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NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS DIALOGUE

Expanding the dialogue on Higher Education & Refugees from Syria

Tuesday, November 27, 2018

Berytech Technology & Health
Conference room, 10th floor| Mathaf
Beirut > Lebanon

For more information:

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

Date: 27 November 2018

Berytech, Damascus Road, Beirut

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday November 27, 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 Berytech Technology & Health in Beirut.

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 Lebanon and the 'Madad Fund' as well the British Council 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 Lebanon.

It 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. The dialogue 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 Lebanon.

> **Awareness raising and outreach campaigns:** The dialogue emphasised the importance of English, the level required and IT skills (internet search skills, office suite, typing, etc.) required for students entering Lebanese HE. Students need to be made aware of different language courses available, where and when, and entry level required to benefit. They need to know what can be expected from courses of language learning (i.e. 1 CEFR level up from A1to A2). They also need to know what free online language learning materials and language learning apps are available and how to access and make best use of them. Recruitment of students needs to emphasise their commitment to completing the course, ideally incentivised by reimbursement of travel and meals at a fixed tariff (paid in retrospect).

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> **e-learning:** Before initiating online or blended courses, students need some basic IT skills training and induction to on-line learning. This could include raising awareness of current online language learning options.
> The course materials should include mobile friendly apps, and downloadable videos that can be viewed off line.
> Course design should show much greater integration of online/face to face learning. With active online learning an integral part of the course.
> Develop a system of peer support for eLearning, for example WhatsApp study groups. Ongoing linking of 'graduates' is desirable to ensure job and other opportunities can be widely shared. Teachers need to be training to operate in this way.

> **Delivery Mechanisms:** Scheduling and locations need to be given greater consideration, as students have difficulty juggling language learning with other courses, or work, or family commitments.
> There should be great flexibility in timing and types of courses.
> Developing cohesion through establishing virtual and face-to-face student-led study groups is primordial. Enable access to technology for all students, possibly using study centres or using underused university computer labs.

> **Course design:** Generally, interactive course and lesson design, with an emphasis on 'practical' English should be sought. This includes also in-course monitoring of student progress, expectation management, and setting of achievable goals as well as more space for individual coaching and guidance.
> Distinction between general English, academic English, and work-focused English for specific purpose (ESP) should be made.

> **Teacher training:** There is a clear demand for teachers able to manage a student-centred/skills focused/project-based language learning approach. Some further training is needed for teachers to incorporate online elements within their teaching.
> Recommendations included both the initiation of a programme to upgrade the skills of teachers of English in schools, including communicative methods, training on trauma and on developing empathy as well as an outreach to identify numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English in Lebanon through NGOs and social media.

DIALOGUE REPORT

This report, on the Lebanon National Stakeholder Dialogue held in Beirut on 27 November 2018, is the second in the series, and summarises the discussion of the issues, and recommendations for practically addressing these issues in Lebanon. 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-earning – fully utilising blended, online and digital courses
- English/ 'Language for Specific Purposes'
- Needs in terms of teacher training

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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 Lebanese students. All took active part in the discussions, and the views of the students were particularly sought.

Welcoming remarks were given by **Dr Carsten Walbiner**, 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 Lebanon was either English or French.

David Knox, Director British Council Lebanon, also welcomed the participants. **Harry Haynes,** the HOPES project lead for the language programme HEEAP, spoke of the 17 partner universities involved in the programme, including five in Lebanon. **Mr. Abdallah Chebli,** the representative from the European Delegation and the Madad Fund, saw HOPES as a manifestation of joint European and Lebanese efforts. He noted that this joint work helped to break down barriers to integration of Syrian students to universities, including providing language opportunities, not only for higher education, but also for skills and for their future.

Dr Maha Shuayb is the Director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University, and her research focuses on the sociology and politics of education. (Presentation link below)

Her presentation noted that language learning is used in Lebanon as an instrument of marginalisation within schools, particularly for Syrian students who often face demotion to classes younger than their age. This also applies to some Lebanese students as well and is a significant driver of student dropout. She described her research and noted that both Syrian and Lebanese children describe learning a foreign language as difficult.

It is unclear whether language learning is a bigger barrier for Syrians than Lebanese. There are almost 1 million children in schools in Lebanon: about 29% of these are in public school, about 67% in private schools, and 4% in UNRWA schools. The 1997 curriculum approach to foreign languages exposes conflict between home language versus internationalisation. Children learn both a first foreign language and a second foreign language for 5-7 hours per week, but the desired outcome for English is described as "native-like proficiency". Maths and science are taught in English after grade 6. Evidence shows that there is a high rate of grade repetition in both the elementary (21%) and intermediate (41%) school, accompanied by a small amount of drop out at each level. 20% of Lebanese to go to university but for Palestinians the figure is 4%. A lot of this can be put down to learning in a foreign language, particularly learning abstract concepts in a second language.

At the 'brevet' (grade 9) there is a 74% success rate in private schools, but only 55% success in public schools. To deal with this issue, teachers translate maths and science books from English to Arabic, and for Syrian students they

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offer preparation for other Arabic language medium certificates, for example Syrian, Libyan, or Syrian Coalition instead of Lebanese certificates.

Despite these strategies, teaching methods based around the Arabic language would be preferable as there is limited use of English outside school and limited support in using English at home. All students, Syrian and Lebanese, struggle with work in English and are unable to use the language effectively.

She concluded with comments on the status of foreign languages in Lebanon, and the need for "decolonising" language and curriculums in schools. There needs to be greater definition on whether English (and French) is a foreign language or a second national language that is being learned, and considerable innovation in the assessment of language skills.

Dr Victor Khachan, is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Lebanese American University and Chair of the Department of English. He defined the key issue as around teaching and learning and the academic schizophrenia that these can cause. In essence, he said, there is lots of teaching of English, but little learning. This is because of a lack of measurement of teaching. He spoke of the passive skills of reading and listening, and the active skills of speaking and writing, and how different genres of communication require different skills mixes. However, in schools, and universities, there is no clear distinction is teaching either general or academic language. There is little concern among teachers about whether the material being used suits the learners and their needs. There is little use of language patterns: around the most frequent words used, allocation of word collocation. And little consideration of the forgetting curve. He illustrated the latter with examples from the website www.lexitutor.com

Racha Nasreddinne is Director of the British Council in Syria, based in Beirut. She spoke of her role as leading the development of a cultural relations and long-term relationships programme for Syria, including the diaspora. She spoke from a practitioner view based on the UNHCR research report 'Access to Higher Education for Syrian Refugees' and the Language for Resilience report. Students are not adequately prepared in school for higher education. More attention needs to be paid to language and other aspects. It is not only language that is the issue: there are many other factors including: the need to work, limited access to technology, and lack of functional language courses for both English and French. English for specific purposes needs to be further prioritised, as does public speaking skills. It is necessary to get student (user) input when designing these.

Dr Therese El Hashem Tarabey is Dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University. She is a researcher and international consultant to the World Bank, UNESCO, and other International organisations, in education economics and planning.

She delivered her presentation in Arabic and these notes are taken from simultaneous interpretation.

She described her research into success in the language component of the University entrance examination using a sample of students, including Syrians. All students appear to have difficulties with this foreign language exam requirement. 60% succeeded in the language exams (English\French). This means that 40% did not pass the exam due to the language component. The picture is the same at the postgraduate level as there is a lack of language support during courses. But she noted that Arabic is also a problem particularly in the use of formal written text.

She noted that there is research evidence which has found that if you do not fully master your own mother tongue, you will be unable to master other languages (sometimes referred to as 'semilingualism'). Her research also shows evidence that success in English at the entrance examination does not necessarily match the language needs for particular courses. This issue of appropriate language for specific subjects is also evident with Arabic. Graduate-level students still have difficulty with language for specific purposes in all languages. There are always different levels of language competence in a class but in general, the teacher teaches at only one level.

The issues for Syrian students are not limited to language, because the education system in Lebanon is different to that of Syria. There is a need for a new assessment test to identify language differences within a class. But reform in addressing language needs requires broader education reform. She proposed harmonising all the strategies, taking a common approach, and rationalising the approach to education and language.

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Despite recent technology advances, language learning was still not improving. She suggested that a minimum of one year's study in an immersion situation is required to master a language, together with the motivation to learn. But, despite these difficulties, learning an international language is a passport to the world.

There was a lively question-and-answer session in which participants agreed with panel members that students are not doing well languages, and that there is an urgent need to assess the situation and innovate. There was a (light-hearted) suggestion of whether Syrians will need English or Russian in the future. **Brooke Atherton El Amine** of AUB briefly described a PADELEIA project to teach science to girls in grades 6 to 9. Teachers were given language lessons, and it was evident that they needed further guidance. They used code switching in Arabic to help address difficult concepts. There was evidence that teachers needed further support in teaching through the medium of English, and that the teacher-mentors also needed more support.

A participant noted the lack of formative assessment for teachers: teachers reflect on their own performance, and self-assessment does not inform future teaching. This affects both livelihoods and an increase in school dropout. There was a suggestion that providing stipends to students who attended classes ensures their attendance.

A participant emphasised one of the presenter's comments that it is not just language that is the issue for Syrian students; it is also the use of a different curriculum from the one they know. It was also noted that career choices for Syrians are unclear because their future is unclear. Career guidance and career planning is something that needs to be more rigorously undertaken. One participant described some 10-11-year-old boys saying they did not want to learn English because it is the "language of the devil". However, counter-examples were also given where children were very keen to learn English.

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 initial comments on each of the five flip charts which asked:

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

- Juggling course work with work and family responsibilities
- General English vs Academic English vs ESP
- A lack of English (or French), which needs more than one year to reach acceptable levels.
- Little interest in the culture of the language.

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

- Provide both online and a physical presence on courses.
- Move courses into real life (connections).
- Schedule for times that are suitable for students.
- Increase the focus on communication skills and group work.
- What about targeting their majors and their main interests?

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

- Market related, part-time learning.
- Coaching and guidance.
- Opportunities post-graduation/ method of contacting students after graduation for job opportunities.
- Achievable goals/ not too complex.
- Increased motivation through content and language.
- Course difficulty matched to students.
- Obligation for all students at the same level to work together and do individual work.
- Flexible courses so students at different levels can all benefit.

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

- Train the teachers to inspire the students to learn foreign languages by relating it to country, culture, etc.
- Use unconventional teaching.
- Train teachers on how they can teach their students to express their thoughts.
- Keep in mind teachers are of a generation and their weaknesses can affect the future generation, either positively or negatively. Therefore, give teachers what they need, salary, peace of mind, etc.
- Keep in mind the differences between Lebanese and Syrian students.
- English is the language of work, it facilitates entry to the job market.

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, group cited a number of barriers: logistic, content and delivery.

> To address logistic issues, they proposed greater flexibility in location, length and timing of courses, greater earlier outreach to likely students.
> To address content issues, they proposed a greater focus on practical English rather than an academic focus.
> To address delivery issues, they proposed much greater student involvement in lessons, and greater teacher involvement in the learning process. Overall, more standardised, interactive and practical English learning.

e-learning

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

> Provide pre-language course training for students in the use of pcs, tablets, headsets, internet, Office package and online platforms.
> Provide blended learning, online and face to face, ensuring that online is integrated with the classroom activity (flipped classroom). Ensure online learning is active as well as passive.
> Raise awareness of current online options, and make these mobile friendly, and multi-language (for eaxample Arabic and English). Create downloadable video, to use off line, ideally video that can be played at varying speed, and develop mobile applications, and tutorials on using them while ensuring these can be used offline.
> Ensure material is culturally appropriate, and ideally locally designed, with some Arabic rubric. It is important not to label materials as being for 'refugees'.
> Promote computer literacy, email protocols, typing skills. Identify online tutorials available.
> Improve awareness of available apps, other online course material (MOOCs), linking on line with university credits (Kiron). Work with the Ministry of Education & Higher Education to advance on-line education.

Comments from other groups:

- They emphasised the need for training in how to access and use on-line materials for self-learning.
- They noted the costs of getting on-line for some students. Suggestions of solutions included study centres, including underused university computer labs, working with platform providers for quick access and on downloadable content that can be used offline.
- Integrate all of the suggestions into teacher training so that teachers can help students to 'self-learn.'

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Delivery mechanisms

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

> Establish study groups, with students taking a leading role. Ensure that the subject of these in interesting, easy to understand, and engaging. (Also spend at least 1 hour per day studying English, writing a diary in English, listen to songs in English and films in English, and speak to English speakers).
> Ensure teachers are well trained and competent, possibly include teacher training for those teaching English in schools (teachers in schools teach two shifts and some have 'a bad attitude'). Some training should be given on empathy.
> Provide access to technology/the internet – it is essential.

In discussions, it was proposed that HOPES could provide spaces for groups to meet, training to group leaders, and potentially materials for the groups to study together.

Teacher training and English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

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

> Thorough training should be provided for teachers, so they are able to manage a student-centred/skills focused/project-based language learning approach.
> Training should be provided in dealing with vulnerable students (trauma and low ability).
> ESP for higher education should include on-line components.
> General English needs to focus on skills required for employment (often oral skills more than reading and writing).
> Although Syrian teachers are unable to work in Lebanese schools, it was suggested that there should be outreach to them via NGOs and social media, as they may be able to help in other ways, as mentors or study group leaders.

Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

The discussions in this event were wide ranging, and covered not only issues facing Syrians in Lebanon, but also the broader issues facing the Lebanese education system, particularly around the role of languages. 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 Lebanon.

Awareness raising and outreach campaigns
Raise awareness on:
> the importance of English (B1/B2) and IT skills (internet search skills, office suite, typing, etc.) for students entering Lebanese Higher Education.
> different language courses available, where and when, and entry level required to benefit.
> free online language learning materials, language learning apps, and how to access and make best use of them. This will include MOOCs linked to university credits (Kiron).
> what can be expected from 100 +45 hours of language learning (e.g. 1 CEFR level up from A1to A2).
> The commitment needed to complete course, incentivised by reimbursement of travel and meals at a fixed tariff (paid in retrospect). This linked to a learning contract?

e-learning
> Provide IT skills training/induction prior to online/blended courses.
> Raise awareness of current online language learning options. Use mobile friendly apps, downloadable videos that can be viewed off line. Ideally that can be played at variable speeds.
> Aim to use, where possible, culturally appropriate materials, ideally locally designed.

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> Provide much greater integration of online/face to face learning. Promote active online 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 such as WhatsApp groups, linking to other English learners around the world. Link to volunteer English speakers globally, for practice, and development of social skills.
> Create/promote Apps/groups to allow students, after graduation from languages courses, to access job and other study opportunities.
> Train and supply online Mentors/facilitators.
> All the above recommendations to be integrated into teacher training.

Delivery Mechanisms

> Scheduling and locations need to be given greater consideration, as students have difficulty juggling language learning with other courses, or work, or family commitments.
> Offer flexibility in timing and types of courses.
> Establish virtual and face to face student-led study groups.
> Enable access to technology for all students: possibly using study centres or using underused university computer labs.

Course design:

> Focus course and lesson design on interactive learning approaches.
> Emphasise practical English.
> Provide in-course monitoring of student progress, expectation management, and setting of achievable goals.
> Provide space for individual coaching and guidance.
> Distinguish between general English, Academic English, and work-focused ESP.

Teacher training

> There is a clear demand for teachers able to manage a student-centred/skills focused/project-based language learning approach.
> Some training for teachers should be on incorporating online elements within their teaching.
> There is a need to upgrade the teachers of English in schools, including on communicative methods, training on trauma and on developing empathy.
> There is a need for outreach to identify numbers and location of Syrian teachers of English in Lebanon through NGOs and social media. Although there are legal barriers to Syrians teaching in schools, there may be opportunities for them to support learning in other ways.

Attachments
- **Presentation of Dr. Maha Shuayb, Center for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University**

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