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## HIGHER EDUCATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR REFUGEES IN COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY THE SYRIA AND IRAQ CRISES

### BACKGROUND

UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and others of concern, and to find solutions for them. As part of its actions to meet these protection and solutions responsibilities, UNHCR considers it a priority to ensure that refugees have access to educational opportunities at all levels, including higher education. One of the key objectives of UNHCR's Education Strategy (2012-2016) is to "Improve access to higher education opportunities for refugee young people" by increasing opportunities for refugee youth to benefit from higher education programmes at colleges, universities and post-secondary technical, vocational or para-professional institutions, leading to certificates and diplomas.

Higher education is a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 26.2), and referred to in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 13c) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 28c).

Higher education is an essential part of the education continuum. Access to higher education serves as a strong incentive for students to continue and complete their studies at the primary and secondary levels. Higher education also contributes to solutions and post-conflict reconstruction, promotes social, economic and gender equality, and empowers refugee communities.



This briefing note has been produced by the Education and Resettlement Units, Division of International Protection, for field operations and partners as a quick reference note on key thematic education issues.

## REGIONAL CONTEXT

One of the tragic and long-term consequences of the Syria and Iraq crises is the interruption of education and an ever-increasing gap in meeting education needs, including higher education of children and youth. As the conflict entered its fifth year in 2015, nearly 50 per cent of Syrian refugee children are out-of-school and many of them lack the academic records and certificates from Syria required to continue their education. With displacement taking on a more protracted character, access to higher education becomes particularly important in providing meaningful educational opportunities for youth, reducing economic vulnerability, improving livelihoods, and contributing to the protection of young people and of their communities.

There are currently over 3.8 million Syrian refugees.<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2015, it is estimated that there will be a total of 4.27 million registered refugees in the five main host countries in the region: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for 2015-2016 in response to the Syria Crisis includes an estimated need of USD 455 million for education, taking into account higher education needs for more than 11,000 refugees.

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 26 per cent of Syria's population were enrolled in higher education in 2011, prior to displacement. When the conflict heightened, many of these students had to leave their country and interrupt their studies. Syrian refugee students eligible for higher studies who demonstrate a desire for and a commitment to education need to be supported. The protracted character of the Iraq crisis has similarly led to a substantive demand for higher education among Iraqi refugees.

In response to the Syria and Iraq crises, an **increasing number of scholarship programmes** at the higher educational level have been made available to refugees in their countries of asylum, as well as in third countries, particularly in the European Union. These higher education initiatives complement the protection and education strategies of UNHCR and partners to preserve the protection space available for refugees in the region.

However, a number of **protection considerations need to be taken into account** by the providers of such opportunities during the phases of planning, launch and implementation of higher education programmes for refugees. Programmes targeting refugee populations in host countries and those that offer higher education in third countries are both invited to consider the lessons learnt from long-standing scholarship programmes implemented by UNHCR and other organizations working in the refugee education sector. *It is essential to remember that third-party initiatives designed outside UNHCR's global protection frameworks and education strategy should first and foremost consider the protection and safety of refugee students, establish the requisite precautions to do no harm, and pave the way towards solutions.* The Education team in the Division of International Protection and the MENA Protection Service are available to provide technical advice on specific protection needs related to higher education of refugee students coming from the MENA region.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>2</sup> See *2015 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis* (3RP) projections. <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/crisis/> It should be noted that, while the status of Syrian refugees under the respective legal frameworks of host countries in the region varies, they are all in need of international protection and of concern to UNHCR. The term 'refugee' therefore includes Syrians considered as 'foreigners', 'asylum seekers', persons under temporary protection, as well as 'displaced Syrians' (Lebanon).

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the response to the Syria crisis, UNHCR works with over 200 partners in the MENA region to provide protection to and build resilience of refugees and host communities. Coordination with relevant partners, including in the education sector, is critical to deliver effective and sustainable interventions. Accordingly, institutions offering scholarships to refugees are strongly encouraged to consult with the protection and education coordination mechanisms in each host country to understand the specific higher education needs and benefit from country-specific risk assessments prior to designing higher education initiatives for refugees. Regular and close consultation along these lines is vital to avoiding unintended consequences, such as possibly jeopardizing the protection of persons targeted by these programmes, including legal status in the host country.

Scholarships need to cover a full course of study to enable the refugee student to complete a certification, degree, or other qualification. Programmes may also provide support for cost of living, accommodation, possibility for close family members to join during the course of study, and proper orientation and social support throughout the course of study. This is particularly important for disadvantaged or socially vulnerable students, who will require intensive, long-term support to benefit in a meaningful way from the programme.

UNHCR strongly advocates that the **“do no harm” approach** is applied and that inclusive, non-discriminatory access to protection and assistance is ensured in all programming. UNHCR is committed to protect and assist populations of concern in a transparent manner that is age, gender and diversity sensitive. This approach is recommended in developing and implementing new scholarship schemes for refugee students, as well as adapting existing higher education initiatives that have previously not yet been used in a refugee context. Special attention is recommended on the following:

- Precautions should be taken that initiatives do not jeopardize the legal status, protection or psychosocial well-being of refugees and carefully manage their expectations.

- Initiatives need to be durable, solutions-driven and should lead to both economic and social empowerment of refugees and communities.
- When initiatives aim to support students in their first country of asylum, the discussion on opening up places in universities for refugee students needs to be negotiated carefully with the Ministry of Education or relevant department in charge of higher education to ensure that participation in the education programme does not jeopardize the legal status or negatively affect the protection space for refugees in the country.
- The dimension of social cohesion needs to be taken into account in programming, including assessment of any forms of additional support that refugee students may need for effective integration into the academic environment.
- Higher education initiatives need to complement parallel protection interventions and priorities, and negative impact on existing resettlement programmes needs to be avoided. Scholarship programmes should not be offered as a substitute or replacement for resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable refugees, and resettlement places should not be reduced by receiving countries in order to allow admission places for scholarship students.
- All government and non-governmental agencies – including those involved with immigration, integration and settlement services, psychosocial support and community outreach services – need to be part of the planning process to ensure that the educational opportunities provided result in meaningful contributions to refugee communities in asylum and other durable solutions contexts.

Clear communication strategies on the parameters of the scholarship opportunities available are vital to responsibly manage young peoples’ expectations and allow them to make informed decisions about their willingness and ability to participate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Annex III for a list of Q&A for refugee students considering scholarship programmes abroad.

Below is a set of questions that should be answered through a comprehensive programme assessment:

## Key considerations on Selection Criteria and Process

- Who will be in charge of the outreach to refugee applicants, liaison with government, academic and other partners, as well as overall coordination and related follow-up with all parties concerned?
- Who is the target population?
- What is the population's age range?
- What are the minimum educational requirements to participate?
- Does the programme make provisions for inclusive, non-discriminatory access to scholarships, protection and assistance? Is there a risk that such a preference will affect social cohesion, lead to other negative consequences or be perceived to be discriminatory?
- Does the programme make provisions to support girls' participation as one of the key protection mechanisms and long term self-reliance goals?
- Does the initiative make provisions for candidates with special circumstances, such as students with interrupted education, students without proof of education certification, or students who wish to transfer academic credits from a previously attended higher education institution?
- Does the initiative take into account potential language barriers of students who otherwise qualify, for example in the form of language support courses?
- What specific measures are implemented as part of the selection process to ensure transparency and inclusiveness in line with the considerations outlined above?

- In cases where the scholarship does not provide full financial support, how will students be guided or facilitated in covering all direct study costs (registration and tuition fees), indirect study costs (e.g. books, supplies, research and other expenses) and cost of living without affecting their academic performance?
- Does the programme require students to certify their legal status to authorities in the country of envisaged study? If yes, is UNHCR's support needed in this regard?

## Key considerations on Programming and Desired Outcomes

- What is the desired impact of the scholarship initiative on the participants, as well as on their families and communities?
- Will the initiative and its outcomes contribute to post-conflict reconstruction, social cohesion and peace building processes in the participants' asylum communities and countries of origin?
- Will the initiative and its outcomes support Sustainable Development Goals from 2016 onwards?
- Will the initiative be focused on student study exclusively, or linked to resettlement, temporary asylum, or family reunion options?
- What are the academic requirements to which the candidates will be expected to adhere? Will the initiative ensure adequate certification upon completion of studies?
- Does the scholarship initiative include options for short-term diploma studies, such as a preparatory year needed to qualify for a degree programme?
- What support will be in place for the students to plan beyond their studies including career counselling and guidance?
- Should refugees decide to apply for asylum in the country of study, will this affect their student status and related benefits?



- What legal and administrative preparations will be necessary for the students' return to their country of asylum or their country of origin? What safeguards are in place to mitigate protection risks, such as forced returns due to cessation of legal status, lack of required documentation, or other legal/ administrative obstacles?
- What learning or experiential opportunities will be available to the students during academic/ semester breaks?
- As scholarship initiatives may raise expectations among refugees about durable solutions including resettlement, how will these initiatives help manage these expectations?

## Key considerations for Higher Education Programmes offered in the country of asylum<sup>4</sup>

Programmes may target secondary school graduates or students whose higher education was interrupted. Programmes may be established in partnership with local universities or through connected/ blended learning programmes either in cooperation with local universities within the host country or independently. The availability of places in institutions in host countries should be carefully negotiated with Ministries of Education and other competent bodies to ensure host country agreement and support, and so as not to overload host institution capacity.

UNHCR encourages donors to support capacity building of local higher education institutions when considering engagement in the provision of scholarships for Syrian refugees. Programmes offered in the first countries of asylum in the MENA region, which at the same time are the largest recipients of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, often provide the best prerequisites for sustainable programming. At the same time, scholarship initiatives can positively contribute towards increased asylum space for refugees in general in these countries.

<sup>4</sup> For related checklist, see Annex I

<sup>5</sup> For related checklist, see Annex II

## Key considerations for Higher Education Programmes offered in third countries<sup>5</sup>

The protection needs of refugees receiving support for study outside of their country of asylum need to be fully considered and addressed prior to student departure to the third country programme. **It is of utmost importance to ensure that students do not find themselves in situations of expired residency, destitution or forced return to their countries of origin as a result of pursuing studies abroad.**

Receiving institutions need to work closely with national governments to ensure appropriate legal status and protection for refugee students, along with lawful travel through formal channels. For instance, universities and receiving States must consider facilitating official exit from host countries and entry to receiving countries, including prospects to remain legally beyond the period of study, if needed, for protection purposes. Such measures can include facilitation of issuance of travel documents for students who for various reasons may be unable to obtain national passports. Once in the receiving country, access should be facilitated to asylum procedures and/or the ability to convert their visa into work or other visa types so as to provide additional prospects for the student to remain should return to Syria (or any other country of origin) be impossible. Universities may consider the possibility of arranging work placement support to provide further development opportunities and encourage self-reliance for the student.

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## ANNEX I

### Checklist for programmes offered in the first country of asylum:

- ✓ The programme takes into account refugees' needs and interests regardless of nationality, ethnic origin or religion.
- ✓ The programme actively contributes to gender equality and takes into account the diverse needs and protection considerations of both female and male candidates.
- ✓ The programme takes into account the culture-specific context to support the academic performance and ensure the protection of students.
- ✓ The programme takes into account the specific needs of students with sensory, physical, cognitive and other learning differences, as well as possible psychosocial consequences specific to refugees, such as conflicted-related trauma.
- ✓ Financial support is available to students for the duration of their studies, allowing them to graduate with desired qualifications and covering direct study costs, indirect study costs and costs of living to an extent that minimizes negative impact on students' academic performance. In addition to tuition and registration fees, students are likely to need support in school supplies, accommodation, transportation, research and internship costs, medical fees, language and integration programmes and any other essential expenses.
- ✓ If the student comes from an especially vulnerable household, the family's livelihoods may be severely disrupted without the student's physical presence or financial remittances over distance. In order to minimize the negative impact on the academic performance and the risk of protection concerns, the programme accounts for the need to provide financial support to families of students that are found to be socio-economically vulnerable upon students' enrolment in a full-time university course.
- ✓ Documentation requirements for admission into the programme are lowered or lifted to avoid putting at risk candidates whose documentation may not be readily accessible or may be accessible only upon return to their country of origin, involving risks to candidates' lives and refugee status.
- ✓ Accreditation and programme equivalency recognition is arranged with the authorities of the host country.
- ✓ Possibilities for the accreditation of higher education degrees and diploma obtained in the candidate's country of origin are explored.
- ✓ Opportunities for the recognition of higher education credentials obtained through distance or blended learning programmes by private institutions are explored both in country of asylum and country of origin.
- ✓ All information relevant to the programme, including the selection process and criteria for admission, are communicated to potential applicants in a timely, transparent and inclusive way. Expectations are managed to avoid possible tensions within the refugee community, or with humanitarian actors, over the limited places available.

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## ANNEX II

### Checklist for programmes offered in third countries:

- ✓ The programme takes into account refugees' needs and interests regardless of nationality, ethnic origin or religion.
- ✓ The programme actively contributes to gender equality and takes into account the diverse needs and protection considerations of both female and male candidates.
- ✓ The programme takes into account the culture-specific context to support the academic performance and ensure the protection of students.
- ✓ The programme takes into account the needs of students with sensory, physical, cognitive, or learning differences.
- ✓ The Programme takes into due account the refugees' situation and academic programmes are tailored to meet their needs (e.g. the requirement of semesters spent outside country of asylum and country of study abroad are waived for refugees who have constraints in traveling internationally).
- ✓ Programmes provide assistance and support to refugees to obtain valid travel documents and visas and to maintain a legal stay for the duration of their studies and related learning opportunities, such as post-degree internships and fellowships.
- ✓ Provision of financial support for direct and indirect study costs, as well as costs of living is considered on an individual basis and carefully monitored to avoid instances of possible fraud.
- ✓ The legal status of prospective students is clarified and confirmed with the receiving government, UNHCR and other stakeholders concerned.
- ✓ Participation in the programme does not jeopardize the rights or legal status of refugees.
- ✓ Clear provisions are made for post-graduation options for all participating students, including outlining a path to gaining legal employment, residency and family reunification in the receiving country when possible, or arrangements for lawful return to and residence in the country of first asylum or in the family's resettlement country, where applicable.
- ✓ Measures are taken to clarify, in advance, whether and when refugee students, and any accompanying relatives, may apply for refugee status in the country of study and whether this impacts on their status and benefits as students.
- ✓ If applicable, prospective students are issued with the necessary documentation to travel to their country of study and access higher education.
- ✓ The programme provides for the availability of psycho-social support to refugees.
- ✓ Financial support is available to students for the duration of their studies, allowing them to graduate with desired qualifications and covering direct study costs, indirect study costs and costs of living to an extent that minimizes negative impact on students' academic performance. In addition to tuition and registration fees, students are likely to need support in school supplies, accommodation, transportation, research and internship costs, medical fees, language and integration programmes and any other essential expenses.

- ✓ If the student comes from an especially vulnerable household, the family's livelihoods may be severely disrupted without the student's physical presence or financial remittances over distance. In order to minimize the negative impact on the academic performance and the risk of protection concerns, the programme accounts for the need to provide financial support to families of students that are found to be socio-economically vulnerable upon students' enrolment in a full-time university course.
- ✓ Documentation requirements for admission into the programme are lowered or lifted to avoid putting at risk candidates whose documentation may not be readily accessible or may be accessible only upon return to their country of origin, involving risks to candidates' lives and refugee status.
- ✓ Provisions are made for continuous support to students beyond the period of their education to ensure successful transition into careers of their choosing.
- ✓ Accreditation and recognition of the programme is arranged with the authorities of the country of study.
- ✓ All information relevant to the programme, including the selection process and criteria for admission, are communicated to potential applicants in a timely, transparent and inclusive way. Expectations are managed to avoid possible tensions within the refugee community, or with humanitarian actors, over the limited places available.



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## ANNEX III

### Q & A for Syrian and other refugees considering scholarship programmes abroad

#### GENERAL INFORMATION:

- 1 A number of different governmental and non-governmental organizations, and institutions are offering scholarship opportunities for Syrian and other refugee students to access higher education.
- 2 UNHCR welcomes scholarship programmes, allowing refugee young people to build on their existing qualifications/skills so that their future prospects are not limited by conflict.
- 3 UNHCR strongly recommends that refugees considering scholarship programmes should have a full understanding of their rights and entitlements under these programmes, as well as the limitations of some programmes. This is to ensure that individuals can make informed decisions for their future.
- 4 UNHCR has therefore developed this Q&A paper to provide refugees with a list of essential factors to consider when exploring opportunities for scholarships abroad.
- 5 If refugees remain unsure whether to accept a scholarship offer, or have any questions not answered in this paper, they can approach UNHCR for assistance.



#### WHAT SHOULD I KEEP IN MIND WHEN DECIDING, IF A SCHOLARSHIP PROVIDES THE RIGHT EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ME?

There are a number of factors to consider when looking at scholarships and you will need clear information both on the qualification that you will receive at the end of your studies and the specific details of what the scholarship covers. When you are speaking with the institution, make sure you find out the following information:

- 1 Does the scholarship ensure that I can complete a course of study and receive a certificate at the end of the course?
- 2 Is the certificate or qualification I receive recognized in other countries?
- 3 What does the scholarship cover? Is food and accommodation included or not? If it is not included, how will I be able to sustain myself?
- 4 Are language courses available to help me make the transition to studying a foreign language, or, if the programme includes study abroad, living in a foreign country?
- 5 What are the various possibilities to reunite with my family members during or after study?
- 6 Are there any possible additional debts that may be incurred, especially if the scholarship does not cover all costs associated with tuition, living expenses, and travel?

### **AM I ABLE TO PROVIDE ALL OF THE NEEDED DOCUMENTS AND FULFIL THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ACCEPTANCE INTO THE PROGRAMME?**

Most institutions require copies of identity documents and educational certification and records. It is most likely that you would need a valid passport (or other valid Travel Document) to enable your travel, if the institution is outside your country of asylum. If you do not have these documents, you will need to see what alternative documentation would be accepted. Please consult with UNHCR to seek additional assistance.

You need to make sure that your existing academic credits are transferrable and are recognized by the institution. Depending on the language of instruction, you may also need to provide evidence of your facility with a required language. Be sure to clarify this with the institution – some institutions offer accelerated language classes along with academic programmes.

### **WHAT ORGANIZATION IS PROVIDING THE SCHOLARSHIP, AND IS IT RELIABLE?**

There could be a number of different organizations or institutions offering opportunities. Make sure that you research the source of your scholarship properly so you know they are reliable and operate in a professional, transparent manner. This protects you from becoming a victim of exploitation. Feel free to consult with UNHCR.

**Any reputable organization would NOT CHARGE A FEE to a refugee in return for services. Beware of individuals who offer to help you enroll in studies overseas in exchange for payment – they may not be reliable.**

### **ARE THERE POSSIBLE RESTRICTIONS OR LIMITATIONS ON SOME SCHOLARSHIPS?**

Some organizations may offer only partial scholarships. They may also not cover your living expenses. It is important to know exactly what you would be entitled to so that you do not find yourself unable to support yourself as a student overseas or your family members in the country of origin, country of first asylum or country of study.

You should also be aware that most scholarships are contingent upon the student passing their courses each semester. As such, you should find out what would happen to your scholarship, if you failed one or more courses.

### **WHAT OTHER LEGAL MATTERS SHOULD I KEEP IN MIND WHEN CONSIDERING A SCHOLARSHIP OVERSEAS?**

Most institutions will inform you of visa requirements needed to enter and reside in the country of study, and it is usually your responsibility to renew your visa or permit to maintain your lawful residency status in the country. Please consult with UNHCR with respect to travel arrangements including documentation. Make sure you know the timeframe of your visa, and be aware of any restrictions that may be in place – for example, the right to work – once you are in the country of study.

## IS THE COUNTRY OF STUDY A PLACE WHERE I WOULD BE ABLE TO LIVE FOR A PERIOD OF TIME?

Scholarships may be available that allow you to study in your current country of asylum which, if you are in a region close to your home country, could enable you to study in your mother tongue. If your family is also present with you in your country of asylum, you could benefit from your existing support network, and you could perhaps remain in a similar cultural context.

Scholarships may also be provided in a number of different countries, including in Europe, North America, and the Gulf States, amongst others. If the scholarship is to support a course of study abroad, be sure that you are financially and emotionally prepared to go and live in another country, perhaps far away from your family and support network, for the length of time needed for your studies. For this purpose, do as much background research as possible on the country of study before making a final decision.

## WHAT LENGTH OF TIME DOES THE SCHOLARSHIP COVER?

In most circumstances, a short period of study may not enable you to gain the level of qualification you would need in order to increase your academic and professional opportunities. Be sure that the qualification you will gain meets your expectations in terms of contributing to your educational and employment goals, and that the scholarship gives you a reasonable amount of time to complete your qualification.

## WHAT LEVEL OF SUPPORT DOES THE SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY PROVIDE ME AS A REFUGEE?

Some refugees may be affected by their experiences, or may be more disadvantaged than others. In these cases, students may need more intensive and longer-term support to benefit in a meaningful way from their scholarship. Make sure the opportunity you are considering can meet your individual needs, and that you will have access to the support you require.

You should also ensure that you will have access to orientation programmes at the start of your scholarship, as well as language courses and extra tutoring or coaching, if needed.

## WHAT OPPORTUNITIES MAY BE AVAILABLE FOR ME ONCE I HAVE FINISHED MY COURSE OF STUDY?

It is important for you to understand what options you may have following the completion of your study. This is to ensure that you do not find yourself in a situation where your residency status expires in the country of study, or face difficulty traveling abroad if your passport expires or cannot be renewed, or become unable to support yourself.

Some countries allow graduating foreign students to obtain a work visa following their study permitting longer term residency. If this option is available to you, it would allow you to work legally. As this policy is different in relation to each country, be sure to clarify the specific rules that are applicable in the country in which you wish to study.

Job placements, internships or other opportunities may also be available once you have finished your studies, although this may vary from one country to another.

**Please seek advice on asylum procedures in the country of study upon your arrival. If you are unable to return to your home country following your course of study, it is important that you are able to access protection from UNHCR and/or the asylum process in your country of study to ensure that your rights are upheld and you are not forcibly returned to your country of origin.**