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HOPES

HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on
Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Monday, December 3, 2018

Hilton Cairo Zamalek Residences

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National Stakeholders Dialogue

“Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience”

REPORT

Date: 3 December 2018

Location: Hilton Cairo Zamalek Residences, Cairo, Egypt

SUMMARY

On Monday December 3, 2018 the HOPES project funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund' and implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic, organised its second National Stakeholders Dialogue, entitled 'Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience' at the Hilton Cairo Zamalek Residences in Egypt.

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

Following the welcome notes by the Delegation of the European Union to Egypt and the 'Madad Fund' as well as the HOPES project; the dialogue incorporated a panel session and various presentations addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system in Egypt. The dialogue sought to integrate suggestions of Syrian students and to discuss programmatic challenges and needs of the higher education institutions in terms of foreign language courses. It also explored further recommendations and approaches towards helping both refugee students and institutions to overcome language barriers on a national level.

More information on the Concept Brief and Programme ([Link](#))

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are distilled from the group discussions and reporting. They are intended to inform future development of language provision within the HOPES, and possibly other initiatives, addressing the language issues facing young Syrians in Egypt.

- > **Awareness raising and outreach campaigns:** The dialogue emphasised the need for an early outreach to Syrian youth and potential students, making clear the importance of a good command of English in pursuing an academic course, or in pursuing a career in Egypt and globally. Another recommendation would be to introduce an induction prior to the start of a language learning course, explaining the level of commitment required, the importance of course completion and the commitment of the teacher and institution to meet the students' needs. This could result in a learning contract between the student and the institution, listing the commitments of each to the other.
- > **e-learning:** Appropriate equipment is needed for e-learning, both within the institution and for the student. Further training of teachers is also needed to counter resistance from older teachers to working with e-platforms. The culture of teachers (and students) around e-learning needs to change.

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It is important that content is entertaining/creative/engaging and uses participative learning materials and methodologies. Students should be motivated to try e-learning, for example, by providing access to IELTS, for successful completion of e-learning modules.

Institutional monitoring of e-learning is key: not only the monitoring of student learning outcomes, but also of attendance, presence in chat rooms, use of the online platform, and so on. This requires additional budget and more administration staff.

- > **Delivery mechanisms:** Scheduling and locations for courses need to be in line with student availability, and ideally different time and location options should be available to students. Classes should be mixed, i.e. Syrian and Egyptian, and not specific to displaced people. Motivation is enhanced when the course is linked to recognised accreditation. Financial incentives should be considered, e.g. covering transport costs for course participants, to ensure ongoing attendance. Considering a clear statement of what institution is providing and what is expected of course participants. The follow up on students who drop out of courses, both to encourage them to continue, should address their issues where possible. If this is not possible, address the issue in preparation for future courses.
- > **Course design, including English for specific purpose (ESP)**
The language-learning pathway should be as follows: general English first, general academic English next (where appropriate) and subject specific/work related ESP after that. The ESP classes need to follow after general English courses. For some jobs and occupations, it was found that conversation classes (i.e. listening and speaking) are more important than reading and writing.
- > **Teacher training:** It is better to provide rewards for teacher success, rather than penalties for failure. Teacher training should model the kinds of teaching the teachers are expected to do: communicative, interactive and engaging. Teacher training must recognize that there are at least three broad areas: Teaching in the formal sector, in the informal sector, and in emergencies. In the third of these, there are specific needs that teachers will have to address. Teachers on HOPES English courses need to take on a pastoral role as well as an academic role and need appropriate training, ideally linked to an international certificate. Universities should provide training in communicative English teaching for all levels of education, and include 21st-century skills.

DIALOGUE REPORT

This report, on the Egypt National Stakeholder Dialogue held in Cairo on 3 December 2018, is the third in the series, and summarises the discussion of the issues, and recommendations for practically addressing these issues in Egypt. When all five dialogues have taken place, a consolidated report will be created allowing the identification of common issues across countries, where a common approach to solutions might work, as well as issues and solutions that are specific to a particular context.

Structure of Dialogues

Each dialogue addresses the following broad areas, though it is likely that different dialogues will focus on some areas more than others. But all dialogues seek 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
- Encouraging a culture of commitment – addressing drop out
- Different models of language course delivery in the local context

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- E-learning – fully utilising blended, online and digital courses
- English/ 'Language for Specific Purposes'
- Needs in terms of teacher training

The structure of each dialogue follows the following lines:

- Welcome and introductions, including any recommendations from previous events.
- **Panel session: Addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system**
- **Language for resilience for Syrian students: Brainstorming and Group Discussions: Identifying opportunities in language programmes**
 - > Programmatic challenges and needs
 - > Capacity of the higher education institutions

The session involves:

 - 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.**

Process of the dialogue and issues addressed

There were 23 participants in the dialogue comprising experts, providers of scholarships, university representatives, teachers of English and Syrian students. All took active part in the discussions, and the views of the students were particularly sought.

Welcoming remarks given by Mr. Harry Haynes, the HOPES project lead for the **Higher Education English Access Programme (HEEAP)**, provided a background to the HOPES project and to this series of national stakeholder dialogues focused on language for resilience. He also spoke of the 17 partner universities involved in the programme, including three in Egypt. Mr. Alex Lambert, Director Programmes, British Council Egypt, welcomed the participants, as did Mr. Ville Suutarinen representing the Madad Fund and the EU delegation to Egypt.

Dr Hanan Al Said is Director of the Centre for the Blended Learning, Ain Shams University. Ain Shams is one of the HOPES partner universities in Egypt. Three batches of students have completed their courses and a current batch of 80 students is doing a course.

Dr Al Said addressed the challenges of running these courses and outlined some of the benefits both to students and to the University. She noted the first challenge as locating Syrian students within the institution considering that there are 200,000 students at Ain Shams. She noted that Syrian students need to be fully involved in the institution so that they are visible. She used informal methods of connecting with students, through social media like Facebook, and more directly through friends and contacts. Once connected, the Syrian students were linked through a WhatsApp group and the administrative work could begin. But this process took some time.

The next stage was trying to fit students into different English-language levels for classes. This was done by the British Council. Ain Shams University has ongoing IT issues as it is on the same circuit as the Ministry of Defence. When the university started working on courses they had to deal with staffing issues with teachers, timing issues for courses that didn't clash with the students' majors and high dropout rates. The University tries to get all students involved in the course, because "we believe in the project" and the University believes in the need for, and importance of, English language for the students. She noted that the courses are also offered to Egyptian students and that 30% of the groups are Egyptians. She emphasised the importance of integrating both Syrians and Egyptians in one class.

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When discussing the benefits of the courses for students, she asked two student participants in the dialogue to comment on what they thought of the course they had attended. Both were very positive. “It was very helpful for me. It helped me understand my medical course and also helped with my general communication skills. Studying with Egyptian students also made it better.” “The course not only improved my level of English and communication skills but also let me meet and talk to Egyptian students.”

Dr Said emphasised that English is the common international language, and everyone needs English to use the Internet effectively, to understand online training courses, and it is beneficial in applying for jobs.

She noted that programme also brings benefits to the University, most particularly staff training in communicative language teaching skills. Having high quality training within the institution is very beneficial. There are still issues with poor Internet, and teaching and course schedules, but the institution continues to learn and improve.

Mr. Alaa Alkraidy is a Syrian refugee working with St Andrews Refugee Services (StARS). He briefly covered the importance of English for refugees, barriers for those with limited English and some solutions. He noted that the Syrian education system is in Arabic throughout, and English is not emphasised. Similarly, employment in Syria does not require English language skills. In Egypt, on the other hand, holders of Egyptian high school certificates can access Egyptian higher education in the same way as Egyptians can. However, some faculties require a high-level of English to complete the course, all scholarships require a level of English, and online training requires English-language skills. In Egypt, job opportunities are better if one has a command of English.

The barriers facing Syrian refugees with no English are profound. Lack of English impacts on further education, the ability to apply for scholarships and job opportunities. So, education, academic opportunities and future career opportunities are all adversely impacted by a lack of English.

He proposed some solutions to this problem: The first is to increase awareness among Syrians of the fundamental importance of English for education and work opportunities outside Syria. He also suggested designing language training based on the need of specific student groups. More importantly he suggested helping develop a culture of self-learning: courses are very useful, but unless individuals take responsibility for their own language learning they will never reach a high-level. The final suggestion is that donors and others target younger students in school, so that by the time they leave school their English level is of a reasonable standard.

Dr Diane Lakh is from the American University of Cairo. She gave her presentation at very short notice and spoke about her research into teaching of languages to refugees and displaced people around the world.

She began by saying that unless students are fully engaged in their learning; they become marginalised and likely to drop out. She reiterated the importance of English for study and for work, and added for emigration as well.

She has studied successful practices used by teachers around the world to avoid student dropout. These include culturally relevant teaching (acknowledging the students home culture while acculturating them to the host countries culture). Teachers need training to include teaching refugees, and ideally practical teaching experience with these groups. A suggestion from New Zealand is to have a time set aside each day in the class for free discussion on matters of importance to individual students. She also recommended the writing of a personal journal, which can alleviate trauma. Teachers’ connection with students’ families is also seen as important. Teaching materials should be customised for different student groups.

She suggested that interest in the class leads to engagement, which in turn leads to commitment. And the key to this is the approach of the teacher. She also recommends “flipped classes”, where the focus is on student-led, and student-centred, learning.

- > In the discussion following the panel presentations, a participant noted that within Egypt the status of Syrian students has changed since 2013. At that stage, Syrian students were accepted into universities without fees. However, now there are three categories of Syrian students. At undergraduate level if a student has passed the Egyptian secondary certificate in a government school, then they are accepted into university as an Egyptian student. If a student has graduated from a private school, an international school, or holds a Syrian school certificate, they are treated as international students and have to pay fees. At postgraduate level, all Syrian students are now considered to be international students.



Someone from Student Action for Refugees (STAR) at the American University of Cairo referred to the comment about the difficulty in connecting with refugees in universities. Emails do not work, and social media like Facebook are the way to do it, she said. She also noted that some refugees want to learn English from native speakers, and STAR recruited international students who are native speakers to teach Syrians at AUC. She also suggested the use of Syrians as teachers, provided they are giving updated training.

Alaa said that Syrians know that English is important, but they do not realise *how* important it is. He told a story of working in Egypt with Syrian colleagues who did not speak English but said, "It is okay, we have a job without knowing English." However, when the organisation closed down, Alaa quickly got another job because he spoke English, but his colleagues found it much more difficult to find work.

During the coffee break participants were asked to comment or make recommendations against five flipchart headings, and that the end of that session they moved into groups to discuss each of the issues.

Below is a summary of the comments on each of the five flipcharts, which asked:

What barriers are there for Syrian students to access higher education in Egypt?

- Students feel it is difficult to start learning English at this age.
- IELTS preparation courses or even orientation are needed before the exam.
- English is mandatory in the first years of study at Egyptian Universities.
- Work should focus on developing the curricula in universities according to student needs.

Programme delivery; times, locations, length, online face to face. What suits Syrian students best?

- Communicate directly with the Syrians at their schools/faculty and not through the International Office only.
- Provide English classes at universities, with different options for scheduling. If different schedules are not possible, provide courses in the summer so that students can balance their work with their course studies.

How can Syrian students be encouraged to complete the course/not drop out?

- Organise outdoor activities to create a social life.
- Tailor provided programme to address specific needs so the student can relate well to materials/content and get motivated.
- Survey students who have dropped out of previous courses.
- Understand reasons for dropout in order to tailor programme outreach.

What is needed to make Syrian students make best use of e-learning for languages?

- Introduce the best free platforms (Coursera, Duolingo etc.)
- Provide e-learning /blended learning modes for both students and teachers
- Provide training for instructors.

Is there a demand for English for specific purposes? Is it practical to offer more teacher training to Syrian language teachers?

- ESP courses are in high demand, but these need to follow on from general English courses.
- Use professionals (Engineers and doctors, etc.) to teach professional (tailored) English courses.
- Give training to all teachers from kindergarden to high school.
- Promote teaching methods that can be interactive (student-centred) using games.

Three mixed groups (each containing at least one student) self-selected to address in detail one or two of the questions, and where possible the others. In the groups the discussions were wide ranging, and the summarised conclusions do not fully represent the richness of the discussions.



Barriers to learning English and ESP and Teacher training

At the end of the session, the recommendations from the group were:

With regard to barriers

- > Reward trained teachers with an international certificate.
- > It is better to provide rewards than penalties for teachers, i.e. rather than penalties for students dropping out, provide rewards for students staying on. Rewards could include fewer academic tasks such as invigilating for exams.

With regard to teacher training

- > Recruit and train teaching assistants for English courses.
- > Universities should provide training in communicative English teaching for all levels of education and include 21st-century skills.
- > Teacher training must recognise that there are at least three broad areas: teaching in the formal sector, in the informal sector and in emergencies. In the third of these, there are specific needs that teachers will have to address.

With regard to ESP

- > ESP classes need to follow after general English courses.
- > For some jobs and occupations, conversation classes (i.e. listening and speaking) are more important than reading and writing.

Other comments were around how there is a progression from general English to academic English to field-specific ESP courses. There was a range of views, but all agreed that each of these was relevant to specific student needs at different times in their language learning. There was brief discussion about different modes of teacher training apart from workshops. These focused around in-class observations, teaching while being observed and peer evaluation of teaching approaches.

E-learning and Delivery mechanisms

At the end of the session, the comments/ recommendations from the group were:

- > There is a need for appropriate equipment for e-learning, both in the institution and for the student.
- > There was a recognition of the need for further training of teachers. In response to a question this was described as a need arising from the resistance from older members of staff to working on E platforms due to a lack of understanding. There is also a fear that e-learning may replace direct teaching. There is a need to change the culture of teachers around e-learning and build their capacity.
- > Classes should be mixed, i.e. Syrian and Egyptian, and not specific to displaced people.
- > There is a need to motivate students to undertake e-learning, for example by giving access to an internationally recognised examination like IELTS. This also linked to the need for more accreditation for courses.
- > The issue of monitoring was raised: not only monitoring of learning outcomes but also of attendance, presence in chat rooms, use of the online platform and do on. And this involves additional budget and increased administration work.
- > The issue of content quality was discussed; that is the need to provide entertaining/creative/engaging/participative learning materials and methodologies.
- > Mobile phone applications were also mentioned as a key tool for e-learning.



Addressing dropping out:

At the end of the session, the comments/ recommendations from the group were:

- > To conduct a survey of those who have dropped out from courses on why it has happened and then work on addressing some of these issues. This would need to be an ongoing process.
- > Initial orientation: before the course begins, ensure that students are aware of the commitment expectations of the course, and that if they drop out they have taken up a place of others who might have benefited from the course. In addition, there should be a discussion with the student on how the programme can support their continued attendance. This could result in some kind of learning agreement between the course institution and the individual student.
- > To define more clearly the role of the teacher. This would include a pastoral role as well as an academic role. It should be seen as part of the teacher's role to ensure that students are able to continue on the course. This might include an element of psychosocial support within the course structure
- > The University has to show a demonstrable commitment to the programme, and both the institution and the teachers have a shared responsibility for ensuring the successful completion of the course by all the students. This includes issues around location and timing of the courses.

Further discussion was around how UNHCR and StARS incentivise their institutions and students to complete their courses. Institutions are paid on number of students enrolled rather than those that graduate at the end of the course. Students are provided with financial support for transport and, sometimes, other allowances and these are paid at each class session. If someone drops out of class, there is a process for early contact to understand the reason for the dropout and where possible identify ways that the student can be brought into the class again. The fundamental barriers are financial and transport issues.

There was some discussion on the best mechanism to pay students. For larger sums this was done through a post office service, but small payments for transport are provided on a lesson by lesson basis. These payments mean that students continue to attend and almost all students complete the courses.

Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

Awareness raising and outreach campaigns:

- > Run outreach campaigns to Syrian youth and students making clear the importance of a good command of English in pursuing an academic course, or in pursuing a career.
- > Provide induction prior to the start of a course, explaining level of commitment required, the importance of completion, and the commitment of the teacher and institution to meet the students' needs. This could result in a 'learning contract' between the student and the institution, listing the commitments of each to the other.

E-learning

- > Appropriate equipment is needed for e-learning, both in the institution and for the student.
- > Further training of teachers is needed to counter resistance from older teachers to working with e-platforms. The culture of teachers around e-learning needs to change.
- > To motivate students to undertake e-learning provide benefits such as access to IELTS for successful completion of e-learning modules.
- > Monitoring is needed: not only monitoring of learning outcomes but also of attendance, presence in chat rooms, use of the online platform and so on. This requires additional budget and more administration staff.
- > Entertaining/creative/engaging content is needed that involves participative learning materials and methodologies.



Delivery mechanisms

- > Scheduling and locations for courses need to be in line with student availability, ideally with time and location options available.
- > Classes should be mixed, i.e. Syrian and Egyptian, and not specific to displaced people.
- > Motivation is enhanced when the course is linked to the need for recognised accreditation.
- > Financial incentives should be considered, for example covering transport costs for course participants, to ensure ongoing attendance.
- > Clear statements of what institution is providing and what is expected of course participants should be developed.
- > Follow up is needed on students who drop out of courses to encourage them to continue by addressing their issues where possible. If not possible, include the issue in preparation for future courses.

Course design, including ESP:

- > The language learning pathway should be general English first, general academic English next (where appropriate) and subject-specific/job-specific ESP after that.
- > For some jobs and occupations, conversation classes (i.e. listening and speaking) are more important than reading and writing.

Teacher training

- > Teacher training should model the kinds of teaching the teachers are expected to do: communicative, interactive and engaging.
- > It would be better to provide teachers with rewards for success than penalties for failure.
- > Teacher training must recognise that there are at least three broad areas. Teaching in the formal sector, in the informal sector, and in emergencies. In the third of these there are specific needs that teachers will have to address.
- > Teachers on HOPES English courses need to take on a pastoral role as well as an academic role and need appropriate training, leading to an international certificate.
- > Universities should provide training in communicative English teaching for all levels of education and include 21st-century skills.

Attachments

- [Presentation of Mr. Alaa Al Kraidy](#)

The HOPES team would like to thank Mr. Gordon Slaven for writing the report.