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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Wednesday, November 14, 2018

German Jordanian University (GJU)
Building F | Activity Hall | S023
Madaba > Jordan

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National Stakeholders Dialogue Jordan
"Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience"
REPORT

Date: 14 November 2018

Location: German-Jordanian University, Amman

SUMMARY

On Wednesday November 14, 2018, the HOPES project funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund' and implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic, organised its second National Stakeholders Dialogue, entitled 'Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience' at the German Jordanian University (GJU), Madaba Jordan.

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

Following the welcome notes by the Delegation of the European Union to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the 'Madad Fund' as well the German Jordanian University and the HOPES project; the dialogue incorporated a panel session and various presentations addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system in Jordan.

The dialogue sought to integrate suggestions of Syrian students and to discuss programmatic challenges and needs of the higher education institutions in terms of foreign language courses. It also explored further recommendations and approaches towards helping both refugee students and institutions to overcome language barriers on a national level.

More information on the Concept Brief and Programme (Link)

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

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

> **Awareness raising and outreach campaigns:** The dialogue emphasised the need for outreach campaigns and expectation management for students embarking on English (or other) language training courses. In Jordan, university students are expected to have a high level of IT skills and English language (B1/B2). Prospective Syrian students need to be made aware of both the language requirements of higher education and the amount of language study required to reach that level. To counter student drop-out, perhaps a learning contract committing the student to complete the course, linked to retrospective payment of travel and meal costs, within a fixed tariff.

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> **IT skills training; induction prior to online and blended courses:** It was suggested that a 'flipped classroom' approach, where students do 'homework', online first, then discuss and practise in the classroom, would ensure greater commitment to, and integration of, online learning as an integral part of the course. This would require some pre-course orientation to online learning. Also suggested were WhatsApp groups both for per groups on the course, but also linking to other English learners around the world, and to volunteer English speakers globally, to integrate both language practice and development of online social skills.

> **Support staffing built in to online offers:** A focus on providing on-line learning mentors/ facilitators would also encourage greater use of online options. There are a large number of free online language learning courses: Duolingo, British Council and BBC online learning content and so on, and providing students with this kind of support in accessing these courses would be beneficial.

> **Scheduling and locations**: The need to provide flexibility in the timing, and a wide variety of locations of the courses, was a key element in the discussions. The latter would minimise costs and time required for students. Suggestions were made around more intensive courses (16-20 hours per week) for a shorter period (6 weeks) for those who are able to commit to this intensity. Assuming further progress is made by students, further courses could then be made available, based on their academic or employment aspirations.

> **Special bespoke provision for those in camps:** Further research in to the particular needs of students based in camps should be undertaken, to include other successful examples of language learning in camps, both from within Jordan and elsewhere.

> **Better coordination between scholarship providers:** The meeting brought this up a great deal as an aspiration, but practical suggestions for implementing such coordination were few.

> **Course design:** Students should be offered a clear pathway for language learning, both in terms of increasing language proficiency, but also leading to specific types of language learning, whether for work, or for academic purposes. Criteria for progression would need to be clear both in terms of language level and suitability for different purposes. Incentives would include access to internationally recognised qualifications at the higher levels. It was suggested that courses were not well balanced across all four skills, and that practical application of skills, for example writing an application for a scholarship or for university entry, and preparation for an oral interview for work or a scholarship should be included in courses.

> Courses of approximately 100 hours each at a number of levels should be considered, for example: entry level (A1); next level (A2); Lower intermediate (B1); Upper intermediate (B2); IELTS preparation course (B2); Academic prep courses; Science/humanities/social sciences HE prep courses content, study skills and language. (B2); English for the workplace and soft skills. (B1, B2); Interpreter training (C1 minimum)

> **Teacher training:** There was insufficient evidence from this meeting of either supply or demand for English language teacher training. There was a suggestion of some research to be undertaken into numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English in Jordan, (or non-teachers with good English that could be trained)

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DIALOGUE REPORT

This report, on the Jordan National Stakeholder Dialogue, held in Amman on 14 November 2018, is the first in the series, and summarises the discussion of the issues, and recommendations for practically addressing these issues in Jordan. When all five dialogues have taken place, a consolidated report will be created allowing the identification of common issues across countries, where a common approach to solutions might work, as well as issues and solutions that are specific to a particular context.

Structure of Dialogues

Each dialogue addresses the following broad areas, though it is likely that different dialogues will focus on some areas more than others. But all dialogues seek to find ways to improve **access** to **high quality** language learning, **continuity and relevance** of learning, and, where possible, a **recognised record of achievement.**

- Addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education systems
- Encouraging a culture of commitment – addressing drop out
- Different models of language course delivery in the local context
- E-learning – fully utilising blended, online and digital courses
- English/ 'Language for Specific Purposes'
- Needs in terms of teacher training

The structure of each dialogue follows the following lines:

- Welcome and introductions, including any recommendations from previous events.

- **Panel session: Addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system**
- **Language for resilience for Syrian students: Brainstorming and Group Discussions:**
  Identifying opportunities in language programmes
  - > Programmatic challenges and needs
  - > Capacity of the higher education institutions

  The session involves:
  - Brainstorming ideas onto flipcharts of issues and potential solutions to the issues above
  - Group discussions on each of the flipcharts, and other issues
  - Feedback from groups with recommendations

- **Next steps and closing remarks.**

Process of the dialogue and issues addressed

There were 36 participants in the dialogue comprising experts, providers of scholarships, government representatives, university representatives, teachers of English, and Syrian students. All took active part in the discussions, and the views of the students were particularly sought.

Welcoming remarks were given by Dr Abdel Nasser Hindawi of the HOPES project office, providing a background to the HOPES project and to this series of national stakeholder dialogues focused on language for resilience. Harry Haynes, the HOPES project lead for the language programme spoke of the 17 partner universities involved in the Higher Education English Access programme, including four in Jordan.

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Mrs Maria Rosa Vettoretto, Attaché, representative of the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the 'Madad Fund' and EU Delegation to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, noted that both the hosts, the German Jordanian university, and the HOPES programme were designed around scholarships. She noted the importance of being self-critical, and learning from the experience of the last few years.

She stressed the need to start the process from the needs of students. Students need to know what options they have, and they need to know that English is essential for success. She noted the need for language improvement to be clearly linked to the requirements of higher education, or the workplace, or the needs of scholarship providers.

By focusing on teacher development, the programme had built capacity within universities to provide English language courses, but it has meant that the overall target number of students has not yet been reached. There is a high level of dropout from the English courses and ways of addressing this, and more clearly linking language skills with scholarships, need to be considered. She recommended that students actively participate in the design of future language learning programs.

Dr Dhiah Abou-Tair of the German Jordanian University, summarised his university's scholarship programme the EDU-Syria, also funded by the Madad Fund and which was supported by the EU funded, British Council managed, LASER programme. This provided English language support to scholarship holders in parallel to the academic programme. In 2016, 200 Syrian undergraduate students were enrolled without any English language requirement, and the LASER programme provided linked English language training in-session. Students found it difficult to do both their higher education course content together with intensive English language learning (as well as work and family responsibilities). For Master's level students, there was a requirement that they complete an English course before they begin their academic course. But, even when completing that through LASER, most of the students failed their university entrance English test. This was partly due to the method of English teaching in LASER, which was communicative and interactive, compared with the University exam which was structural and grammar focused.

Dr Ahmed Hawamdah, of Jerash University discussed his research into the language needs of Syrian refugees. He noted the lack of coordination between donors and scholarship providers and the overlap of some issues and the differing requirements of different donors in regard to language.

English language training was rarely closely linked to either the scholarship requirements or the subject that the student sought to study.

He highlighted the need for greater clarity for Syrian students about the central need for a command of English when attending Jordanian universities. Unlike Jordanians, who have been studying English for many years before attending university, most Syrian students have very limited experience of English and are unprepared for the high-level of English required in Jordanian universities. There is little in-session language support for Syrian students within Jordanian universities.

Dr Nahed Ghazzoul is a Syrian professor at Al Zaytoonah University in Amman. She reported on a recent study she undertook by questionnaire to approximately 1000 Syrian students in five WhatsApp groups. She got 494 responses.

The survey asked three broad questions: Is English-language important to you? What is your opinion of the HOPES English language programme? What else do you want to say about English language learning?

90% of the students responded that English language programmes were very important to them, and 10% noted the need for certificates. The HOPES English language programme was seen as extremely useful buy almost all respondents and helped them in applying for scholarships. But 80% felt the APTIS certificate was insufficient, and they would have welcomed a longer course, or the opportunity to do a follow-up course. She mentioned that high course dropout was primarily due to issues around distance and transportation costs, as well as inconvenient timing for courses. Most students would prefer highly intensive courses to reduce travel costs and to learn more quickly.

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They would prefer native speaker teachers if possible and would welcome some more innovative teaching approaches, for example, they felt writing is not currently a focus for the HOPES courses.

When the panel opened for questions and comments from the floor, **Dr Awad Al Sheikh** of the UNHCR recognised the importance of skills in English, and that our task is to help and support students to achieve the English language level they need. He suggested that, as a general rule, teachers in Jordan teach rules of English rather than teaching how to use English. The UNHCR can support any programmes proposed for Zaatari camp.

This was followed by a lively discussion from members of the panel with regard for access to Zaatari camp, connectivity within the camp, and its suitability for successful language learning. Dr Hawamdeh noted that any single course is not suitable for everyone and that more specific English-language teaching is required for induction into universities. A teacher suggested that blended learning courses needed to be designed with care particularly if they are to be delivered within the camps. Limited connectivity and the timing of courses make them difficult to sustain.

The discussions ended with Dr Awad suggesting that, in future planning, it is best to speak to the people who are living and working in the camp to decide what is possible or not, as connectivity has been greatly improved in the recent past.

A student spoke up to praise his non-native speaker teacher in helping him achieve an upper intermediate level of English. But now he was looking for access to an IELTS preparation course which was difficult to find.

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

Below is a summary of the comments on each of the five flip charts which asked:

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

- Low level of English of young students, and it is difficult to reach the required level.
- Communicative skills: conversation, presentations.
- Academic skills: preparing a research question, and structuring a research study.
- IELTS/TOEFL preparation.
- Funding.

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

- Teaching materials are too general, need more targeted materials.
- Neither face to face or online are appropriate for refugees: 'hybrid' courses are needed, with a facilitator to keep students motivated and on track.
- Location of the learning centre is important, if it is too far for the student they are likely to drop out.
- The duration of the course is too short to improve all the 4 skills.

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

- Have someone to talk to students and understand their issues and try to make adjustments and motivate the students, to ensure they can continue on the course.
- Create a positive and human relationship with the student.
- Make the courses more directly relevant to the students' needs.
- Co-ordinated courses between donors: donors to co-ordinate better.
- Identify incentives for the students to continue on the course, e.g. refund transportation costs.

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

- Access/space/incentives/guidance/recognition.
- Create a closed learner management system (LMS) for students and teacher. Assistance/guidance in using the tools, and skills like seeking learning resources on-line.

Is there a demand for English for specific purposes?

- Yes, but which 'specific purpose' is it?

Is it practical to offer more teacher training to Syrian language teachers?

- Yes, because they share a culture with the students they will be able to connect with them better. (The flipchart addressing English for specific purposes and teacher training was not discussed, and no group coalesced around the poster. There is a lesson here about not providing yes/no questions...)

The four mixed groups (each containing at least one student) self-selected to address in detail one of the questions, and where possible the others. In the groups the discussions were wide ranging, and the summarised conclusions do not fully represent the richness of the discussions. Below are the summarised notes taken by Francis Randle in the group discussing barriers to learning English for Syrian students, as an example of the richness of the discussion.

Barriers to learning English

Higher education in Jordan requires English competence at the intermediate/upper intermediate level. While Jordanians learn English at school from an early age this is not the case in Syria, where there is a single course, with a single textbook. Many HE students are therefore almost 'false beginners'. At Al Quds university the whole diploma course is in English. Students have to make presentations in English. Sometimes the teacher may translate words in class, but otherwise it is all English. Private universities teach undergraduate courses in Arabic, but postgraduate in English. Syrians at school do not understand the importance of English for higher education. A teacher in the group recounted how a student succeeded in getting accepted for a course even though his grades were low because he did well in his interview, which was conducted in English.

IELTS is very difficult, particularly listening. Speaking and conversation are very important, but some English courses do not include speaking. Syrians find it difficult to understand the importance of English in Jordan as it was not important in Syria. However, after four years, students' attitudes are changing. HOPES offers the APTIS examination, but it is not recognised. People are looking for IELTS or TOEFL, but most Syrian students are not ready for IELTS. 'The more you are aware of the exam, the more you will study'. HOPES does not offer IELTS, or preparation courses for it. A (fluent English speaking) teacher notes that IELTS is very hard. He received a 5.5, and was very disappointed. When his students heard this 'they got very afraid'.

Syrian students do not emphasise the 4 skills; students are often absent when asked to prepare presentations. Skills are linked and should be taught in an integrated way. Students should be given projects or assignments in English (but they will use Google Translate). Students want to learn how to complete application forms, write a CV and cover, prepare for and be able to do an interview. The want to prepare answers for likely questions in interviews, but interviews are difficult.

Students can take basic English courses, but the courses do not support the curriculum they are studying, or plan to study. There are no English for specific purposes courses (ESP). The problem becomes worse at postgraduate level where the English requirements are higher. The college gives a test in all four skills. After the entrance exam, there is no further language support. He pays for language lessons at a private centre.

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

> Syrian students need to be made aware of the level of English skills needed for higher education within Jordan's higher education system.
> An IELTS preparation course is required.
> Specialised English courses for work are needed.
> It is difficult for students to leave camps for English lessons. It is better to teach within the camps to international examination level.

e-learning

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

> Technologies are available in most places.
> Prepare students for the importance of e-learning, including practical guidance, and as motivation. Link this to training on 'how to prioritise e-learning within a busy life'.
> Create peer communities for e-learning for mutual support.
> Accredit e-learning courses.

Comments from other groups included: are Syrian students autonomous learners? Peer learning online is a great tool. Linking students online with native speakers is needed for motivation and further learning. Online needs to be, at least initially, closely integrated with the students learning plan, i.e. not an optional extra.

Delivery mechanisms

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

Time: Integrate language into the overall learning process as part of the course. Allow for different times for lessons. Make the courses more intensive so the travel time/cost is less. Consider an intensive 4 to 6-month course prior to subject learning.

Location: Where possible use the same institution for English learning as for students' area of study. Create more English learning centres.

Online: Needs to be closely integrated with face-to-face teaching. Greater facilitation of 'how to use' online opportunities, and methods for learning online.

Face-to-face: There is not enough writing on the current HEEAP course. 100 hours +45 online is too short to progress to a level suitable for English medium Higher Education. Courses should be long enough to finish all 12 units in the course book (another 20 hours). Research shows that many students do not use the 45 hours of online learning and this needs to be dealt with.

Other comments: There is a need recognised accreditation of English studies: for getting a job, for future study at high level. Offer international exams (e.g. IELTS) to those able to do them.

Addressing dropping out:

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

> Transportation issues around distance and cost.
> Change student expectations: ensure they understand what they are likely to achieve within a 100 (+45 on line) hours of learning.
> Teachers should focus on all skills throughout the course.
> Provide better materials so that students engage more in the learning process.

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> Provide students with a clear 'pathway, based on their success, with different levels of graduation, up to IELTS preparation courses.
> Small levels of financial support essential for most people.

Other comments: A 'culture of commitment' is not there because Syrian students are not paying for courses. It was suggested that this is a cultural issue. Students have to be taught the need to realise the benefits of study by persevering. Within the camps, there are many women-led households. There is a trend for children of these households to leave school early, in order to work to earn income for the family.

Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

Awareness raising/outreach campaigns
Raise awareness on:
> the importance of English and IT skills for student entering Jordanian HE (B1/B2)
> different language courses available, and entry level required to benefit from them
> what can be expected from 100 +45 hours of language learning (one level up e.g. A1 to A2).
> The commitment needed to complete course, incentivised by reimbursement of travel and meals at a fixed tariff (paid in retrospect).

IT skills training/induction prior to online/blended courses
> Provide much greater integration of online/f2f learning.
> Explore a flipped classroom approach for language learning: students do 'homework' first, on line, and then discuss and practice in class.
> Promote peer support for eLearning through, for example WhatsApp groups linking to other English learners around the world, linking to volunteer English speakers globally, for practice, and development of social skills.

Support staffing built in to online offers

> Mentors/facilitators should be trained and supplied.
> There is a large number of free online language learning courses: Duolingo, British Council and BBC online learning content, and so on, and providing students with this kind of support in accessing these would be beneficial.

Scheduling and locations
> Locations and times need to be given greater consideration.
> There should be flexibility in timing and types of courses. Consider intensive courses 16-20 hours per week for 6 weeks) for those who demonstrate the capacity, one week's break, then continue with the next level intensive course.
> There should be a wide choice of locations for study.
> Conduct research into where concentrations of students are: central, or near known roundabouts/junctions and so on. Move the provision nearer the students rather than the students to the provision.

Special bespoke provision for those in camps
> Further research is needed.

> Examine other examples of this work in camps both within Jordan and elsewhere (Cf. University of Geneva).

Course design:

Provide:

> a clear pathway for students, each level with clear success criteria for progress to the next level (approx. 100 hours each level).
> internationally recognised qualifications from B1 onwards (e.g. Cambridge First certificate).
> balanced teaching of all four skills from the beginning.
> a link between language courses and scholarships and academic courses.
> a focus on writing skills and interview skills for academic success.
> courses at entry level (A1), next level (A2), lower intermediate (B1), intermediate (B2)
> an IELTS preparation course
> academic preparative courses: Science/humanities/social sciences HE prep courses content, study skills and language.
> English for the workplace and soft skills.
> Arabic/English Interpreter training courses.

Teacher training

> Insufficient evidence from this meeting of either supply or demand.
> Some research into numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English or those with good English that could be trained.

Attachments

- **Presentation of Dr. Nahed Ghazzoul**

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

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