Stakeholders Dialogues across Egypt, Northern Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey in late 2018 and early 2019. These dialogues brought together experts, institutional and other stakeholders together with students, to explore what works, and further approaches to

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helping both refugee students and institutions in overcoming language barriers. The British Council uses the term 'Language for Resilience' for this work.

Language for Resilience

Language for Resilience is an approach to language support programming based on research conducted by the British Council into the language needs of refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It explores all the areas in which refugees need language skills to take part in a new society and access services, education and jobs. The five principles behind this work are as follows:

- Developing home language and literacy: creating the foundations for shared identity, belonging and future study.
- Access to education, training and employment.
- Learning together and social cohesion: language-learning activities as a basis for developing individual resilience, ensuring dignity, self-sufficiency and life skills.
- Addressing the effects of trauma (extreme distress) on learning: language programmes as support and as a means to address loss, displacement and trauma.
- Building the capacity of teachers and strengthening educational systems: building institutional resilience through professional training for language teachers.

In terms of higher education, lack of appropriate language skills can be a particular barrier to refugees from Syria. They often have come from a fully Arabic medium education system but are now in education systems where courses may often be taught in English or another foreign language, and this can further reduce the already low participation rate in Higher Education amongst the Syrian community.

The series of HOPES National Stakeholder Dialogues brought together experts, practitioners and Syrian students to discuss what additional concrete steps can be taken to help refugees from Syria and host community students to overcome language barriers to higher education.

This consolidated report brings together the commonalities between Syrian student needs in the five countries, and also identifies issues that are specific to each country, and sometimes to different parts of the country. The details for each country are contained in the relevant country report. This report distils the key recommendations that can be applied in all countries, though the detailed implementation of them may differ between countries.

Structure of Dialogues

Each dialogue addressed the following broad areas, though different dialogues focused on some areas more than others, depending on local priorities. But all dialogues sought to find ways to improve *access* to *high quality* language learning, *continuity and relevance* of learning, and, where possible, a *recognised record of achievement.*

- Addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education systems. This is summarised in the **Awareness-raising/Outreach** section
- Encouraging a culture of commitment – addressing drop out. This is addressed in the **Awareness-raising/Outreach, Course Delivery,** and **Course Design** sections.
- Different models of language course delivery in the local context. This is addressed in the **Course Delivery** section
- E-learning – fully utilising blended, online and digital courses. This is addressed in the **E-learning** section
- English/Language for Specific Purposes. This is addressed in the **Course Design** section
- Needs in terms of teacher training. This is addressed in the **Teacher Training** section.

The structure of each dialogue followed the following general lines:

- > Welcome and introductions, including any recommendations from previous events.

> Expert panel session, focusing on the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education systems.
> Coffee and networking, including 'brainstorming' ideas onto flipcharts of issues and potential solutions to the issues above.
> Group discussions on each of the flipcharts, and other issues.
> Feedback from groups with recommendations.
> Next steps and closing remarks.
> Lunch.

Consolidated report on findings

Process of the dialogue and issues addressed

Following a general introduction by a HOPES team member, a panel of experts highlighted some of the areas they thought were particularly relevant to the discussion from their experience. This created a good foundation for the following discussions by all participants. During the coffee break, all participants added comments to flip charts around the room, addressing the key issues. This generally gave rise to very interesting discussions, and the experiences of the student participants were particularly sought after. Mixed groups then coalesced around each of the flipcharts and took a deeper look at the issues and recommendations for ways of addressing them. This often brought issues to light that were not addressed on the flipcharts. At the end of this session, each break-out group presented their recommendations to the whole gathering, who both questioned and added to the group's conclusions. The summary of these became the recommendations put forward by the meeting and are provided in the report of each dialogue. For this summary report, the focus is on commonalities, and general recommendations that apply across the board.

Findings and comparative recommendations.

Annex 1 provides a table of recommendations from each country, showing commonalities and country specific findings.

Awareness-raising/outreach activities.

These recommendations were aimed at addressing the barriers facing Syrian refugees in accessing higher education in particular countries, and in accessing English courses where these are required for such access. Three of the five countries were similar in that higher education was conducted (at least in some courses) through the medium of English. In Turkey, there was an added complication in that many courses were Turkish medium, and, of course, the language of the community was Turkish, not Arabic. Like Turkey, the KRI does not use Arabic, but Kurdish as the home language. Public universities teach in Kurdish, though private universities increasingly teach in English. No awareness-raising/outreach issues, or recommendations, were raised in the Turkish dialogue, though some were raised as part of the e-learning issue.

- Raising the awareness of Syrians about the importance of English proficiency to access higher education was seen as very important in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. The comparative lack of English in Syrian schools means that Syrian students have difficulty matching local students' command of English, either evidenced though school leaving exams (Egypt) or by university course entry requirements. In Turkey and KRI, there is the added requirement of proficiency in Turkish or Kurdish as well.
- The importance of basic IT competency was also noted in all countries, not only for e-learning, and self-access learning, but for practical administration: checking emails, applying for courses, scholarships, or for

accessing other information. Lebanon and Turkey both noted the need for IT skills training/ induction/ orientation prior to beginning courses which involve online/blended courses.

- More specifically, there was a need for awareness-raising, and expectation management of what a 100/140-hour English course can achieve, even if pursued conscientiously. This would be one level, for example from A1-A2, and this, in most cases, would be insufficient to ensure entry to higher education (which would require a minimum of B1).
- Egypt suggested that a clear statement of what the institution is providing and what is expected of course participants, before the classes begin is agreed by the institution and each student. A mutual commitment to providing the lessons and to attending the courses could also reduce drop-outs. This proposal of a learning agreement between the institution and the student, is one that could be adopted in all countries.

E-learning

There was a general consensus across all countries that Syrian students were not very conversant with the notion of e-learning, or even blended learning. This was articulated in different ways in different countries, and in Egypt in particular, there was a similar lack of familiarity with e- and blended learning from local academics as well. KRI was the least enthusiastic about e-learning.

- Turkey noted the need for ongoing teacher support to students from teachers in using the internet for language learning once the course has begun. HEEAP courses offered at some campuses are intensive, with limited time for revision.
- Turkey and Egypt noted the importance of motivating students to undertake e-learning, ideally by providing a recognised qualification or access to an IELTS course, for successful completion of e-learning courses.
- Jordan and Lebanon focused on much greater integration of online/face to face learning throughout the course. Both these meetings suggested the 'flipped classroom' approach for language learning where students do 'homework' first, online, and then discuss and practice in class. Both these countries also recommended training online mentors and facilitators to support students online learning. Both meetings, and Egypt, also stressed the importance of online learning being active and engaging (this applies to face to face learning materials as well).
- Jordan had the most ideas about 'out of classroom' learning. The meeting suggested peer support for e-learning through, for example, for example WhatsApp groups, and linking to other English learners around the world. They also suggested linking to volunteer English speakers globally, for practice and for the development of social skills. This meeting, together with Lebanon, noted the large number of free online language learning courses: Duolingo, British Council and BBC online learning content and so on, and providing students with support in accessing these to enrich their learning would be beneficial. Jordan and Lebanon proposed to encourage students, post-graduation, to form peer support groups for online learning: for example, for example WhatsApp groups. Lebanon extended this idea to developing an App-based language courses directed primarily on skills for accessing job opportunities.

- Lebanon and Turkey also noted the importance of having mobile-optimised learning materials, and the fact that more students have access to a phone than to a computer. The British Council should invest in apps with downloadable videos, ideally that can be played at variable speeds, so that they can be viewed off line. Lebanon also proposed the use of culturally appropriate materials, ideally locally designed. Turkey noted that LearnEnglish Select as offered on HEEAP courses is very useful when it is accessible, but it might be necessary to restructure it to make it more accessible, like making it mobile compatible.
- Egypt was the only country to mention monitoring learner activity. This went beyond academic monitoring of learning outcomes, but also of attendance, presence in chat rooms, use of the online platform and so on. The purpose of this would be early identification of students who were having difficulties and addressing their problems. However, as was noted, this requires additional budget and more administration staff.

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- Lebanon noted that all of these recommendations should also be integrated into teacher training for the courses. Egypt also emphasises the need to train teachers and change the currently resistant culture among teachers toward e-learning. Egypt and KRI also noted the need for appropriate equipment is needed for e-learning, both in the institution and for the student.

Delivery mechanisms

There was a general consensus across all countries that greater flexibility in both location of courses, and in scheduling of courses would be beneficial, and go some way to addressing the issue of participant drop-out from courses. Most of the recommendations from all five countries were practical, though implementing some of them might prove problematic or costly.

- All five countries, in different ways, recognised the need for flexibility in scheduling and in locations for classes in line with student availability. Jordan put this clearly: move the provision near to where students are rather than expecting students to come to where the provision is. Jordan proposed research to identify where is easiest for students to reach. Lebanon emphasised that students are trying to fit classes into a busy life of work, other courses and family commitments. Turkey noted that evening courses are difficult for women to attend. Turkey also proposed that female students need classes which allow both mother and children to attend.
- In addition to location and scheduling, there was a common desire for a greater range of courses at different levels. Jordon proposed intensive courses (16-20 hours per week for 6 weeks) for those who demonstrate the capacity, and, after one week's break, they continue with a next level intensive course.
- Related to the scheduling and locations, Egypt led on consideration of financial incentives, for example covering transport costs for course participants, to ensure ongoing attendance. Turkey and KRI also made this suggestion.
- Egypt and Turkey both noted that motivation would be enhanced when the course is linked to a recognised accreditation. Turkey also noted that social and integration events with Turkish students were very motivational. In the same vein, Egypt proposed that classes should be mixed i.e. Syrian and Egyptian, and not specific to displaced people.
- Lebanon proposed enabling access to technology for all students: possibly using study centres or using underused university computer labs. In addition, they proposed establishing virtual and face to face student-led study groups.
- Egypt sensibly proposed follow-up on students who drop out of courses, both to encourage them to continue, by addressing their issues where possible. If not possible, include the issue, and proposed solutions, in preparation for future courses.
- Jordan had a specific need for bespoke provision of classes inside the camps and proposed research into what has worked with other organisations, both within Jordan and in other analogous situations (for example the work done by University of Geneva). KRI also has a significant population of refugees in camps (37%) but this issue was not raised in the dialogue.

Course Design

The 'delivery mechanisms' section looked at the practicalities of providing the courses to students. This section is more 'technical', looking at the content and structure of the courses themselves. The core of the reservations about the current HEEAP courses were that there is only 'one size' for everyone, and most of the recommendations were for greater discrimination, as well as for a greater range of courses at different levels. Also mentioned is the need for recognised qualifications at the end of each course.

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- For the current course, Jordan, KRI and Lebanon all recommended more balanced teaching of all four skills from the beginning. Also a more interactive course and lesson design, with a greater emphasis on 'practical English. Turkey also proposed greater interactive teaching in the classroom, that includes student-led activity.
- Egypt and Lebanon suggested that the language learning pathway should start with general English first; moving on to general academic English text (where appropriate); and subject-specific or job specific ESP after that. Jordan also recommended a clear pathway for students, each level with clear success criteria for progress to the next level, as did KRI. This approach would develop a clearer link between language courses, scholarships and academic courses and could include HE preparatory courses around study skills and language. These, together with academic preparation courses in three broad areas: sciences/humanities/social sciences. Turkey made a similar suggestion of ongoing specialist language support during courses or different levels in, for example, medicine or engineering. KRI made a similar suggestion of ongoing language support to students during their university courses.
- Jordan proposed access to internationally recognised qualifications from B1 onwards, like an IELTS preparation course and access to the examination.
- Lebanon proposed in-course monitoring of student progress, expectation management, and setting of achievable goals. This, combined with space for individual coaching and guidance.
- Egypt suggested that for some jobs and occupations, conversation classes (i.e. listening and speaking) are more important than reading and writing. Jordan also suggested a greater focus on English for the workplace and soft skills. But for the academic student, Jordan suggested a greater focus on writing and interview skills.
- Turkey proposed that HOPES develop a smart phone app for online learning, related to the course, which can include practice with native speakers; for example, through regular 'live' online classes with native speaker teachers and a learning community.

Teacher Training

Teacher training was, perhaps surprisingly, an area which did not, except in Egypt, generate a great number of recommendations or proposals. This is perhaps because many of the recommendations for the other areas will naturally require an element of teacher development to implement them successfully.

- Egypt strongly felt that many teachers need training in IT, and in IT enabled learning. They also noted a need for more interactive course and lesson design and methodologies, and a greater focus on students need for practical English. This would include better in-course monitoring of student progress, expectation management, and setting of achievable goals, and require more space for individual coaching and guidance.
- Jordan recommended research into numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English (or those with good English) within Jordan that could be trained to support Syrian learners. Lebanon also suggested outreach to identify numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English in Lebanon, through NGOs and social media.
- Lebanon identified a clear demand for teachers able to manage a student-centred/skills focused/project-based language learning approach, and a requirement for training teachers to incorporate online elements within their teaching.
- Lebanon also identified a need for the upgrading of teachers of English in schools, including communicative methods, and training on trauma and on developing empathy with their students.
- Turkey, on the other hand, identified training needs for teachers both on the specific English courses they are teaching, and on the 'content' courses their students will be taking.

Conclusions, recommendations and action points

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There were similarities in some areas across all five countries, or between three or four of the five. There were also some that were very specific to the circumstances pertaining in one country. In Lebanon, for example, the discussion went far beyond discussion of Syrian refugees, to consider the faults in the overall school curriculum and in higher education. While these are beyond the power of the project to address, they do provide a very helpful context. Jordan has a specific issue around students who live in camps, which no other country mentioned (though KRI may have a similar issue).

The recommendations proposed below are felt to be appropriate for all countries, although the methods of implementation might vary in different contexts. The recommendations are, therefore, rather general in nature. However, they provide a useful guide both for general regional planning for future interventions, and, in combination with the individual country reports, provide a clear guide for planning at the country level as well.

An initial key overall recommendation is expanding the number of course providers in each country, to respond to the key issue of location and timing of courses. Metrics of success should be number of students entering the courses, and aiming for, say, at least a 60% completion rate.

Awareness raising/outreach activities.
-    Provide clarity to prospective students on the need for English for entry to HE (and for other occupational purposes), and considerably more clarity on expectations from a 100 +40-hour course. Provide access to a pathway of courses from beginners to IELTS preparation, with clearly defined 'success' at one level, giving access to a course at the next level. Realistic expectations on how long it will take to get to a university-entrance level.
-    Provide all accepted students with a 1-week 'introduction to learning on line' course. This may be different in different contexts but will includes basics of email and internet searching and how to optimize the use of free on-line learning materials for self-access language learning.
-    Consider introducing a 'learning agreement' between the institution and the student, articulating the responsibilities and commitments of each party before the course begins.

E- learning

-    An introduction to using IT for learning purposes should either be provided in pre-course induction (see above) or is the first part of the course.
-    Blended learning should be fully integrated into the course (not an option), including peer learning and student collaboration activities. Students will need to be introduced to these new ways of working in a managed way.
-    Mobile compatibility needs to be central to any upgrade/revision of LearnEnglish Select, and to recommendations for on-line learning apps.
-    If there is a recognised qualification for using IT for learning, then students should be encouraged to get this. If there is not, then even something like the 'European Computer Driving Licence' would provide evidence of basic competence.

Delivery Mechanisms

-    A range of courses should be available, with a clear pathway (from beginners to IELTS preparation, or to other ESP or EAP courses) for students seeking a particular outcome, whether academic or occupational. Progression to the next level should be determined by performance and commitment at the first level.
-    Flexibility in course locations and timing should be offered, to ensure the maximum number of students are able to attend.
-    Consider stipends to cover travel/meal costs for students who have to travel a significant distance to attend classes.

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- Assess the feasibility of providing English language qualifications that are internationally recognized for students who demonstrate both the ability and commitment to succeed.
- Integrate social messaging, for example WhatsApp, into the programme delivery process, both for logistic and learning purposes.

Course Design:

- Design a clear pathway of courses from beginners to IELTS preparation, with well-defined learning outcomes for each level, including criteria for progression.
- Provide a comprehensive induction and 'learning contract' (see above)
- Consider developing a smart phone app for online learning, related to the course, which can include practice with native speakers. Have regular 'live' online classes with native speaker teachers and a learning community.
- Design for interactive teaching in the classroom, including student-led activity, and balance the teaching of all four skills from the start. Students will have been alerted to this approach in the pre-enrolment briefing. Initiate a means of in-course monitoring of student progress, to flag possible 'drop-outs' early enough to intervene before it happens.

Teacher training

- Provide training in general communicative language teaching skills, as required. Focus on interactive, learner focused activities in addition to teacher led activities. Help teachers understand how to manage blended learning approaches.
- Provide focused training for teachers on the specific courses they are teaching, as well as what learning support for the course level is available online.
- Teachers also need focused training in the specific needs of Syrian students: language learning issues, but also some training (from psychologists?) on how to deal with non-academic issues in the classroom, arising from trauma, and from social adjustment issues.

Annexe 1: comparative table of recommendations by country.

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