

# CHALLENGES FACED BY SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS OF HOST COUNTRIES AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM. LESSONS LEARNED FROM JORDAN

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The Syrian crisis has had a significant impact on most of the countries hosting Syrian refugees. Considering the lack of political solution to the war, host countries have started to develop new approaches and response frameworks to deal with the consequences of the prolonged stay of refugees. In this line, and following the London Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region in February 2016, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has shifted the approach of its refugee policy from humanitarian assistance to one oriented to empowerment (Shteiwi, 2017a).

Against this backdrop, this policy brief aims to analyse whether and to what extent Syrian refugee students have access to higher education in Jordan. The article discusses the main challenges faced by Syrian refugees to enter, continue and conclude higher education in Jordan. Lastly, and based on lessons learned from Jordan, it provides policy recommendations on how to promote more inclusive education policies for young Syrian refugees in the host countries.

Due to the political stalemate regarding the Syrian conflict, the common framework in terms of standard laws, regulation and inclusive practices appears to be needed not only in the Hashemite Kingdom but also in the European countries hosting and integrating young Syrian refugees in their respective social and economic contexts. The Jordan model might be considered a key case from which to take lessons and employ them in other countries facing the new challenges related to Syrian refugees entering, performing in and concluding higher education.

Challenges discussed in this article and related policy recommendations are based on research conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) in 2018 in Jordan (Center

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for Strategic Studies [CSS] - University of Jordan, forthcoming). The research was based on a mixed-methods approach consisting of a survey conducted among Syrian refugee university students and a series of focus group discussions with key stakeholders (policy-makers, practitioners, higher education providers, experts and NGOs involved in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis).

### **Changing Approach in Education Policies**

The prolonged stay of Syrian refugees in Jordan has led to a number of reforms and the adoption of new policies in the field of higher education. The Jordan Response Plan (JRP), adopted in 2015, implemented a set of policies aiming to include Syrian refugees in tertiary education. In 2016, Syrian refugees were allowed to legally enter the Jordanian labour market and become eligible for a work permit (Government of Jordan, 2016).

In order to better understand to what extent Syrian refugees effectively entered the Jordanian higher education system in recent years, it should be highlighted that, at the time of writing, the number of non-Jordanians currently enrolled in tertiary education in Jordan represents 14% of the total higher education population, out of whom 6.5% are Syrian refugees. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) reported that 15,944 Syrian students were officially registered at Jordanian universities in the academic year 2016-2017. Almost two thirds of students (10,665) were enrolled in private institutions, while 5,279 of the rest attended public universities (Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, 2018).

In parallel, international donors and NGOs launched fellowship and scholarship programmes addressed at Syrian refugees, enabling them to pursue tertiary education in different countries, including Jordan and Europe. This constituted a new approach, as for years international donors' initiatives focused mainly on primary and secondary education needs.

The main rationale behind those new policies was that the inclusion of Syrian refugees in higher education in the host countries had a significant impact on social and economic contexts. Firstly, empowering the young generation of refugees by giving them access to higher education reduces their dependence on external assistance and, in the longer term, leads to the creation of economically self-sustainable actors. Furthermore, in some cases it could mitigate the risk of some young refugees turning to criminal or even terrorist activities, prompted by lack of socioeconomic opportunities. Additionally, it significantly reduces risks of exploitation of refugees by host communities and contains social tension between the host and hosted communities. Opening access to tertiary education might also act as a stability vector within the most affected regions and help fulfil the demands of the emerging labour market.

Nevertheless, despite the overall positive outcome the more inclusive education policies can have on host countries, the barriers and obstacles still seem to remain.

### Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees in Higher Education in Jordan

The obstacles can be grouped in four categories: financial, academic, administrative and informative. These challenges can be met in distinct phases of the higher education cycle, namely: access, performance and conclusion/career.

The classification of challenges is presented in the table below (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Challenges faced by Syrian refugees in the higher education phases.

	Financial	Academic	Administrative	Informative
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of adequate financial resources to afford university fees, housing, stationery, transportation, food</li> <li>Lack of all-inclusive scholarships</li> <li>Uncertainty about job opportunities (investment risk)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of English and/or further foreign language proficiency</li> <li>Different education backgrounds</li> <li>Lack of needed prerequisites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Long, unclear and controversial procedure for getting equivalence or registering</li> <li>Unclear legal regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of information about scholarship opportunities</li> <li>Lack of orientation in higher education</li> <li>Lack of information about study programmes</li> <li>Lack of information about new fields</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Household students (breadwinners)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unsustainability of long-term programmes (3 years and above)</li> <li>Lack of time to properly dedicate to studying</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of knowledge about tailored opportunities in terms of life-long training</li> </ul>
Career/Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of capital to be invested for starting up a freelance profession</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mismatch between acquired knowledge and professional on-demand skills</li> <li>Lack of life-long entrepreneurial skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncertainty about job permit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of information about labour market</li> <li>Lack of capacity in CV building, and recruitment performance (professional skills)</li> <li>Lack of information on job opportunities</li> </ul>

### **Access**

As shown in the table, the main obstacles in the access phase are financial and informative resources. In fact, lack of sufficient financial resources prevents Syrian refugees from enrolling in tertiary education as long as no other form of alternative support exists. Furthermore, most scholarships tend to cover only university fees and do not cover expenses related to housing, food, transportation and stationery. This is directly linked to the lack of comprehensive information about the scope and coverage of scholarship opportunities. In addition, there is a lack of information about registration procedures and study programmes, as well as labour market demands, which would help direct students in their choices.

Furthermore, potential students encounter academic and administrative constraints. While attempting to enter tertiary education in Jordan, Syrian refugees face several barriers related to low proficiency in English, needed not only to access a certain number of study programmes in the Hashemite Kingdom but also considered a key skill to be competitive in the job market.

Furthermore, there is a lack of a comprehensive framework for procedures regulating access to higher education, which would effectively address diverse cases. Indeed, many Syrian refugee students reported experiencing a completely different credit and certificate acknowledgment procedure processes (Center for Strategic Studies [CSS] - University of Jordan, forthcoming). It should be noted that Syrian refugees often lack necessary documentation and face considerable difficulties to obtain them in their home country. Consequently, alternative forms of official acknowledgement should be conceived.

### **Performance**

In the *performance* phase, further barriers emerge. Very often young Syrian refugees are the only breadwinners in the household. In the best of cases, this can result in opting for short tertiary education programmes or postponing the graduation due to inadequate work-study coping strategies. Those house-holding patterns affect Syrian refugee students' performance, causing delays in graduation and preventing them from fully dedicating themselves to courses and education activities (e.g. enrolling on professional courses, networking, improving linguistic proficiency, career building) that would make them more competitive in the labour market.

### **Career/conclusion**

Challenges and barriers increase while entering the labour market. Following graduation, Syrian refugees are not skilled in fairly competing within the job market. They lack the skills needed to access competition, such as CV building, knowledge of labour market dynamics and of available vacancies.

Secondly, graduated Syrian refugees lack professional skills and knowledge, which prevents them from accessing at least the preliminary stages of employment competition. In addition,

they cannot financially self-sustain their own start-up ideas and lack entrepreneurial skills needed for freelancing. Administrative barriers exist as well, as in some cases lack of work permission is a severe obstacle to legally enter certain employment fields in Jordan and uncertainty in getting it is an issue itself. Competition in the job market and lack of sufficient employment opportunities for Syrian refugees and Jordanians may furthermore create tensions between the two groups. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the CSS in 2017, 52% of Jordanians oppose employing Syrians in Jordan, whereas 73% think that employment of Syrians creates tensions between both communities (Shteivi, 2017b). Such dynamics and hostilities may further deter the “lost generation” to access and successfully conclude higher education in the host countries by leading to potential extremism, marginalisation and exploitation.

### Towards More Inclusive Education Policies

To effectively address the challenges faced by Syrian refugees in the higher education cycle in Jordan, this section proposes a set of policy recommendations, following the same system of classification as in Table 1.

**Table 2.** Policy recommendations for creation of a more inclusive higher education cycle.

	Financial	Academic	Administrative	Informative
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All-inclusive scholarships</li> <li>• Realistic job opportunities (risk management)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparatory courses</li> <li>• English and/or further foreign language extra courses</li> <li>• Bilingual courses</li> <li>• Extra courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unified legal framework</li> <li>• Clear and simplified procedure for equivalence and registration</li> <li>• Alternative equivalence forms (e.g. incoming test)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication strategy (e.g. peer to peer, social media)</li> <li>• Coordination among donors</li> <li>• Unified systems for all scholarships</li> <li>• Establishing hub-offices</li> <li>• Orientation about programmes and new fields (e.g. digital market)</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-study strategies</li> <li>• Family support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative and/or short-term programmes (vocational training, professional diplomas, e-learning)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-life and continuous orientation and counselling</li> </ul>

	Financial	Academic	Administrative	Informative
Career/Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business incubation (supporting young start-ups)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional and hard skills courses (digital skills)</li> <li>• Academic spinoff</li> <li>• Extra courses (soft skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and capillary information about work permit eligibility</li> <li>• Digital market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation in labour market</li> <li>• Monitoring and database (research)</li> <li>• Empowerment for successful CV building and recruitment performance</li> <li>• University platforms for job opportunities (cooperation agreements with private and public sectors)</li> </ul>

**Facilitating access**

In order to ensure the access and prevent Syrian refugees from dropping out of higher education, a series of policies and strategies should be implemented to tackle financial, academic, administrative and information obstacles. Firstly, financial sustainability should be ensured by conceiving scholarships covering not only university fees but also housing, transportation, stationary and food expenses. Furthermore, coordination between donors should be strengthened to avoid overlapping and saturation for certain fields. This could be achieved through the creation of a unified system/platform or hub-offices able to collect and provide all the information about scholarship opportunities.

In this respect, more attention should be paid to the role played by counselling in providing all the necessary information concerning access to higher education and orienting Syrian refugees towards approaching tertiary education. Peer-to-peer communication and promotion by other Syrian refugee students might be a successful solution since it would lead to spreading trusted information among a vulnerable community. In parallel, social media and online communities are a precious channel for spreading information by relying on key opinion leaders and influencers within the community itself. As a result, a systematic communication strategy is needed.

The information gap should be filled at all stages and counselling should be transversally guaranteed for registration, programme range description and expected job opportunities. Consequently, university counselling needs to work as a key hub for informing about

registration procedures, credit acknowledgment, programme range and future plausible labour demand.

In parallel, preparatory courses (e.g. English or other foreign languages, extra courses) might temporarily fill the academic access gap; entry preparation bilingual courses represent a concrete option in the first stage. Administrative gaps should be blurred by promulgating univocal standard regulations concerning academic certificates, legal status and credit acknowledgment, not to mention the need to simplify bureaucratic procedures without favouring one group over others. In addition, alternative equivalence forms should be taken into account in case of missing documentation (i.e. incoming test).

### **Mitigating barriers in performance**

In order to be able to performing in higher education, Syrian refugee students need continuous support. Breadwinner students are not rare (i.e. single mothers, parent-students with underage children, single or orphan students, etc.) and for this reason rational and sustainable work-study policies and in some cases work-study-family balance can represent a successful coping strategy. Furthermore, short study programmes, distance learning and career-oriented curricula should be developed (e.g. vocational training, professional diplomas, e-learning). Continuous monitoring, orientation and counselling are recommended, especially with regard to CV and hard skills building. Lastly, qualitative research should be conducted among Syrian refugees to consider their perspective and implement evidence-based higher education policies.

### **Connecting to the labour market**

The last phase of the higher education cycle, namely Syrian refugees graduating and entering the job market, should also be carefully monitored. In this phase, universities play a key role in job orientation both for Syrian refugees and regular students. The needs of the job market should be carefully analysed and university orientation should focus on the fields with high demand to avoid oversaturation. Students should receive advice on where and how to search for job vacancies. One of the solutions would be to promote job vacancies through a unified system managed by universities. Moreover, advice on how to undergo a selection process for job vacancies is needed. In this respect, there is a need for strengthened cooperation between higher education providers and private and public sectors.

Universities should play a key role in containing social tension between host and hosted communities. Fair competition, cohesion, inclusion and community building should be promoted through communication at all levels in order to prevent stereotyped representation of refugee students.

Conceiving newly-graduated Syrian refugees as mere jobseekers might be a severe obstacle to the implementation of the empowerment framework (Shteivi, 2017a) and surely affects the recipient country economy. Therefore, universities should promote entrepreneurial orientation through developing professional hard and soft skills. Business and start-up incubators at the universities should be equally developed. Moreover, university orientation clearly needs to appear realistic in terms of job opportunities and effectiveness of getting a legal work permit in Jordan and host countries. Specific attention should be paid to emerging new fields and professions, such as digital marketing and companies since there is a severe lack of knowledge about them both among higher education students.

Focusing on the digital market might also help mitigate administrative and legal issues related to the work permit. The digital market does not require a specific country-related permit and, in this respect, it is a concrete solution in the light of an uncertain work permit and possible repatriation/migration plans.



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