



HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES
FOR SYRIANS

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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on
Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Thursday, December 13, 2018

Limak Ambassadeur Hotel – Ankara
Bogaz Sokak No:19 | Ankara > Turkey

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

Date: 13 December 2018

Location: Limak Ambassadeur Hotel in Ankara, Turkey

SUMMARY

On Thursday December 13, 2018 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 Limak Ambassadeur Hotel in Ankara, Turkey.

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 Turkey as well as the HOPES project; the dialogue incorporated a panel session and various presentations addressing the specific language requirements of the local higher and further education system in Turkey. 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 Turkey.

- > **e-learning:** Many Syrian students lack appropriate IT skills and need help to improve these skills in order to fully benefit from online materials. This training takes time and considerable support from teachers. Courses are intensive, and this gives limited time for revision.

Students need experience and orientation before they are able to self-direct their online learning.

Blended learning needs to be fully integrated into the course and include peer learning and student collaboration. Students need to be trained in how to do this.

All online materials need to be made mobile friendly. LearnEnglish Select (British Council online course provided on HEEAP courses) is very useful when it is accessible, but it might be necessary to restructure it.

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Students tend to 'skip' speaking practice. Mobile compatibility needs to be central to the design of any upgrade to LearnEnglish Select.

If there is a recognised qualification for online learning, this will provide an incentive for people to undertake and complete the course.

- > **Delivery Mechanisms and Course Design:** Teaching schedules need to match student availability. Offer morning and evening courses as well as afternoon courses (evenings are not good for many women). Female students often cannot attend courses because of dependent children, therefore create classes which allow both mother and children to attend. In Istanbul in particular, travelling distance is important as it takes time to get to other parts of the city. Some consideration should be given to providing courses in centralised locations.

Rewards for students for attendance should be provided: e.g. money, entrance fees for IELTS (or other) tests, social activities. Consider a small stipend to cover students transport and meal costs.

Social events will help build a closer student learning community. Either provide a university-recognised certificate or ensure universities accredit the APTIS test (as provided on HEEAP).

Another recommendation would be to develop a smart phone app for online learning, related to the course, which can include practice with native speakers and have regular 'live' online classes with native speaker teachers and a learning community.

It would be better to have longer term, less intensive courses with more opportunity to practice using the language i.e. 300 hours proposed. In addition, integrate some specialised English courses at different levels e.g. English for medicine or engineering. A 25-hour course was proposed.

More focus should be allocated to interactive teaching in the classroom that includes student-led activity and a lot of speaking practice, in order to break routine and avoid boredom. Mixing higher and lower level classes together will both provide peer support to lower level students and motivate them through a positive example of language success.

A welcoming approach from the institution, together with ongoing in-course language and integration support would be very helpful.

- > **Teacher training:** Focused training is needed (rather than general ELT (English Language Teaching) training) for teachers on the specific courses they are teaching (such as HEEAP), and on the content their students will be covering on the course.

Some Syrian students lack basic literacy in English down the level of not knowing the alphabet. There are also pronunciation issues which are different for Arabic and Turkish speakers. More support is needed for teachers to successfully support Syrian students with their language issues.

Teachers also need focused training in the specific needs of Syrian students: language learning issues, as above, but also some psychosocial training on how to deal with non-academic issues in the classroom arising from trauma, and from social adjustment issues.



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DIALOGUE REPORT

This report, on the Turkey National Stakeholder Dialogue, held in Ankara on 13 December 2018, is the fourth in the series, and summarises the discussion of the issues, and recommendations for practically addressing these issues in Turkey. 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
- 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:

 - 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 32 participants in the dialogue, comprising experts, providers of scholarships, university representatives, teachers of English, and Syrian and (one) Turkish students. All took actively part in the discussions, and the views of the students were particularly sought.

Welcoming remarks were given by Dr Carsten Walbinder Project Director of HOPES, providing a brief background to the HOPES project, and the focus of the dialogue: what has been done and what still needs to be done. He noted that the language of higher education in Turkey is obviously primarily Turkish. And unlike other countries where at least the host community's language is Arabic, the language of the community is Turkish. This causes double difficulties to Syrian students in Turkey. They need to learn Turkish, and for many courses they also need English to



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enrol and succeed. Harry Haynes, the HOPES project lead for the **Higher Education English Access Programme (HEEAP)** for HOPES, spoke of the 17 partner universities involved in the programme, including five in Turkey.

Expert Panel

Ms **Jennifer Roberts**, Senior Education Officer at UNHCR, noted that, for refugees in Turkey, language is not only needed for education but for daily life. Language is an issue of protection, and is needed for living, as well as for personal needs like visits to a doctor.

In Turkey, 97% of refugee children are in primary school, but only 27% in secondary school. Access to higher education for refugees builds human capital, enhances community resilience, improves protection, builds social ties and allows graduates to contribute to the host society.

The pathway to higher education in Turkey is by having a recognised Grade 12 certificate from Turkey or another country (e.g. Syria), by passing the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) entry examination (YÖS) and by providing proof of Turkish language proficiency.

UNHCR offers a comprehensive higher education support programme: a preparatory year focused on language improvement; promotion of enrolment of refugees, and support for refugee students to continue with their studies and prevent dropout. The 9-month preparatory course includes 960 hours of instruction, aiming to take beginners in Turkish to C1 level (most reach B2-C1). A monthly stipend of TL700 is provided.

8,000 students have completed this course in 3 years, <7,000 urban dwellers, and >1,000 rural dwellers. The courses have covered 21 cities, 27 Universities, and 42 TÖMER (Turkish Language) Institutes. A high level of Turkish language competency is achieved, and students have shown a high level of commitment.

From the lessons learned so far: The intensive course (30 hrs per week) needs to be completed for success. Some institutes have shown a lower level of success.

There is an ongoing need for standardisation of courses, and regular monitoring for quality assurance. YÖS examinations, and their preparatory courses take time, and university enrolment can take place up to 2 years after the completion of the preparatory course.

Ms. Aysen Guven, Head of English and Higher Education for British Council Turkey, spoke of the British Council's strategy of engaging with universities, and this presentation provides a snapshot of work to improve English in Higher Education in Turkey, both for refugees and the host community.

Research has demonstrated that English language barriers apply to both refugees and Turkish speakers as well. There are 2,20 universities in Turkey, of which 120 also use English as a medium of instruction. There are 20,000 Syrian students at Turkish universities. But they, like Turkish students as well, face challenges in accessing quality English language provision.

In a 2015 British Council report on improving ELT provision in Turkish higher education, the fundamental finding was that access is there, but the quality of provision is very variable. In 2017, the British Council started work to improve capacity in some specific institutions, and in 2018 have been developing minimum standards for English as a medium of education (EMI) in preparatory courses. So far, 10 institutions have gone through the assessment procedure. The power of having Syrian, and other international students, is crucial to the continuing internationalisation of Turkish higher education. Any English language solutions for Syrian students also need to be available for Turkish students. The priority areas for developing English skills, are for academic purposes, for greater community integration and for employability.

The final two speakers were **Dr Cengic Turan**, lecturer in foreign languages, Adana Science and Technology University, and **Mr Mohammed Musaob Wazzan**, a Syrian, working as a lecturer in the school of Foreign languages in the Social Sciences Faculty at the University of Ankara.

Dr Turan noted that the need for English for all students is real, many courses are through English medium, and even those that are not, have English language reading requirements. A better English provision will benefit all students at this level. He had found it challenging to teach Syrians, and it took time to learn how cultural and

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gender differences manifested themselves in language learning. He found the HEEAP package well designed and it provided effective training. However, not many students benefited from the on-line component as very few used it. The Aptis exam is good, but he, and the students, would prefer to have an internationally recognised examination like IELTS as a benefit, though he recognised that the benefits of using IELTS would only appear if the students were at B1/B2 levels. In his institution there are seven teachers involved and 70 students. He has found delivering HEEAP a valuable experience.

Mr Wassan received his Master's in Syria and moved to Turkey. His brother died, so he became the only son in his family. He was looking for a PhD placement, but could not get the needed GRE certificate due to cost. He outlined some of the barriers for Syrian students in Turkey. The Turkish language courses are insufficient to meet the academic needs of students. TÖMER charges high fees, so students need to work. GMAT and IELTS examinations are too expensive and Syrian students are unfamiliar with self-directed on-line learning. The solutions offered included, fee waivers to attend international English exam preparation courses and exams (e.g. GRE and IELTS). Because of many Syrians' interrupted educational background, students need preparation in specific fields of study. Many also need to learn the skill of writing in English, which they may not have in Arabic. Models of good academic writing and feedback on their writing would be beneficial.

In the following Q&A, it was confirmed that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was recognised by the British council as part of the reforms they are working on, and Jennifer Roberts from UNHCR noted that students also needed academic language support in Turkish as well. She noted that there was considerable anxiety among students about passing tests, and she had found that removing the anxiety about tests made learning more efficient and quicker.

Discussion moved on to the particular language issues of Arabic speakers. All agreed that the biggest issue was writing, and students need both more practice in writing and more support with their writing. It was suggested that Syrians are often very good on content, but poor on grammar, spelling and punctuation. Turkish students were often observed to be the other way around.

It was agreed that having integrated Syrian and Turkish groups on HEEAP courses was beneficial to both groups and supported social cohesion. Syrian students had limited experience of online learning. No Turkish universities appear to have permanent writing centres, but the British Council report recommends these are established.

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

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

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

- Testing, and much teaching content is delivered in English at universities and Syrian students often do not have the level of English required to complete tests and courses successfully.
- In preparation programs, a barrier is a lack of university-supported extracurricular (e.g. club) opportunities for Syrian students and Turkish students to continue their interaction outside the classroom bubble. This should be institutionally supported rather than volunteer-based.
- University English requirements should be publicised more widely, by being shared on social media perhaps.
- Funding.
- English Medium Instruction practical work should be improved (there is a lack of communication between the school of foreign languages and content departments).
- The IELTS test should be provided instead of the APTIS test as in the HEEAP program



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

- Some kind of community engagement: integrating students into Turkish spaces and interactions outside the university.
- More tailored language content based on student and teacher decisions (less dependence on a pre-fixed grammar curriculum).
- Employing language experts who have experience with Syrian learners.
- Online platform for practising conversation with native speakers (or perhaps a partnership with Paper Airplanes, an organisation that actually does this for Syrians in Turkey).

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

- Test fee waiver incentives.
- Providing a prize for students who attend the course. For example, include free travel, a free international language exam or other options.
- Strengthening the certificates in a way, making them suit the standards of university.
- Long-term courses are seen as more effective (instead of intensive short-term patch). Having more than 3 to 4 hours a day can be challenging.

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

- Ensuring students sign up to the programme on time is a key issue.
- Providing scholarships to students, and making lessons more interactive, for example through trips.
- Ensuring programmes are usable on mobile devices.
- Using the platform in the classroom for the first few lessons

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

- English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) courses would be beneficial for multidisciplinary classes.
- English teachers specialising in one specific 'content' department would increase the departmental knowledge.
- Co-ordination between prep programmes and departments regarding what level of 'jargon' vocabulary proficiency is needed to adapt to departmental standards.
- English for Academic Purposes materials which cover basic academic vocabulary instead of English for Specific Purposes ones might be useful.
- HOPES should be in contact with Student preparation classes and freshman classes to see what level of vocabulary they expect.
- More training is needed specifically for Syrian refugees. Possibly with psychologists dealing with everyday issues which arise in lessons (HOPES).

Groups then coalesced around each of the flipcharts, and discussion was lively throughout the discussion session. 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:

- > As APTIS is not a recognised entrance exam for many universities, graduates of the HOPES course (HEEAP) could need additional university preparation courses, costing students time and money and potentially leading to dropout.



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- > Some students lack basic literacy in English down the level of not knowing the alphabet. There are also pronunciation issues which are different for Arabic and Turkish speakers. More support is needed for teachers to successfully support Syrian students with their language issues.
- > Further research is needed into departmental English requirements, and students' demand for language. Are students learning English only for the university requirements, or do they have a broader objective?
- > A welcoming approach from the institution together with ongoing in-course language and integration support would be very helpful.
- > More flexibility is needed in terms of timing, to cope with other demands on students' time, and training is needed for students to understand how to be successful with blended learning.

e-learning

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

- > LearnEnglish Select is very useful when it is accessible. But many students lack appropriate IT skills and need help to improve these skills in order to fully benefit from the materials. This takes time and more support from teachers.
- > Some HEEAP courses are delivered intensively, and this gives limited time for revision.
- > Blended learning needs to be fully integrated into the course and include peer learning and student collaboration. Students need to be trained in how to do this.
- > All online materials need to be made mobile friendly, and it might be necessary to restructure LearnEnglish Select so that content cannot be skipped. Students tend to skip speaking practice.
- > If there is a recognised qualification for online learning, this will provide an incentive for people to undertake and complete the course.

Comments from other groups: pronunciation teaching needs to be face-to-face. Students need experience and orientation before they are able to self-direct their online learning. LearnEnglish Select does not work well on all phones. Mobile compatibility needs to be central to the design of any upgrade to LearnEnglish Select.

Delivery mechanisms

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

- > Teaching schedules need to match student availability. Offering morning and evening courses as evenings are seen not good for women would be appreciable.
- > Location is seen as a key factor in success. In Istanbul in particular, distance is important as it takes time to get to other parts of the city. Some consideration should be given to providing courses in centralised locations.
- > Social events will make students more integrated and will create a closer learning community.
- > Rewards for students for attendance should be provided: e.g. money, entrance fees for IELTS (or other) test, social activities.
- > Either provide a university-recognised certificate or ensure universities accredit the APTIS test.
- > A smart phone application for online learning, which can include practice with native speakers is needed.
- > Offer longer term, less intensive, more practice-oriented courses. 300 hours proposed.
- > Provide specialised courses for different levels e.g. in medicine or engineering. 25 hours.
- > In the classroom, break the routine regularly with a variety of activity types to stimulate student interest.
- > Female students often cannot attend courses because they have children. Therefore, classes which allow both mother and children to attend should be created.
- > Provide interactive teaching that includes student led activity and a lot of speaking practice.



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Comments from other groups included: a recommendation for live online classes with native speaker teachers and communities working together. Mixing higher and lower level classes so that the lower level can see what is possible. Organising study buddies. The need to make teachers more proficient in English. Online material tends to be rushed through by students who thus do not receive the full benefit of the language practice activities.

Teacher training and ESP

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

- > Focused training is needed for teachers on the specific courses they are teaching, on dealing with the particular issues of Syrian students, and some training from psychologists on how to deal with non-academic issues in the classroom

Preventing dropout

- > Provide a test fee waiver or preregistration for IELTS.
- > Accreditation of APTIS certificate is needed by government/universities.
- > Use social media to create groups and loyalty to the course.
- > Recognition of students' work is needed or attendance with rewards.
- > Logistical barriers include difficulty in travelling out of Temporary Accommodation Centres.
- > Evenings are difficult for women.
- > Organise and support online learning as part of the course.
- > Allow women to bring children to classes or organise specific courses for young women.

Discussion following this focused on ways of rewarding students, with small stipends to cover transport and meal costs. In some courses they are given 'prepaid' cards, which are topped up after each class, or each week.

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 Turkey.

e-learning

- > Many Syrian students lack appropriate IT skills and need help to improve these skills in order to fully benefit from online materials. This training takes time and considerable support from teachers. Courses are intensive, and this gives limited time for revision. Students need experience and orientation before they are able to self-direct their online learning.
- > Blended learning needs to be fully integrated into the course and include peer learning and student collaboration. Students need to be trained in how to do this.
- > All online materials need to be made mobile friendly. LearnEnglish Select is very useful when it is accessible, but it might be necessary to restructure it. Students tend to 'skip' speaking practice. Mobile compatibility needs to be central to the design of any upgrade to LearnEnglish Select.
- > If there is a recognised qualification for online learning, this will provide an incentive for people to undertake and complete the course.

Delivery Mechanisms and Course Design:

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- > Teaching schedules need to match student availability. Offer morning and evening courses as well as afternoon as evenings are seen not good for women. In Istanbul in particular, travelling distance is important as it takes time to get to other parts of the city. Some consideration should be given to providing courses in centralised locations.
- > Provide rewards for students for attendance: e.g. money, entrance fees for IELTS (or other) test, social activities. A small stipend to cover students transport and meal costs should be considered. Social events will help build a closer student learning community.
- > Either provide a university-recognised certificate or ensure universities accredit the APTIS test.
- > Develop a smart phone application for online learning, related to the course, which can include practice with native speakers. Have regular 'live' online classes with native speaker teachers and a learning community.
- > Offer longer term, less intensive, more practice-oriented courses. 300 hours proposed.
- > Specialised courses for different levels (e.g. in medicine or engineering; 25 hours) should be considered.
- > Female students often cannot attend courses because of children, therefore create classes which allow both mother and children to attend.
- > Provide interactive teaching in the classroom that includes student-led activities and much speaking practice, to break routine and avoid boredom. Mix higher and lower level classes so that the lower level can see what is possible.
- > A welcoming approach from the institution together with ongoing in-course language and integration support would be very helpful.

Teacher training

- > Focused training is needed for teachers on the specific courses they are teaching, and on the 'content' courses their students will be taking.
- > Some Syrian students lack basic literacy in English down the level of not knowing the alphabet. There are also pronunciation issues, which are different for Arabic and Turkish speakers. More support is needed for teachers to successfully support Syrian students with their language issues.
- > Teachers also need focused training in the specific needs of Syrian students: language learning issues, as above, but also some training (from psychologists?) on how to deal with non-academic issues in the classroom, arising from trauma, and from social adjustment issues.

Attachments

- [Presentation of Ms. Jennifer Roberts](#)

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