

Beirut, 26 September 2017

Press release - Draft

EU organises conference on Higher Education and Refugees in the Mediterranean region

26-27 September in Crowne Plaza Hotel, Beirut, Lebanon

The European Commission and the HOPES project funded by the EU's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad' Fund, are organising a conference on 26 and 27 September 2017 on how to support refugees and vulnerable populations from host countries access to higher education in the Mediterranean region.

The opening of the conference was attended by H.E. Minister of Education and Higher Education, Marwan Hamade, the Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, Ambassador Christina Lassen, and the President of the Association of Arab Universities, Sultan Abuorabi Al-Adwan.

The conference is gathering more than 120 participants, including representatives from ministries, international and non-governmental organisations, universities, as well as students from the Mediterranean region and Europe, in addition to representatives from the European Commission and EU Member States. It aims at facilitating discussions and comparing successes and challenges in providing access to higher education for refugees from Syria, as well as for vulnerable students from host communities.

In her opening remarks, Ambassador Lassen said: "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. 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, and higher education institutions that encourage cultural and religious diversity, and promote respect for the individual and personal freedom." During this conference, it is important to show the successes, as well as the challenges that still lay ahead. Both will be key inputs for EU future cooperation and for the second Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region that will be

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organised in 2018 as announced in New York last Friday by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini," she added.

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 school and university education of millions of displaced Syrian children and youth. More than half of 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, 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 rebuild Syria and thus must not become a 'lost generation'.

The European Union has provided material, help and expert knowledge to incorporate Syrian youth and vulnerable host communities into the 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, 5,741 language courses and over 40,000 counselling sessions. Girls and women represent an important number of those benefitting from these actions. Throughout 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.

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

The involvement of participants from Southern Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Turkey, Syria and Tunisia) and interested EU Member States (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) will not only widen the options to be presented but also enrich the discussion.

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