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European
Commission

HOPES

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND REFUGEES

in the Mediterranean Region

27-26 September 2017
Beirut, Lebanon

REPORT



«Higher Education,
Investing for the future»
التعليم العالي، استثمار في المستقبل

Education &
Training

Conference on Higher Education and Refugees in the Mediterranean Region

26th - 27th September 2017, Beirut, Lebanon

Context

The war in Syria is now in its seventh year, with no lasting solution in sight. Over seven million Syrians have been displaced internally and around five million have fled the country, leaving behind not only family, friends and property, but also hopes and aspirations.

One of the spheres heavily disrupted is the secondary and higher education of millions of displaced Syrian children and youth. More than half of the Syrian refugees are younger than 18 and need, and want, to be educated.

While a lot has been done to secure primary and partly also secondary education, the enrolment of young Syrian refugees in higher education is still massively insufficient. This creates a dangerous gap in the learning and qualification of Syria's young generation; the generation that one day will have to rebuild Syria and that must not become a "lost generation".

SUMMARY

The European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), in partnership with the HOPES project (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, jointly organised a two-day conference on Higher Education and Refugees in the Mediterranean region.

The conference was held on 26th and 27th September 2017 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Beirut, Lebanon, attended by some 135 key stakeholders and representatives from ministries, higher education institutions (HEI), professionals, experts and students from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and Europe.

During the two days, participants discussed the impact of the Syrian crisis on the higher education systems of neighbouring countries, whilst also addressing various examples of higher education systems facing similar challenges in Europe and other Southern Mediterranean countries.

The overall objective of the event was to take stock, learn from each other and enhance cooperation. Having the relevant stakeholders together represented an opportunity to evaluate and improve ongoing engagements with refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The international community in general and the European Union in particular have provided resources, material help and expert knowledge to incorporate Syrian youth and young people from vulnerable host communities into higher educational institutions with an investment of EUR 53 million alone from the EU's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (the "Madad Fund").

This support has generated around 3,800 full scholarships, nearly 6,000 language courses and over 40,000 counselling sessions. Girls and women represent an important number of those benefitting from these actions. For four years, students are allowed to attend and complete undergraduate and master degrees, professional courses and language classes in key sectors like nursing, pharmacy, education, engineering and business administration, among others.

These efforts complement other European Union interventions to improve the quality and facilitate the reform of higher education systems and institutions, mainly in the framework of Erasmus+ and specific bilateral interventions including some of EU Member States.

All stakeholders confirmed that **tertiary education is a fundamental right of refugees** as well as of young, vulnerable people from the host communities. Efforts should be maximised to prevent a lost generation and ensure that qualified young refugees can access higher education and are ready to move forward towards the reconstruction and the stability of Syria after the war.

Despite the enormous efforts made, higher education institutions, national authorities and the international community are all **struggling to provide educational opportunities and tangible solutions** for the plummeting numbers of Syrian students enrolled in higher education in the host countries compared with the pre-Syrian crisis period. Challenges are often exacerbated by a general lack of capacity affecting the supply of opportunities for an already overstretched higher education sector.

Efforts have been mainly focused on primary and secondary education. However, the war has now lasted for more than six years, students are getting older and the **demographic pressure on higher education systems** is increasing (without taking into account the demand of older students who interrupted their studies a few years ago).

It is very difficult to adapt financial support from the EU or other donors to countries neighbouring Syria, as it is impossible to anticipate when it will be safe for students to return to their country. **Tensions are palpable between the reconstruction logic in Syria and the integration logic** in hosting societies overwhelmed by the high influx of refugees, already palpable.

Need to increase and adapt support for students and hosting universities

- During various panel sessions, participants identified bottlenecks hindering young refugee students' access to higher education from different perspectives. The two main obstacles for accessing higher education remain language proficiency and financial support (especially in universities with tuition fees).
- The need for higher-level **English language courses**, as well as **other foreign language courses** (Turkish, French, etc.), specialised in the study field chosen by the student and including online language support, must be considered as a top priority in all programmes developed to enable easier access to scholarships and higher education in general.

In all countries of the region enormous efforts, by governmental and non-governmental organisations, have been made to allow for an opening of the higher education systems to refugees from Syria.

Southern Mediterranean countries and EU Member States have signalled interest to learn from these practices and see how institutions and other organisations are addressing the higher education needs of migrants and refugees.

- There was also a clear call for **extended financial support for students** in countries neighbouring Syria as well as for displaced students inside Syria. Students must very often work in parallel to support their families and this has a clear impact on their academic achievements.
- Participants also emphasised the need to provide **sustainable support** to students in obtaining a degree and not stopping assistance after a few months. The need for medium-term perspectives is regarded as crucial.
- Discussions proved that Southern Mediterranean students are increasingly open-minded towards **online study solutions**, but strong coaching/mentoring and accreditation mechanisms must be put in place. It is essential that these programmes offer transferable credits, which are recognized internationally.
- Outreach strategies should focus on social media to guarantee an appropriate dissemination of information.
- Discussions also underlined that **refugee scholars** are sometimes not seen as necessary for teaching activities in the host countries despite the scarcity of resources. Their know-how should be better used.
- There are several initiatives targeting refugee students, supported by the EU and other donors; however, there is a need for better **centralised information** about their offers and achievements, for both donors and refugee students. The HOPES website, with its online catalogue, is an example of good practice.
- Several speakers emphasised the need to **better anticipate the reconstruction** of Syria and enable students to become agents of change. This could be made possible by singling out study fields closely linked to reconstruction needs (health, education, engineering, etc.), integrating entrepreneurship and citizenship courses into study programmes, using present and past scholarship holders as change agents and supporting students and the academic community inside Syria.

Need to improve the governance support mechanisms

- Participants underlined that the **creation of synergies** and further coordination between various institutions at the local, regional and international level are crucial to avoid duplicating programmes and to strengthen the response to the needs of refugees.

- There is a **lack of coordination** between donors themselves and with national authorities, the latter complaining about this situation.
- Participants agreed that **tailored national initiatives and programmes** should be developed with a more systematic approach to achieve a more efficient and sustainable response using existing resources and education systems.
- Particular attention should also be paid to the **needs and constraints of the local higher education institutions** and host communities. The active involvement of local communities in any measure designed for refugees is crucial to avoid social and political tension.
- Further research is needed to obtain **reliable data and statistics** to increase the understanding about refugees and needs in the higher education sector. This would improve the learning process of students as well as the quality of education programmes and support provided to refugees from Syria and to disadvantaged local students.



CONFERENCE REPORT

*Moderation and welcome address
by Claire MOREL, European
Commission - DG Education,
Youth, Sport and Culture - Head of
Unit for International Cooperation*

- *Marwan HAMADEH, Minister
of Education and Higher
Education, Lebanon*
- *Christina LASSEN, Head of the
European Union Delegation
to Lebanon*
- *Sultan ABUORABI AL-
ADWAN, President of the
Association of Arab
Universities*

*"The Syrian crisis has numerous
consequences and effects on the
whole region. This is causing a
huge pressure on the
international institutions to make
a step." Marwan Hamadeh.*

*"Through access to higher
education, these individuals and
their communities will have
higher hopes and better prospects
for the future. For that, we need
quality universities that can
create an environment of trust,
respect, and non-discrimination.
Higher education institutions that
encourage cultural and religious
diversity and promote respect for
the individual and personal
freedom." Christina Lassen*

*"The EU is committed to investing
in the future of this region, which
harbours the cradle of civilisation,
our common history and present,
and therefore also our common
future. We need the young
generation to rebuild a fair,
democratic, tolerant and diverse
Syria and to achieve a better
future for a prosperous and
peaceful region." Christina Lassen*

Day 1 – 26th September 2017

Opening: INTRODUCTORY STATEMENTS

In his introductory statement, the Lebanese Minister of Education and Higher Education, Mr. Marwan Hamadeh, emphasised the effects and consequences of the Syrian crisis on the whole region, highlighting the pressure faced by the neighbouring countries in hosting refugees while confronting a spectrum of inherent difficulties and uncertainties on their own, such as the challenges to access higher education, unemployment and vulnerability. In the light of the on-going crisis, which has become a mixture of international interferences, and the unknown future of Syria, the situation has negatively affected the hosting communities.

As part of its response strategy to the situation, the Lebanese Ministry's efforts have mainly focused on primary and secondary education and the strengthening of collaboration with international institutions to find appropriate solutions in that regard. However, efforts at the higher education level remain insufficient and require assistance and help despite the tremendous efforts of the EU in providing opportunities in the region.

The objective is to ensure that qualified young refugees access higher education so that in the future they can contribute to the reconstruction and stability of Syria after the war. He also highlighted the possibility of many young refugees fleeing to Europe and North America instead of returning to Syria.

According to Mr. Hamadeh, Lebanon's position is a straight refusal of the long-term settlement of the refugees and a refusal of a forced return. Lebanon encourages a "go-back policy" for Syrian refugees, in secure conditions, resulting from a peaceful political decision.

Ambassador Christina Lassen, Head of the European Union Delegation to Lebanon, considered the Syrian crisis to be one of the most severe to hit the Euro-Mediterranean region in recent times. Reconstruction will not be possible without educated citizens and well-qualified professionals. Thus, the role of higher education and vocational training is key in that process since Syria, the region, the European Union and the whole world need highly-educated, technically-sound, self-confident and motivated people who are active members of their communities and societies. She stressed the need for quality education and quality higher education institutions.

In her speech, Ambassador Lassen confirmed the European Union's commitment to addressing the challenges faced by both refugees and

host communities in the region. This can be achieved by providing financial resources, material help and expert knowledge, with the goal of incorporating Syrian youth and vulnerable members of the host communities into higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions in countries affected by the Syrian refugee crisis.

The EU's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (the "Madad Fund") has invested EUR 53 million, supplemented by other EU efforts, to support the improvement of the quality and the reform of higher education systems and institutions, mainly in the framework of Erasmus+ and specific bilateral interventions involving some EU Member States.

"During this conference, it will be important to show the successes and the challenges that still lie ahead. Both will be key inputs for future EU cooperation and for the second Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region to be organised in 2018, as announced in New York last Friday by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini", she added.

Subsequently, Prof. Sultan Abuorabi Al-Adwan, President of the Association of Arab Universities, described the long tradition of cooperation between the European Union and the Arab countries.

While agreeing that neighbouring countries were heavily affected by the crisis, he highlighted the importance of higher education for refugees and the need to integrate refugees from Syria into both the European and Arab higher education institutions as a way of counteracting the risk of them being a target for terrorist organisations.



Session 1: IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Panel discussion 1 "Assessing refugee students' needs. The student perspective"

Moderation by Christian HÜLSHÖRSTER, DAAD, Director of Scholarship Programmes Southern Hemisphere

The session incorporated:

> "Moving Forward" video: Portraits of refugee students from Syria (HOPES)

> (1) A presentation of key findings from a joint perception survey conducted amongst students from projects funded by the EU's "Madad Fund"

- *Job ARTS, Policy Officer, The EU Delegation to Jordan*
- *Carsten WALBINER, HOPES Project Director*

The first session included a presentation of key findings from a joint perception survey conducted amongst student beneficiaries of four projects and institutions, namely HOPES, SPARK, the GJU (German Jordanian University) and Laser programme, in five different countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey).

According to Mr. Job Arts, Programme Manager for Education and Youth at the EU Delegation to Jordan, the survey covering different study programmes at Bachelor, Masters and diploma levels follows a well-needed exploratory approach that seeks to gain insight into the perceptions of students, refugees from Syria and disadvantaged members of the host community.

The survey should be considered as a starting point to increasing quality in education and improving the learning processes of students as well as the support provided to Syrian refugees and disadvantaged local students.

A total of 1,837 students aged between 19 and 30, mainly refugees from Syria and a small percentage of students from the host communities in Iraq and Jordan, took part in the 64-question survey.

The preliminary results presented by Dr. Carsten Walbiner, HOPES Project Director, offer a variety of data ranging from general information, reasons for studying, time management to challenges encountered. The results reflect the success of the education as well as the students' needs and should be the cornerstones to the different education systems in various countries. The results can be helpful for monitoring (higher) education programmes.

The key findings from the perception survey highlight the following:

- The reasons of the students for pursuing academic studies range from a genuine interest in the subject, to a desire to learn, improved job perspectives and gaining a qualification to improve their social standing.
- As expected, the majority of students are very keen to develop their knowledge in their academic fields and to explore new ideas.

- Although 69% to 89% of students stated that their prior expectations regarding the study programmes has been positively met and exceeded, they feel pressurised by financial burdens and difficulties. Scholarships were deemed insufficient to maintain a decent standard of living in the host countries without working in addition to their studies.
- The students also identified the main prerequisites for successfully pursuing their studies: These range from equipment (material for studies, books, computers) to extra English language training to overcome language barriers in the e-learning module courses.

Further discussions on the quality of education between teachers, administrators and students are very much needed in order to improve access to higher education for a greater number of refugees.



> (2) Panel discussion with students

- Ayham ALKAWI, Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association, President of the Middle East Chapter
- Refugee students from different countries studying in Lebanon:
 - Ms. Sadaf AKRAM SAID, from Iraq (Lebanese University)
 - Ms. Fatima ALBATOUL FAKHOURJI, from Syria (DAFI)
 - Ms. Alaa MAAROUF, Palestinian (UNRWA)
 - Mr. Oussama EL GHEMIANE, from Syria (SPARK)
 - Mr. Mouhannad AL SAGHIR, from Syria (HOPES)
 - Mr. Ashraf ABDEL WAHAB, from Yemen (not a student)

> Questions and answers with Nadim KARKUTLI, European Commission, Manager EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the "Madad Fund"

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion with refugee students from different countries, of which only a certain number had been granted a scholarship by international donors. Several bottlenecks were identified by the refugees regarding study opportunities and higher education. The challenges faced by students and their needs reflect the preliminary results obtained from the perception survey.

Financial barriers: in some host countries, refugee students are considered to be international students. They therefore have to pay international tuition fees which they cannot afford even if they have a job. Many students, despite benefiting from a scholarship, continue to work to support themselves and their families. The scholarships are often not enough to cover tuition fees, transportation costs and subsistence costs or for them to maintain themselves without working. This is naturally affecting their study performance.

Those students not living with their families have to pay high rents which also compels them to work. Moreover, students consider that transportation costs to reach universities on a daily basis are very expensive and use up a considerable amount of the scholarship. Students claim that it is often very difficult to find employment in the host countries.

Language problems: in many countries, study programmes at universities are taught in English. Students frequently do not have the necessary command of English to complete an entire study programme in this language.

In addition to the general level of English required, students highlight that subject-specific English courses are also necessary but rarely offered. For many programmes, students have to provide an IELTS or TOEFL certificate to enrol in study programmes. These certificates (and preparatory classes) are very expensive and in most cases the students cannot afford them.

Choice of study programmes: students argue that in many scholarship programmes, the fundable subjects are limited, and students cannot always study their preferred subject or enrol in programmes best suited to their abilities. Also, the language of instruction limits the choice of programmes. Humanities, for example, are more likely to be taught in Arabic in contrast to engineering or similar subjects, which makes many students opt for subjects of no real interest to them. The students also highlight that many would like to continue their studies with a PhD but that there are very few funding opportunities.

Online/blended-learning programmes: students generally appreciate online or blended-learning courses, provided they have access to the necessary technical equipment and the Internet (for instance in

camps). A major problem, however, is the lack of official recognition of certificates for online learning courses.

Students consider quality assurance and accreditation to be important issues and that online courses should be complementary to traditional courses. Blended courses are an alternative but require strong involvement, rigour and motivation from the students (the dropout rate is high). Students request better follow-up from teachers for online courses.

The interaction between the student panellists, the audience and Mr. Nadim Karkutli, Manager of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis – “Madad Fund” – led to an intense discussion on how some of these challenges can be or are being addressed and stressed the responsibility of the international community, national governments and local higher education institutions. The panellists agreed on the following:

- The need to encourage the enrolment of refugee students and to facilitate academic careers is still a major challenge. All disciplines and academic fields will have a role in rebuilding the country and cultural exposure is beneficial for this purpose.
- The international community needs to support a greater number of students. Doctoral studies have to be considered should demand increase.
- International and national stakeholders have underestimated the need for higher-level specialised English and other language courses that target study subjects more and include online language support. This must be considered as a top priority in programme proficiency to provide easier access to study opportunities and scholarships.

Panel discussion 2: “Assessing refugee students’ and scholars’ needs. The university perspective”

The session aimed to learn lessons on how higher education institutions can foster more equitable access and improved learning for a greater number of refugee students and disadvantaged members of the host communities.

It is widely recognised that higher education institutions in the Middle East region and in the EU have been affected by the Syrian crisis and the high influx of refugees. This panel discussion shed light on the various efforts of these institutions in responding to the crisis and the challenges and barriers they face. It focused on lessons and shared experiences while reflecting upon the refugee students’ and scholars’ needs in an attempt to propose appropriate recommendations, while taking into account the institutions’ constraints.

*Moderation by Nouredine
MANAMANNI - Campus France,
Director for External and
Institutional Relations*

- *Asma CHAMLI-HALWANI,
Lebanese University,
Coordinator at the
International Relations Office*
- *Dhiah ABOU-TAIR, German
Jordanian University, EU
Higher Education Programme
Manager*
- *Ali GUNES, Karabuk
University, Vice Rector*
- *Rund HAMMOUDI ALBAZZAZ,
Dohuk University, Head of
International Affairs*
- *Mathieu SCHNEIDER,
University of Strasbourg, Vice
President for Science and
Society*

In addressing the question of institutional responses to the Syrian crisis, representatives from several universities highlighted a range of challenges being faced:

According to Dr. Asma Chamli-Halwani, **Lebanese University (LU)**, budgetary restrictions faced by the only public state university in Lebanon impede further programmes and assistance to refugees despite the various international cooperation agreements and collaboration in projects. The university is focused on providing education opportunities to 70,500 students, of whom 1,700 are Syrian refugees and who are frequently unable to cover the basic registration fees. This affects their enrolment at the university.

It has already been mentioned that in Lebanon the language barrier frequently pushes refugees into studying human sciences which are often provided in Arabic. While male students often select humanities and female students science courses, it was found that the number of Syrian students enrolled on humanities programmes at the Lebanese University had been decreasing since 2011. Even before the war, students used to register in humanities in order to avoid military conscription.

During his overview of the situation in Jordan, Dr. Dhiah Abou-Tair of the **German Jordanian University (GJU)** also stressed financial shortcomings as a major barrier to young refugees accessing higher education. Financial support is often too limited to cope with the high tuition fees students are requested to pay. The demand for scholarships remains significantly higher than supply. Refugee students have to get a job which subsequently affects their academic results.



All university representatives agree that language proficiency is one of the major barriers and challenges faced by students.

According to Dr. Ali Gunes, Vice Rector of **Karabuk University** in Turkey, the university, its academic staff and its students were not fully ready to accept the Syrian refugees when the crisis started given the lack of experience in teaching international students in a multicultural environment. As the main language of instruction in Turkey is Turkish, several complaints were raised by lecturers and local students, due to the difficulty of understanding. In response, the university offered English programmes to facilitate student integration but all other courses were mainly provided in Turkish.

Dr. Mathieu Schneider from **Strasbourg University** in France considered that Europe must "take its share" and not let neighbouring countries assume this crisis alone. The provision of French courses (FLE – French as a foreign language) is only the first step in easing the access to higher education to refugees. And while funding for hosting migrant students remains insufficient, the preparatory language learning course (one to two years) is considered too long, as it distances the students from their field of study. Sponsorship systems aiming at gradually integrating students might be a better solution.

In Iraq, the higher education institutions have insufficient places on offer in the science faculties. Syrian students generally attend yearly or vocational training courses.

Expanding enrolment in higher education is still a concern, in particular given the lack of documentation, high drop-out levels, low attendance and low female enrolment in education.

According to Dr. Rund Hammoud Al Bazzaz of **Dohuk University** in the Kurdish region of Iraq, the majority of Syrian refugees aged 18 to 24 are unable to access tertiary education in Iraq. With more than 250,000 displaced persons having arrived in Dohuk, the city is not able to cope with the overall situation. Many students are living on the streets and face health issues or are unable to commute from camps to universities. Refugees are being 'invited' to local HEI, but their lack of documentation precludes them from being properly registered and they cannot therefore graduate at the end of their courses, despite the facilities and procedures proposed by Dohuk University.

The panel discussed the lack of appropriate documentation, accreditation, certificates and travel documents as factors hindering student admissions and graduation. Issues such as students' ignorance of university procedures and lack of academic and career guidance

which provide pathways to the labour market or further education were another topic.

The panel recognised that providing education in humanitarian and emergency situations requires greater commitment from higher education institutions and governments. While this is understandable when other life-saving priorities such as food and shelter are so critical, there is a clear need to increase the levels of funding and attention given to higher education.

Suggestions such as more funding for refugee students through additional scholarships, language courses for specific purposes or allocating top-up funds to researchers in the universities were put forward. The panel also recommended further coordination between institutional and associative partners, at local and national levels, in Europe and the region as well as working closely with the Syrian community to assess their needs.

Session 2: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Panel discussion 1: “Formulation of the problem, approaches, results and further challenges. Governmental perspectives”

*Moderation by Nadim KARKUTLI,
European Commission, Manager
EU Regional Trust Fund in
Response to the Syrian Crisis, the
“Madad Fund”*

- *Jordan - Suha
ABDELRAHMAN, Cultural
Counsellor at the Jordanian
Embassy in Lebanon*
- *Lebanon - Ahmad JAMMAL,
Director General for Higher
Education*
- *Turkey - Kagan BILGE
OZDEMIR, Director of the
International Office, Council
of Higher Education (YÖK)*
- *Egypt - Ashraf HATEM,
Counsellor of the American
University in Cairo, Former
Secretary General of the
Supreme Council of
Universities*

This session explored some of the ways in which governments and education systems are responding to the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees. The focus of the session was to understand how the plummeting percentages of Syrian students enrolled in higher education in the host countries, compared with pre-war statistics, are being addressed by the ministries of higher education and other relevant state institutions. An enormous discrepancy was found between the actual number of refugee students registered in the higher education systems of the host countries and the number of refugee students of university age.

In **Lebanon**, the priority of the Ministry has been, according to Dr. Ahmad Jammal, to secure primary and secondary school education for Syrian refugees. Policy developments are mainly focused on addressing the sheer numbers and challenges of refugee students at the secondary education level. With Syrians completing secondary school there is a growing need for the provision of places at university. There are currently only 5,780 Syrian students enrolled in Lebanese universities, whereas before the war the number was almost 13,000. Currently students' limited knowledge of English or French restricts their range of choices.

Dr. Ashraf Hatem presented the situation in **Egypt**, stating that Syrians constitute 46% of the total number of international students. Originally, Syrians were treated like Egyptians in public and private

universities, but since 2015, in terms of fees, Syrians have been divided into two groups. Those who completed their secondary education in Egypt or Syria are still treated like Egyptians; those who graduated from schools in the Gulf region are treated as international students.

In **Jordan**, the main problem facing Syrian students is the lack of documentation. According to Ms. Suha Abdel Rahman, the Ministry of Higher Education operated a system of positive discrimination through fixing facilitated prerequisites for non-Jordanians as entry requirements. This has allowed the recording of Syrian students at the Ministry.

The situation in **Turkey** was presented by Dr. Kagan Bilge Özdemir. Turkey is currently hosting more than three million Syrians, many of whom are now graduating from secondary school. Of them, 98% do not have access to higher education, but the Turkish government has set the target for 2018 at 25,000 Syrians enrolled at university.

In answering the question as to whether **governments or universities** should take the **main responsibility** for increasing the number of Syrian students enrolled in higher education and whether any governmental strategies exist to cope with the situation, the following points were raised:

As has been said, in **Lebanon**, the Ministry's strategy is mainly to focus on primary and secondary education. There are large drop-out rates in secondary education due to financial and economic reasons. Financing and resourcing are major issues for an already overstretched higher education sector, with students unable to pay even reduced fees. Although universities have the flexibility to develop initiatives to secure student enrolment, the institutions usually depend on these fees for survival. More collaboration between donors and governments should be sought.

In **Egypt**, demand already outstrips supply and there are five million 'guests' from countries other than Syria who are also seeking to enter the same higher education system. Among Syrians, demand is highest (80%) for medical courses. The Supreme Council of Universities has expanded blended learning to cater to this sector.

In **Jordan**, many students enrol for the "wrong" specialisation and are crowded into several universities, partly in areas of study being "dictated" by donors. Many scholarships are provided to Syrian students without considering their educational backgrounds or what they have studied previously in Jordan or back home in Syria.

Another problem is that many NGOs only cover students' tuition fees without providing a stipend, or limit scholarships to one or two

semesters. This places students in a very difficult situation and makes it tricky for them to complete their studies successfully.

The geographic dissemination of students within universities is also considered an issue; while some universities are overrun with students, others still have capacity. The drop-out rate is relatively high, therefore in the former.

In **Turkey**, Syrians at public universities are supported by the government through 5,000 scholarships in a five-year programme on offer since 2014.

It was felt that there was a need for more direct communication with EU interventions, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan. In Lebanon, work is being done on engagement and human rights to prepare students for the future. In Egypt, there is a strong political will to help all Syrians and other guests academically and there is a similar desire in Jordan. In Turkey, it is now clearly understood that many Syrians will not be returning home soon and that they need to be prepared for life in Turkey.



Panel discussion 2: “The response by the international community”

Moderation by David WHEELER,
Al Fanar Media, Editor

a) European Union

- Nadim KARKUTLI, European Commission, Manager EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the “Madad Fund”
- Claire MOREL, European Commission - DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Head of Unit for International Cooperation

b) UNHCR

- Maren KRÖGER, UNHCR, Tertiary Education Officer, Division of International Protection

c) Private donors

- Farooq BURNEY, Director of the Al Fakhoora campaign, Qatar

The international community has played a major role in providing funding, material help and expert knowledge in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Tremendous efforts towards improving tertiary education for refugees and education in emergencies have been made in the past years. This panel discussion shed light on the international community’s efforts and challenges in bridging the education gap for refugees with a keen eye on sustainability and future prospects.

According to Ms. Claire Morel, the **European Commission** has acted strongly in managing refugee migration and providing support to enhance the integration of refugees in higher education in Europe and in other countries.

The priority has been to focus on developing strategic partnerships with local partners, providing online linguistic support and support for refugee researchers within and outside Europe thanks to Erasmus+ capacity-building projects in higher education.

Mr. Nadim Karkutli referred to the EU’s regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the “**Madad Fund**”, as an EU integrated, non-humanitarian aid response to the crisis which primarily addresses the longer-term educational, economic and social needs of Syrian refugees and overstretched host communities.

The prime concern of the Trust Fund in funding education programmes is to prevent a whole generation from losing hope in the future.

In the long term, the “Madad Fund” could be extended beyond its initial mandate, with two potential scenarios. In the first scenario, the crisis continues and projects will need to cater for further displaced persons in the neighbouring countries. The second scenario has a keen eye on the refugees’ return and the reconstruction of Syria.

In addition, through the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund (DAFI), **UNHCR** has been able to provide considerable support for tertiary education for Syrian refugees in the region.

According to Ms. Maren Kröger, the key to DAFI’s success is its solid collaboration with local implementing partners. This coordination facilitates access to higher education scholarships and reduces the student drop-out rate to a minimum.

Coordination between institutions at both country and regional levels, such as with UNESCO and the HOPES project, is regarded as crucial for the success of the programme and to strengthen the response to the needs of refugees.

Tremendous efforts towards improving tertiary education for refugees have also been made by private institutions and donors, such as **Al Fakhoora**, which has grown from a student-led campaign to an organisation providing a comprehensive support system to higher education in Gaza and funding for some projects inside Syria.

Mr. Farooq Burney considers that offering more opportunities to refugees will empower Syrian students to lead the reconstruction of Syria in the future.

The panel recognised that providing education in humanitarian and emergency situations requires greater commitment from the international community. Expanding support in tertiary education, while continuing to look at how this support best addresses the needs of refugees, is one of the requirements to ensure that Syrian refugees continue their education in this protracted crisis.

Further communication and coordination at the international level is imperative to prevent duplicating programmes and to ensure a coordinated response. It will be important to find new ways to communicate with beneficiaries and promote available programmes.

The panel also highlighted the importance of taking host communities and national education systems into consideration in their provision of education support to refugees as well as providing education in the transition to longer-term development.



Networking Exhibit – POSTER PRESENTATIONS ON PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

The first day ended with a public display of various poster presentations on projects and initiatives conducted by local, regional and international institutions. This networking session was a chance for participants to showcase their initiatives and to share their experiences with each other informally.

For more information:

<http://www.hopes-madad.org/gallery/?gallery=22>



Day 2 – 27th September 2017

Moderation by Abel PIQUERAS,
Programme Manager, EU
Delegation to Lebanon

- Yannick DU PONT, Director,
SPARK
- Rabih SHIBLI, Director of the
Center for Civic Engagement
and Community Service,
American University of Beirut
- Mohammad SALMAN,
Director of academic
programme, Brussels Free
University

Rapporteur: Rosa DI STEFANO,
Research Mobility and European
Projects, Sapienza University, Italy

Session 3 - DISCUSSING INSPIRING PRACTICES

Breakout session 1: “Easing access to higher education: scholarship schemes and beyond”

National and international organisations and higher education institutions have launched various scholarship programmes and adopted different approaches in the region and in Europe to provide young refugee students with tertiary education opportunities and ease their access to higher education. The discussion during this breakout session reflected on some of these scholarship programmes in an attempt to examine the pre-conditions and success factors of the initiatives and discuss challenges and approaches going beyond addressing the funding gap for youth and the lack of resources in the support of tertiary education for refugees.

First approach: support prior to accessing higher education.

Beyond the scholarship schemes and grants provided by various donors and partners, the approach and main focus adopted by the **American University of Beirut (AUB)** in their on-campus and off-campus Refugee Education Programs, is to prepare undergraduate students for university admission. According to Dr. Rabih Shibli, AUB also provides formal mobile education by setting up educational programmes in local schools to increase access to primary, intermediate and tertiary education. Training programmes include intensive English, psychosocial support, vocational training and digital learning, with a special focus on school drop-outs to enhance their employment opportunities and MOOCs to provide credits to refugees.

Second approach: easing the enrolment process of refugee students.

Dr. Mohammad Salman presented the Welcome Student Refugees Programme developed by the **Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)** to support actively the integration of refugees who have obtained official refugee status in Belgium into VUB.

By analysing the Syrian educational system and the challenges faced by refugee students, be it with the online university enrolment procedures (language barrier), the difficulties in writing academic papers and - being more accustomed to formal and traditional methods - struggles with the assessment and examinations methods, the university was able to offer special educational programmes for refugees such as special Arabic programmes and non-conventional tailored programmes to meet the educational needs of the Syrian students.

Third approach: special focus on the integration of students in the local labour market/reconstruction efforts.

As presented by Mr. Yannick du Pont, **SPARK**'s objective is to develop higher education and entrepreneurship programmes with the purpose of creating a pool of graduates who can lead their conflict-affected societies in the future. Full BA and TVET scholarships are provided in specific, selected fields with a keen eye on future employment or the reconstruction of Syria. In this context, **SPARK**'s main focus is on the provision of leadership and entrepreneurship training for economic empowerment.

The discussion between panellists and the audience focused on the limitation of scholarships as a unique solution to easing access to higher education for refugees. Traditional scholarships, for refugees, for university study are usually provided in an uncoordinated and sporadic fashion. Given the scale of the Syrian crisis, this approach falls short in accelerating the language learning of students and providing students with access to employment.

Current educational programmes need to be evaluated in order to propose further tailor-made programmes to meet the educational needs of Syrian refugees under a more integrated and comprehensive strategy.

Participants agreed that programmes should be developed under a more systemic approach to achieve a more efficient and sustainable response using existing resources and national systems.

Additional leadership and entrepreneurship programmes and training courses should be offered to students to help them to overcome their current difficulties at universities as well as to prepare them for their professional life. The main challenge would be in making such holistic and tailor-made solutions standard in public universities and at the government level. Creating synergies and further coordination between different stakeholders at a national level (service providers, authorities, higher education institutions) is key to enhancing integration in the education system and increasing financial channels.



Breakout session 2: “Building institutional capacities to welcome and integrate refugee students and scholars”

Moderation by Hana ADDAM EL GHALI, American University of Beirut, Senior Program Coordinator and Lecturer

- *Marcello SCALISI, Director, Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED), RESCUE project*
- *David VAN KAMPEN, Project Manager, Nuffic, HOPES project*
- *Hasan MANDAL, Deputy President, Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK)*

Rapporteur: Yasser ELSHAYEB, Coordinator of the National Erasmus+ Office, Egypt

The influx of refugee students into the higher education systems of their host countries creates an enormous challenge for the receiving higher education institutions, as proven by the sheer numbers presented by Prof. Hassan Mandal (**Turkish Council of Higher Education**).

There are over three million Syrian refugees in Turkey and approximately 500,000 of them are of university age. At the moment, 15,000 (a mere 3%) are enrolled in higher education institutions, with 4,000 supported by scholarships. In addition, 350 Syrian academics have found positions at Turkish universities, thereby accounting for 12% of the international teaching staff in Turkish HE, but hundreds, if not thousands of qualified people have not been so lucky. As Prof. Mandal pointed out, “in Turkey, it is first of all the numbers that count, when thinking about a response to the situation”.

Institutions face many problems in attempting to accommodate potential Syrian students. These range from a lack of language proficiency, missing documents and inadequate previous learning achievements to the individual financial and psychological difficulties frequently encountered by refugees.

One of the greatest challenges is the enormous lack of information on the Turkish higher education system for Syrian youth aspiring to higher education, especially on procedures and formal requirements. Turkish universities have responded in various ways to this situation. The Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK), which has an overarching and coordinating function for Turkey’s higher education system, is closely observing the situation. It advises institutions affected by the crisis and has decided to create within its own structures a special unit for providing better information on the Turkish HE system to Syrians.

A strategy developed at the Hatay Conference in March 2017 focuses on creating more programmes in the fields of (higher) vocational training and distance learning, thus easing the huge pressure generated by the high demand for study places in certain crucial fields in traditional universities.

The situation is more or less similar in the other countries in the region affected by the Syria crisis, with one obvious difference: the governmental response in Turkey is much weaker, in some cases even non-existent. This is due to the restricted means and insufficient structures available. International support is therefore crucial for capacity-building activities within the higher education institutions. Two respective initiatives were presented to the audience.

The Mediterranean Universities Union (**UNIMED**) referred to a project called RESCUE recently implemented in a couple of Near Eastern countries. It aims to assist local universities in coping better with the needs of enrolled refugee students.

Dr Marcello Scalisi stressed the need to set up a permanent observatory on refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs) in crisis situations with regards to education/higher education. This would help to understand the situations better and use (higher) education as a tool for combating crises by providing the affected youth with educational opportunities, thereby avoiding the risk of a lost generation and helping to be better prepared for the future.

New lines of actions focused on actual needs have to be developed and programmes should also be made available inside Syria itself. "We cannot predict the future but at least we can try to be as flexible as possible in order to adapt ourselves to the constantly-changing conditions on the ground." Therefore, it is necessary to obtain reliable data and statistics for a clearer understanding of refugees and needs in the (higher) education arena.

It is obvious that institutions involved in addressing refugees suffer from a lack of coordination among themselves. The establishment of an effective coordination tool would prevent fragmentation and duplication and the development of an "island mentality" amongst providers. For future sustainability and an upscaling of existing activities, the various stakeholders must act together in a coordinated fashion.

Dr. Scalisi said that regional approaches and tailored national initiatives and projects should pay particular attention to the needs and constraints of the local higher education institutions. To achieve this, it is absolutely essential to involve the local communities in any refugee-specific measure thus avoiding social and political tension.

In his presentation and as mentioned during the more general session, Mr. David Van Kampen considered the **HOPES** project to be more than just a scholarship programme, since it also focuses on capacity-building activities. These activities have been achieved through a call for proposals whereby local higher education institutions, research institutes and also NGOs were invited to submit project proposals to assist in facilitating Syrians' participation in higher education. The first call received considerable interest with almost two hundred applications, from which nineteen projects were selected. A wide variety of project ideas came in during this call ranging from digital education and the recognition of previous qualifications to employability. This last topic especially received a great deal of attention, with project proposals focusing on various activities including career guidance, curriculum development and entrepreneurship skills training, etc.

With a second call planned for the end of 2017, all participating stakeholders have been invited to spread the word to local HEIs and NGO, inviting them to submit future projects.

The **discussion** focused partly on the issue of the employability of Syrian university graduates and the potential role of universities in this field. While it was understood that universities cannot create jobs, it was nevertheless underlined that they have also a responsibility in this regard towards their students. It was stressed that in most countries no reliable data exist concerning the needs of the labour market; however, even in this context, career counselling is still possible.

Even more unfathomable is the situation inside Syria. More research is necessary, especially on the question of what manpower Syria will need to rebuild the country once peace has returned.

Universities should be provided with better guidance to help and train students in preparing for their professional career. In this regard, an appeal was made so as not to forget the HE institutions in Syria itself. These not only accommodate a great number of internally-displaced persons but also play a crucial role in preventing more young people from fleeing the country.

Another lively debate ensued on how decisions at the university level should be made. While a number of participants favoured a bottom-up approach, with universities acting independently out of understanding and the acceptance of their social responsibility, others opted for a centralised response (top-down) - especially given the enormous scale of the crisis.

All agreed that it was of the greatest importance for university leaders to understand the problem. Here, more information dissemination and awareness building is necessary. However ultimately, finding appropriate solutions is the responsibility of the global (academic) community at large. Improved coordination structures have to be developed and more funds provided to face up to the challenge appropriately.



Breakout session 3: "MOOCs and embedded learning to reach out to refugee students and staff"

Moderation by Harry HAYNES,
British Council, Online Learning
Specialist and HOPES HEEAP Work
Package Manager

- Grace ATKINSON, Head of
Jordan Operations, Kiron
Open Higher Education
- Jilani LAMLOUMI, President,
Virtual University of Tunisia

Rapporteur: Bronwyn PARRY,
PADILEIA partnership, Head of the
School of Global Affairs at King's
College London

There are many barriers to tertiary education for refugees across the region, including incompatible qualification systems, expensive fees and the need to prioritise financial earnings over the pursuit of education. As the gap between need and provision remains unfilled, this breakout session focused on e-learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and blended learning as a complementary alternative to the higher education refugee response.

According to Ms. Grace Atkinson, the tailor-made curricula of MOOCs provided by **Kiron Open Higher Education** are easily accessible to students and can be recognised at a university once students fulfil the language and legal requirements. Digital online learning platforms for *in situ* and transfer refugees will not only help refugees to access higher education but also overcome barriers to it. Kiron's innovative approach to teaching combines digital and traditional learning while providing support services such as mentoring and psycho-social counselling and guidance to create the best learning environment for students.

Mr. Jilani Lamloumi in his presentation of **the Virtual University of Tunisia** (VUT) stressed the importance of developing educational technologies for lifelong learning. By developing web- and Internet-based courses and university curricula, the VUT takes into consideration the needs of Tunisian students and the international labour market. By establishing further partnerships and cooperation with several European and regional universities, the spectrum of online training courses, BA and professional masters could be moulded into an alternative to traditional higher education programmes for refugees.

One of the great challenges for providers of e-learning is the lack of acceptance of this form of education by students due to misconceptions and prejudices. This sceptical view is often bolstered by a lack of recognition and accreditation of such programmes in many countries, including Syria. Another challenge is the high absenteeism and drop-out rates for a variety of reasons, including economic and financial pressure on students. Both panellists also raised the issue of language, as MOOCs commonly require proficiency in English which is not achieved by most refugee populations.

The interaction between panellists and the audience was valuable in discussing how some of these challenges can be or are being addressed:

- Humanitarian and government organisations acknowledge the vast potential of digital platforms for educating refugees. With regards to refugees' access to online platforms in camps and their mobile readiness, it was found that most refugees have Internet access and can be easily reached through social media channels. However, study hubs in camps and IT equipment for refugees might help in easing access to such programmes.
- Creating e-learning modules is often more cost-intensive than delivering classroom teaching; students may not be able to afford their costs and maintain themselves without working, which also affects students' academic performance and leads to absenteeism and drop-outs. Providing additional student support and stipends would help refugee students to overcome obstacle to studying.
- There is a need to provide students with pastoral as well as academic support. The aim is to ensure that students have access to a framework of support measures that builds on best practices, meets the needs of students, is of good quality and is consistent. The educational framework should also help students to monitor their progress and performance more systematically and relate these results to their longer-term aspirations.
- Programmes should involve bespoke/tailored training for buddies and mentors in psychosocial support. Students also require additional training in study skills and sometimes hardware use. Special support such as transportation to and from teaching centre has to be put in place to allow students to balance employment with higher education.
- With regard to certification, quality assurance and accreditation, courses need to be recognized by governments, requiring high-quality provision and suitable accreditation. Most universities require equivalency to accredit MOOC provision. To secure certification, programmes offered must be consistent and internationally recognised. It is crucial that these programmes offer internationally transferable credits, which would also allow recognition inside Syria for returning Syrian refugees.
- Digital learning should also take into consideration specific language courses and delivering MOOCs translated into Arabic and adapted to the local context.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

*Moderated by Claire MOREL,
European Commission - DG
Education, Youth, Sport and
Culture - Head of Unit for
International Cooperation*

- *Carsten WALBINER, HOPES
Project Director*
- *Nadim KARKUTLI, European
Commission, Manager EU
Regional Trust Fund in
Response to the Syrian Crisis,
the "Madad Fund"*
- *Ahmad JAMMAL, Director
General for Higher Education
in Lebanon*

The panellists of the concluding session found the two-day conference very helpful in providing new and sharpened insights into the Syrian crisis and the challenges faced by the various stakeholders in the field of higher education mainly in the Near East region but also in Europe.

The conference gave a clear overview of the situation in the region and especially the gaps that could be bridged by providing further educational opportunities.

The main conclusions from the conference have already been mentioned at the beginning of the report.

