

TERTIARY EDUCATION FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

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Summary

This policy brief is based on several research studies led by AUB's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs on tertiary education and Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. The studies sought insight into the opportunities and challenges facing Syrian refugees to access tertiary education in Lebanon, with a special focus on the policies, practices, and perspectives of relevant stakeholders. This policy brief provides a set of recommendations to address the critical need for access to education.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) should provide a legal framework that recognizes refugees as special students, which entails the need to develop a national pedagogic assessment for refugees and a special residency program targeting students admitted to local tertiary education institutions.
- ▶ Scholarship providers should coordinate operations in order to avoid any duplication in their supporting efforts and funding.
- ▶ Local institutions of tertiary education should provide dynamic pedagogical practices and new skills and competencies through modalities that go beyond the on-campus activities in order to cater for the needs of the Syrian refugees and allow them to rebuild Syria once the situation normalizes.

Introduction

As the Syrian crisis continues into its eighth year with no end in sight Syrian refugees are facing a protracted situation. Lebanon is the second largest host country with over one million registered refugees and an estimated 500,000 unregistered, which resulted in Lebanon reaching the highest per capita rate of refugees globally. Before the war, an estimated 20 percent of Syrian young people were enrolled in tertiary education, but as the crisis continues, refugee youth are facing barriers to access tertiary education in Lebanon and other host countries. In 2015-2016, only an estimated 2.9% of Syrians were enrolled in universities in Lebanon, with overall numbers decreasing as shown in Table 1.

The continued disruption of Syrians' education poses a great threat to the financial status and quality of life for these refugees. Moreover, an uneducated "lost generation" will not be equipped with the necessary capacities to participate in the reconstruction of the economic, political, educational, and health infrastructures in post-war Syria.

ACADEMIC YEAR	SYRIAN STUDENTS IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES	SYRIAN STUDENTS IN THE LEBANESE UNIVERSITY (PUBLIC)	TOTAL NUMBER OF SYRIAN STUDENTS IN LEBANESE UNIVERSITIES	TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN LEBANESE UNIVERSITIES
2013 – 2014	-	-	5,549	187,209
2014 – 2015	5,059	2,013	7,072	190,524
2015 – 2016	4,370	1,490	5,860	214,722
2016 – 2017	4,599	1,689	6,288	196,119
2017 – 2018	5,715	1,600	7,315	140,561

Table 1. Number of Syrian Students Enrolled in Universities in Lebanon 2013-2018 (Source: MEHE, 2016, 2017, 2019)

Tertiary education is important and is considered as an instrument of protection in refugee contexts, as it provides youth in conflict settings with an opportunity for peacebuilding and potentially serves as a counter-terrorism method. Recent studies find a lack of clear, consistent policies that support refugee access to tertiary education; scholarship programs emerging as a response to financial barriers; a lack of sufficient coordination among stakeholders; and confusion among Syrian students regarding academic and career options, opportunities and procedures.

“An uneducated ‘lost generation’ will not be equipped with the necessary capacities to participate in the reconstruction of the economic, political, educational, and health infrastructures in post-war Syria ”

Policies, or lack thereof

The government has not issued formal policies or decrees for the provision of tertiary education for refugees and Lebanon since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis. Additionally, Lebanon does not implement the convention on the international recognition of qualifications in higher education nor is it a signatory of the refugee conventions. However, MEHE is involved in some individual initiatives such as MERIC-Net and the project “Integrating Syrians into Lebanese Higher Education through Recognition of Qualifications”.

One of the main challenges refugee students face is that they do not have access to their academic certificates and documents. Students who do not have an original copy of the Syrian Baccalaureate diploma nor an authenticated copy cannot get equivalence and therefore cannot legally enroll at any university. It is sometimes difficult for some students to obtain any academic documentation from institutions at which they had been enrolled and now have turned into rubles. Despite these challenges in securing authentic copies of academic documents, findings show that some local private universities register Syrian refugee students even before ascertaining the equivalency of their certificate or degree, allowing the student more time to get the needed documents.

“One of the main challenges refugee students face is that they do not have access to their academic certificates and documents”

Additionally, students are required to have valid residency permits in Lebanon in order to pursue university studies; yet its costs and procedures are prohibitive. Nonetheless, some universities do not follow up with students to confirm the validity of their residency permits once they have enrolled which is advantageous to them as well.

Despite this, ways to overcome some of the other challenges refugee students face when applying to local universities are still not quite clear.

Affording tertiary education

Research show that costs are among the main barriers hindering access to tertiary education in Lebanon. One student in Tripoli explained, “University is expensive; we need to pay to get our documents; we need books and transportation... but money can solve it all.” As a result, many local and international organizations are working to provide support through scholarships, language support, sponsored programs, and cost of living subsidies. However, findings show a disconnection between potential students and organizations supporting refugees. While some scholarship programs are inundated with applications, others cannot find enough students. Some students are not always aware of the range of opportunities available to refugees, yet others receive support from multiple organizations. Additionally, recent data shows that the number of students enrolling at universities in Lebanon has decreased in recent years as shown in Table 1, indicating that even with the possibility of receiving scholarships many young Syrian refugees are choosing not to pursue their higher education as they are the sole breadwinners for their families, and going to university will prevent them from working to support their families.

Uncertain futures

Should students pursue study subjects that will be relevant upon their return to Syria, or subjects that might provide employment opportunities in Lebanon? For those refugees who are able to access tertiary education, the choice of what to study can be daunting.

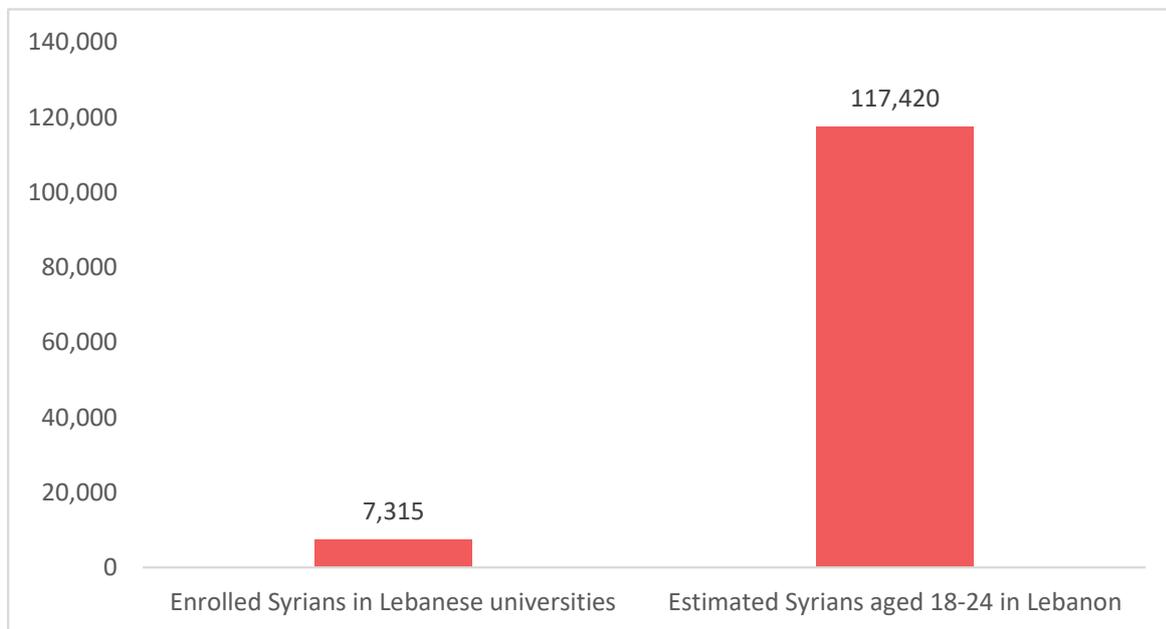


Figure 1. Enrolled Students, 2018 (Source: Interviews; MEHE, 2018; UNHCR, 2018)¹

This is because students do not always understand the courses of study and related career paths. A representative at an aid organization in Lebanon explains that “most of the students either don’t know where they can excel or don’t know what available opportunities are there for them.” Refugee students seem disoriented in the choice of the subject of study as they are constrained within the Lebanese labor market laws and regulations. Lebanese labor laws prohibit foreigners from joining many professional syndicates such as Lebanese Order of Physicians, Accountant Associations and others. Additionally, in 2015, the Ministry of Labor issued a decision noting that Syrians can only work in agriculture, construction, and environment sectors, limiting these students’ work options.

“Refugee students seem disoriented in the choice of the subject of study as they are constrained within the Lebanese labor market laws and regulations”

Moreover, most of the Syrian refugee students enrolled in local universities do not seem to be well prepared to tackle the academic demands of the courses. Language has emerged as one of the secondary barriers to the success of these students within the Lebanese tertiary education system. In addition, most institutions still offer the traditional undergraduate and graduate programs that may be challenging or irrelevant to many of the refugees.

It is important for local institutions of tertiary education to evolve into multi-dimensional institutions that offer teaching modalities that go beyond on-campus offerings such as connected learning.

Flexible scheduling and dynamic pedagogical practices with curriculum that emphasize skills and competencies, information analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and communication are strongly encouraged.

It is important for institutions to also introduce programs that develop students’ characters to encourage their curiosity, sense of initiative, persistence, adaptability, ethical awareness and reasoning as they are equally essential for refugees.

Conclusion

Increasing access to tertiary education for Syrian refugees is of paramount importance in order not only to prepare the labor force for rebuilding post-war Syria, but also to provide meaning for these young people’s lives, and to contribute to the development of the local economy in Lebanon. As the Syrian crisis continues, stakeholders in Lebanon must work together to improve opportunities for refugees to access tertiary education. Investing in the education of young Syrian refugees is an opportunity to empower, and equip them with a critical consciousness for wise decisions, tools for better life choices, and hope for them and others. Investing in tertiary education for refugees is a necessity and a right.

¹ Note that the estimated number of Syrians between 18 and 24 is from 2017 (for in the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon - VASyR 2018 there is no breakdown of age groups in the demographics)

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Education and Youth Policy

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