

Workshop Report

Strengthening Delivery of Higher Education to Syrian Refugees

October 6-7, 2015 Istanbul

Introduction

The scale of the problem is well known, and staggering: Four million Syrians have been forced to leave their country, and millions more are internally displaced, as a war that is in its fifth year rages on.

Hundreds of thousands of them are students who risk losing critical years of their education and, as a result, the foundations of a better future for them and their country. Many young people have already been in refugee camps for several years.

Participants used the workshop to share best practices, explore ways to scale up solutions, connect with donors, meet new partners, and push the boundaries of what could be accomplished.

Participants agreed the workshop provided an effective start. All attendees who completed a post-event survey said they had met partners they hoped to work with in the future, and nearly all said they had learned about a program they hadn't been aware of before.

All respondents wanted to work on post-workshop teams, conducting research and developing projects to present at a future event. There was near-universal agreement that the workshop was one of the most useful events that they had attended recently on the subject of refugee education.

The workshop took a regional and collaborative approach to a problem that numerous countries have been struggling to deal with on their own for years.

Al-Fanar Media, in partnership with Koç University, SPARK, and the Institute of International Education, organized a two-day workshop in October to increase the number of Syrian youth in higher education.



It really helped to create concrete practical coordination on the ground of all these initiatives and at a political level I think it has raised awareness of the importance of the problem and the type of solutions that we can work on together.

Yannick Du Pont
Director, SPARK

Coordination for Scale and Impact

A recurring theme of the workshop discussions was the urgent need for better coordination of responses to the challenge of refugee education.

This need extends across the board, from smaller organizations to the largest global entities working on the problem. Officials from universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, which now hosts two million refugees, said they have received little help from outside the region and are funding much of the work themselves.

"We have great knowledge on how to accommodate [students]," said Ahmed Dezaye of Salahaddin University in Erbil. But he says the current efforts aren't nearly enough.

"We need a very long-term strategy," he said. "These students—they have suffered, lost families, lost their cities. They need help."

Supporting local institutions, said Yannick Du Pont, director of SPARK, a Dutch NGO focused on higher education and entrepreneurship in post-conflict societies, is essential.



By the end of the event, the participants could, I believe, get a clear image of the type and the scale of the problem, along with a better understanding of what can be done better.

Maqsood S. Mohammed
Director of International Relations,
Kurdish Ministry of Higher
Education and Scientific Research
Iraq

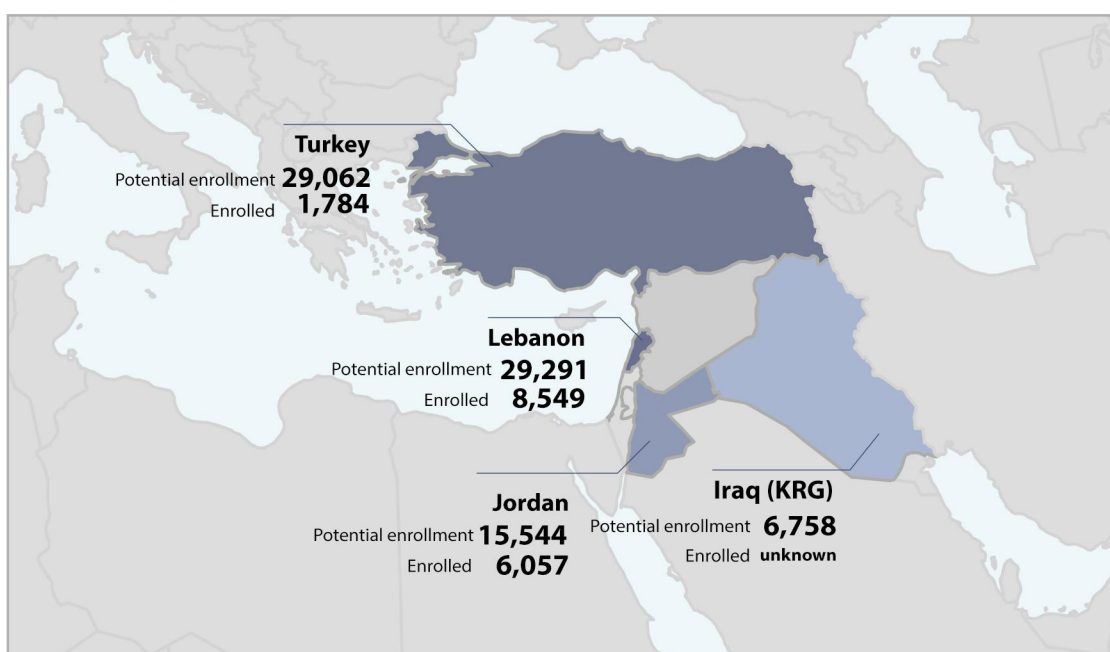
“Institutions in the region can do it themselves—they have their own scale-up plans. I want to know how to support them. We need to consider what we can do in the region, and at home. And we need more support for regional solutions.”

Johannes Tarvainen, education officer for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), echoed others at the workshop, saying: “No one can run programs alone. You need partners such as governments, academic institutions, NGOs, refugee committees and the involvement of the refugees in the design and implementation of the program. It's critical for success.”

Tarvainen and other UNHCR representatives at the meeting were unanimously skeptical about the idea, often voiced, to create entirely new universities for Syrian students. The agency’s experience in other refugee contexts has been that parallel systems for refugees don’t work, said Tarvainen.

Syrian Youth Are Missing Out on Higher Education

Fewer than 6% of Syrian youth ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in universities. Before the war, a quarter of the same age group was enrolled in higher education.



Source: UNHCR, European Union report, Al-Fanar Media, SPARK.



Representatives of the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education also emphasized the need to coordinate efforts.

IIE's Celine Taminian said an Emergency Student Fund working in Jordan has shifted its focus from the refugee camps, where potential students were having difficulty getting permission to leave, to outreach in cities, where 80 percent of refugees live in Jordan. Taminian said success depends on working closely with local universities, clear communication, outreach, and flexibility. "We molded the idea to the situation," she said.

The fund, she said, will focus on fields such as education, language, psychology and nursing, specialties that have the potential to immediately serve the Syrian community.

The program looks for students with a track record of community service, in the hope that they will also be committed to it after graduating.

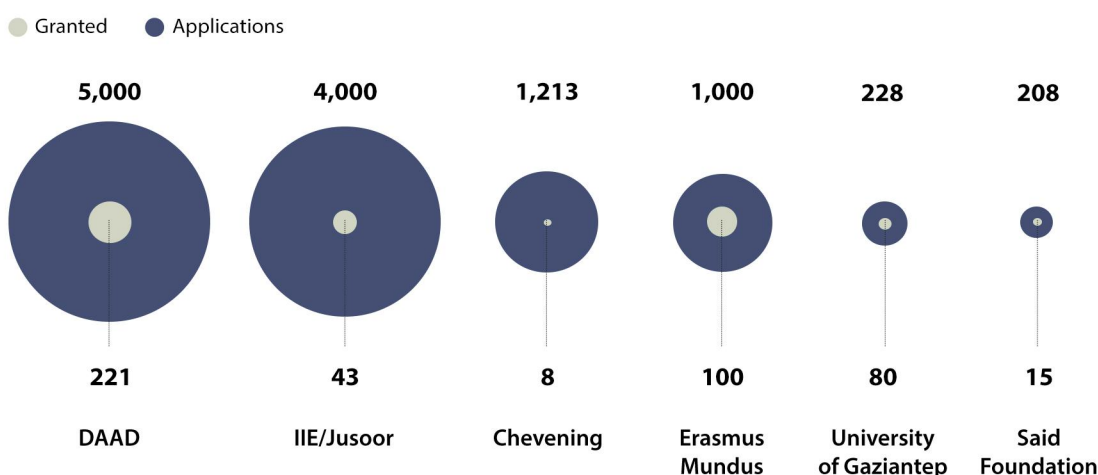
Scholarships: Doing What Works

Scholarships were a primary topic of discussion. Both established and newer programs shared the stage, and expressed similar challenges. The DAFI scholarship, financed by the German government and administered by UNHCR since 1992, has served more than 7,000 refugee students.

Among the lessons learned in that program: the need for a clear and fair selection process; making sure outreach extends to as many needy students as possible; and clear communication with applicants, including setting expectations.

Expansion to serve more students is urgent, organizers said. “Less than one percent of all refugees globally have access to higher education, and demand is increasing,” said Tarvainen. According to UNHCR, 51 percent of the global refugee population are children under the age of 18, a record high.

Syrian Students' Demand for Scholarships Overwhelms Available Grants



Two hundred scholarships were also awarded for UNHCR DAFI scholarships but the number of applicants is unknown.

Sources: UNHCR, European Union report, Al-Fanar Media, SPARK.

Although DAFI has scaled up significantly to serve Syrian refugees, with more than 200 new scholarships offered in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, the need still far outstrips current offerings. In Turkey this year, 5,800 students applied for 70 slots.

Prof. Dr. M. Yavuz Coşkun of the University of Gaziantep and Muhammet Musa Budak of the Presidency for Turks and Related Communities spoke about a new program for Syrians who want to study in Turkey that currently serves 1,000 students and plans to expand to 5,000 in five years.

"There are a lot of things to do in the region, and because we are in the region, it is our duty to do something more," said Coşkun.

"There are two million Syrians living in Turkey. We need to work together." The program, which currently provides full and partial scholarships for undergraduates, hopes to add master's degree and Ph.D. programs and to expand to urban areas where refugees not in camps often reside.

Among the program's innovations is a program for doctors who need to refresh their knowledge, a focus that acknowledges Turkey's proximity to war zones.



I thought that I knew a lot about refugee challenges in getting opportunities to continue their higher education, but the workshop gave me other perspectives from the challenges they face in countries neighboring Syria.

Rebeen Azad Jalal
Director of Admissions
American University of Iraq – Sulaimani



Some programs are tackling the issue of cost. LASeR operates in Lebanon, where it delivered 440 scholarships this year, targeting those “most likely to go forward in academics,” according to the organization’s representatives, Mustapha Jazar and Zeina Awaydate. (See a related article on Al-Fanar Media, “*A Novel Approach to Getting Syrian Students Into Universities.*”).

The program negotiates favorable tuition for Syrian students with local universities, sometimes securing discounts of as much as 75 percent, they said.

LASeR involves students in the program's design and provides support for them. "We wanted to close the circle. We wanted to help," said Awaydate. "And we wanted to create an atmosphere of social entrepreneurship. We don't deal with them as Syrian refugees but as Syrian students, as adults who want to do something with their future."

LASeR focuses on middle-class students, believing poorer students can't easily find time to study due to their need to work and wealthier ones have other options.

Another program with a very specific target for its effort is Fakhoora's Dynamic Futures Program, currently operating in Palestine but exploring expansion to serve refugee populations in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank.

The program devotes a great deal of attention and resources to a few carefully selected students and their families. "There was a gap in education in Gaza, something that was not happening," program director Farooq Burney told attendees.

"We wanted to build advocates—effective leaders for the outside world—taking a holistic approach." The Dynamic Futures Program offers 100 scholarships, which also include support for students' families.



I wanted to thank you for your organization of the workshop this week. I found it to be engaging and fruitful in bringing together stakeholders in youth work and discussing relevant issues in the region. Well done!

Emma Bonar
Youth Project Manager
Norwegian Refugee Council
Jordan

Like the Dynamic Futures program, Lebanese American University has invested a lot of resources in a few disadvantaged students, from poor families or rural areas, in the belief that students who receive more support are more likely to succeed both during and after their studies. (While the students were not Syrians, the program was held up as a possible model for what could be done with refugee students.) This program took "50 brilliant students" and covered their expenses, said Abdo Ghie, vice president for enrollment management at LAU. It offers an "entire support system" to help students succeed academically, psychologically and culturally, with advising, counseling, and coaching.

The program created its own test to determine the academic potential of students, recognizing that the College Board's SAT wouldn't suit some students. After finishing the program, students get help finding jobs and are expected to give back to their country with some form of public service.

Ghie said institutions in the region need to step up to do their part. "We need to come together as a community, as a society, and do something to help these students," he said, "or be ashamed of ourselves." He also added, echoing other presenters: "We have a successful model. We have money and resources, and experience. Also, we want to help. But we are not sure where to go. We need partners.



Congratulations again on a great event. I think it exceeded all of our expectations.

James R. King
*Senior Research & Communications Manager
Scholar Rescue Fund
Institute of International Education*



The Needs of Syrian Refugee Students

Workshop discussions repeatedly confronted the difficulties faced by Syrian students seeking to study outside their home country. One much-discussed barrier was language.

Syrian students know they need to study English to get into many master's degree and doctoral programs, but those who live in Turkey also need Turkish to relate to their fellow students and to get around in daily life.

Scholarships to academic programs are of little use to students who can't speak the language of instruction, and language courses are usually expensive. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Dezaye of Salahaddin University said, the science and medical faculties also teach in English, leaving many Syrian newcomers struggling.

In response to this barrier, LASeR, the Lebanese scholarship program, created an intensive English program for its students, which also serves as a filter to determine which students will show up for classes and are serious about their studies.



Coşkun of the University of Gaziantep said they have a new Arabic-language curriculum in majors including engineering, the social sciences, and education. He said the university is sending Turkish-language teachers to refugee camps. Still, attendees agreed that current efforts are falling short.

Sally Ward, regional manager for the British Council based in Dubai, described an effort in the start-up phase that seeks to help almost 3,000 youth ages 18 to 30 get re-integrated with education.

The effort will include language and academic skills classes in English, French and German, online short courses and longer, fully accredited online courses for 300 students. The project is supported by the European Union.

A monitoring and evaluation process, Ward said, "will enable us to find out more about what works and what does not, as we go along."

Syrian refugee students also want and need access to books in their native language. One group of Arab entrepreneurs began a bookstore and cultural center in Istanbul and has plans to open others, including possibly one in Berlin.

With newfound partners at the workshop, the bookstore hopes to supply reading material to refugee camps and schools where Syrian children study.

“People view [Syrians] negatively, as murderers, so we wanted to show our true culture,” said founder Samer Al Kadri, of Pages Bookstore Cafe.



The whole friendly atmosphere made it easy for us to interact with others and it was one of the best meetings we have attended because it was very practical and we meet a lot of people who are interested in the work we are doing and vice versa.

Zeina Awaydate

Marketing and Fundraising Officer
LAsER- Lebanon

Will Online Learning Work With Refugee Youth?

The possible role of online and blended-learning programs in the response to refugee education needs was another one of the workshop's major themes.

Ali Zuhair ElKarmi, vice president for scientific colleges and centers at Hashemite University in Jordan, articulated the need for online programs. Serving these students isn't just a matter of creating spaces at universities, he said, or overcoming bureaucratic hurdles or lowering tuition.

His institution, he says, often has difficulty getting students to come. Some can't leave the camps; others can't afford the transportation. Some need to work to support their families, and many are unaware of the opportunities that exist.

Providers need to bring the classroom to them, attendees said, either in the camps, online, or a combination.

Edraak, possibly the largest provider of online Arabic educational content, offers both academic courses and practical skills training, said Dina Bokai. It serves some refugees in pilot programs.



Thank you for organising the conference – it was very helpful – both in terms of practical examples of what we can do and is being done, and in terms of networking. A direct consequence of the conference is that we are looking into supporting scholarships in Lebanon with one of the conference organisations.

Marieke Bosman
CEO, The Asfari Foundation



Some challenges, she said, include a lack of international standards for online courses, concern from students that program certificates won't be widely recognized, and severe technological challenges like electricity outages, a lack of computers, and insufficient student computer skills.

Some solutions, she said, include making courses available on smartphones, offering remedial technology courses, creating international standards for online courses, and managing students' expectations. "Online education is not a silver bullet," she said, "but it addresses geographical and logistical issues."

Many attendees said blended learning could be more effective than online learning because it offers some face-to-face interaction and more support, and that universities should prioritize creating more such options.

Besides offering something closer to a "campus experience," courses with an in-person component serve as a kind of rehabilitation, getting refugees into the classroom and away from the camps.

The lack of facilities could be addressed through agreements with local universities for the evening use of their classrooms, attendees said. Emma Bonar of the Norwegian Refugee Council added that online and blended-learning programs needed to be better integrated with existing programs that serve refugee youth.

Some courses, including the ones offered by Edraak, SPARK, and the Syrian Economic Forum, a think tank based in Gaziantep, Turkey, focus on practical skills that can serve the community and provide employment.

"People in the camps are just waiting, and that's dangerous," said Rami Sharrack of the Forum, which is supported by the Syrian private sector. The Forum's courses emphasize practical professional and entrepreneurial skills such as positive thinking and time management.

He said 500 to 600 students graduated last year from four-week courses during which students submitted proposals for projects to solve local problems. The winning projects receive start-up funding. This program will be expanded to inside Syria this year, he said.

A program in Jordan, Luminus, offers short vocational and technical programs of less than one year. Ayman Maqableh, dean of Al Quds College in Jordan and a Luminus partner, stressed the need to expand this kind of program.

He said that while the overall unemployment rate in Jordan for college graduates is 26 percent or higher, it is just 1 to 2 percent among students with vocational training. "Do we just need bachelor's degree holders to rebuild Syria?" he asked. "Who is the most useful? . . . We should not just focus on academic programs."

Advocates of vocational training acknowledged its challenges, including costs for things like equipment and facilities, as well as a regional perception that this kind of education is not as desirable as a traditional university education.

"We need to convince students it is a good route," said Maqableh. Bonar of the Norwegian Refugee Council said one challenge is fine-tuning vocational education for the refugee context. "We need solutions that fit, and don't remove the best and brightest from the community," she said.

She cited programs that offer skills useful to the community, such as information technology and refrigeration repair. Also particularly valuable are programs that link graduating students with projects in the camps, such as repairing wheelchairs, holding electricity-safety sessions to prevent fires, installing solar panels to ensure consistent power, and building carts to transport water from taps.

SPARK's Syria programme coordinator, Nasser Ishaq described a recently launched project that serves the food security and health needs of the community through a vocational institute near Aleppo. It helps farmers by training young technicians in approaches that improve food production, such as plant disease testing and better irrigation, and trains nursing assistants with a focus on first-responder skills.

The program stays outside of cities and never gathers more than 25 people in one place at a time for safety reasons, Ishaq said.



The Biggest Hurdle: Documentation

Regardless of what kind of program Syrian refugee students might seek out, one almost universal bureaucratic hurdle for them is a lack of documents. Most refugees don't have their academic transcripts, exam results, or diplomas, and have no way to verify their prior education.

They also often don't have proof of citizenship or legal residence in the country they are in. This can severely hobble student applications.

Coşkun of the University of Gaziantep, in Turkey, said the university has sometimes accepted such students conditionally without documents, enrolling them in preparatory courses. "If these students succeed, they can move forward," he said. He also noted that a special committee had been set up to consider the admission of medical students without transcripts

Students without official status as refugees also often lack documents, so that even if they receive scholarships, they cannot get visas to go to another country.

This is part of the reason that Turkey, which doesn't require visas for Syrians, is home to two million refugees. Regional coordination among education ministries, including the existing Syrian administration, emerged as one way to address this problem.

Participants said they could coordinate efforts, inside the Arab region and beyond, to lobby governments to ease administrative hurdles such as visa processes, coordinate more closely with foreign ministries, and make officials aware of the issues hindering would-be students from getting access to education.

Workshop participants also agreed that an online portal that records the academic progress of refugee students and can be accessed from anywhere (rather than being kept at one institution), at any time during their academic careers, would be very helpful.

Another barrier for students is a lack of understanding about how to apply for academic programs, what the requirements are, and how admissions decisions are made. Not surprisingly, Syrian students are discovering that educational systems and universities vary tremendously.

In Turkey, for example, "There are 108 universities," said Souhaib Al-Shami, founder of the Syrian Students Office of University Services (SSOUS). "That means there are 108 ways to apply." Aziza Osman of Jusoor, an NGO of Syrian expatriates that provides scholarships to Syrian students, said this issue is a major focus for her organization.

"We teach Syrians how the system works abroad and also how to apply." Shekri Alatassi of Khatwa, a Syrian student group in Egypt, said his organization has also started a Facebook group to help fellow Syrian students. But the need is great, and the group has quickly been overwhelmed by requests, he said.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The workshop participants established four working groups that it is hoped will continue to communicate about topics identified as high priorities and will do research and help develop project proposals to present at a future meeting.

The four topics are blended and online learning; vocational education; overcoming administrative and documentation hurdles; and developing work opportunities. Attendees pledged to further explore new possibilities for collaborations that emerged from the meetings, and urged the scheduling of a second workshop, which is now in development for March 2016.

Organizers are also exploring the creation of an online clearinghouse for those working in higher education with refugee youth, to track new initiatives, best practices, and to help people working in the field to network. Such an effort was widely recommended by participants.

The Syrian students who attended the workshop offered a sobering degree of skepticism about the potential of one event to make a difference. One Syrian Ph.D. student now in Turkey, Amer Shamia, said he thought the discussion of problems and solutions was too general.

Khaldoun Matar, a Ph.D. student who was forced to flee his Damascus home and who is also now in Turkey, said: "I am hoping the conference will not be like the others—all talk. I hope we can achieve one percent of what was talked about here."

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All photographs in this report are by Dinamo Istanbul.

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