



EUROPEAN UNION

Lessons learnt and recommendations from projects financed
by the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH LEARNING - HIGHER EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

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REPORT

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH LEARNING - HIGHER EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

On November 30, the joint implementing partners¹ of the higher education components of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (2016-2021), organized an online event titled 'Creating opportunities through learning – Higher Education in emergencies'. During the event we looked back on the Trust Fund's higher education programming, discussed the impact with scholarship holders and alumni and explored recommendations for future programming. This report shortly summarizes the conclusions drawn at the event and offers a series of recommendations for further higher education programming in emergencies. [The event was recorded and relevant documents and the recording can be accessed online.](#)

Ms. Angela Atzori, Deputy Manager of the EU Trust Fund delivered an opening statement which highlighted how the trust fund has delivered crucial services including as higher education since its inception in 2014. She discussed how the Trust Fund and its activities have evolved to accommodate the protracted nature of the crisis: from broad interventions responding to urgent needs initially by offering scholarships, to more focused interventions that accommodate the full educational pathway and provide additional support for the target group. She concluded by underlining that even if the Trust Fund is ending, the European Union stays committed to a comprehensive aid response to the Syrian crisis and therefore welcoming the reflections and recommendations gathered during the event.

After a short video on the achievements of the various projects, the programme continued with a panel discussion between representatives of the three implementing consortia: Dr. Carsten Walbiner of HOPES-LEB, Dr. Dhiah el Diehn I. Abou-Tair of EDU-SYRIA and Mr. Yannick Du Pont of SPARK. The representatives shared their insights on the importance of careful selection of candidates, localisation of activities and the added value of working with local partners. All parties underlined the importance of the linkage between higher education and the labour market as well as the importance of sustainable interventions, through coordination between donors and by local partnerships.

¹ Which are: the European HOPES-LEB consortium (currently formed by the DAAD, Campus France and Nuffic), the German Jordanian University and its partner institutions, and SPARK.

The panel discussion was followed by conversations with current scholarship holders and alumni of all three projects. The students inspired with their powerful stories on how scholarships supported them in providing for themselves and their family. They strongly advocated for the importance of guidance and counselling for students given the complicated psycho-social backgrounds many of these students have. Furthermore, they stressed that labour market opportunities are in their perspective, vital components of a comprehensive offer. To that end, not only education but also opportunities like internships were mentioned as highly valuable.

The event ended with a last panel on recommendations for future programming. Dr. Nora Stel of Radboud University and Mr. Sajjad Malik of UNHCR both touched upon the more protracted characteristic of many conflicts across the world, including the Syrian crisis and its implications for programming of interventions. In particular they discussed the need to be realistic about the nature of these conflicts and the subsequent need to offer structural higher education opportunities. Professor Ala'aldeen Al-Halhouli, president of German-Jordanian University expanded upon the role of universities and local institutions in supporting refugees and marginalised groups, followed by Mr. Manuel Bouard of the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation whom reiterated the importance of the theme and appealed for further coordination amongst member states and the European Commission. Further contributions were made by Ms. Saja Majali, the Jordanian Ambassador to the European Union and Mr. Abdullah Eren, Head of YTB.

Through the many valuable contributions outlined above, the event bundled a wealth of knowledge and generated many new insights for participants and viewers alike. Based on these insights, the second part of this report provides a series of recommendations on future programming. The recommendations are grouped into four themes: 1) coordination of interventions, 2) sustainability of interventions and 3) a comprehensive approach. The recommendations are discussed below.

Recommendations on higher education in emergencies

1) Coordination of interventions

It was mentioned on multiple occasions during the event that coordination of interventions would lead to more meaningful, effective and sustainable interventions. This coordination is needed both at the donor and implementing level. It is therefore recommended that:

- A. Donors coordinate their intended interventions as early as the design phase to ensure eventual complementarity throughout the entire chain, from donor to beneficiary.
- B. Implementers coordinate closely with other implementing parties and stakeholders to make sure that the higher education programmes are complementary and aligned, in particular on topics like the vulnerability and protection activities. Moreover, it is important to establish linkages to other sectors including secondary education, reconciliation, livelihoods and the labour market.
- C. On the European level, to improve coordination between multilateral, European Commission-led and bilateral initiatives. This European coordination needs to take place both in Brussels and in-country. Team Europe Initiatives are a potentially useful coordination mechanism.
- D. Coordination between parties is a separate activity and requires structures and manpower and must therefore be embedded in work plans and supported by funding accordingly.

2) Sustainability of interventions

By nature, projects are limited in their duration. In addition, the problem of crisis interventions is that they are heavily driven by political considerations/priorities, often short-lived and changing (i.e. not sustainable themselves). Answers to this challenge of making interventions more sustainable, and raised during the event, could be threefold:

- A. Diversification of funding through donor coordination as outlined above, so that projects have additional time and opportunity to build upon obtained experience and lessons learned.

- B. Connection between previous and following activities to prevent a loss of institutional knowledge and the destruction of established structures and networks.
- C. Enabling local ownership through true participation of host communities, going beyond the specific targeted group of beneficiaries. This also means embedding gained institutional knowledge, structures and networks locally through working with local parties.

3) A comprehensive approach

Participants of the event underlined the need to understand '(higher) education' as having a broad impact beyond its intrinsic value. This includes its contribution to employability but also relates to contributing to civil society and even peacebuilding. Therefore, interventions need to deliberately aim towards a comprehensive approach. It is therefore recommended to:

- A. Further adopt the 'pathway approach' already established under the latest round of higher education projects. This means extending support activities to secondary education as well as to labour market activities, centred around the transition to and from higher education. Activities could include additional training for (soon-to-be) high school graduates, internship opportunities, mentoring programmes and more.
- B. Additionally, such a pathway approach needs to go beyond only offers to individual beneficiaries, but would also benefit from capacity building of secondary education and higher education institutions. Such activities would help institutions offer basic career skills, support life-long learning and create opportunities for work experience parallel to academic studies.
- C. Finally, a comprehensive approach also needs to address the individual needs of beneficiaries, given the complex contexts. This means that interventions need to address issues such as psycho-social support and social cohesion. Given the very individual nature issues, coaching and supervision are a must to stimulate resilience and support the physical and mental health of beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The implementing higher education partners of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis have gathered almost six years of experience on offering higher education in emergency situations. Many of those experiences are captured not only above, but in the day-to-day activities that we undertake in the countries we work in. We talk to students and help them overcome the hurdles that have been thrown at them, through no fault of their own. We support institutions that are trying to help as much as they can, sometimes while in dire straits themselves. We work with partners on the ground and elsewhere because what binds us is our aim to do what needs to be done to support the Syrians that fled a gruesome war and the host communities that have received them. It is work that we are tremendously proud of and we stand ready to do more and to do even better. What we learned on November 30th will contribute towards that and we look forward to engaging with the European Commission and other partners to keep highlighting the importance of higher education in emergency situations.