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## LOOKING BACK ON 4 YEARS OF HOPES an interview with the project's Director By Dr. Abigail Chantler

As the crisis in Syria enters its ninth year against a backdrop of political and economic instability across the region, the imperative for the international community to continue to provide humanitarian aid to refugees fleeing the conflict, as well as to the communities in neighbouring countries which host them, remains urgent.

Within this context, the European Union-funded [Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians \(HOPES\)](#) project serves as a beacon, demonstrating how relatively small-scale, targeted investment can have a sustainable impact on the ground at local and regional levels.

With funding of 12€ million from the European Union, through the [EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, the 'EU Madad Fund'](#), HOPES has been implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in partnership with the British Council, Campus France and Nuffic—a consortium which, as the HOPES project Director, Dr. Carsten Walbner, points out “has a shared commitment to international cooperation in higher education”.

By improving access to further and higher education opportunities, the project aims to enhance the prospects of refugees from Syria as well as of young people in the host communities in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey through the provision of scholarships, English-language courses and academic counselling. In addition, HOPES has provided funding to institutions for innovative, short-term education projects and has organised conferences and stakeholder dialogues to support capacity building across the further and higher education sectors in the context of the Syrian crisis.

“Developed in line with the main objective of the ‘EU Madad Fund’—to foster the self-reliance of refugees, helping them to thrive, not just survive, and to assist the countries and communities hosting them—HOPES has been”, Dr. Walbner recounts, “one of the first responses of the EU to the Syrian crisis in the sphere of higher education in which higher education



institutions in the region have participated”.

The breadth of the achievements of HOPES within a short time-frame is impressive. Fully funding 620 scholarships across the five participating countries to enable students’ participation in short vocational training courses, two-year diplomas, bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees across disciplines, HOPES has significantly enhanced scholarship provision in the region.

Dr. Walbner explains that, “prior to HOPES, most of the scholarships that were available across the five countries were at undergraduate level” and that “by providing scholarships at master’s level, HOPES has given opportunities to many students who had completed their undergraduate degree but who could not find a job, enabling them to advance their studies and improve their employability”.

“With youth-unemployment at %35–%33 in the region, HOPES has made an important contribution to addressing a significant, long-term challenge”, says Dr. Walbner. Furthermore, by providing scholarships not only for refugees from Syria but also for young people in the communities hosting them, HOPES has recognised that such “local young people are often not any better off than refugees of post-secondary age” and “has demonstrated the necessity to attend to the needs of host communities as well as of refugees themselves” Dr. Walbner reflects.

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However, it was clear from the outset to Dr. Walbinder and his colleagues in the HOPES consortium that, while scholarships are vital for improving young people's prospects, they are not in their own right sufficient to build the capacity of higher education institutions in the region to respond to the Syrian crisis on a sustainable basis. Accordingly, HOPES also provided funding for a wide range of innovative, short-term, local education projects targeting refugees and vulnerable host communities across the five countries. Spanning the areas of innovation in teaching and learning, online and blended learning, lifelong learning and flexible learning, these projects have involved a wide range of local and regional bodies—higher education institutions, governmental organisations and NGOs.

*«HOPES has given opportunities to many students who had completed their undergraduate degree but who could not find a job, enabling them to advance their studies and improve their employability».*

As Dr. Walbinder observes, “this ensured that there was a strong sense of ownership of the projects at the local level, harnessing the goodwill and readiness to help which is strongly in evidence in the host communities despite the challenges presented by the influx of refugees”. He continues, “by enabling this responsiveness by host communities to the varied needs of refugees and local young people, these ‘bottom-up’ initiatives have created timely solutions to problems arising at the micro-level and have had an impact on the ground which is often unattainable through large projects”.

As well as providing English-language training courses, developed and quality-assured by the British Council, in which over 8,500 students enrolled, HOPES has also provided training for approximately 280 teachers who delivered the courses locally. Furthermore, in addition to some of the short-term education projects funded under the grant scheme of HOPES, which have enabled responsiveness to the needs of specific groups of students, such as those with disabilities and with mental health issues, Dr. Walbinder explains that “HOPES has also supported student-led initiatives, such as courses in statistics and research methodol-

-ogies which were developed by students for students”.

The HOPES Education Desks in each of the five countries have provided a source of academic support for students as well as a means of referring them to other support-services as required—for example, in relation to psychological trauma or legal matters. “The low drop-out rate of beneficiaries of HOPES indicates our success in this endeavour” says Dr. Walbinder.

Another important strand of the HOPES project has been the support that it has provided for networking and knowledge exchange at national and regional levels. Dr. Walbinder recounts, “through national stakeholder dialogues and regional policy conferences, HOPES has brought relevant stakeholders together to focus on topical issues and to find common solutions to shared challenges”, with “for example, one series of dialogues held across all five countries focusing on the theme of ‘languages for resilience’ and supporting discussion about the importance

of language competency for successful study at university and for employability as well as about the specific language barriers faced by refugees”. In addition, the HOPES consortium hosted two regional conferences—in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan—which brought together key players from different parts of the region to exchange experiences across borders. As Dr. Walbinder observes, “facilitating such comprehensive stakeholder engagement, which transcends the local level, has been another key achievement of HOPES” which, “as a well-established presence in the region without a political agenda, was able to forge relationships and build trust between key players in the sphere of higher education and beyond through the networking activities organised as part of the project”.

Emphasising that, on the one hand, “education has an intrinsic value and through HOPES thousands of people have received education and training at different levels” and, on the other, that “the situation in Syria has become a protracted crisis and education has necessarily become a part of refugee life”, Dr. Walbinder calls for “a sustainable, long-term solution to educational provision in the region and inside Syria”.

Within this context, he provides assurance that the four partner organisations in the consortium “will all continue to be present in the region”.

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