

UNIVERSITIES RESPONDING TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Two-day Conference

November 6 - 7, 2017

Summary by Rayan Korri

“Universities Responding to the Refugee Crisis”, the 4th conference of the Alliance of Lead Universities on Migration (ALUM), took place at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on November 6 and 7. The two-day conference was organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB and the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics (LSE), members of the ALUM network, in collaboration with the #AUB4Refugees Initiative.

The speakers discussed the critical role that universities can play in the current refugee crisis and how they can provide ideas and policy proposals to ameliorate the situation of refugees and host countries in the region. Fifty-two regional and international scholars from twenty-one different universities, governmental officials, business leaders, and representatives from leading NGOs presented on the different challenges faced by the refugees, such as health, employment, and access to education, through 2 keynote speeches, 5 panels, and 2 roundtable discussions.

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At the end of the conference, the “Beirut Declaration: Academic Partnership for Human Mobility” was announced after it was written by a team of ALUM members and discussed in a plenary session involving all participants. The declaration is considered an outline for how universities can respond to the refugee and migration crises.

Attended by 165 individuals, the conference also used the hashtag #AUB4Refugees, which was trending in Lebanon for two consecutive days through different tweets that discussed many ideas and facts presented in the conference.

Dr. Nasser Yassin, the Director of Research at AUB’s Issam Fares Institute and the Co-chair of the #AUB4Refugees Initiative, and Dr. Erik Berglof, the Director of IGA-LSE, **opened the conference** by asserting the role of academics in addressing the issues of refugees and bringing them back to the debate through interdisciplinary research and policies.



AUB Provost Mohamed Harajli then affirmed that the position of universities is not in providing academic luxury, but to serve the underprivileged. UNHCR Representative in Lebanon Mireille Girard stated that universities can be social moderators by combatting fears regarding the refugee crisis with facts and advocating for the rights of refugees.

Professor Marek Belka, former Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Poland, gave [the first keynote speech](#) about the political context of the refugee crisis and the causes of xenophobia.

During the first panel discussion, [“Migration, Displacement and the Public Perception,”](#) speakers discussed the important role universities play in constructing new ethics of humanity, the rise of right wing populism and its link to the false fears of welfare cuts due to refugees, and the role of media in generating an atmosphere of fear towards refugees.



[“Political and Institutional Constraints to Migration and Displacement”](#) was the second panel, in which participants claimed that forced migration should not be taken for granted as a subject of resilience, as is the case in Lebanon. However, academic institutions should change the debates regarding forced migration into a more practical and research-based one.

The third panel, [“Return Migration and Vulnerable Groups,”](#) highlighted the important role of the academic sector in developing return policies that save the humans rights of refugees.

[“Advocacy, Policy and Research Impact on Issues of Migration and Displacement”](#) is the title of the first roundtable discussion, during which participants agreed on the role of academics in being activists and engaging with civil society, rather than only being observers. The discussion also mentioned the unique role of universities as a bridge between politicians and practitioners.

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AUB’s Faculty of Health Sciences Dean Iman Nuwayhid, concluded the first day with a [keynote speech](#) that highlighted AUB’s involvement in the mentioned activism through research and the inclusion of its students.

Dr. Francisco Marmolejo, the Tertiary Education Global Coordinator and the Lead Tertiary Education Specialist of the World Bank, stated during [the second keynote speech](#) that higher education is a necessary drive for change and the remaining source of hope for the future.

According to Marmolejo, higher education institutions should be locally connected and socially responsible, especially in the present where the world is constantly changing and becoming knowledge based.

During the 4th panel [“Health and Nutrition of Migrants and Refugees,”](#) speakers discussed both how the health challenges faced by refugees should be researched without bringing additional stigma to them and the goal of providing health services for all refugees in one region. Additionally, two different community outreach projects done by AUB focusing on refugees’ health were presented by AUB scholars.

According to the participants in the final panel, [“Refugee Education,”](#) universities should change and move beyond their traditional repertoire by empowering refugee students and finding innovative solutions that tackle the students who are not eligible for regular degrees.

Moreover, the educational status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was presented and the necessity and importance of tertiary education was emphasized.

During the second roundtable, **“The Consecutive Role of Business Initiatives and Scholarship in the Refugee Crisis,”** speakers discussed the role of business initiatives in building a sustainable future and turning the refugees’ crisis into opportunities. In their opinions, creating jobs for refugees not only improves the economic sector but also provides skills and experiences to refugees that they can benefit from and use upon returning to their countries.

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Additionally, companies’ partnerships with NGOs can create solutions regarding the refugee crisis which will be anchored to businesses.

Lebanese and regional media widely covered the conference and published an overview of it: [Al Araby](#), [Al Bawaba-English](#), [Al Bawaba-Arabic](#), [Al Kalima](#), [Al Mustaqbal](#), [Anbaa](#), [An-Nahar](#), [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), [Al3arabiya](#), [Lebanon Files](#), [Madar](#), [NNA](#), [Tarbaweya](#), [Tripoli Scope](#).

🕒 [Click here for a short briefing on the conference](#)

