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HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION  
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES  
FOR SYRIANS

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SYRIA CRISIS WHAT'S NEXT?



AMMAN, JORDAN  
9 & 10 APRIL, 2019

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REPORT

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# HOPES REGIONAL CONFERENCE

## Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: What's Next?

9 & 10 April 2019, Amman – Jordan

### SUMMARY

*The conflict in Syria, now in its eighth year, remains unresolved despite the numerous efforts of key international players to find a solution.*

*With more than seven million Syrians internally displaced and around five million Syrian refugees, the toll of this enduring crisis on the Syrian population as well as on neighbouring countries has been devastating.*

*Within this unstable economic and political context, the adverse effect of the influx of a large number of university-age Syrian refugees on the higher education systems in the region has presented a significant challenge.*

*As a result, access to higher education institutions has been limited for these young people, only a small percentage of whom have the financial means to continue their studies.*

*Furthermore, the majority of post-secondary-age Syrian students currently enrolled in programmes in higher education institutions are struggling to adapt to the academic systems of their host countries.*

Within this context, the HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians) project, funded by the European Union (EU)'s Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund', aims to improve access to quality further and higher education opportunities for refugees of post-secondary age from Syria as well as for young people in the host communities affected by the influx of refugees. The project consortium, led by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and comprised of the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic organized its second regional conference, 'Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: What's Next?', on 9–10 April 2019 in Amman, Jordan.

More than 118 representatives of ministries, embassies, and higher education institutions, along with students and other key stakeholders, convened from Egypt, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Europe to discuss the latest achievements in the higher education sector in the context of the Syria crisis and to analyse their impact on students and higher education institutions in the region.

Through a range of addresses and panel discussions, the second HOPES regional conference provided an opportunity to examine the state of the higher education systems in the region and the strategies adopted at a local level to address the Syrian crisis.

Presentations showcased the innovative educational initiatives, utilising blended and online teaching and learning, which have been implemented to improve the learning experience of Syrian refugees as well as of local students.

Syrian and Jordanian HOPES students shared their concerns, ambitions and future plans during the panel "What's next for me?", stimulating further discussion on the second day of the conference on students' language needs and the necessity to find more innovative and realistic solutions for graduate employment in the context of the prevailing situation in the region.

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Enabling participants to deepen their understanding of the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries, the conference supported in-depth exploration of how best to enhance the coordination of programmes and to develop innovative, sustainable and viable approaches to meeting the educational needs of students in the region.

*Various measures have been taken by local, national and international stakeholders in the countries affected by the crisis to support higher education institutions to better address the educational needs of these students—by identifying the challenges that they face, exploring new approaches to addressing these, and developing new educational programmes.*

*However despite the enormous efforts made, the higher education institutions, national authorities and the international community are all struggling to provide sufficient educational opportunities for Syrian refugees in the region, and to identify tangible solutions to address the low and plummeting numbers of such refugees enrolled in higher education in their host countries.*

*These challenges are often exacerbated by a general lack of capacity, adversely affecting the supply of opportunities within an already overstretched higher education sector.*

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

A strong consensus emerged about the vital importance of providing access to higher education opportunities for refugees from Syria and for youth in the host communities, in order to uphold their right to self-determination and to enable them to realise their aspirations, but also to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities to the communities of which they form a part.

### *Acknowledging the difficulties faced by refugees and young people in the host communities to pursue their higher education studies*

Despite the seminal role played by higher education institutions, national authorities and the international community in responding to the needs of both refugees and host communities, bottlenecks impeding young refugees' access to higher education were acknowledged.

Challenges include the language barrier created by a lack of familiarity with the medium of instruction in the host country, a lack of digital skills, a lack of preparedness for academic study, inability to comply with residency requirements, financial barriers and cultural barriers, including the hostility and discrimination that many refugees experience in their host communities. Refugees with a disability or special needs face additional challenges which often prove insurmountable without the provision of targeted support.

### *Acknowledging the financial and administrative pressure on higher education institutions*

Furthermore, higher education institutions' capacity to meet the needs of the influx of refugees as well as of domestic students in the host communities is challenged by the costs of catering for increased student numbers, by the staffing required to enable this as well as by a policy and regulatory environment which is not designed to facilitate the participation of displaced persons.

However, as the interventions funded through the HOPES project have demonstrated, there is much that can be done to overcome these challenges and to support access to higher education opportunities for refugees and young people in the host communities.



*While it is impossible to anticipate when it will be safe for Syrian students to return to their home country, there is a consensus that the academic needs of Syrian young people, and of those in the communities hosting them, should be considered of paramount importance.*

*Meeting these needs is essential in order to prevent a lost generation of students—an outcome that would have lasting implications for the students' personal futures as well as for the future of their country.*

*Exploring solutions and approaches to better integrate and offer higher education opportunities to refugees and young people in the host communities*

#### **Developing new innovative teaching and learning methods**

Building the capacity of higher education institutions to deliver online and blended learning while also equipping students with the digital literacy to engage successfully with such innovative teaching and learning solutions has the potential to have a positive impact on the current capacity constraints of the higher education sector in the region.

In particular, blended learning can ensure that students receive the support on campus that they require to succeed in higher education while also facilitating the accreditation of courses with a component of online learning. Furthermore, digital platforms have an important role to play in supporting the continuing professional development of teachers as well as in building the evidence-base for 'best practice' in the classroom through teacher-led research and knowledge-exchange.

On the second day of the conference, there was a particular focus on the value of reconceptualising language learning, not just as a remedial activity to ensure sufficient competency in the medium of instruction to enable high-level study, but as an integral part of academic study across disciplines and across the continuum of education. Furthermore, language learning is central both to building the personal resilience of refugees as well as to fostering social cohesion in host communities.

#### **Adopting inclusive and inter-sectoral approaches covering the students' educational pathways, from secondary level through to employment.**

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the imperative to enhance the employability of graduates through the adoption of a holistic approach to the provision of education that takes into consideration the student's educational pathway, from secondary level through to employment.

It was recognised that policy-making and approaches in higher education need to move from a siloed approach to higher education provision towards an inter-sectoral approach, in which higher education institutions collaborate with other stakeholders to ensure responsiveness to the emerging skills needs of the labour market.

Providing students with language training and ensuring that they are digitally literate as well as equipping them with the skills for life-long learning is central to this endeavour. Accordingly, the value of vocational training programmes was emphasised, along with the importance of career guidance.





The potential for entrepreneurship education, for the establishment of business incubation centres on campuses, and for the provision of seed funding for start-up companies to enhance the future prospects of graduates was also highlighted.

Nevertheless, given that in the longer term today's young Syrians will need to be educated to a level that will enable them to rebuild their country, it was recognised that employability is not the sole objective of higher education. Accordingly, there was acknowledgement of the importance of education in the arts as well as of the value of providing opportunities for higher level postgraduate study.

***Highlighting the necessary responsibility-sharing and cooperation between all key stakeholders to elaborate long-term strategies and interventions***

Since there is no certainty about the time frame within which there will need to be a continued response to the Syrian crisis, there was a consensus about the need for close partnership-working between all stakeholders, including the international community, national governments and state bodies, non-governmental organisations, higher education institutions, and the refugees and host communities themselves.

Only through such on-going cooperation and collaboration can the scale of the challenge presented by the enduring crisis be effectively addressed through a strategic and holistic approach. The central role played in this endeavour by the European Union through the Madad Fund and other initiatives was commended, and there was agreement about the need for the enhancement of the response to the crisis and for the development of a long-term integrated strategy for the region.

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### Day 1: Tuesday 9 April 2019

#### **OPENING Welcome and introductory addresses**

Dr. Carsten Walbiner highlighted the guiding question of the conference, both from the student's perspective as well as at a regional level—"what's next?".

From the students' perspective, obtaining an academic degree cannot be an end in itself, but rather has to lead somewhere—both for the students themselves and for the society of which they are part. This requires enhanced cooperation between all stakeholders and the adoption of a holistic approach to higher education provision that takes into consideration the student's educational pathway—from secondary education to the job market.

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- **Dr Carsten Walbiner**, Director, HOPES Project
- **Professor Manar Fayyad**, President, German Jordanian University (GJU), Amman
- **Ms. Maria Rosa Vettoretto**, Attaché, Delegation of the European Union to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

At the regional level, there is an imperative to share experience and to take stock of the lessons learnt in order to foster emerging synergies, to develop ideas for future initiatives and approaches, and ultimately to enhance the role played by the higher education sector in addressing the Syrian crisis.

Professor Manar Fayyad observed that the Syrian crisis has had a huge social and economic impact on the region, on which it will exert an influence for years to come. The projects funded by the EU Madad Fund, including the GJU's EDU-Syria Scholarship Program have all contributed to providing support, creating opportunities, and building the necessary framework to overcome the obstacles that limit Syrian students' access to higher education.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, through scholarships and collaborations with public and private national and international entities, the German Jordanian University has played an important role in the 'No Lost Generation' initiative.<sup>2</sup>

Ms. Maria Rosa Vettoretto emphasised that it is vitally important to provide a safe learning environment, both for Syrian students and for students from the host communities. Through initiatives like the HOPES project, the EU is providing significant support to higher education institutions in the region, helping to ensure that students' right to self-realisation and to the fulfilment of their aspirations is upheld. However, at the same time students need to be pragmatic and realistic about their immediate future.

Within this context, the EU in Jordan is liaising with the Jordanian Government with a view to opening up the labour market to Syrians in several areas and for particular skills. The EU is also in dialogue with young Syrians and with various stakeholders with the aim of developing innovative solutions to maximise their employability in a range of future scenarios. To advance these objectives, further dialogue and the dissemination of information on the needs of students and the opportunities available to them in the region is a necessity.

In order to address these issues there is a need for a participatory approach which gives a voice to young people. Recognising the crucial importance of higher education for addressing the humanitarian and development challenges arising, there is also a need for an inclusive process that facilitates the access of women and students with special needs to higher education.



<sup>1</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfund-syria-region/content/home\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfund-syria-region/content/home_en)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nolostgeneration.org/>.



## SESSION 1 Higher Education and the Syria Crisis: A closer look at the situation

- Moderation by **Dr. Hana Addam El-Ghali**, Director of the Education and Youth Policy Research Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policies and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, and expert in the EU Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) team
- **Dr. Mohamed El-Shinawi**, Advisor to the Minister for International Cooperation and Relations, Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
- **Dr. Amanj Saeed**, Advisor to the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Kurdistan Regional Government
- **Professor Manar Fayyad**, President, German Jordanian University (GJU), Amman
- **Dr. Khalil Gebara**, Professor and Expert, Lebanese American University (LAU), Beirut
- **Mr. Muhammad Akif Ataman**, Academic Specialist, Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK)

Session 1 of the conference was dedicated to discussing the state of the higher education systems and the situation of refugee students in the five countries in which the HOPES project is being implemented, namely Egypt, the KRI, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The approaches and strategies by which governments and education systems are responding to the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees were also explored.

The panel discussion shed light on the various national initiatives and reforms undertaken within the legal, institutional and higher education frameworks of the five countries. It focused on the challenges, constraints and lessons learnt with a view to formulating appropriate recommendations that take into consideration the future perspectives of the students.

During the overview of the situation in their respective countries, the panellists emphasised the key role of ministries, government agencies and higher education institutions in continually introducing innovative educational and legal reforms in their higher education systems in order to keep abreast of global trends.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, there have been a range of initiatives at the local level to ease Syrian students' access to higher education through the provision of direct financial support, language courses or capacity-building, and to address issues arising in respect of students' lack of documentation and residency. These initiatives have been based on the inclusive policy that all eligible Syrian students should be enrolled in a higher education institution. Nevertheless, despite these efforts to integrate Syrian students, the panellists highlighted the bottlenecks and challenges hindering young refugees' access to higher education.

### Curriculum and language barriers

Observing that Syrian students are still struggling to adapt to the curricula of higher education institutions in their host countries, Dr. Mohamed El-Shinawi emphasised that they lack the necessary command of the language of instruction (mostly English) to complete an entire study programme.

Dr. Khalil Gebara likewise reported that a lack of proficiency in English, and sometimes French, in Lebanon is still a barrier to sitting entrance examinations for, and enrolling in, higher education institutions. Explaining that, in Turkey, where the principal medium of instruction is Turkish, refugee students have to sit the University Entrance Examination



for Foreign Students (YÖS), comprised of a 'Basic Learning Skills Test' and a 'Turkish Language Proficiency Test', Mr. Muhammad Akif Ataman reported that such students are offered language courses to prepare them for this examination.

### Pre-requisite documents and Residency requirements

Discussion ensued about the extent to which residency requirements militate against Syrian students' enrolment in higher education institutions in the region. Professor Manar Fayyad reported that, while students' lack of documentation presented a major issue at the beginning of the Syrian crisis in Jordan, this problem now only occurs occasionally. Dr. Amanj Saeed explained that, in the KRI, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has amended the regulations pertaining to residency requirements in order to enable refugees from Syria to register on a temporary basis for the purpose of commencing studies in higher education institutions.

Emphasising that there is an important distinction between Syrians who have refugee status and those who have not and are already enrolled in an educational institution in Lebanon, Dr. Khalil Gebara reported that compliance with residency requirements represents the main obstacle to Syrian students' participation in higher education in Lebanon, with no more than 300 out of 1 million refugees registered with UNHCR being in possession of the residency permits which are issued to Syrians over 15

### Financial barriers and limited capacities of the local universities

The funding arrangements in higher education vary across the region, with tuition fees levied in some host countries and Syrian students categorised as international students (with the attendant requirement for the payment of international student fees) in others. These requirements can render higher education unaffordable for young Syrians, even if they are in employment.

Dr. Mohamed El-Shinawi noted that in Egypt, Syrian students face financial challenges to accessing higher education despite the 2016 decree, issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, in accordance with which Syrian students who completed their secondary education in Egypt or Syria are granted access to higher education on the same footing as Egyptians.

Even those students in receipt of a scholarship are often obliged to participate in paid employment in order to support themselves and their families since the scholarships are insufficient to cover the cost of tuition fees, transport, and subsistence. Similarly, Dr. Amanj Saeed reported that in the KRI, despite the waiving of tuition fees for more than 1,335 Syrian students by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, refugee students still require access to funding for living and travelling expenses. Explaining that in Lebanon the priority of the Ministry has been





to secure primary and secondary school education for refugees from Syria, Dr. Khalil Gebara reported that no financial support is provided by the Lebanese Government in the form of scholarships to Lebanese or Syrian students in higher education.

The panel called for further partnership-working between governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and higher education institutions at national and international levels to address the financial barriers prospective Syrian students face, suggesting that the provision of vocational and blended learning courses, additional scholarships for refugee students, the allocation of top-up funding to researchers, and the capacity-building of higher education institutions could overcome these.

### Graduate prospects and employability

In the discussion about the future prospects of graduates, employability emerged as an area of particular concern—both for refugees themselves and for the youth of the host communities. The necessity for the development of preventive strategies to reduce the risk of social conflict arising due to increasing feeling of competition between Syrian and host community graduates for employment opportunities was highlighted. There was a consensus that policy-making and approaches in higher education should be concerned not only with graduate employability but also with responsiveness to the skills needs of the labour market at local and regional levels.

Reporting that there are no legal restrictions in the KRI on the employment of refugee students, who are treated the same as domestic students in terms of their eligibility to participate in the labour market, Dr. Aman Saeed nevertheless highlighted the challenges that arise, emphasising the imperative for equal opportunities and the equal provision of labour market skills for all students.

It was noted that, in some countries in the region, employment for refugees can be confined to informal opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality and the food industry.

Referring to Syrians who pursued higher education in Lebanon as ‘mobile labour’ akin to the Lebanese work-force which is absorbed by the labour market of the Gulf countries, Dr. Khalil Gebara expressed concern that the economic crisis, the political situation and the decline in the number of employment opportunities for such internationally mobile workers would lead to further unemployment among higher education graduates.. While historically the employment of Syrians, specifically that of non-graduates within the informal sector has always been an integral part of the Lebanese economy, proposals for the formalisation of employment opportunities for Syrians may decrease the number of such opportunities available to them and have a negative impact on their employability.

Mr. Muhammad Akif Ataman described the prioritisation in Turkey of university–industry cooperation through the creation of departments and



commissions in response to the needs of the labour market. Encouraging scholarship providers to fund students' vocational education will enhance graduates' employment prospects. In Turkey more than 5,000 students are currently pursuing two-year associate vocational degrees, and Turkish language courses are also being provided to enhance students' ability to access the labour market.

Dr. Mohamed El-Shinawi reported that in Egypt higher education reforms conducted as part of the *Egypt Vision 2030* sustainable development strategy encompass the enactment of new legislation to provide for the opening of international branch campuses as well as for the creation of vocational universities and institutions with the objective of preparing students for the labour market.<sup>3</sup>

There was a consensus amongst the panellists about the necessity for a holistic approach to higher education provision which is cognisant of the skills needs of the labour market. It was suggested that the development of vocational and entrepreneurship courses, support for start-up companies, the creation of centres for career-development within higher education institutions, better preparation of students for employment, the organisation of job fairs and the creation of more opportunities for postgraduate studies could all play an important role in this endeavour.

## SESSION 2 Moving forward along the academic pathway

- Moderation by **Dr. Carsten Walbner**, Director, HOPES Project
- **Dr. Ammar Edress Mohamed**, Head of Department, Duhok Polytechnic University, and Manager of the "Pre-sessional course for high-school graduation of Syrian refugee students with low grades to enrol in diploma study" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the interventions in the field of higher education were fragmented from a student-pathway perspective, mostly focused on providing scholarships and language training. However, there is now a greater appreciation amongst institutions working in the higher education arena that the development of programmes should cater for students from secondary education through to employment.

Through the grant scheme of the HOPES project, national and regional organisations and higher education institutions have launched 32 innovative, short-term education projects across the KRI, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey targeting refugees and supporting host communities.

Session 2 of the conference reflected on the achievements of some of these small-scale projects with a view to understanding the pre-conditions, challenges and success factors of such initiatives.

### Improving access to higher education: preparatory programmes and courses

The session commenced with consideration of the project, "Pre-sessional course for high-school graduation of Syrian refugee students with low

<sup>3</sup> See <http://sdsegypt2030.com/?lang=en>.



- **Mr. Apak Kerem Altintop,**

Researcher, Istanbul University, and Representative of the "Bring future back: disability-based experience of Syrian students in the higher education system in Turkey" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

- **Ms. Joya Sfeir, Programme officer, Ettijahat-**

Independent Culture, Representative of the "AJYAL"—an initiative to develop the skills of the Syrian artistic scene project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

- **Dr. Anas Al Sobeh, Assistant Professor, Yarmouk**

University, and Manager of the "Transferring e-business fundamentals to Syrian refugees (TEFSR)" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

grades to enrol in diploma study at Duhok Polytechnic University", implemented by Duhok Polytechnic University in the KRI.

Dr. Ammar Edress Mohamed explained that the project was designed in response to statistical analysis which showed that only 1 out of 100 Syrian students of post-secondary age in the refugee camps enrolled in higher education. This demonstrated student refugees' need for preparation and financial support to enable them to engage with the educational system in the KRI.

The project aims to help post-secondary school graduates with low grades to enrol on a diploma or bachelor's degree course at Duhok Polytechnic University (DPU) after following an intensive two-term, pre-sessional course, of a total of 16 weeks' duration. The first term of the course covers basic knowledge of the English language, Kurdish language, ICT, and mathematics. During the second term, students follow a variety of more advanced elective courses specific to their field of study. This preparatory programme was found to enhance students' academic performance and to support their integration into their host higher education institution.

### **Integration of refugee students and vulnerable youth into higher education**

Discussion of the project, "Bring future back: disability-based experience of Syrian students in the higher education system in Turkey (UDISES)", implemented by Istanbul University in Turkey, ensued.

Mr. Apak Kerem Altintop highlighted the importance of adopting an inclusive and comprehensive approach to the development of initiatives in higher education that takes students' gender, age and disability into account. According to the theory of intersectionality<sup>4</sup>, Syrian refugee students with special needs face multifaceted forms of discrimination and particular challenges which are distinct from those experienced by local students and by other Syrian refugee students. Disability is often overlooked in the responses to immigration, indicating the importance of having direct contact with refugee students with special needs in order to gain a good understanding of their situation and requirements.

The UDISES project seeks to overcome the additional barrier that disability creates for Syrian students in higher education by investigating the experience of students with a disability and the problems they encounter. It aims to involve Syrian students with disability (SSD) in developing solutions for their problems and enabling them to take part in higher education and in the national disability system and networks.

<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality is defined as the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Oxford Dictionary). The theory of intersectionality was first introduced by Dr. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw



- **Professor Dr. M. Murat Erdogan**, Türkiye Mülteci Konseyi-TMK (Turkish Refugee Council) and Director of the Turkish German University Migration and Integration Research Center, Manager of the "Elite Dialogue II: dialogue with Syrian refugees in Turkey through Syrian academics and postgraduate students" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

This is done through visits to associations, awareness-raising, experience-sharing, and participation in a range of workshops, panels and conferences.

Key findings of the project were that standard scholarships would not be sufficient to support the integration of Syrian students with disabilities into higher education, and that responses to addressing their needs should take into account their requirements for special transportation as well as for other specific forms of assistance.

### Supporting young artists

Ms. Joya Sfeir reported that through the "AJYAL" project, Ettijahat-Independent Culture, Lebanon aimed to create opportunities to enhance and sustain education while strengthening and supporting arts education specifically. The deterioration in the overall quality of arts education, and the diminution of the space for freedom of expression, has led to an increased risk of losing an entire generation of art and culture if specific support is not given to young artists.

The project comprises two components, the first of which is the provision of alternative academic resources through the medium of online videos in which experts deal with specific cultural phenomena, such as theatre, cultural mapping and music. The second component consists of the provision of scholarships to new-generation artists for studies at bachelor and master's levels in Syria, neighbouring countries and Europe. By supporting art in higher education, the project is creating an environment that is supportive of cultural expression and intellectual diversity.

### Beyond higher education: guidance, entrepreneurship and access to the labour market

The main objective of the "Transferring e-business fundamentals to Syrian refugees (TEFSR)" project, implemented by Yarmouk University, Jordan, is to provide refugees from Syria with the knowledge and skills needed to start and operate an e-commerce business using the latest open-source tools and web-technologies. This objective is advanced by enabling students to pursue a number of web and commerce-related higher education degrees in both ICT and economics and/or to start their own businesses.

Dr. Anas Al Sobeh reported that 245 students have graduated successfully from these programmes and that most of them have developed their own e-commerce websites. Accordingly, the project provides added value by supporting refugee students—mostly women—to start their own e-businesses and to engage with the local community to market their products and improve their income.





During the ensuing discussion, the panellists emphasised that the creation of synergies between various programmes and initiatives, and the coordination of donors, would not only strengthen the responsiveness to the needs of refugees but would also close gaps in current provision. Coordination with the programmes of organisations external to the higher education sector would increase the chances for students to access employment opportunities.

### Integrating academics and refugee scholars

Professor Dr. M. Murat Erdogan explained that the project "Elite Dialogue II: dialogue with Syrian refugees in Turkey through Syrian academics and postgraduate students", implemented by Türkiye Mülteci Konseyi (TMK) (the Turkish Refugee Council), was developed as a continuation of "Elite Dialogue I". It endeavours to improve understanding of the situation of Syrian postgraduates and academics in Turkish higher education institutions with a view to developing sustainable strategies and policies for their integration, welfare and employment, and to enabling them to act as mediators between the Syrian refugee community and Turkish society and institutions.

The project encompassed surveys and the organisation of workshops to explore the legal and academic status of the participants, issues related to their academic experience, the social problems they are facing as well as the challenges of accreditation and of the transferability of qualifications. These interactive and inclusive workshops resulted in the formulation of recommendations related to career-planning and the unemployment of Syrian academics and postgraduate students. The latter are identified as having potential to bridge the divide between the two communities—Syrian and Turkish—thereby contributing to social cohesion in the country. The main findings of the survey and workshops are as detailed below.

- Statistics indicate that today 3.6 million of the 4.1 million refugees in Turkey are Syrian. It is therefore of the utmost importance to manage the situation through long-term strategic planning.
- There are almost 140,000 Syrian refugees in camps while the remainder are in an urban environment. 1 million Syrian refugees are of school age, while more than 50% do not go to school.
- It was found that in 2018–2019 the number of Syrian students enrolled across more than 140 Turkish higher education institutions increased to almost 28,000 students.
- The main challenge for Syrian students is the language barrier because many programmes are taught in Turkish. In order to overcome this challenge, programmes in the Arabic language have been delivered with the assistance of Syrian academics.
- More than 70% of Syrian refugee students have found Turkish higher education institutions to be of a higher quality than those in Syria.
- Only 10.44% of Syrian higher education students had their living costs covered by scholarships.





- Higher education students seem positive about their future prospects in Turkey, with 63.17% indicating confidence that they will find a job that matches their ambitions and major discipline of study. However, 61% expressed the view that the situation in Syria will become worse in the future, with only 10% planning to return to their home country.
- There is strong competition between academics when applying for teaching positions in Turkish higher education institutions, especially because, once they have been granted Turkish citizenship, Syrian academics can lose their international positions and stipends.
- Some Syrian academics hold teaching positions in Turkish higher education institutions, but mostly as teachers of Arabic rather than in their own field. Academics should not lose their academic competencies, and should be employed in jobs that match their study fields.
- There is a need to create platforms on which Syrian academics can express themselves, in addition to fostering channels of communication with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) with regards to accreditation processes and the position of Turkish and Syrian academics.
- There is a need to create solution-oriented integration policies in which Syrians are an integral part of the decision-making process. There is also a need to tackle not only academic difficulties but also communication and integration problems. In this context, communication should be strengthened, to which end coordination between institutions is crucial.



### Sustaining the impact of the projects

In addressing the question of the main challenges in the implementation and the sustainability of the impact of the projects, project representatives highlighted the following:

- With an unpredictable future in terms of political development in Syria and the region, the challenge remains to define how organisations could provide possibilities for continuous learning in the light of uncertainty, the disruption in educational pathways, and the temporary nature of the interventions in the sphere of higher education.
- Assistance and interventions developed in the context of emergencies are rather focused on quick and short-term impact and planning. Key stakeholders are reluctant to address the long term for political reasons, even though studies show that refugees stay for an average of 17 years in a country. Accordingly, the "what's next" question should be at the heart of the strategies developed by both host countries and the international community.
- The issue of building trust, especially given that students and beneficiaries are reluctant to express themselves in order to avoid stigmatisation or because they have become mistrustful. This is why clear communication and the management of expectations are crucial to avoid frustration.



- The necessity to develop an efficient and sustainable comprehensive and inter-sectorial approach that would take into consideration both the students' pathway and their needs from secondary education through to employment as well as the limitations of the hosting countries.
- The necessity to have extended financial support for students as well as for higher education institutions.
- Further research is essential to obtain reliable data that would provide the evidence-base for policy and strategic planning.
- Encouraging networking, information dissemination and awareness raising, as well as strengthening the links between sectors are crucial to connect students with potential study or employment opportunities.

### SESSION 3 Blended learning and online solutions

- Moderation by **Ms. Agatha**

**Abi Aad**, Associate Education Officer—Lebanon, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- **Dr. Hanan El Said Ali**,

Director of the Blended Learning Center, Ain Shams University, Cairo

- **Ms. Allison Church**, Regional Director Middle East and North Africa and Country Representative Jordan, Kiron Open Higher Education

- **Dr. Mai Abu Moghli**,

Research Associate, University College London and Research Fellow, the Centre for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University (LAU), Beirut; representative of the "Online and blended learning: support to teacher professional development in Lebanon" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES

Recognising that, despite the tremendous efforts of various stakeholders, there continues to be a shortfall in the provision of higher education opportunities for refugees, session 3 of the conference focused on blended learning, e-learning solutions and on massive open online courses (MOOCs) as complementary to the mainstream higher education refugee response. Exploring new perspectives on, and approaches to, higher education provision, the session aimed to improve understanding of the issues arising in respect of these innovative learning solutions, in terms of the barriers to engaging in e-learning, accreditation mechanisms and the challenges of recognition.

The standard approach of those who provide scholarships to refugees for study in higher education has been to invest primarily in supporting full-time, on-campus programme provision. However, there is growing recognition of the need to widen access to higher education to encompass increased diversity of students who face a range of challenges preventing them from gaining admission to higher education. These challenges include a lack of transcripts documenting prior educational attainment, non-compliance with residency requirements, language and financial barriers and challenges experienced particularly by refugees and displaced persons who are continually on the move.

Ms. Agatha Abi Aad reported that the UNHCR is engaged in the development of scholarships to support "alternative pathways to education" for refugees in other countries. Through the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium, which the UNHCR has co-chaired since 2016, a range of "connected learning" programmes have been promoted



- **Dr. Ahmed Aleroud,**  
Professor of Computer  
Information Systems,  
Yarmouk University, and  
coordinator of the  
“Empowering Syrian  
undergraduates to join  
MicroMasters programs  
(SYMPRO): towards career-  
focused and affordable  
graduate studies” project  
funded by the grant scheme  
of HOPES

with the aim of facilitating refugees’ access to higher education through engagement with technology.<sup>5</sup>

Panellists highlighted the widespread concerns about the quality of education that online learning provides, and the misconceptions about online and connected learning which are common amongst key stakeholders, students, their families and even policy-makers. In the ensuing discussion about the strengths of blended and online learning, the panellists made the following observations:

#### **Low cost and mobility**

Dr. Hanan El Said Ali emphasised that, in addition to affordability, a key benefit of online learning is that it can be accessed at any time and from any place, providing internationally recognised courses across borders. In partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, Ain Shams University has opened the first e-learning centre in Egypt, providing accredited bachelor’s degrees via blended learning.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Providing alternatives to on-campus quality higher education**

Dr. Ahmed Aleroud provided a briefing on the HOPES-funded project, “Empowering Syrian undergraduates to join MicroMasters programs (SYMPRO): Towards career-focused and affordable graduate studies”. This project has enabled 12 Syrian and vulnerable Jordanian students to participate in a MicroMaster new graduate-level certificate programme (equivalent to 25%–50% of a master’s degree) offered online via a MOOC platform.

Such programmes, validated by companies, are designed to be career-focused as well as affordable and accessible. Furthermore, given the challenges associated with providing a full degree online in Jordan, the programmes, which have had a 90% success-rate, have proved extremely valuable, enabling higher education institutions to enrol students without having to create a digital platform independently.

#### **Supporting career development**

Ms. Allison Church observed that online and digital learning enables students to upskill and reskill in order to change their career path, particularly in later life. The majority of the Kiron Open Higher Education students in Jordan and Lebanon have achieved upper-secondary-level educational attainment as well as bachelor’s degrees or other prior learning, but they require opportunities for life-long learning in order to enable them to respond effectively to the emerging skills needs of the labour market. Blended learning enables students to enhance their employability through participation in academic and vocational courses, “training of trainers” (TOT) courses, and leadership courses which ensure that students’ skills match labour-market requirements, locally and internationally. In addition, blended learning opens up opportunities for

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.connectedlearning4refugees.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://elc.asu.edu.eg/>.



engaging in freelance employment and in employment in the digital sphere.

### **Bottom-up knowledge-creation and the democratisation of knowledge**

Presenting the HOPES-funded “Blended learning for teachers’ professional development” project, Dr. Mai Abu Moghli observed that digital platforms and blended learning enable the “bottom-up” creation of new pedagogies through research-development and capacity-building training for teachers and educational practitioners in a refugee-specific and context-sensitive environment. Without much-needed support, teachers often struggle in such an unfamiliar context.

Through the project a certified Teacher Professional Development (TPD) course has been developed. This combines face-to-face learning and a MOOC to develop the capacity of educators to provide quality teaching and learning for children and young people, both from Syria and Lebanon. It encompasses co-designed research that enables teachers to share their knowledge about effective practices and facilitates the re-contextualisation of this knowledge to generate context-specific practices that have been tested by other teachers. Taking teachers out of the classroom, it supports the socialisation of good practice.

This participatory approach supports the reconceptualization of the MOOC as a research tool, transforming it into a massive open online collaboration tool and highlighting how such digital platforms can be used to engage teachers as researchers. Through the course, teachers design, adapt and test learning techniques, collect data and share expertise. By making research central to the process, the course does not only equip them with skills and knowledge they require in challenging environments but also supports them as “educators for change” in order to ensure that higher education enhances employability, fosters social cohesion, and facilitates the reconstruction of post-conflict communities.

### **Blended learning—taking down barriers**

Ms. Allison Church reported that Kiron Open Higher Education’s experience has shown that online courses have limited potential to address students’ needs in the context of the Syrian crisis. However, blended learning courses, incorporating face-to-face tuition, produce better results. The response and success rate of Kiron’s blended certificate programmes provided in three community centres in Jordan has exceeded expectations.

Working in the community helps to erode some of the barriers to accessing higher education, supporting peer-to-peer learning and student support. Blended learning programmes also accommodate project-based learning related to the course content, which would be very challenging in an online environment.

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On completion of the course, students are in possession not only of the certificate they have obtained but also of the product that they have designed and implemented, thereby enhancing their employability. This demonstrates that, while online learning can support success, providers and educationalists need to understand the context for programme delivery and adapt the content of programmes accordingly. This represents a significant challenge in the context of the Syrian crisis.

### Accreditation issues

Discussion ensued about the challenges associated with the recognition, quality assurance and accreditation of online courses. Although these courses are developed by leading universities worldwide, they nevertheless need to be recognised by national governments, requiring direct partnership-working with higher education institutions at the local level.



Kiron Open Higher Education's mandate is to work with higher education institutions in Jordan and Lebanon to match programmes offered online with the ones offered by local institutions, thereby enabling the recognition of Kiron by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Jordan. However, Ms. Allison Church emphasised the distinction between the recognition of learning and accreditation. While certificates obtained from Kiron Open Higher Education can support entrance to higher education through the recognition of prior learning, they may nevertheless not necessarily be accredited. Whereas, courses offered by higher education institutions locally could be accredited.



The local production of MOOCs presents various challenges. The regulations of the Ministries of Higher Education may allow that higher education institutions only provide 25% of a degree programme online, there being a requirement for the remainder of the programme to be delivered on campus and to be subject to examination. Accordingly, MOOCs have to be developed jointly by local higher education institutions, and international courses have to receive joint recognition from multiple local higher education institutions. Thus, existing regulations have not matched yet the needs arising and the local contexts.

Dr. Hanan El Said Ali highlighted the challenges associated with transforming standard educational programmes into hybrid programmes. While online learning is considered more affordable for students, the creation of e-learning modules and the transformation process into blended learning programmes is often more cost-intensive than delivering classroom-based teaching, and necessitates greater engagement from the part of instructors. In Egypt, programmes are submitted for approval to a specialist committee on the Supreme Council of Egyptian Universities and then transformed into blended learning programmes in accordance with the rules and guidelines of the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education.



## Scalability, policy-development and sustainability

Dr. Mai Abu Moghli emphasised the potential for the scalability of the certified Teacher Professional Development (TPD) course module. Through close collaboration and partnership with the Lebanese Ministry and key institutional stakeholders, the project aims to integrate this innovative blended learning tool into standard teacher training programmes, and to move towards recognition and accreditation of the module.

In the open discussion between the panel and conference delegates, the following points were made in relation to the sustainability of online learning solutions.

- There is still a need to provide students engaged in online learning with on-campus education and support. In this regard, the aim is to ensure that students have access to a framework of support measures that builds on best practices, meets their needs and helps them to obtain an education and qualifications that are recognised locally as well as in Syria.
- Awareness-raising about the benefits of online learning solutions is important in order to ensure that students' learning is recognised.
- Further collaboration between policy-makers and higher education institutions in relation to the development, recognition and accreditation of blended and online programmes is crucial to their success.
- Within the context of the Syrian crisis, it is important to build the momentum to link educational and development programmes in order to provide sustainable learning solutions.



- Moderation by **Dr. Sylvie Bruratout-Conway**, Deputy Head of External and Institutional Relations Department, Campus France, Paris
- Co-facilitation by **Ms. Rania Helou**, Education Project Manager, HOPES Project, Lebanon

## SESSION 4 Student talk-show: "What's next for me?"

### "What's next for me?" Survey findings

Session 4 of the conference commenced with a presentation by Ms. Wisam Barhoumeh on the key findings of the "What's next for me?" survey of Syrian HOPES students. The students surveyed have participated in bachelor, master's and vocational training courses in Egypt, KRI, Jordan and Lebanon. The survey seeks to provide insight into the perspectives of students on their future and plans after graduation and reflects the students' ambitions and needs. The key findings of the survey are detailed below.

- As expected, the vast majority of the HOPES respondents are very keen to further their education to the next academic level (81.2%). Only 14.8% of them intend to find a job in the area of their qualification, while 4% expressed their willingness to earn a living in any field. No students expressed a wish to stay at home for domestic duties, even though there was a 42% response rate from female



- **Ms. Wisam Barhoumeh,**  
Project Management Unit  
Officer (PMU), HOPES  
Project, Jordan

*Presentation of the main findings of 'What's next for me? survey' from the students perspective conducted amongst HOPES students*

#### **Discussion panel comprised of Syrian and Jordanian students:**

- **Ms. Aya Al Shama'a,** Master's in Clinical Psychology, Al-Ahliyya Amman University

- **Mr. Omar Abu Aisheh,**  
Master's in Accounting,  
Zarqa Private University,  
Zarqa

- **Ms. Arzaq Yousef  
Mohammad Abu Eid,**  
Master's in Anthropology,  
Yarmouk University, Irbid

- **Mr. Arin Mansour,** Master's in Curricula and Instruction, Al-Albayt University, Al-Mafraq

- **Ms. Nidaa Khaza'li,** Master's in Anthropology, Yarmouk University, Irbid

- **Mr. Mohammad Eiz Eldeen,**  
Master of Business Administration, Petra University, Amman

- **Mr. Abdullah Mahmood  
Ghanim,** Bachelor of Media and Technology, Jadara University, Irbid

students. This clearly indicates that female refugees strive to be breadwinners.

- While single students' priority is to find a job, married students' highest priority is to continue their education.
- Students who want to continue their academic studies after graduation indicated a preference either for further study opportunities abroad (53%) or in their present country of residence (46.4%), with only 0.6 % indicating that they would consider returning to Syria to continue their higher education.
- The principal reason cited by students for leaving their country of residence to go abroad is to find study opportunities (91%) whereas 8% would consider going abroad to search for job opportunities. The majority of the students who wish to go abroad were male (67%).
- With regards to employment, 66.7 % of the students who expressed a wish to find jobs in the area of their academic qualification would like to do so in their present country of residence. By comparison, they expressed willingness to go abroad to search for study opportunities.
- The greatest proportion of the students who indicated willingness to search for any job even if it doesn't match their academic qualification were bachelor's students (56%), followed by master's students (33%). This indicates that after graduation those with higher degrees are less willing to find a job which does not match their qualifications.
- 77.8% of respondents indicated that they would prefer to find any job in their present country of residence.

When asked about the most helpful measures to make their studies relevant to their future after graduation, given the existing labour market restrictions and the paucity of job opportunities, the students proposed the following solutions:

- Continuing full-time with their education (34%)
- English language training (25%)
- Undertaking additional courses to refresh their knowledge of their discipline while working in an unrelated field of employment (15%)
- The provision of internships in their area of specialisation (13%)
- The provision of specialised skills training focusing on labour market needs (10%)

Most master's degree scholarship-holders indicated a preference to continue studying full-time (37%) or to undertake additional courses to refresh their knowledge (29%) whereas bachelor students indicated a preference to undertake skills training based on the needs of the labour market (32%) or to continue studying full-time (29%). Both married and single students expressed a need for English language training and for the continuation of their education, with married students ranking these equally while single students ranked studying full-time as their top priority.



### Panel discussion

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion Jordanian students and Syrian students resident in Jordan who shared the perspectives of survey respondents.

Both Syrian students and young students in the host community are concerned about their future after graduation and about the lack of employment opportunities that match their aspirations. In response to the “what’s next?” question, Syrian students indicated four main directions: finding job opportunities in their country of residence or abroad, pursuing further study in higher education, investing in small businesses, and eventually returning to Syria—an option currently rendered impossible for political and security reasons.

Students also highlighted the lack of internships or job opportunities in their field of study and the discrepancy between chosen fields of study and the reality of the labour market. They underlined the social pressure placed on them by their families and professors when choosing a speciality that is not directly related to the labour market needs of the country in which they are living. They suggested that higher education programmes should be more responsive to the needs of the labour market.

Students highlighted the need for support through funded scholarships but also recommended the funding of small businesses and job opportunities. They stressed that programmes should take into consideration the integration into the labour market of both Syrian students and their peers in host communities.

In the second half of the panel discussion, the students shared their experiences, focusing on how the opportunity to have access to higher education positively affected their life, and how the requirement for HOPES scholarship-holders to undertake volunteering helped them to further understand the context in which they live, widening their perspectives and enabling them to contribute to their community. Voluntary work helped them to develop as citizens, to become more engaged in their community, and to find peer support. It also increased their motivation to engage in self-improvement and lifelong learning, allowed them to gain knowledge and skills that they could not have acquired solely from their on-campus studies, and helped them to enhance their employability.

When asked about the skills they need for participation in the labour market, students highlighted the importance of English-language courses, practical and training workshops, communication skills and data collection and analysis skills. They also emphasised the necessity for support for scientific research programmes for master’s students, which would help them to gain practical experience in their field.





## Networking Exhibit Along the path towards the future:

### Innovative projects funded by the grant scheme of HOPES (Call for Proposals)

The first day of the conference included the organisation of a regional exhibit to promote the 32 projects implemented by local educational institutions and organisations funded by the grant scheme of the HOPES project. This networking session allowed participants to showcase their initiatives and exchange knowledge and experience in an informal atmosphere.

## Day 2: Wednesday 10 April 2019

### SESSION 5 Higher education and refugees from Syria: round-table discussions

#### Round table 1 "Cohesion"/ integration, reducing tensions, and the situation of the host community

The protracted Syrian crisis and the resultant influx of refugees has placed a heavy burden on host countries and particularly host communities, many of which are struggling with a faltering economy and growing unemployment. This spilled over into increasing tensions between refugees and host communities amidst a general feeling of a lack of hope. This roundtable session explored the contextual situations in the host countries, highlighting ways to reduce tensions between refugees and host communities, and outlining approaches leading to rapprochement, conflict-mitigation and enhanced integration.

When describing the contextual situation, panellists highlighted the following key issues:

- Despite the tremendous efforts to integrate refugees from Syria, the lack of overall integration schemes and strategies as well as gaps and limitations in legal frameworks has led many university-aged Syrians to exist in a state of limbo, resulting in fear about the unknown.
- Host communities are deeply polarised and divided in relation to the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees, with anti-refugee sentiments, lobbying and negative discourses becoming more prevalent.
- It is important to consider and treat university-aged Syrians as refugees and not as international students. They have been subjected to trauma and stress, face discrimination and feel isolated in the community.
- Social cohesion in the environment and context in which we are working is very difficult to achieve, especially in Lebanon, the KRI, and Jordan due to domestic structural problems predating the crisis, socio-economic crises and socio-political dynamics. In addition, the differences in political opinions and views militate against social cohesion.



- Moderation by **Ms. Maren Kroeger**, Tertiary Education Officer, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Copenhagen
- **Mr. Metin Çorabatır**, President, İltica ve Göç Araştırmaları Merkezi (Research Center on Asylum and Migration - IGAM), Representative of "My first day on campus is the best day at my university: A comprehensive pilot project on social cohesion and support for academic success of Syrian refugees" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES
- **Ms. Zeynep Tuğçe Çiftçibaşı Güç**, Director of AGU Youth Factory, Abdullah Gül University, representative of the "Path of hopes" project funded by the grant scheme of HOPES
- **Mr. Selim Mawad**, Independent consultant and specialist on dealing with the past and conflict transformation
- **Rapporteur: Ms. Hande Gürdağ Uzuner**, Country Manager, HOPES Project, Turkey

- Research and surveys have shown that both Syrian students and students in the host community have similar socio-economic concerns and are disillusioned about their prospects, inhibiting their ability to plan for the future, especially with youth unemployment rates increasing.
- While, in the past, the higher education sector was oriented towards education and research, nowadays it is more concerned with ensuring that it fulfils its civic responsibility and that it has greater societal impact. There is a need for research based on students' learning experiences in order to better understand the relationship between addressing societal challenges and problems on the one hand and educational paradigms and pedagogical approaches on the other hand.

Mr. Metin Çorabatır reported that the aim of the "My first day on campus" project is to create an ecosystem to strengthen the integration of Syrian refugee higher education students into their host community, enhancing social cohesion and improving the students' academic success through complementary support activities. The project comprises two components, the first of which is an orientation programme constituted of an introduction to students' host higher education institutions, campus tours, informative conferences and city tours, and the provision of museum cards and library tours, designed to help new students to adapt to their host city and higher education institution.

The second component of the project is concerned with the provision of mentoring activities through which Syrian students are 'buddied' with Turkish students to provide academic and social support, and to help Syrian refugee students to improve their Turkish language skills. These mentoring activities help to increase the students' sense of belonging to their host higher education institution and their commitment to their course.

The project also incorporated "Tandem-Story Telling" between Syrian and Turkish students, enabling them to develop common stories and to tell them in two languages. This increases students' self-esteem, reducing prejudice and strengthening students' social network by increasing openness to other cultures and respect for both languages. The project seeks to set a standard for integration, building bridges and connecting people and also aims to gather valuable data on the challenges that impede the integration of refugee students and Turkish students.

The project highlights the importance of remembering that refugees are forced to leave their home countries and to adapt to new conditions. The creation of a friendly ecosystem is therefore important for their academic success—a psychological perspective that should be kept in mind when developing academic projects.



In her presentation on the "Path of hopes" project, Ms. Zeynep Tuğçe Çiftçibaşı Güç explained that its aim is to facilitate access to higher and further education opportunities for immigrants and vulnerable young people, and to support this transition by enhancing their personal and professional competences. The project seeks to overcome the preconceptions that the Syrian and Turkish communities harbour about one another, and to support their social integration with a view to strengthening the capacity of educational institutions to accommodate immigrants more effectively in the longer term.

The project encompasses the provision of needs analysis, "learning by doing" training workshops, peer-support sessions and networking activities conducted with Syrian students to help them develop their key competences, integrate into their host communities, and boost their employability.

An initial survey of the young participants found that Syrian students are not aware of the study opportunities available to them and therefore need academic coaching and career guidance. Furthermore, they need to be prepared for the jobs of tomorrow rather than of today. A key challenge in addressing these needs is to overcome the stereotyping of refugee students by increasing the intercultural understanding of schools, teachers and their peers, and to support the integration of Syrian students into the Turkish community.

Mr. Selim Mawad made the following recommendations for supporting the integration of refugees into host communities:

- The need to define social cohesion and the role of higher education in the context of the Syrian crisis. Social cohesion is a cross-cutting issue on which further longitudinal research is needed, particularly in relation to the impact of higher education.
- The need to demystify the concept of social cohesion because it scares people, societies and organisations. Communicating the meaning of social cohesion in a clear and transparent manner can reduce misunderstanding and the stress experienced by host communities.
- An open and honest dialogue between host communities and refugees on social cohesion and the higher education services provided should be initiated. Some people assume that dialogue will happen naturally, but there is a distinction between dialogue and rapprochement.
- Dialogue should be facilitated by professionals rather than by NGOs or service providers themselves. While they have good intentions, higher education service providers lack the knowledge and skills to start a dialogue on social cohesion, which should include refugees and members of the host community. The dialogue should be structured to enable the participants to express their needs and challenges to one another face-to-face. Rigorous multidisciplinary





approaches are needed to build trust through such “bottom-up” initiatives.

- The objective of providing higher education to refugees should not be reduced to enhancing their employability, but rather should encompass the transformation of their vulnerability into resilience through the acquisition of skills either informally or through formal academic education.
- There is a necessity to adopt a more effective and rigorous psychosocial approach in the response of higher education institutions to refugees which encompasses dealing first-hand with the prejudices, stereotypes and xenophobia which lead to social exclusion.
- Enhancing the advocacy work of non-governmental organisations working in the sphere of higher education, international donors and their national partners in order to open up the debate about the respective responsibilities of local governments as well as of the international community in the provision of higher education opportunities to refugees which will enhance their skills and employability in the region and in Europe.
- The necessity to “think outside the box” in relation to the quality of higher education opportunities that are offered.
- The need to undertake policy-work to underpin the role of higher education in dealing with the past. Central to this is consideration of the objective of providing higher education in the context of the Syrian crisis, and whether this is to help people to flee from Syria in the long-term or to eventually return to their homeland. The need and the responsibility to strike a balance between the provision of services to refugees and host communities in order to reduce tension between the two groups. The international community through its local partners has a huge responsibility to manage the expectations of refugees. By reducing expectations, social stress and tension can also be reduced. This should be done in partnership with the refugees and local community.
- Honest communication and transparency about the objectives of the project and the broader situation is key to its success. In general, there is a prevailing sense that assisting refugees of any nationality is a kind of missionary intervention, which is unhelpful. Refugees have responsibilities to their host communities as well as rights, especially when the conflict from which they have fled lasts for more than 7 years. However, refugees often confuse rights and responsibilities because they are miserable and traumatised.





## Round table 2 The question of employability and labour-market access for refugees and the need to find more innovative and realistic solutions

The second round table focussed on the question of employability and the future careers of students and scholarship-holders, highlighting the view of many scholarship-providers that the provision of scholarships only makes sense if the beneficiaries have a chance to apply what they have learned in higher education in the labour market. This has become an urgent issue in the light of the prevailing economic situation, high rates of unemployment, and labour-market frameworks in the host countries in the region.

Ms. Amanda Kelleher reported that Luminus Education's approach in Jordan is to adapt its courses to respond to labour-market needs. This requires the establishment of a mechanism for on-going consultation with all the relevant stakeholders, including employers. In recent times Luminus has witnessed national and international donors, by whom Syrian refugee students are mainly sponsored, requesting a guarantee of employment for the students. Through a range of measures, Luminus has been able to comply with this request, achieving a job placement rate of more than 80% in some programmes. However, this limits the disciplines that can be offered to the students and raises expectations about employment outcomes.

Job placements are mainly facilitated by a support team, which helps the employer as well as the employee to get through the first difficult stage of employment. Experience has shown that soft skills are vitally important for job applicants. Luminus is working closely with employers through, for example, regular site visits, job fairs, internships and other meetings between students and potential employers.

While there is currently no reliable data on the outcomes of the job placements, a new tool (created as part of the student management system) will soon be able to track participating students for one year after graduation. The establishment of a business accelerator will also help to optimise students' employability.

Mr. Ahmad Albadareen reported that, since 2013, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has implemented a dedicated strategy in Jordan to respond to the Syrian crisis. This encompasses the provision of support for competency-building, guidance and counselling. For these purposes, 13 centres have been established all over the country. Other important components of the support provided are:

- Entrepreneurship training (including the provision of seed money).
- Facilitating the obtaining of work permits. Since 2016, 140,000 work-permits have been issued, 66% through the ILO support scheme.



- Partnership-working with business, for instance through the provision of an on-the-job-training programme.
- Lobbying at policy level.
- Strengthening the capacity of other stakeholders (ministries, chambers of commerce, NGOs, etc.) to respond to the crisis.

The 140,000 work permits which have been issued are mainly for jobs below graduate level in low-skill professions. No more can be expected from a host country with an extremely high rate of youth unemployment.

The Turkish institution, Ingev, one of the beneficiaries of the HOPES grant-scheme for small projects, reported on the establishment of a business consultancy centre in Turkey which facilitated the creation of 52 Syrian enterprises within a short period of time.

### Panel discussion

In the ensuing panel discussion, the following observations were made:

- Realism and pragmatism are needed when seeking to align scholarship provision with labour market needs. The limited potential of labour markets to absorb additional workers in most host countries has to be taken into consideration. Lebanon and Jordan are chronically weak economies which have suffered from a multitude of problems for decades. They depend on foreign aid and are on the brink of economic collapse.
- In respect of entrepreneurship as a career option for refugees, the question arises as to whether the latter require a B.A. or M.A. in order to run a small business—a question which is linked to the management of expectations. There is also the question of whether it would be better to invest in seed money for the establishment of businesses rather than in the provision of scholarships for degrees, which might cost tens of thousands of dollars and which, most likely, will not lead to employment.
- In the KRI, higher vocational training programmes of 1–2 years' duration have become increasingly popular. To enhance their attractiveness, additional business incubators should be established on campuses (with the provision of seed-money for start-ups). This would definitely improve the employability rate among both local people and refugees, and the small enterprises created might generate additional job opportunities for low-skilled or untrained workers.
- Consideration should be given to the viability of digital livelihoods in the region. These often necessitate electronic money transfers which in turn necessitate the existence of a bank account or credit card. This poses a problem for refugees, especially given that some of the new sectors of the digital and virtual world are not currently a reality in the Middle East. For example, at the present time, digital banking is not an option. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that many locals and especially Syrian refugees do not regard themselves as citizens of a global world—an idea is totally alien to them. One can





therefore not realistically expect them to be able to profit from the advantages that the 21<sup>st</sup> century offers.

- As the problem of migration has become a global issue, there is a need for responsibility for refugees to be shared globally. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is a first step in this direction and should be enacted and taken into greater consideration.<sup>7</sup>
- The provision of study opportunities and career counselling has a moral dimension: providing training or education without providing clarity on the employment prospects to which this will lead is not ethical.
- Counselling and career guidance should provide familiarity with the conditions of the labour market. Failure in job applications is the rule rather than the exception. People often have to start their professional career in low-skill jobs, working hard for promotion and ascendancy up the career ladder. An understanding has to be developed that there is not a simple solution to this problem and that job seekers will inevitably experience some disappointment.

### Open discussion

In the open discussion between the panellists and conference delegates, the following observations were made:

- Changing the mindset of all stakeholders (including current and potential beneficiaries, donors, ministries, and NGOs) is necessary in order to ensure that a realistic approach is taken towards the provision of higher education and how the latter relates to graduates' employability.
- There is the need for the provision of more tailored and focused entrepreneurship training, which should encompass the provision of seed money to support the realisation of the most promising ideas. Without such support, the training will remain theoretical and will not have any impact.
- There is a need for more research on the opportunities within emerging economies for entrepreneurship to address existing gaps.
- As the opportunities in the domestic labour markets in the host countries in the region are, and will remain, limited, and as the doors to the Western world have been closed shut, the potential for South-South migration to provide employment opportunities should be explored.
- The development of future funding mechanisms must pay more attention to the often-changing realities in the area. Flexible and integrated approaches are necessary, together with a stronger emphasis on employability.
- Closer coordination between policy-makers—including ministries, industry representatives, donors and higher education institutions—is necessary.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.



- To address the normally very weak relationship between higher education and the labour market, on-going analysis of this relationship, as well as better career-guidance for students, must be provided.
- There should be greater focus on the provision of job-oriented, short-term training rather than on long-term full-degree programmes.
- There is a need for a holistic approach to catering for the technical and soft skills needed for the labour market.
- Higher education and career-orientation packages should be integrated. Career-orientation should be consistent with higher education programme provision in order to ensure that students are prepared for the transition to the job-market through rehabilitation programmes.
- There is a need for greater focus on in-demand sectors and post-conflict needs.
- There should be robust and consistent orientation towards labour market opportunities.
- Freelancing culture and business-creation should be sustained through entrepreneurial skills training.
- Research on the growth areas and skills needs of the labour market should be undertaken, with consideration given to the supply and demand of skills in the short term.
- Integrated approaches to lifelong education and training should be pursued.
- Transferable skills should be fostered, especially in case of the prolonged stay, repatriation or relocation to third countries of refugees.
- There is a need for international cooperation with emerging economies in developing countries and for global approaches to addressing the Syrian crisis.

- Moderation by **Mr. Harry Haynes**, British Council, Regional Project Manager of the HOPES Higher Education English Access Programme (HEEAP), Egypt

- **Mr. Gordon Slaven**, Consultant to the British Council on the findings of the second round of the HOPES National Stakeholder Dialogues, "Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education—Language for Resilience"



### Round table 3 The language needs of student refugees in higher education

The majority of the recommendations emerging from national and regional meetings and conferences, surveys, and research studies have emphasised the need of Syrian students for higher-level foreign-language courses. The lack of appropriate language skills, particularly in the medium of instruction in higher education constitutes one of the main obstacles adversely affecting the enrolment of Syrian refugees in higher education in the host countries and their successful completion of their studies.

The third round-table session aimed to explore the specific language requirements of higher and further education systems in the host countries and the challenges associated with meeting these. It also enabled consideration of new approaches to language programme provision and of opportunities for strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions.



## Languages for resilience

In his introduction to the session, Mr. Harry Haynes highlighted the findings of the research conducted by the British Council through the 'Languages for Resilience' initiative.<sup>8</sup> This research has identified the ways in which language has the potential to build resilience and foster social cohesion in host communities. From this perspective, language provides individuals with the skills that they need to overcome the challenges that they face in the host countries.

Mr. Gordon Slaven reported on the findings of the second round of the HOPES National Stakeholder Dialogues, "Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education—Language for Resilience", which were held in Egypt, the KRI, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey between November 2018 and March 2019. These five local meetings supported the participation of Syrian students in discussions about the challenges associated with foreign language programme provision in higher education institutions. They also encompassed the exploration of approaches to help refugee students and institutions to overcome language-barriers at the national level. From these Stakeholder Dialogues the following recommendations and observations emerged:

- There is a need to organise awareness-raising and outreach campaigns on the importance of language proficiency and IT skills for accessing higher education.
- Students lack understanding of what they are signing up for and of what can be expected from a particular course or training session. It is important to provide prospective students with clarity on the level of English required for successful study in higher education, and to manage students' expectations about their course as well as about how long it will take for them to attain the language level for university entrance.
- There is a need for training, induction and orientation prior to the commencement of language courses which involve online and blended learning.
- There is a need for the provision of a pathway of courses, from beginners' level to International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation, with well-defined learning outcomes at each level, including the criteria for progression.
- There is a need for a 'learning agreement' between the institution and the student which sets out the responsibilities and commitments of each party before the course begins. This will encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/language-for-resilience> and <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/schools/support-for-languages/thought-leadership/research-report/language-resilience>.



- In terms of the delivery mechanisms for courses, further flexibility regarding the locations at which a course is provided and the scheduling of the course should be offered to ensure that the maximum number of students are able to attend. In addition, stipends should be provided to cover students' transport costs.
- There is a need for teacher training in general communicative language teaching skills, interactive learning and on the specific needs of Syrian students.
- Course design should encompass interactive teaching in the classroom, including student-led activities.
- The feasibility of providing English-language qualifications that are internationally recognised for students who demonstrate both the ability and commitment to succeed should be explored.
- A smart phone application for online learning which is related to the course and which can support the practice of a language with native speakers should be developed.

Many of these recommendations are already being implemented through the HOPES project and future initiatives will need to place an even greater emphasis on a structured English language development process.

In her presentation, Dr. Lina Choueiri stressed the importance of language, arguing that it is “the elephant in the room” in all of the discussions about higher education in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. Language is often framed by Syrian students and providers of education as a barrier to accessing education, and as the basis for defining language remediation interventions and intensive ‘high-level’ English or French-language courses. This is reflected principally in the link between the medium of instruction and students’ choice of discipline, in low enrolments, and in the high drop-out rates in higher education.

Reducing language training solely to an issue of “access to higher education” does not ultimately serve the needs of refugee students nor of potential students. Some current research on, and pedagogical approaches to, language teaching and training are premised on a view of language as a resource. Other literature which is grounded in research on English for academic purposes and on the teaching of English in higher education contexts links it to “writing across the curriculum”. This literature calls for more contextualisation of language teaching and learning, for example by linking courses.

### Language for academic purposes

Many of the “language issues” identified by refugees and aid workers could also turn out to be “content or curriculum issues”. There is a need to develop interventions that are grounded in, and speak to, research on language teaching and learning, such as the teacher training capacity-building programme implemented by the American University of Beirut

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(AUB) in the HOPES-funded project, "Science education: a key to university access for refugee girls".

This project aims to increase the capacity of mathematics and science educators to teach the Lebanese curriculum to Syrian refugees with a focus on language barriers and critical thinking. The programme recognises that a lack of proficiency in the medium of instruction—in this case French or English—makes teaching subjects like mathematics and science more difficult. It is grounded in research on the interconnectedness of language and content, which suggests that both should be treated as goals and as integral to the learning process. The importance of analysing the features of the language of science and mathematics and of correlating language demands with an emphasis on non-technical words in science, rather than the technical words that are usually easy for students to learn, is emphasised on the training course. There is a need to create meaningful contexts when, for example, supervising laboratory work.

Contrary to common beliefs, immersing students in a language will not help them learn faster or encourage their participation. Rather, using Arabic as a tool and integrating it strategically in the lessons will allow students to learn effectively.

The positive outcomes of the training programme include the active participation and positive attitude of the teachers, the recognition by participants of the value of non-technical terms and genre analysis and the importance of integrating these into lesson plans.

In the development of future interventions to address the language needs of Syrian refugees, the following should be recognised:

- The complexity of language competence should be acknowledged. Attaining the level of competence in an additional language required for success in higher education requires substantial time.
- The language needs of refugees are complex and change in nature along the students' path through higher education. Supporting Syrian refugees to succeed in higher education requires different kinds of support over a substantial period of time.
- Support should be both for the students and for the teachers (through professional development).
- Most of the energy so far has been spent on remediation, focusing on access and readiness for higher education. It is essential to move from "equipping" refugees with "language skills", to integrating language and content and supporting the students' language needs throughout their pathway through higher education. Through this approach, teaching languages means inviting students to utilise language appropriately in order to critique, illustrate, approach a problem, and formulate a solution. 'Linked courses' that are paired, or team-taught courses where language/rhetorical instruction is matched to the





assignments and activities of course content can be helpful in this regard.

- There is a need to ground interventions in research and to improve the translation of research into practice (for educators) and into policy (for institutions and policy-makers).

### Languages for access to higher education

Ms. Gülistan Koç gave a presentation on the HOPES-funded project, "Improved access to education of Syrian post-secondary-age young people in urban settings in Turkey" which is implemented by the YUVA Association. The objective of the project is to provide safe, participatory and inclusive learning spaces and learning support through high-quality education to young Syrian students and disadvantaged members of the local community aged between 17 and 29 years in Istanbul.

The project mainly addresses the Syrian refugees' lack of Turkish language skills and proficiency, which is necessary for the TÖMER language examination. The lack of these skills is reflected in the high drop-out rates of students and is exacerbated by the lack of examination support for foreign students. This support is necessary to facilitate access to higher education. As previously noted, in Turkey, refugee students have to sit the University Entrance Examination for Foreign Students (YÖS), comprised of a 'Basic Learning Skills Test' and a 'Turkish Language Proficiency Test'. The YÖS and Turkish-language courses are considered necessary for the preparation of refugees for higher education.

The project encompasses the provision of TÖMER language preparation courses, and study support for YÖS. After following the preparatory courses, the students struggled mainly with the payment of the examination fees as well with finding scholarships to pursue their higher education. The project offers in-kind educational support covering both examination fees as well as counselling, mentoring and the organisation of career days to provide information on the educational opportunities and available support for students who are applying to continue secondary school, open school or higher education. It is crucially important for institutions to work within governmental structures, which play a key role in bridging gaps. The collaboration with the municipality of Istanbul in the implementation of the project has been essential to ensure sufficient outreach to, and transportation of, students.

However learning Turkish is not enough to understand programme content, and so there needs to be a focus on academic Turkish-language writing and reading skills. In addition, considering that every institute and higher education institution has different registration requirements for the acceptance of international students, the method and approach adopted for support and preparation is crucial.





It is also important to provide a comfortable participatory learning environment for both male and female students. Students are encouraged to bring their experiences into the classroom. Focus groups with students are necessary and help to plan, monitor and evaluate the study programmes and to better integrate their recommendations. Digital learning resources are valuable but courses need to be mainly face-to-face and to encompass non-formal interactive teaching, such as role-play and theatre. Digital resources should be seen as an additional support for the learning process.

### Open discussion

The ensuing discussion between the panellists and conference delegates was invaluable in identifying the themes which resonated throughout the presentations, as detailed below.

- The need to reconceptualise the approach to language learning from a means of gaining access to education, which focuses on intensive remediation and basic language courses, to instead focus on language teaching for specific academic purposes. This entails integrating language teaching within the subject-based curriculum and the provision of on-going English language learning for students throughout their higher education studies and pathway through higher education. This requires schools and higher education institutions to change how they teach languages.
- The importance of teacher capacity-building. This needs to be evidence-based and long-term, providing on-going support for teachers as they are engaging in instruction. Participants highlighted the need to test this approach on a larger scale.

## SESSION 6 Improving response mechanisms

- Moderation by **Dr. Carsten Walbiner**, Director, HOPES project
- **Dr. Enes Efendioğlu**, Advisor to the Turkish Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB)
- **Dr. Amanj Saeed**, Adviser to the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Kurdistan Regional Government

The final session of the conference was devoted to an analysis of the current needs of Syrian refugees and the challenges associated with addressing these. The objective of the session was to explore more effective and durable solutions and to improve response mechanisms. The discussion focused on coordinated programme development that would take into consideration gender issues and stakeholders' needs, as well as support collaboration between various institutions at the local and regional levels in order to strengthen the response to refugees and their host societies.

### Realities, challenges and responsibilities

In analysing the current situation, the existing constraints and the key challenges that should be taken into consideration when seeking to improve the response to refugees in higher education and across other sectors, the issues detailed below were highlighted.



- **Mr. Steven De Vriendt**, Task Manager of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, EU Delegation to Turkey
- **Dr. Nasser Yassine**, Director of Research, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policies and International Affairs, American University of Beirut
- **Ms. Maren Kroeger**, Tertiary Education Officer, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Copenhagen



### *Timeframe of interventions and response mechanisms*

According to Dr. Nasser Yassine, the main challenge is that the current response system is not designed for a long-term intervention but rather for a short-term response. In general, approaches to all crises are premised on the assumption that they will only last for a few years and that either the refugees will return, resettle or integrate into the host countries. However, the scale and protracted nature of the Syrian crisis are increasing the pressure on the current response-system.

It is essential to keep in mind that there are preconditions and prerequisites for the return of refugees to their home country, including post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction processes. Technically, this process takes years. When enhancing response mechanisms, it is crucial to take into consideration that not all refugees will return and that the return will not happen in a short period of time.

Noting that considerable support for tertiary education for Syrian refugees in the region has been provided in recent years, Ms. Maren Kröger argued that the priority at this stage is to focus on the consolidation of results and to prepare for the next response phase. Within this context, the biggest challenge will be to maintain the momentum and to find additional funding for scholarships, despite donor fatigue, especially given that the number of students qualified for higher education is increasing.

### *Collaboration and Responsibility-sharing*

Overall there is an increasingly "hostile environment policy", not only in the region but also in Europe, preventing the development of a more effective response mechanism. Policy-makers are basing their responses on the assumption that, if there is hostility towards refugees or if they are made uncomfortable, they will return or leave. Dr. Nasser Yassine declared that this assumption is wrong: refugees have never left the host communities because they were pushed to live on the margins. All the research shows that refugees who have better access to education, to opportunities and to security will return faster than those who are in a worse situation.

Dr. Amanj Saeed observed that the Syrian crisis is one of the world's biggest refugee crises of recent times. Neighbouring countries were not prepared for the number of refugees or for the duration of their stay in host communities. There is a necessity for responsibility for refugees to be shared between hosting countries and the international community.

Within this context, Ms. Kroger underlined the urgent need for more equitable burden-sharing and responsibility-sharing among all United Nations Member States, together with other relevant stakeholders



including host community members and the refugees themselves, as proposed by the Global Compact on Refugees presented by the High Commissioner for Refugees in 2018.

Dr. Enes Efendioğlu emphasised that that, from his perspective, there is no global approach to the Syrian crisis but rather a clear distribution of responsibilities. The neighbouring countries of Syria, such as the KRI, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, are taking a huge responsibility but the fact that they are the neighbours doesn't mean that they are solely responsible. Furthermore, despite the efforts of the international community, including the EU, US and international institutions, there is a need for increased support and funding.

Dr. Nasser Yassine highlighted the need to address the value system around asylum seekers and refugees in general and to change perceptions towards refugees. There has been a general shift in the response to refugee crises as well as in the value system to which we all adhere as nations. When the 1951 Refugee Convention was developed, it was based on the principle of shared responsibilities for asylum seekers between nations. However, nowadays refugees are seen as burdens, to be kept out by borders in order to ensure that they remain where they are. With anti-immigrant sentiment increasing everywhere, the essence of the problem lies in the 180° shift in the values that underpin how the response should be developed.

Mr. Steven De Vriendt reported that the European Union and the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis has invested more than €60 million in the region, supplemented by other EU initiatives relating to the framework of higher education and the Syrian crisis. Coordination and collaboration with various stakeholders, including governments, as well as between sectors, is of key importance in order to foster sustainable solutions and approaches.

Dr. Enes Efendioğlu observed that countries have faced a range of challenges and take different approaches to handling the refugee crisis. Furthermore, refugees themselves have different experiences and needs depending upon the host country in which they are residing. From that perspective, when designing global and regional approaches and interventions, there should be enhanced focus on national approaches as well.

Dr. Nasser Yassine also highlighted the need to take into consideration current exigencies, particularly if the objective is to ensure that young people are on the pathway of higher education. In general it is well-known that crises impact the poorest, whether refugees or local people in host communities, especially those who, historically, have been excluded from mainstream development. This has to do with the adverse effect of





informal labour market employment on people. When discussing fatigue in general, including donor fatigue, it is essential to keep in mind that due to the protracted Syrian crisis, fatigue is mostly felt by the refugees themselves who have exploited all their savings, networks, assets and resources during the last 8 years in order not to fall into further misfortune. Fatigue is also felt among the host communities especially in the poorest areas. This situation is creating a lot of pressure within host communities and increasing negative discourses and perceptions of refugees.

Dr. Walbiner presented some key findings from the joint perception survey conducted amongst student beneficiaries of four projects and institutions funded by the EU Madad Fund, namely HOPES, SPARK, the GJU (German Jordanian University) and the LASER programme, across five different countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). The focus of the survey was on the learning experience of the students with a view to enabling the respective programmes to gain insight into the students' perceptions, which will help institutions to improve students' learning processes as well as to enhance the support provided to Syrian refugees and disadvantaged local students. The results indicate that the main reason that students pursue academic studies is because they have a genuine interest in their subject and a desire to learn. Only 18% of respondents indicated that their decision was based on a wish to enhance their employability. As expected, Syrian students are more likely than their peers in host communities to drop out of higher education, which is indicative of the enormous stress that the students are under throughout their studies. The majority highlighted the need for further English language courses.

### *Employability*

Mr. Steven De Vriendt expressed the view that one of the biggest challenges facing Syrian refugees is employability. There needs to be investment in changing the perception that refugees are a burden and in building recognition that they can contribute enormously to the host community's economy.

The panellists highlighted the fact that host countries are facing challenges on economic and structural levels, which affects the labour market and employability. If the young people in host communities are not able to find jobs, Syrian refugees cannot be expected to be in employment. The young people in host communities should be taken into consideration when discussing and establishing labour market opportunities for the refugees.





## Recommendations

The following recommendations were put forward as a means to address the challenges identified:

- The panel recognised that the further enhancement of response mechanisms is needed and that this requires the development of a long-term integrated strategy as well as equitable responsibility sharing between neighbouring host countries and the international community.
- Support in the context of the Syrian crisis should be expanded while taking into consideration the contexts and realities in the host countries, and while continuing to look at how this support best addresses the needs of both refugees and host communities.
- The panel also highlighted the importance of collaboration between different sectors and key stakeholders in order to support integrated qualitative and participatory approaches. The involvement of the international community, hosting governments and institutions, as well as of host communities and refugees themselves in enabling access to higher education is central to the development of response interventions.
- Rather than focusing exclusively on responding to basic needs while continuing to provide new development opportunities, there is a need to move to a "response plan 2.0" and for educational institutions to provide beneficiaries with lifelong skills that will help them in the future. This necessitates securing funding for additional scholarships, especially given that the number of students qualified for higher education is increasing.
- It is important to move to a more integrated approach towards scholarship provision that will take into consideration the student pathway from secondary education all the way to employment. It is essential to create a cost-efficient model which would include language support, flexibility in the procedures, psychosocial support and career counselling.
- Support for online learning opportunities will fill the gaps in provision and expedite access to higher education by preparing students for enrolment in higher education. Master's degrees via connected learning might provide the solution for students who cannot be reached through traditional scholarships.
- Consideration should be given to the provision of more opportunities for qualitative technical vocational training in accredited institutions as well as scholarships to pursue master's and Ph.D. degrees.



- The importance of building a bridge between higher education and the labour market by moving from an isolated, siloed approach towards further inter-sectoral cooperation was highlighted. In this context, further career counselling and mentoring is needed as well as research on the skills needs of the labour market. Potentially, market-oriented or career-oriented educational opportunities, especially short training courses or bachelor degrees which are compatible with labour market requirements, can be offered.
- The approach to the provision of high-quality education should not be limited to improving employment prospects in the hosting countries or in Europe. An analysis of the post-crisis situation within Syria and of the future needs of the Syrian labour market and Syrian higher education should be considered as well.
- Communication, networking and dialogues are essential to enable the awareness-raising, learning, and knowledge-exchange through which effective solutions and responses to the crisis can be identified and misconceptions be tackled.
- In order to improve the response to the Syrian crisis in the higher education sector and to understand the challenges arising, it is important to involve the Syrian refugee community in solving their problems and to actively engage beneficiaries in the design of activities, policy-making and the vision underpinning interventions. This engagement should be facilitated through universities, workshops and focus groups.

