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Peer support and volunteering during times of crisis: Alumni students give back to the HOPES community

In HOPES-LEB, the provision of scholarships for vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria is seen as one of the project's core activities. Given the scarcity of scholarship offers and the extremely difficult economic situation in Lebanon, a high interest had to be expected.

In order to be prepared for such a rush and the processing of a huge amount of data, it was decided to use an electronic portal for the submission and management of the applications.

For most of the applicants this was an unknown novelty which to deal with required some basic English and access to and also a certain familiarity with computers. Finally more than 1,400 students mastered this challenge.

They were supported by the HOPES-LEB team which had prepared detailed guides for the applications process and provided counselling by different means. But there was also a group of four former HOPES scholarship holders who stepped up as volunteers and made considerable efforts in order to give a helping hand to their fellow students and to enable them to submit their applications. This is their story.

A challenging application process:

When it became clear that many applicants needed personal advice and access to hardware which could not be provided by the HOPES team in Beirut alone, four former HOPES scholarship holders stepped up as volunteers and dedicated their time to support the HOPES-LEB team to disseminate the scholarship programme and to coach potential applicants in their application procedures.

Bassam, Khaled, Ali and Ahmad used their own experiences to guide students across Lebanon.

During the preparation phase, focus groups conducted with the students allowed to test the application procedure and the functioning of the portal and to fine-tune the processes based on the students and



to help students throughout the application process. Nevertheless, personal peer-to-peer advice remained a key element in the provision of support. Our four students accepted this challenge and set up individual counselling schemes in different parts of Lebanon.

Born and raised in Syria, Bassam Al Salloum, has been pursuing his Master's in Arabic Literature at the Lebanese University with the support of a HOPES scholarship. In parallel, he teaches Arabic classes to 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades students with the Kayani and JRS Foundations in the Bekaa region of Lebanon. "I faced many difficulties at the beginning to be able to understand the online application. And since I had my work and thesis proposal to work on, I asked Ahmad as well to help. We tried the applications and made recommendations. After different trials, we even suggested to produce a video documentary to explain the whole process."

According to Ahmad Jassem, a former DAFI student who holds a Bachelor's in English Literature, "the application on the DAAD/ HOPES-LEB portal was in English, which constituted a great obstacle for a large number of students. This made me want to give a helping hand to my peers wishing to apply for this scholarship. I helped in the dissemination of the scholarship announcement through my friends, and on WhatsApp. And then, I was helping in providing support to potential applicants in the Bekaa region through the students' networks or directed by HOPES-LEB and answering their requests."

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Khaled Al Asri, also a HOPES alumnus who pursued his Master's in Arabic Literature at the Lebanese University, was coaching applicants in Beirut and Saida. He says, "since I am not currently working and had some experience in computers, I considered myself able to help answering the students' requests."

In terms of challenges encountered, he added: "Applicants mostly needed help to organise themselves. It took a student many days to compile all the needed documents, which extended the application process. Students had also issues in writing their essays; I tried to help by asking them questions to guide them".

«The majority of the applicants did not have the experience or the knowledge to use computers and laptops. They did not have the proper equipment nor the internet connection and as regions were far, students could not commute.»

Like Khaled, Ali Al Mohammad, soon to be holder of a Master's degree in history and International relations with the support of a HOPES scholarship, mainly provided guidance to applicants residing in the North of Lebanon.

He considered that "since the application was online, it took us some time to review the documents and understand the process. Some students used to contact us at different times during the day and even at night; we used to stay up until sometimes one or two at night to be able to answer them. The last 2 days before the deadline, we faced a lot of pressure with the high number of students contacting us.

Communication was mainly through WhatsApp, as the majority of the applicants did not have the experience or the knowledge to use computers and laptops. They did not have the proper equipment nor the internet connection and as regions were far, students could not commute.

We had to check all the documents provided of which a lot were missing and get back to them. Data protection was also another challenge; we tried

mainly to guide the students but insisted on them applying themselves to avoid dealing with personal information".

Ahmad recalls: "The biggest challenge was related to explaining the needed documents and organising them. I had to meet with applicants in my or their home or to answer the phone for hours. Applicants did not have all the required documents, such as residency permits, or equivalency of diplomas and university certificates. We were in a constant communication with the HOPES-LEB team to ask about alternative documents that could be accepted instead, in order not to hinder the application's submission".

In addition to guiding students in their application, Bassam added, "we had as well to explain the recognition process and the documents needed to obtain equivalency of diplomas. A great number of students were not able to obtain their equivalency but yet applied".

Khaled noticed that most new applicants and secondary school graduates could not differentiate between the majors and courses at the university and were not able to check their schedule: "I sometimes went and checked the courses of each major and got the schedule and transcripts. They also didn't know how to scan and convert documents into the PDF format; they didn't know what a PDF was though it was explained in the guides".

Turning their own experiences and insights to help others

The four volunteers took these challenges into consideration when dealing with the applicants and tried to understand the personal situation of each applicant. A week after the launching of the application, Bassam and Ahmad produced a video documentary portraying in detail and step-by-step the application process.

Having been students themselves, Bassam explained that "we know best what the students might need and we knew that many questions would be raised. Though the application process would seem at the beginning complex, it is not that hard once you are familiarized with it. The objective was to guide the students throughout the application process, and help answering the common questions."

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From right to left, Bassam, Khaled, Ahmad and Ali

"It took us three days to produce the video," Ahmad recalls. "We ran into some technical hurdles for the shooting of the video and in the editing process" but considering the comments received, applicants attest to the huge benefits that they reaped from watching the documentary.

The application process lasted from 14th of July until the 8th of September 2020 and resulted in 1,420 applications from which 292 students were selected to join the HOPES-LEB community.

Bassam explained the increase in the numbers of applications in comparison with the years before: "This year, there is a lack of study opportunities offered. The DAFI programme run by UNHCR did not have an intake this year and the Dutch SPARK organisation as well. Students did not have many other opportunities to receive a scholarship. Some of the students were waiting since a year or two for the EU funded HOPES project to launch its scholarship programme and to apply. Student unions and Facebook groups such as the Association of University students in Lebanon group tried as well to help applicants by offering counselling and advice in the application process."

Amidst the current context and situation, most of the students, Lebanese and refugees from Syria as well, face many challenges in completing their higher education studies.

According to Ahmad, who received a HOPES-LEB scholarship to pursue a Master degree after 2 years of interruption, "the majority of the students if not all, have someone to support, and we work day and night in order to do so. Some of us have family and children, and some have a mother and father to take care of. Finding a balance between work, study and our private life is the biggest challenge we face. In addition to that, we have difficulties in moving around amidst Covid-19.

I live in Zahle and the University is in Beirut. I work in the morning until half past one in the afternoon. Lectures start at 2 pm. Now since we are following online lectures, I can attend from my home. But when the country will open again, I will face a new challenge."

«The objective was to guide the students throughout the application process, and help answering the common questions.»

Bassam considered that the main challenge for refugees from Syria remains the residency permit. "I had the opportunity with the help of HOPES to continue my Master's degree but the main challenge was getting the legal papers and residency permit."

Khaled considered that the main question most of the alumni and graduates ask themselves pertain to their future after graduation. "What's next? In the future, do we continue our education or do we work? We are mostly affected by the situation in our country of residence and the region and there is a lack of both study and labour market opportunities."

Ali added: "We used to hope that the situation in our country would be better and that we would return after completing our studies and graduating, even before that, to work there within our major field. This is not possible at this stage. The majority of my Master's peers want to continue their postgraduate studies but due to the lack of opportunities, they feel stuck. The crisis in Lebanon is making things worse."

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Volunteering: an added value and a great opportunity

When asked what the HOPES-LEB project could offer to help alleviate these bottlenecks, all four volunteers agreed on the added value of volunteering. Khaled stressed the importance of reducing the gap in the student's educational pathway; he proposed to strengthen the peer support experience through "volunteering opportunities for alumni students who will implement projects with other organisations for school dropouts, psychosocial support, education, depending on their studies. On one hand, we are helping others and on another hand, we gain practical experience."

For Ali, "there are no labour market opportunities due to the regulations in place. Contribution through volunteering opportunities can be indeed a solution. We gain both practical and social experience that would help us on find labour market opportunities in the future". He added that language and ICT skills are primordial in this perspective, and would allow finding opportunities outside the country of residence."

In addition to the need for an increase of scholarships, Bassam proposed that "HOPES-LEB could create a bridge between the alumni and other organisations and agencies who offer internships and volunteering opportunities specially in implementing projects and activities for adults and children inside camps." Support to the alumni in terms of finding PhD scholarships abroad was seen as necessary as well.

Ahmad's description of the volunteering experience as "somewhat stressful but at the same time wonderful and fruitful as it strengthened the spirit of cooperation and sharing" reflects the feeling expressed by all four volunteers. "The joy comes when you hear words of thanks and praise from students requesting assistance in the application. I hope that this project will continue after 2023, because it is a source of hope for all who wish to complete their academic path."

Ali added "I really appreciated having been chosen by the HOPES-LEB team to volunteer and help our peers, it provided me with a moral and psychological support allowing me to feel that we are still here and can help. It was an amazing experience, I was very happy to do something for my peers, especially the ones applying for their Bachelor, as they needed further help. I used to volunteer with other organisations, but this volunteering experience was unique since it was the

first time, I volunteered online. It taught me to use the online technology when helping other people. It allowed us to create networking opportunities and to get to know students from various majors and to learn more about other major fields which can be helpful for us in the future as well."

The recognition of the value of peer support and guidance is attested to by many of the participating students and applicants. According to Khaled "cooperation between students and alumni is primordial. We as students also needed help, this experience allowed to create a link between us and the students which can be as well considered as an example to students to help each other. Volunteering with HOPES-LEB provided me with practical experience on how to apply for other scholarships and increased my interest in searching for opportunities abroad. Thanks a lot to the team of HOPES for what you have provided us with before and what you are providing until today."

«The joy comes when you hear words of thanks and praise from students requesting assistance in the application. I hope that this project will continue after 2023, because it is a source of hope for all who wish to complete their academic path»

Bassam could build on his previous "volunteering experiences in the field and inside camps, but this was the first time I had this kind of opportunity. Whenever I used to receive any link for a study opportunity, I used to glance at it and close it down without really reading it. I always had the feeling that applying would be a complicated process. I now have the curiosity to read carefully all scholarship announcements before deciding to apply or not." And Bassam was very happy that the opportunity provided by HOPES-LEB allowed him to give back a little of what he had received, for "whatever we can say or do, we cannot thank you enough because on a personal level, if it was not for HOPES, I wouldn't have been able to continue my Master's".

And he, like his three volunteering colleagues, hopes that many other students will receive a scholarship too and make best use of it.

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