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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Monday March 4, 2019

CRISTAL ERBIL HOTEL
100 meter Rd. Badawa | Erbil > Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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

Date: 4 March 2019

Location: Cristal Hotel in Erbil, KRI

SUMMARY

On Monday March 4, 2019 the HOPES project funded by the European Union and implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic, organised a National Stakeholders Dialogue, entitled 'Language Needs of Syrians for Higher Education - Language for Resilience' at the Cristal Hotel in Erbil, KRI.

This gathering is part of a series of stakeholders 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 welcomes by Dr Abdel Nasser Al-Hindawi from DAAD, and Jeffrey Armstrong from the British Council; the dialogue incorporated a panel session and various presentations addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system in KRI. The dialogue integrated suggestions of Syrian students and discussed 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 KRI.

e-learning

- E-learning was seen as a useful adjunct to, rather than a central part of, language learning.
- Providing Syrian young people with initial training to enable them to access free online language learning materials were seen as useful.
- Hardware, software and Internet access also perceived as difficulties.

Delivery Mechanisms and Course Design:

- Greater consideration needed of a pathway from initial instruction through to the level required for university entrance, for example IELTS examination.
- Clarity needed of both the outcomes and demands of undertaking a language course. Managing expectations.
- Greater support needed for students already in university to continue learning English.
- Provide flexibility both in timing and location of courses, particularly taking into account the needs of women.
- Consider stipends to cover travel and accommodation where required

Teacher training

- Teacher training courses should not only include skills for classroom training but also assisting students to access online learning materials that they can study by themselves.
- Teacher training should focus on learning outcomes rather than teacher inputs.

DIALOGUE REPORT

This report, on the KRI National Stakeholder Dialogue, held in Erbil on 4 March 2019, is the fifth and final event in the series, and summarises the discussion of the issues, and recommendations for practically addressing these issues in KRI. A consolidated report, on the finding of all of the dialogues 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 different dialogues 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
- eLearning – 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:

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- 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 approximately 20 participants in the dialogue, comprising experts, providers of scholarships, university representatives, teachers of English, and Syrian students. All took active part in the discussions, and the views of the students were particularly sought.

Welcoming remarks were given by Dr Abdel Nasser Al-Hindawi, the deputy director of HOPES, providing a brief background to the project, and the focus of the dialogue: what has been done and what still needs to be done.

Expert Panel

Hogir Tofiq, Director of English Language Center at Sulaimani Polytechnic University, spoke first. He covered the language needs of university students. For most students, going to university is the beginning of a new life, with challenges of self-reliance and self-discovery. Universities need to help students deal with this, and helping improve their language and academic skills is central to this. Language proficiency in all four skills and a command of grammar and vocabulary are essential. Good listening skills are essential for learning and speaking skills for articulating what has been learned. Reading critically and thinking critically, are essential skills, as are study skills and common core language skills. Time management and library skills are also essential for student success. English medium education requires all these skills in English.

He described the language needed for university students as (English) language for academic purposes (EAP), which arises form a good general grounding in English. EAP can be divided into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). EGAP is what is covered in pre-sessional courses, and in-session learning: English is needed for undertaking (all) academic tasks. ESAP is focused on the specific language needed for an individual discipline. Language skills and study skills are, therefore, interdependent. Receptive language skills are a prerequisite for productive language skills, Academic writing is a complex amalgam of language, content knowledge and writing skills. These skills are needed by all students, not just Syrians, and teacher training is needed for those working with developing students language and study skills.

Dr. Himdad al Mohammed, Professor of English at Salahaddin University, spoke next. He noted that English is an essential need for refugees, including international examinations like SAT or IELTS as well. There needs to be a commitment to language learning from both the teachers and the students. It is best if the atmosphere is relaxed and where possible to use Syrian teachers who understand where their students are coming from. It should be a content driven curriculum but sensitive to the particular needs of Syrian refugee students. For example, talking about family, a common starting point for language learning, could be fraught with difficulty when involving refugee students. There should be greater coordination among the various bodies that are involved in this work. Syrian teachers are not used in the courses, because of difficulties around recognition of qualifications. Apart from general English, vocational English for jobs and social integration are needed. It is time to recognise the value and utility of e-learning for refugees. There should be a focus on continuing professional development for Syrian, and all Kurdish, teachers.

Shaswar Kamal, British Council English programme manager, was next. As a teacher with 25 years of experience he noted the importance of Arabic but also other ethno-religious languages like Kurdish. For refugees there are needs for teaching in three languages: mother tongue, host community language, and English. Refugees need more and wider options for language learning beyond the classroom, for example mobile phone apps. For the host community refugees have potential capacities which can benefit not only themselves, but also the host community.

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He noted the difference between the Syrian and the KRI school curriculums. In Syria 2016 only the primary sector was compulsory for everyone in Syria. In KRI, K1-2 and grades 1 to 9 are compulsory. In KRI, this is followed by either a three-year academic stream, or a three-year vocational stream, or a five-year institutional programme.

Universities have a foundation year +3, and some courses extend to 5 or 6-year programs. Not all universities use English as a medium of education for courses, though science courses generally are in English. Humanities and social sciences are generally not in English. Before entry to universities, Syrian students should have a good working knowledge of both English and Kurdish. Syrian students have problems with both these languages, particularly poor spelling because of pronunciation issues. Language is a sensitive issue and intervention in learning languages should start much earlier than preparation for university. There are also issues around the attitude of learners towards English or Kurdish. Shaswar believes people who are already bilingual in two languages will have developed language learning techniques which can help with learning the third and fourth language. He proposed compulsory language courses for everybody including workers: general English courses, English for vocational work and English for academic purposes. He proposed using Syrians as volunteer teachers and many more practical steps to help embed language learning in daily life.

The final speaker,**Louay Salman Haji,** was a master's student supported by HOPES who used to be a teacher in Syria. He noted the wide gap between what is needed and the resources available. For master level courses English language requirements are quite high, particularly for skills related to academic language. It is rare in teaching that equal balance is given to the four skills. Syrians generally have low levels of English and generally see speaking as the most important skill which is therefore given a priority over the other skills. A broader focus on all four skills sees more frequent dropout of students, therefore teachers tend to teach what the students see as the most important aspect, and the learning of language is therefore unbalanced. Undergraduate students need general English and ESP, whereas postgraduate students need ESP/EAP. Because most language teaching organisations are commercial they tend to teach what the market requires rather than the balance of all four skills, and they should stick to the CFR language standards.

"We love our professors but language teaching is different. You can't teach language by lecturing."

Every student has different needs and needs to be helped along the way. Only 1% of refugees are in higher education and English not only gives the tools needed to benefit from higher education, but also the tools for applying for scholarships.

Following a short break there was a general discussion on the issues raised in the panel discussion. It was suggested there was a need for a 'Census' of Syrians in KRI, including Syrian graduates who cannot find work. In particular to look at the role of English and local languages, and general communication skills. What does the market need? Employers are looking for degrees and other certificates but soft skills are not valued: *"employers don't care about communication skills".* There were some disagreement about this and with some saying that communication skills are essential in commercial jobs. The conversation widened out to more general issues facing refugees seeking residence in KRI and was brought back to focus on language. There is little coordination between the organisations who support language learning in KRI, and it was noted that e-learning is not recognised by the government. While English is in demand in the jobs market other skills are as well. However the economy is in recession and so there are no jobs for the 5,000+ graduates each year.

The participants then broke into five discussion groups in different areas and discussion was lively throughout. At the end of the session each group presented a flip chart with their recommendations for the future development of English courses. These are summarised below.

Barriers to learning English

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

- Private universities are moving towards English as medium of instruction (EMI). Some are completely EMI and others only in part.

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- Public universities require Kurdish. Examinations are needed for entry.
- There are no specific courses for Syrian refugees at universities, but they can attend general courses that are available for everyone.
- The demand from Syrian refugees for English for special purposes, particularly business and academic English, is high. However, HOPES does not provide English follow up courses to scholarship students in KRI. They recommend a placement test followed by successive courses until the students reach the required level for academic work, or for successful employment.

e-learning

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

- Equipment including computers, laptops, data show projectors and internet services and are needed, in addition to software, programs and applications.
- IT training is required to make the best use of all of the above.
- More study in this regard but e-learning should be interactive and guided by a teacher.
- Digital learning platforms could be used and be supportive, but should not be the main tool for language learning. Also e-learning is good fun for learning some skills, rather than education as a whole process.

Delivery mechanisms

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

- Encourage commitment by being clear about the benefits of committing to learning, and understanding the consequences of their actions.
- Advocate for special cases, including women.
- Address issues of logistics around transport and accommodation.
- Address the differences between students within the education sector system and those who are working.
- What should be done with dropouts? Ensure the selection of the right students.
- What language requirements are mandatory or optional?

Teacher training and ESP

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

- Teacher training should not only cover teaching classes of students, but also managing online courses, and blended learning courses.
- Content of teacher training/upgrading courses should include: needs analysis (particularly in ESP), how to best teach the four skills, making effective use of online platforms and a focus on interaction and learning outputs.
- Areas of training will include general communicative English; and ESP divided into English for academic purposes and English for occupational/vocational purposes.

Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

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 KRI.

e-learning

- E-learning was seen as a useful adjunct to, rather than a central part of, language learning.
- Providing Syrian young people with initial training to enable them to access free online language learning materials was seen as useful.

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- Lack of hardware, software and Internet access are also perceived as difficulties.

Delivery Mechanisms and Course Design:

- A pathway is needed from initial instruction through to the level required for university entrance, for example the IELTS examination.
- Clarity is needed on both the outcomes and demands of undertaking a language course. Expectations need to be managed.
- Greater support is needed for students already in university to continue learning English.
- Provide flexibility both in timing and location of courses, particularly taking into account the needs of women.
- Consider stipends to cover travel and accommodation where required.

Teacher training

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