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## UNHCR lebanon, paving pathways to higher education for refugees

An interview with Ms. Agatha Abi Aad,  
UNHCR's Associate Education Officer in Lebanon

Close cooperation and coordination with other stakeholders working in the same field is one of the guiding principles for the implementation of the HOPES-LEB project. Especially close are our relations with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Based on a MoU concluded in 2016 between the DAAD and UNHCR, the HOPES-LEB project continues the intensive collaboration developed between the two entities in previous years, namely through the HOPES project (2016-2020).

UNHCR plays a multiple and leading role in the field of higher education for refugees. It provides scholarships through the DAFI scholarship programme, coordinates with the Higher Education in Emergencies round table the most important forum for coordination among relevant stakeholders in Lebanon, shares in manifold ways its expertise and experience, especially with regard to the protection of refugees, and is an ardent advocate of increased opportunities for refugees in higher and further education.

We have spoken with Agatha Abi Aad, UNHCR's Associate Education Officer in Lebanon, about the present situation of refugees in Lebanon, UNHCR's work in the field of higher education, and possible options to provide solutions including the sphere of connected/digital learning.

*Agatha, who holds a degree in sociology-anthropology from Beirut's Saint Joseph University, joined the UN agency in 2006 in response to the internal displaced crises, facilitating the capacity building programme with NGOs and the Ministry of Social Affairs.*

*Since 2008 she coordinates UNHCR education programmes with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. More specifically, Agatha is currently co-chairing the Higher Education in Emergencies coordination efforts, overseeing UNHCR's tertiary education programmes, facilitating*



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*alternative pathways to third country scholarships and promoting innovative ways to expand opportunities such as Connected Learning programmes.*

Here is the full interview we conducted in early December 2020:

***Lebanon is momentarily in a deep crisis, perhaps the most difficult situation since the end of the civil war in 1990, reaching out to all spheres of life. Under the influence of the worldwide pandemic and the disastrous harbour blast on 4 August, poverty is skyrocketing and many people have to fight for bare survival. How has this situation affected the refugees hosted in Lebanon, especially with regard to the chances to acquire knowledge through education, including higher education?***

Years of displacement and the deep economic crisis in Lebanon as well as the impact of Covid has pushed refugees deeper into poverty and despair.

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Through UNHCR supporting programmes and VASyR (the vulnerability assessment for Syrian refugees), we understand that today close to 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the extreme poverty line compared to 55% last year. It means that there are nowadays much less possibilities to live a dignified life and earn a stable income. Coupled with the necessary monthly payments for food, medicine, rent and other basic expenses, most refugees have depleted the savings they might have had when they fled to Lebanon.

This situation creates also pressure on the children themselves, leading to serious mental health issues. Children and specially adolescents dropped out of school to support their family as breadwinner. We at UNHCR are very concerned about the level of despair among the refugees.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) is developing with the support of many stakeholders, a strategy for Distance Learning. However even with the imminent implementation of the strategy, which will hopefully happen soon, the situation of the children out of school remains a stagnant variation between 44% to 55% of children who are out of formal education. And this is only an estimate as we still lack current enrolment figures. We urge the MEHE to share and implement the national Distance Learning Strategy, with a special attention to vulnerable groups, including second shift schools.

With regard to higher education, the last academic year was heavily affected by the pandemic; especially at the Lebanese University which is by far the biggest Higher Education Institution in Lebanon. It had to reshuffle its complete academic agenda to an extend that even by November some faculties still struggled to close their final exams for the last academic year. In parallel, they are still working to launch and enrol students for the new study year.

***What is UNHCR currently doing in the field of higher education? Where do you see the main challenges in that field?***

UNHCR's Beirut office is implementing the DAFI scholarship programme, with the support of the German MoFA, Said Foundation, Asfari Foundation and Hands up Foundation.

In the last six years over 700 young people benefitted from the scholarship studying at numerous faculties at the Lebanese University. The programme selects its students based on academic merits and protection considerations with special emphasis on gender equity and community engagement. It builds the students' academic and transferable skills to allow them to become role models in their communities and to contribute to rebuilding their home countries when it is safe to go back.

This year, despite the confinement, many DAFI students were mobilised to raise awareness on Covid-19 and took part in the Beirut blast response efforts.

In addition to running the DAFI programme, UNHCR facilitates the Higher Education in Emergencies round table which is a coordination platform to support the exchange among various stakeholders in the field of higher education for refugees. Furthermore, the round table is complementing the sector's efforts, though advocacy and the provision of good practices for better access of refugees to higher education.

The challenges we face in our work are manifold. Let me only refer to a couple of them.

Secondary education is a recurrent bottleneck for higher education. The very low number of refugee students in the final year of secondary schooling interrupts the flow of lifelong learning.

Another challenge is the depletion or the competitive aspect of opportunities of scholarships for tertiary education. But – to be clear on that – even with an increasing commitment and under improved circumstances, there is no chance to provide opportunities for each refugee seeking higher education. The 'Education for All' approach that holds true for primary and secondary education is interpreted differently in the tertiary sector. That is why a thorough selection has to be made which has to be merit-and-protection-based and competitive in the end.

Nevertheless, we have to make sure that all involved stakeholders – from the donors, to the universities, to the students – are aware of this and we must help the young people to prepare for such a competition.

There is also a challenge linked to the delivery mode of tertiary education. We observe a swing towards Connected Learning/Distance Learning.

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This trend has been considerably accelerated by the Covid pandemic which led donors to shift their approach from on-campus support to the provision of online opportunities. While recognised Connected Learning is not at all a challenge but a great opportunity to reach more students, the barrier sustains to inform the communities on these opportunities and to advocate for their acceptance.

Refugee young women's access to higher education in Lebanon exceeds the number of men; over 54% of DAFI beneficiaries are women enrolling in various competitive fields of studies. However, keeping young women in higher education is a challenge as many are still facing high pressure from their families and communities in order not to enrol at university and to dedicate additional time to care for household matters. This is why ongoing support is needed to ensure that women complete their studies, to prove themselves in their field of interest and most importantly to ensure that their voices are heard.

Data access and accuracy is another challenge. While globally, 3% of refugees are attending higher education, in Lebanon, we consider 6% of refugee youth access to higher education. This figure might be imprecise, since universities capture nationalities in their enrolment data and not the legal status of the students.

Capturing timely meaningful data becomes an obligation to all stakeholders allowing to better understand the communities we are serving and to develop adequate inclusive programmes and address the protection issues.

*With regard to their future, the Syrian refugees in the region are in limbo – a return to Syria is for many (still) not an option; the already weak opportunities in Lebanon – for example – have further deteriorated; resettlement of larger numbers seems to be very unlikely. What has to be done to create feasible Higher Education prospects for the refugees?*

A majority of Syrian refugees, well over 80%, have expressed an ultimate wish to return to their country, in safety and dignity. However, until they feel it is possible to do so, it is critical that they have full access to the basic services in the country where they have protection; including to education.

Education is also a way to ensure refugees develop their skills and their human capital during their years in exile, which will help them when they return to Syria to transition into their school system, find jobs and rebuild their lives. The key to do this is inclusive policies that ensure access of refugees to education.

From the education perspective, we can look into two tangible prospects:

Connected Learning is an opportunity. The recognition aspect of a quality Blended or Connected Learning is an obligation in the hand of ministries and stakeholders while its promotion, as a recognised tertiary education pathway, is in the hand of institutions and community actors. Philanthropists are more and more interested in supporting higher education opportunities and more precisely Connected Learning pathways and consider this as a win-win situation.



Agatha with a group of DAFI students volunteering in a tented settlement.

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Migratory pathways should be as well kept in mind. I can name for instance the NGO 'Talents Beyond Boundaries' which is looking for talented and skilled refugees in order to link them with jobs and opportunities in different countries needing such skills and talents. In this context, it is important to see beyond what can be provided directly by UNHCR and coordinate our efforts to disseminate such opportunities within the refugee community.

Education complementary pathways are priceless chances that allow students to embark in a competitive academic journey combined with a durable solution perspective in a third country. UNHCR is dedicating time and resources to activate these complementary pathways especially in the MENA region, where hundreds of students have benefitted from these opportunities to study in Canada through the WUSC/SRP programme, in Japan through the JICA/JISR programme, etc...

To date we are counting over 2,000 competitive scholarship opportunities on yearly basis offered by universities and NGOs in Lebanon. UNHCR uses all its communication channels to disseminate these valuable perspectives and bring in the protection element to academic institutions when required.

*Speaking of connected learning, UNHCR is a pioneer in the promotion of distance learning as an appropriate approach for providing people in emergencies with learning opportunities. Has the Covid-19 pandemic created new solutions in that regard and changed the perception of distance learning by education providers and decision makers?*

Since 2016, UNHCR promotes, designs, coordinates and supports the Connected Learning pathways through the "Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium" (CLCC), an established forum gathering donors, NGOs and prominent universities that already have recognized connected learning programmes. The CLCC Quality Guidelines Playbook is available to enhance synergies and strengthen the evidence base for progressive pedagogies.

Relying on the tremendous work established globally, UNHCR was among the first stakeholders to promote connected learning as a recognized pathway in Lebanon. In October 2018, we organised a workshop with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and various local and international universities to

discuss the different practices and approaches and argued for a wider use and recognition of connected learning in Lebanon. Unfortunately, the multi-crises Lebanon is going through are delaying the recognition process, nevertheless we are not letting go and we are working with other stakeholders at national and regional levels to recognise Connected and Blended Learning pathways in or between the Arab states.

We strongly believe that Connected Learning is one essential tool to achieve UNHCR's goal by providing access to tertiary education for 15% of refugee youth by 2030 **#15by30**.

This can only be realised through the combination of efforts, including on campus scholarships such as DAFL or HOPES-LEB, but also through education complementary pathways to third countries as well as through recognized connected learning opportunities, providing educational chances to students who cannot access campuses, refugees in remote areas, refugees with other competing priorities, taking care of a family or having to work, for example. These are windows of opportunity we have to open to a greater number of refugee students and allow them to access a higher and further learning.

More specifically in Lebanon, we need to explore connected learning in a low tech environment, and make quality education accessible to all, maybe through radio courses or integrated offline courses. Community centres must become learning hubs with mentors available to help refugees who do not have access to internet or the needed equipment.

With the Covid situation and pandemic, connected learning is being developed at different levels, whether globally or through the MEHE in Lebanon. We are seeing good practice models, which need to be scalable to robust.

Our obligation is twofold: On the one hand, we keep pressuring for the recognition of connected learning at ministerial levels and monitor universities to provide quality programmes.

On the other hand, we communicate effectively with the community for promoting connected learning as a recognized opportunity for all youth. This will help them build their digital skills to succeed in the 21st century. We have to keep the momentum created by the Covid outbreak and make sure not to fall back to the pre-pandemic level of connected learning.

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