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Educate. Empower. Employ.

The Higher Education Needs of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Danielle L. Bernard
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Abstract

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Lebanon is estimated to have taken in more than two million Syrian refugees. Due to policy and security obstacles, many of these refugees are considered by the Lebanese government to be living in Lebanon illegally, which restricts, among other aspects, their ability to continue employment or education. Based on field research conducted in-country through interviews, surveys, and focus groups, the authors have identified areas where innovative and inclusive higher education opportunities can be provided for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to allow them to move forward with their lives in self-sufficiency and dignity.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

- Where are the intersections of the interests and expectations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon with higher education and employment opportunities?
- How do individual characteristics such as gender, age, time in exile, and class affect refugees' perceptions of their higher education needs and ambitions?
- What are the current barriers to accessing higher education, and what is the necessary support needed to overcome the barriers?
- Where are the opportunities for universities to fill the gaps in programming or resources?

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, it is estimated that Lebanon has taken in more than two million Syrian refugees--this into a country with a population of four million Lebanese citizens and 500,000 Palestinian refugees who have lived in the country for decades. Syrian refugees in Lebanon face many challenges, some of the most difficult being:

- In 2015, the Lebanese government stopped allowing the UNHCR to register Syrians entering the country as refugees. Since then, any new arrivals have been consequently unable to access protection or benefits. Given the long and complicated history between the two countries, and the influx of Palestinian refugees who remain in Lebanon decades later, the Lebanese government is making it difficult for Syrians to stay in the country.
- Syrians in Lebanon must obtain residency papers and renew them every six months through an arduous and expensive process. This has resulted in many refugees living, as considered by the

government, illegally in Lebanon which restricts their movements, options, and ability to access employment or education.

- As the Syrian conflict continues, tensions are growing between host communities and refugees.
- The uncertainty around the U.S. travel ban, specifically its impact on the mobility and resettlement of Syrian refugees, drastically diminishes their options and support for a safe and dignified future. Supporting this population in their host countries is more crucial than ever, particularly with scholarships and access to education in many countries presently restricted.

This complex emergency has stripped Syrian refugees of access to education and employment. Through our research, we sought to provide recommendations for higher education institutions to develop programs that could lead to economic opportunity for this vulnerable population. With that in mind, the following questions informed our research and recommendations for program design:

1. Where are the intersections of the interests and expectations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon with higher education and employment opportunities?
2. How do individual characteristics such as gender, age, time in exile, and class affect refugees' perceptions of their higher education needs and ambitions?
3. What are the current barriers refugees face in accessing higher education, and what is the necessary support needed to overcome those barriers?
4. Where are the opportunities for universities, both domestic and international, to fill the gaps in programming or resources?

In order to conduct a thorough assessment and answer these research questions, we conducted a systematic literature review and field research. We held interviews with 42 stakeholders, six focus groups with a total of 54 Syrian participants, and deployed a mobile survey taken by 784 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The information and data collected was disaggregated by gender, age, class, and time in exile, and provided us with insight into the extraordinary circumstances faced by this population. It was apparent that designing a program that addresses their unique needs requires creative thinking, innovative solutions, and adequate support. This report details the conclusions from our research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research exposed a strong desire among Syrians in Lebanon to pursue higher education. Among survey respondents, 78.7% of those who identified as female and 77.8% of those who identified as male responded that they wanted to pursue an advanced degree. Additional research found that certain key support aspects would need to be in place to ensure that Syrians are able to equally access and successfully complete a program.

Programming for Employment Realities

A thorough market analysis demonstrates employment barriers and pathways for Syrians in Lebanon. Formally, they are legally restricted to work in just three sectors: agriculture, construction, and service. However, some flexibility can be found when looking into more nontraditional options including freelance or contract options, work with NGOs especially INGOs and entrepreneurship. Overall, programming should create pathways toward realistic livelihood possibilities.

Providing Courses in Education, IT, Social Sciences, and Media

Our research concluded that among the respondents to our survey, education (26%), information technology (19%), social work (18%), and psychology (17%) were the most sought after majors. This interest intersects with potential employment opportunities. Syrians in Lebanon have been hired to work for international organizations as freelancers, NGOs as social workers or paid volunteers, and as teachers at informal schools. Additionally, freelance and contract work could also come from the media sector in journalism, film, and photography, creating a necessary space for the Syrian voice in storytelling of their circumstances and perspectives surrounding the crisis. There is also an opportunity to develop programs in areas like instructional design or educational technology, which would combine the respondents' interest in education and information technology.

Promoting Syrian Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Many of our focus group participants shared a strong preference for self-employment. There is an opportunity for universities to develop programs that promote innovation and social entrepreneurship to help shift the market to more high-productivity sectors. This could give Syrians skills that are not currently found in the region, which may position them as innovators in the field and offer the opportunity to build businesses that create jobs for others.

Offering Technical & Vocational Skills Certification

Our market analysis shows that many employers reported a gap between education and technical or vocational skills. Based on this finding, there is an opportunity to develop programs that address these skill gaps. Programs could focus on teaching core competencies like English language skills, computer skills, program management, and problem solving. These could be short-term, certificate programs, launched in collaboration with a local NGO or university. Any program launched to teach technical or vocational skills should connect students with employers for internships or short-term on-the-job training.

Partnering with the Private Sector

In order to provide pathways from education to economic opportunity, universities could develop partnerships with private sector businesses, especially international companies operating within Lebanon. Since international companies work under contracts with the Lebanese government, they are known to have more flexible hiring standards and therefore could be a viable avenue of employment for refugees. These businesses could provide internships and hands-on learning opportunities for students to show demonstrated experience to help them stand out in challenging job market.

Opening Programs to the Host Community

Any program must be open to Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians to ensure a sustainable future. This will help to address hostilities that arise from inequalities in access to services. Unemployment and poverty are high among the Lebanese and Palestinian populations in Lebanon. Providing open access, regardless of citizenship, will counter the perception that only Syrians are receiving benefits.

PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the complexity of this situation and its significant barriers, our research discovered areas where higher education programs could be enhanced or developed in a capacity unique to the needs of Syrian refugees, and vulnerable Lebanese and Palestinians within Lebanon. These initiatives were designed with resources that partnerships from universities could provide. They aim to equip

participants with transferable skills, allow for equal access, and result in livelihood opportunities that lead to self-sufficiency and dignity for Syrians whether their future is in Lebanon, Syria, or another country in which they resettle.

NGO Partnerships

Organizations such as the Lebanese Association of Scientific Research (LASeR) provide educational training and scholarship opportunities to hundreds of refugees. Additional university support could significantly increase the capacity of the programs they offer by utilizing technical expertise in blended and online learning and connecting students to peer mentors globally. Basamat for Development is an example of an NGO reaching the most vulnerable refugees, often in remote areas. To support their work, an accredited university could offer teacher training, curriculum expertise, development of additional programs, and accredited certification.

University Partnerships

Creating partnerships between universities in Lebanon and those in other countries could extend the reach of existing programs, such as those in community development, and create unique, flexible, and quality education to help refugees stand out in a challenging job market. Another potential path for partnership with a Lebanese university is to develop programs in instructional design. The program could equip its students with the skills needed to develop online courses, which could transform the higher education landscape in the Middle East and ultimately reach a larger population of refugees than traditional in-person courses.

In order for any of these programs to be successful, they would need to include the following types of support:

Flexible application requirements.

Many Syrians fled without obtaining proof of prior studies. Of the people who responded to our survey, 18% said they fled the country without transcripts of their work, and had no way to return and obtain them. Universities should strongly consider waiving requirements for proof of prior studies, relaxing certain entry requirements, or finding alternative means of verifying equivalencies. This could mean developing tests or evaluations that allow students to opt out of courses they have already taken, or having a representative from the university work directly with the Syrian and Lebanese governments to obtain documents for these students to ensure the students' safety is not put at risk.

Blended online and in-person format with computer and internet access.

A refugee's location and circumstances can change abruptly, making flexibility a necessity. Offering courses in a blended learning format (partially online and partially in-person) could extend the reach of the programs, while still maintaining the necessary face-to-face support students desire. The majority of our survey respondents (62%) were in favor of a blended online and in-person instruction. However, internet infrastructure in Lebanon is poor. A program would need to ensure access to computer labs and internet.

English language support.

Syrian education was conducted in Arabic, while instruction in Lebanon is in English. Of our survey respondents, 14% marked that they spoke no English at all; 62% ranked themselves at a basic or intermediate level; while only 24% marked themselves as advanced or fluent. Language support will prepare refugees for a primarily English curriculum and better position them for employment.

Teaching initial courses in a blended language format could help ease students into learning in English, and make programs more accessible to those who struggle with the language. Face-to-face instruction could be provided in Arabic while reading materials are provided in English, or teachers could instruct partially in Arabic and partially in English until students feel comfortable enough to learn completely in English. Offering individual courses in advanced English training would also be helpful.

Full scholarships.

Financial need was by far the biggest barrier to accessing education. More than half of those who participated in our survey (56%) said that they do not have the financial resources to continue their education. Scholarships should cover tuition, fees, books, supplies, transportation expenses, child care (when necessary) and a small living stipend to ensure that refugees are able to access the opportunities while still providing for their families. Scholarship opportunities should also not be age restrictive.

Gender sensitive design.

This research was conducted through the use of a gender lens due to the fact that refugees, already marginalized due to their circumstances of conflict and displacement, have these vulnerabilities further exacerbated by other intersecting identities. We found that gender was a factor for both men and women. Men reported being targeted as militants or terrorists and having the pressure to provide for their families. Research on Syrian women exposed high rates of child marriage, vulnerabilities to sex trafficking, and labor responsibilities that largely center around unpaid care work and the informal sector. In order for programs to be inclusive, they must use a gender sensitive design so that all refugees can access them by providing resources to address gender-based, or other identity-based obstacles, including disabilities.

Psychosocial support services.

The emotional, physical, and psychological aftereffects of trauma from having fled war make it difficult for Syrian students to concentrate on their studies and re-adjust to normal life. Students also face immense stress of living under physical and economic insecurity in Lebanon. Psychosocial support services must be made available to address these issues.

Connecting students with tutors and mentors.

Mentors help students navigate the complexities of studying while living in a state of uncertainty. They could consist of previous program graduates or current students in similar programs. It could even be an opportunity to promote cultural exchange by connecting with other students globally studying the same topic, or partnering Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian students together to promote social cohesion and ease existing tensions.

Engagement in provision of educational programs must take a long term, sustainable approach to ensure that students can succeed and, perhaps most importantly, not lose hope for their futures.

II. INTRODUCTION

There are 25.4 million refugees in the world today, more than at any other point in recorded history. Syrians account for 25% of this number.¹ This research aims to understand the higher education needs of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon and determine if there is a space for universities to create educational programs with pathways for Syrians to enter the job market, or develop skills to support themselves in current and future livelihoods. The research aimed to answer the following questions:

- **Where are the intersections of the interests and expectations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon with higher education and employment opportunities?**
- **How do individual characteristics such as gender, age, time in exile, and class affect refugees' perceptions of their higher education needs and ambitions?**
- **What are the current barriers to accessing higher education, and what is the necessary support needed to overcome the barriers?**
- **Where are the opportunities for universities to fill the gaps in programming or resources?**

In the past, humanitarian assistance has focused mainly on providing short-term solutions addressing basic needs, but as the number of people displaced and their length of time in displacement increases, long-term and sustainable solutions become vital. Within this, human rights must be upheld and opportunities should exist to empower people to become active and self-reliant citizens in any country where they settle. This includes host country integration, resettlement, or return to Syria where there will be a need for educators, engineers, urban planners, peacebuilders, and entrepreneurs to help rebuild the country.

This research found tremendous obstacles in the way of accessing higher (or even secondary) education, including a lack of access to legal residency, inability to pay for tuition, the need to financially support a family, and other barriers explained in detail throughout this report. However, it also exposed a great deal of interest in short-term, practical programs, as well as efforts already underway to help Syrian refugees access higher education. As we heard from people over and over again during our research, education is hope.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since higher education has not traditionally been a focus in humanitarian assistance, research related to its long-term impact for refugees is lacking. However, existing literature on higher education in general points to positive impacts on social, cultural, and economic advancement. A 2011 report commissioned by The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that education is a core component of building sustainable peace. The values and attitudes that are formed through education can lead to conflict transformation, social cohesion, economic growth, and national advancement.²

¹ "Figures a Glance," UNHCR, accessed November 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² Novelli, M. "The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: A Synthesis report of findings from Lebanon, Nepal and Sierra Leone." *United Nations Children's Fund* (2011).

In a report issued jointly by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and UC Davis, it was argued that rebuilding Syria and stabilizing the Middle East is dependent on “maintaining the human and intellectual capital these young people represent.” Syria will need educators, engineers, urban planners, peacebuilders, and entrepreneurs.³ In 2007, the UNHCR performed a study of 696 graduates from around the world who had received scholarships through their Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) program over the past 15 years. They “found a direct link between tertiary education and positive impacts on durable solutions.” Those who received higher education moved back earlier in the repatriation process, and 70% took up work as civil servants or non-governmental organization (NGO) managers.⁴

When looking at the impacts of higher education outside of the refugee context, positive correlations have also been found between rates of higher education enrollment (by number of years) and GDP growth per capita in China,⁵ India,⁶ Romania,⁷ Zimbabwe,⁸ Pakistan,⁹ Iran,¹⁰ Malaysia,¹¹ the EU and former Soviet Union,¹² and in a multi-country analysis of 81 countries.¹³ The benefit of higher education is underscored by its adoption as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It states that higher education “shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” Further, “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”¹⁴ Therefore, higher education opportunities should be made available and accessible to refugees, based on merit, in order for them to achieve a life of dignity, realize other rights, such as the right to work, or simply to exist in a more peaceful world.

While there have been a number of higher education initiatives recently launched for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, there are vast gaps between programs available to refugees and the number of refugees with a desire to attend college.¹⁵ It is estimated that there are as many as 70,000 Syrian university students in Lebanon, yet only 6,500 are currently attending a university.¹⁶ Rebuilding Syria and stabilizing the Middle East requires investing in the human and intellectual capital of those who have been displaced. To have a society that exists in a state of positive peace, quality education must be provided along the entire education continuum.

³ Watenpugh, K., Fricke, A. and King, J. “The War Follows Them: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon.” *Institute of International Education, Inc* (2014).

⁴ Morlang, Claas, and Sheri Watson. Tertiary Refugee Education. (UNHCR, 2007) p.6.

⁵ Wang, Ying, and Chao Ni. “The Role of the Composition.” (2015) p.779.

⁶ Self, Sharmistha, and Richard Grabowski. “Does education at all levels cause growth?” (2004) p.54.

⁷ Dănăciță, Daniela-Emanuela, and Lucian Beldușcu. The Interactive Causality. (n.d.) p.7.

⁸ Zivengwa, Tichaona, et al. “Investigating the Causal Relationship.” (2013) p.406.

⁹ Abbas, Qaisar. “The Role of Human Capital in Economic Growth.” (2000) p.465.

¹⁰ Fadaee Khorasgani, Mahdi. “Higher education development.” (2008) p.172.

¹¹ Bakar, Noraznin Abu, et al. “The Nexus Between Education.” (2014) p.140.

¹² Grdinić, Maja. “Higher Education as a Means of Achieving Economic Growth.” (2014) p.105.

¹³ Chatterji, Monojit. “Tertiary Education and Economic Growth.” (1998) p.352.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html> [accessed 18 November 2018]

¹⁵ Watenpugh, Keith David, et. al. The War Follows Them. (2014) p.11.

¹⁶ Reisz, Matthew. “Refugees from Syria excluded from Lebanese universities.” *Times Higher Education* (2014).

IV. METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

This research began with an extensive literature review that included reports on the Lebanese labor market, relevant legal structures, Lebanon's history, and organizations involved in providing higher education for refugees in Lebanon, including universities, UN bodies, international and local non-governmental organizations (INGOs & NGOs), and the Lebanese government.

Field Research

Field research was conducted in Lebanon between July 9th and Aug 13th, 2016, including 42 interviews and six focus groups using a participatory research approach.

Interviews

Interview subjects were identified from the reports in the literature review stage, as well as through recommendations made by other interviewees. Questions addressed current higher education opportunities available for Syrian refugees, the barriers faced in accessing those programs, employment prospects after graduation, and what the necessary program infrastructure to ensure equal access, regardless of gender, age, class, or other factors.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with six groups of Syrian refugees across the country, totaling 54 individuals. Participants were identified through the UNHCR, Jusoor, the Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASeR), and a small university in the Bekaa Valley that's name is withheld for security reasons. They included a group of men aged 26-40 and a group of women aged 18-25, DAFI scholars attending Lebanese University, LASeR students who attend universities in northern Lebanon, students from the university in Bekaa, and a group of women in an informal tented settlement in Bekaa. Questions focused on their interest in higher education programs, prospects for employment, barriers they face, and what support they need to access and complete a program.

Survey

The purpose of the mobile-friendly, online survey was to reach a large, geographically distributed audience, and to provide quantitative data. The link was distributed to NGOs and universities in Lebanon, who then sent it through their databases of Syrian refugee contacts. Refugees of university age were targeted, defined for this purpose as 18-40, to account for those who may have been enrolled in universities in Syria but had their studies interrupted by the war. Over a period of three weeks, 784 responses were collected from the survey. Data was disaggregated by gender, age, time in exile, and class.

Limitations

The three researchers' native language was English, while participants spoke mainly Arabic. Focus groups were conducted in Arabic through a translator. This may have caused a loss of nuance, especially with regard to side conversations and opportunity for follow-up questions. Translation of the survey from English to Arabic and back to English may have resulted in subtle but meaningful changes in precisely-chosen language. Because the survey was distributed online, it did not reach those without access to a computer or mobile phone with internet.

The research did not include intersecting identities beyond gender, age, and class, such as disability, religion, and sexual identity. Further, binary language of “male” and “female” was used in the survey to disaggregate gender, which did not allow for the inclusion of gender non-binary individuals and may have been limiting for transgender refugees to respond. Therefore, the voices of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees may not have been captured and a fully inclusive reach may not have been achieved (further research to ensure this is recommended). Questions that may have triggered traumatic memories were avoided to prioritize protection. Many of the research participants were also experiencing research fatigue. At a focus group conducted at a university in Bekaa, a woman shared that that researchers treated Syrians like lab rats instead of human beings.¹⁷ They felt they had been given hope for resources, scholarships, or pathways to a better life, that were never delivered.

It is also important to note that the researchers were women from the United States. Their nationality and gender may have influenced the type and quality of information given in meetings, though this was not immediately evident. Further, the researchers carry with them inherent privilege. Given this, it is not possible for them to fully understand and convey the challenges faced by Syrian refugees, a highly marginalized population. It may have also affected how much focus group participants trusted them, and how that impacted the honesty of their responses.

Protection

Syrian refugees living in Lebanon face a great deal of hostility and uncertainty with few legal protections available to them. To ensure their participation in this research would not put them at further risk, measures were taken to protect privacy. In any quotes that are attributed to a particular person, names have been changed to protect the identity of interviewees. In areas of the country where tensions are high, or refugees could be singled out, names of the institutions where we met with refugees have been withheld.

V. HISTORY & CONTEXT

The political, social, religious, economic, and governmental landscape of Lebanon was complex prior to the Syrian crisis. When the civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, Syrian forces were the first to intervene and remained in the country after the war ended in 1990, causing many Lebanese to view them as an occupying power creating resentment that lingers today.¹⁸ Since the war’s end, it has been a challenge to integrate the many Lebanese political and religious factions. This has resulted in government inefficiency and a breakdown of the economy, social services, and infrastructure, leaving many Lebanese citizens vulnerable and needing support. When civil war began in Syria in 2011 and refugees fled to Lebanon, their presence was accepted at first. The duty of Lebanese to provide refuge was seen as reciprocity for Syria sheltering Lebanese refugees during its own civil war. However as an overwhelming number continued flowing into the country, the strain on resources heightened tensions.

The shift in attitudes was evident throughout this research. During interviews with Lebanese, comments were often made that the Lebanese were in need too, and there were not enough resources for everyone. Aid workers described their frustrations about high birth rates in the informal tented settlements and their conflicted feelings about providing Syrians with jobs when unemployment in

¹⁷ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian DAFI Scholars. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

¹⁸ Ochsenwald, W., Barnett, R., Bugh, G., Kingston, P., Khalaf, S., and Maksoud, C. “Lebanon”. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2014).

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: www.ags.edu (Please cite this paper as the following: Danielle L. Bernard, MaryBeth Bognar, Jami Hunter (2018). Educate. Empower. Employ. The Higher Education Needs of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 4.

Lebanon is already high. Syrian refugees are aware of these resentments. Focus group discussions included the following reflections:

“If people come from parts of Syria where there is fighting, Lebanese assume they’re all with the government and part of the fighting. Lebanese say, ‘you people are the ones who did this to Syria.’ This affects us emotionally.”

— Sahar

“Gatherings of Syrians frighten the Lebanese. My friends and I were at a restaurant for a long time. The owner called the police on us.”

— Gamila

“Any time there is a security issue like a bombing, they assume it’s the Syrians, so we stay home because we don’t want to get arrested.”

— Nabil

When considering the influx of Syrian refugees, it is important to note that Palestinian refugees have also been present in Lebanon since the creation of Israel in 1948, with a large influx occurring in the early 1970s. At present, there are approximately 450,000 Palestinians living in Lebanon.¹⁹ Palestinians are categorized as “non-Lebanese” despite residing in the country for over 70 years. They do not have access to government services or rights and benefits afforded to citizens, including education and certain types of employment. The non-temporary nature of the Palestinian refugees has caused concern that a similar protracted situation will happen with the Syrians as well. The official UNHCR tally of Syrian refugees in Lebanon stands at 1.1 million, but this number is likely inaccurate. The government ordered the UNHCR to stop registering refugees in January of 2015, and unofficial estimates place the number closer to two million, making up roughly one third of the population.²⁰

Despite the complexities, many Lebanese and international organizations are working to improve the lives of Syrians. In higher education, there are both local and international universities and NGOs that are working in the following ways:

1. The American University of Beirut (AUB), the Lebanese American University (LAU), Lebanese University (LU), the Universite Libano-Francaise (ULF), among others, have scholarships designated for Syrian students. Several have negotiated a lower tuition rate and flexed requirements for residency documents and proof of prior studies.
2. Local and international NGOs such as LAsER, SPARK, Jusoor, and AMIDEAST work to connect Syrian students to scholarship opportunities and provide English language classes and psychosocial support.
3. The UNHCR partners with the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD) to connect Syrian students with scholarships to German universities. The UNHCR also offers Syrian refugees scholarships through their DAFI program, which allows refugees to attend public

¹⁹ “What We Do,” UNWRA, accessed December 2016, <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do>.

²⁰ “Refugee Response in Lebanon Briefing Documents.” UNHCR (2015): Beirut.

universities within their host countries.

4. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the only UN body with a mandate for lifelong learning, which encompasses primary, secondary and higher education. In Lebanon, the scholarships they offer aid both Syrians and Lebanese.

VI. LEGAL ANALYSIS

International Law

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol. However, it is still bound by customary law and *inter alia* bound by leading principles of refugee protection.²¹ This includes recognizing Syrians fleeing violence as refugees under the definition, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”²² Lebanon is currently not defining these Syrians as refugees. Lebanon is also a party to human rights treaties that express these norms including the 1984 Convention Against Torture, 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Arab Charter of Human Rights. Article 11 of ICESCR requires social protections to non-citizens and recognizes their rights to obtain shelter and means to a livelihood.²³ The right to work is a universal human right under Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further defined under ICESCR in Article 6. Though Article 2 allows developing countries to determine to what extent they will guarantee these rights to non-nationals, there is a “Minimum Core” of rights to live a dignified life that must be ensured.²⁴

Legal Provisions Between Syria and Lebanon

In 1994, Syria and Lebanon signed a Bilateral Agreement in the Field of Labor regarding temporary residency permits for Syrians entering Lebanon. Article 4 of the agreement states, “Ministers of Labor in both countries shall be entrusted with pursuing their efforts in order to find the means likely to ensure workers’ rights in both states.”²⁵ Syria and Lebanon also signed the Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination, under which Article 1 ensures freedom of movement between both countries and the freedom to stay, work, employ and practice economic activity in conformity with national laws.²⁶

Domestic Law

Lebanon passed the Law Regulating the Entry, Stay, and Exit from Lebanon in 1962, which emphasizes the country’s commitment to refugees, including non-refoulement. It also defines a refugee under Article 26 as, “any foreign national who is the subject of a prosecution or a conviction

²¹ Janmyr, M. “The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” *The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut* (2016).

²² “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.” *Geneva: UN General Assembly* (1951): 137.

²³ “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” *UN General Assembly* (1966): vol. 993: 3.

²⁴ “Overview of Right to Work for Refugees: Syria Crisis Response: Lebanon & Jordan.” *International Rescue Committee* (2016).

²⁵ “Bilateral Agreement in the Field of Labor Between the Government of the Lebanese Republic and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic.” *Syrian Lebanese Higher Council* (1994).

²⁶ “Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination between the Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic.” *Syrian Lebanese Higher Council* (1993).

by an authority that is not Lebanese for a political crime or whose life or freedom is threatened, also for political reasons, may request political asylum in Lebanon” and Article 31, “when a political refugee is deported from Lebanon, he or she will not be returned to a country in which his or her life or freedom is threatened.”²⁷ A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Lebanon and UNHCR in 2003. It does not entitle refugees to remain in Lebanon permanently and articulates that Lebanon will accept asylum seekers only if they are seeking asylum to another country.²⁸ Further, the principles of international human rights law exist within Lebanon’s Constitution. Its Preamble states, “Lebanon [...] abides by its [the United Nations] covenants and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and “the Government shall embody these principles in all fields and areas without exception.”²⁹

Restrictions on Refugee Rights

Regulations adopted in 2014 placed higher restrictions on obtaining residency permits for Syrians. In February 2016 during a conference co-hosted by the United Nations, Lebanon issued a Statement of Intent in which the government “committed to work on achieving priorities mainly in the field of education, as well as economic opportunities and employment,” for Syrians.³⁰ Lebanon has a responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of Syrian refugees within the country, which includes easing residency permit restrictions and ensuring economic livelihood opportunities. It is also important to note that this obligation should not solely fall on the Lebanese government. At a time when many, often wealthier, countries are restricting or banning Syrian refugees, the countries bordering Syria continue to host the vast majority of refugees. With Lebanon in particular having the highest number of refugees per capita, it cannot be underestimated the impact this has on its already diminishing resources. Therefore, it is not just Lebanon’s, but the world’s responsibility to together address the needs of Syrian refugees, including through education and livelihood opportunities, among others including basic needs. Ongoing discussions around the Global Compact on Refugees further defines how countries are to together uphold the human rights of refugees.³¹

VII. MARKET ANALYSIS

The Lebanese economy has long been affected by its own civil war that ended in 1990. While Lebanon has a free-market economy that welcomes foreign investment, corruption and the complex systems of government discourage potential investors. Prior to 2011, Lebanon boasted four straight years of 8% GDP growth, which since stagnated due to the effects of the Syrian Civil War.³² The previous GDP growth however, did not translate into jobs. In the same period, employment only grew by 1.1% while the eligible labor force grew at double the speed. This significantly increased unemployment, particularly among young adults, and created an exodus of young, skilled laborers who felt they had little choice but to migrate to other countries to find work that matched their skill level.³³

²⁷ Lebanon. “Order No. 319 of 1962 regulating the status of foreign nationals in Lebanon.” (1962).

²⁸ “Country Operations Plan: Lebanon.” *UNHCR* (2004).

²⁹ Lebanon. “Lebanon Constitution.” (1989).

³⁰ “Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality: The Impact of the Lebanese State’s Policies on Syrian Refugees’ Daily Lives.” *Lebanon Support* (2016).

³¹ “The Global Compact on Refugees.” *UNHCR* (2018).

³² “The World Factbook-Central Intelligence Agency-Lebanon,” Central Intelligence Agency, accessed December 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>.

³³ Robalino, D. and Sayed, H. “Republic of Lebanon Good Jobs Needed.” *World Bank* (2012).

The Syrian crisis has had widespread negative effects on the Lebanese economy in nearly every major sector. Transportation and insurance costs for Lebanese imports and exports have skyrocketed as the only overland route to external markets is through Syria.³⁴ Tourism has plummeted because of the spillover of the Syrian conflict in border areas. This has affected both the service and construction sectors as many of the homes being built throughout the country were from regional tourists constructing vacation homes near the Mediterranean.³⁵

As nearly two million Syrians have poured into Lebanon over the past six years, the struggling economy has become a major cause of tension between the two groups. The Lebanese believe that the Syrians are taking their jobs, and there is some evidence that in certain sectors, it may be true. In daily agriculture and construction work, there are reports that Syrians will work for lower wages than their Lebanese counterparts, beating them in a race to the bottom.³⁶ The tension between these two groups is contributing to local instability, yet the livelihoods sector remains the most underfunded sector in the Lebanese crisis response, securing only 13% of requested funds.³⁷

One third of workers in the Lebanese labor force have tertiary education, however the ease of finding a job is highly dependent on the quality of education. Even among college graduates, employers report a skills gap in “necessary technical, cognitive, and non-cognitive skills.”³⁸ Most graduates are unable to find a job within a year after graduation, but those that graduate from top universities are able to find employment fairly easily.³⁹ While there is no comprehensive data set on the education levels and skill sets of refugees in Lebanon, surveys have shown that there is a positive correlation between education and permanent, reliable employment.⁴⁰

While there has not been a comprehensive employment study of Lebanon since 2004, estimates from a 2012 study commissioned by The World Bank show that unemployment rates for women and youth are extremely high—18% and 34% respectively—with an overall unemployment rate of 11%. Even before the Syrian Civil War hit its peak, it was estimated that the economy would be able to absorb less than 17% of the 23,000 laborers newly entering the job market.⁴¹

There is currently no comprehensive employment data available for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, however in a multi-sector needs assessment commissioned by the UNHCR in 2014, only 32% of respondents reported being employed. Seventy two percent of those working were employed on a temporary basis (either daily, weekly, monthly, or seasonal), and 92% did not have any sort of work contract.⁴²

The vast majority of Syrian refugees work in daily and temporary jobs, mainly in agriculture (28%), construction (12%), and service (36%).⁴³ However, based on findings from the UNHCR Lebanon Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis, with the current state of the market system, these sectors

³⁴ “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016.” *UNOCHA* (2014).

³⁵ “Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis of the Construction and Labor Market System in North and Bekaa, Lebanon.” *International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Danish Refugee Council, Oxfam, UKAid* (2013): 11.

³⁶ “Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis of the Agricultural Labor Market System in North and Bekaa, Lebanon.” *International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Danish Refugee Council, Oxfam, UKAid* (2013): 19.

³⁷ “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016.” *UNOCHA* (2014).

³⁸ Robalino, D. and Sayed, H, “Republic of Lebanon Good Jobs Needed,” 3.

³⁹ Robalino, D. and Sayed, H, “Republic of Lebanon Good Jobs Needed,” 2.

⁴⁰ “Inter-agency Multi-sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) Phase One Report: Secondary Data Review and Analysis.” *UNHCR* (2014): 13, 14, 24.

⁴¹ Robalino, D. and Sayed, H, “Republic of Lebanon Good Jobs Needed,” 2.

⁴² “Inter-agency Multi-sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) Phase One Report: Secondary Data Review and Analysis,” 13, 14, 24.

⁴³ “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016.” *UNOCHA* (2014).

are no longer viable income-earning paths for refugees or host community members to support themselves.⁴⁴

The increasing difficulty in getting residency permits, and legal barriers to work permits, have forced many refugees to work illegally. Refugees often report being exploited and not getting paid for their work because they have no legal recourse. This has caused a deep distrust in the system and has led many to feel hopeless about their ability to financially support themselves.⁴⁵ It has also significantly impacted poverty rates. Approximately 52% of the displaced Syrian population in Lebanon “are unable to meet their minimum survival requirements.”⁴⁶

Overall poverty rates in Lebanon have increased from 28 to 32% since the start of the Syrian conflict. The country’s stability is being threatened as “long-standing economic inequalities are becoming deeper and more widespread.”⁴⁷ Innovative and radical solutions are needed quickly to address the rising levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment among both Syrians and Lebanese.

VIII. FINDINGS

Q1: Where are the intersections of the interests and expectations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon with higher education and employment opportunities?

Hypothesis 1: Syrian refugees may want to pursue higher education programs that do not match with the available jobs in Lebanon, but are tailoring their learning expectations for that job market, even if it is not in the field they prefer. PARTIALLY TRUE.

On the surface, there seem to be few areas where the interests of Syrians match the needs of the Lebanese market. Focus group discussions showed that many Syrians do not believe they will find permanent employment in Lebanon, but remain hopeful that they will be able to migrate and find employment in other countries. A Syrian professor working at the American University of Beirut stated, “We should prepare them to go back or leave. We cannot avoid this issue.”⁴⁸ Representatives from SPARK and University of the People shared that most of their graduates are looking for work outside of Lebanon, or for remote job opportunities. Two other organizations said that we should be educating people for the Gulf labor market, because only low-skilled work is left in Lebanon. And a director at the Lebanese American University said, “Connectivity with the labor market will not happen in Lebanon. There is only cheap labor here. Once they are educated, they will leave.”⁴⁹

However, some people shared a more optimistic view. Unclear or unspecific areas in policy allow people to create opportunities, partly because of thin or absent regulations. Multiple interviewees said that while there are no opportunities in the public sector, partnerships with the private sector are a potential avenue of employment for refugees. Particularly, international companies work under contracts with the Lebanese government and have more flexible hiring standards.⁵⁰ Others made note of the opportunity to encourage Syrians to start their own businesses, especially in areas like social

⁴⁴ “Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis of the Agricultural Labor Market System in North and Bekaa, Lebanon,” 19.

⁴⁵ Kukrety, N. “Poverty, Inequality and Social Protection in Lebanon.” *Oxfam, Issam Fares Institute of American University Beirut* (2016).

⁴⁶ “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016.” *UNOCHA* (2014).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Interview with Professor at American University of Beirut. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁴⁹ Interview at Lebanese American University of Beirut. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁵⁰ Interview with Researcher for Lebanese Studies at Lebanese American University of Beirut. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

entrepreneurship and media.⁵¹ An interesting opportunity could also be in areas like instructional design and educational technology, areas that do not currently have a market in Lebanon, but may start to see growth. The Gulf countries are leading the way in the Middle East with investments in these areas.⁵² The Middle East online education and e-learning market is expected to grow at 9.8% between 2017 and 2023. Populations may also become more flexible on standard educational delivery methods by necessity. As war and conflict drive people from their homes, forcing them to become more mobile, attending in-person classes may be impossible.

While most of the refugees in the focus group discussions had desires to work or study in specific fields, when asked what they would like to study or what kind of work they would like to do, many of them said “anything.” Salah, a current student at a university in the Bekaa Valley said, “I don’t want to sound dreamy, but I want a PhD in mechanical engineering or interior design.”⁵³ Invoking these two completely unrelated fields is perhaps more a sign of being willing to try anything than an indication of a sober assessment of his own interests and capabilities, as too is the terminal degree to which he aspired, a degree that requires investment of significant resources not realistically available to him. According to Sahir, a young woman in the same focus group, “The war destroyed us. We just want to prove that we can do something.”⁵⁴

Hypothesis 2: The Lebanese government and private sector may be constrained in offering positions to Syrian refugees due to existing economic challenges in the country and the resulting pressure from Lebanese citizens who perceive an increase in competition with Syrians in an already difficult job market. TRUE.

There exists a perception that Syrians are stealing jobs, even though there is very little evidence it is happening on a large scale.⁵⁵ These tensions have negatively impacted job opportunities and pushed the government to pass even more restrictive laws for Syrians. A Syrian professor at AUB said, “What was good for them in 2011 to 2013 is no longer good. Two years ago, there were many Syrians working in bars and restaurants in Hamra. Now there are almost none.”⁵⁶ A representative from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stated that every year, the Lebanese government decides what sectors are available exclusively to Lebanese. From this decision two years ago, the government allowed ten professions to be open to Syrians, and now there are only three.⁵⁷ It is unlikely that these restrictions will change in the near future.

This resentment was not only coming from low-skilled workers who felt their jobs were being taken. Lebanese humanitarian workers also expressed conflicted feelings. A representative from DAAD shared, “I am very stormy about this. On the one hand, I am a humanitarian. On the other hand, I am taking bread from my children.”⁵⁸ A Dean at the University of Balamand said, “When we create these new possibilities, I am afraid with lower salaries, we are replacing Lebanese from the local market.”⁵⁹

⁵¹ Interview at Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASeR). In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁵² “Middle East Online Education & E Learning Market Size, Demand, Opportunity & Growth Outlook 2023.” Research and Markets (2017).

⁵³ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian students. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Bekaa Valley).

⁵⁴ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian students. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Bekaa Valley).

⁵⁵ Interview with Alert Syria. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁵⁶ Interview with Professor at American University of Beirut. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁵⁷ “Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis of the Agricultural Labor Market System in North and Bekaa, Lebanon,” 19.

⁵⁸ Interview with DAAD. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁵⁹ Interview at University of Balamand. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Balamand).

Hypothesis 3: Syrian refugees in Lebanon may have an interest in the following types of programs: education and teaching, marketing, project management, finance, or programs that could lead to work with NGOs. PARTIALLY TRUE.

Understanding that the right to work is restricted for refugees in Lebanon, it was hypothesized that refugees may want to start their own informal businesses, and therefore may be interested in pursuing programs like marketing, project management, or finance, that could help them build a successful business. It was also hypothesized, based on research from IIE and UC Davis, that Syrians in Lebanon may have an interest in pursuing programs like education, social work, or peacebuilding, that would prepare them for jobs that to help their fellow refugees.⁶⁰

Education was the number one program of interest for women refugees and refugees over the age of 26, and the number two choice for men between 18 and 25 years old. Overall, the most selected majors were education, information technology, social work, and psychology. These interests are discussed in more detail under research question two. While refugees are legally limited to work in agriculture, construction, and environment, the programs they are interested in could offer potential employment by NGOs or international organizations. Many NGOs, international companies, and informal schools are hiring Syrian teachers, though unofficially. In order to get around the work permits, they hire them as “volunteers,” but pay them a living wage. However, Syrians are not allowed to work in government-run schools, even in the second-shift classes that host mainly Syrian students.

Several focus group participants were volunteering as social workers for NGOs like Caritas and Save the Children, and an additional 35 survey respondents wrote in that they are volunteering at various organizations. Survey results show a large interest in programs like diplomacy, gender studies, peacebuilding, psychology, social work, global affairs, and international development. It does seem that Syrians have a desire to work in the NGO sector, developing programming and providing support to their fellow refugees. A representative from ULF shared that Syrians can operate their own NGOs in Lebanon, though no legal support could be found for this statement.

It was hypothesized that refugees may have an interest in starting businesses, which could lead to an interest in programs like marketing, management, or finance. The first part was true, but this did not necessarily translate into an interest in the programs we specified. Multiple participants in the focus groups did express a desire to start their own businesses. During the focus group discussion in Bekaa, a student said, “I don’t want to be an employee, I want to be the owner of a business.” Another echoed his sentiment, “We are always working as employees. We want to have higher positions in order to help ourselves and our community.”⁶¹ In the survey and focus groups, however, there was not a significant interest in programs like marketing, project management, or finance.

Q2: How do individual characteristics such as gender, age, time, in exile, and class affect refugees’ perceptions of their higher education needs and ambitions?

Hypothesis 1: Women Syrian refugees may be less likely to envision themselves attending higher education programs than men. FALSE

⁶⁰ Watenpugh, Keith David, et. al. *The War Follows Them*. (2014) p.11.

⁶¹ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian students. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Bekaa Valley).

Due to traditional gender roles, which are often exacerbated in situations of displacement due to, among other aspects, the breakdown of social services and increased need to cover this gap through unpaid care work that disproportionately falls to women⁶², it was hypothesized that women might not show interest in pursuing higher education because they do not perceive it to be a reality within their current circumstances. However, this hypothesis was proven to be false. The majority of survey respondents regardless of gender had completed some post-secondary education with the rest having completed at least primary school with the exception of two women with no education. There was nearly an equal proportion of men (78.7%) as women (77.8%) who had an interest in pursuing higher education opportunities. In our focus group of DAFI scholars, Sahar stated, “We have equality between women and men! The proof is in this room, four women and three men.”⁶³

Hypothesis 2: Syrian refugees who are in the age range of 18-25 may be more likely to want to attend higher education programs than those over age 25. PARTIALLY TRUE

Age did have an impact on this perception. Syrians aged 18-25 have a higher interest in pursuing higher education at 86.6%. Syrians aged 26-34 still had a high interest at 78.6%, but those over age 35 begin to have doubts about continuing their education with 58.1% having interest and 29.5% answering “not sure”.

Hypothesis 3: The longer Syrian refugees have been in exile, the less likely they are to envision themselves attending a higher education program. PARTIALLY TRUE

There was a decline in the percentage of survey respondents answering yes to having interest in higher education as years in exile increased. However, the number of respondents who have been in Lebanon for six years or more was relatively small compared to those who have been in Lebanon less than five years. Therefore, while a larger percentage of them answered no to having an interest in higher education, the numbers are not large enough to make a determination on whether this is significant. Aside from noting this potential trend, we cannot verify what motivated students to select the response they did—whether a need for practicality in pursuing education that would lead to employment, or hopelessness due to facing continuous barriers over time.

Hypothesis 4: Poorer refugees and those living in rural areas in Lebanon, whether men or women, may be less likely to envision themselves attending university than wealthier or urban refugees. FALSE

According to the survey, social class (determined through proxy questions on urban or rural location, and how respondents financially compared themselves to other Syrians back in Syria and Lebanese around them in Lebanon) did not have an impact on perceptions of wanting to continue education. Regardless of class, Syrians had a strong desire to pursue higher education.

Q3: What are the current barriers to accessing higher education, and what is the necessary support needed to overcome the barriers?

Hypothesis 1: Funding will likely be the most significant barrier to accessing higher education. TRUE

⁶² “Lebanon: Supporting Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality in Fragile States,” UN Women. (2016).

⁶³ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian DAFI Scholars. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

Financial need was brought up in every focus group as the primary barrier to accessing higher education opportunities. This was reiterated in the survey where 42.46% responded that they did not have enough financial resources to continue their education. The UNHCR focus group of men ages 26-40 cited their need to work to provide for their families instead of attending school.⁶⁴ The focus group through LAsER added to this gender dynamic in discussing how men have to provide for their families both in Lebanon and back in Syria.⁶⁵ Though men were brought up more when discussing the choice of work over school, the UNHCR focus group of women ages 18-25 did discuss the need for class timing outside of a typical workday because they would need to work in order to pay for school.⁶⁶

Another issue that came up in focus groups was that most scholarships were only accepting Syrians up to age 24. This is problematic since many had to suspend their education due to the conflict and, though they are ready to go back, do not fall into the typical university student age range.

Hypothesis 2: Gendered constraints are likely present for both men and women, but affect them differently. TRUE

The focus groups and surveys did not expose significant gender barriers, and specific concerns that came up were primarily for men. For example, some men participating in the focus groups cited the need to financially provide for their family as a reason to not pursue higher education. Men also shared that they are more likely to be stopped or detained at government checkpoints because they are seen as potential militants or terrorists, which restricts their movement including to class locations.

Women focus group participants did not bring up gender-specific issues that could prohibit them from pursuing higher education. This aligned with the survey where a larger percentage of female survey respondents (35.4%) strongly disagreed with the statement “family obligations make it difficult for me to attend class,” while only 17% strongly agreed. This is in comparison with male responses where 29.5% strongly agreed and 24.6% strongly disagreed. However, at a roundtable with actors working on higher education in this context, a SPARK representative noted family pressure for women being a top reason for their high dropout rates.

The literature review portion of the research suggests that gender-based violence and vulnerabilities are a larger issue than the focus groups and surveys showed. The discrepancy among these results could be because: women underestimated the vulnerabilities they face; there was misinterpretation of our survey and/or focus group questions due to limitations addressed under methodology; or the women most vulnerable to violence and discrimination were harder to access and therefore underrepresented in survey and focus group data.

Further research or program implementation must include a more in-depth gender analysis to determine necessary resources for equal education access, especially due to the reports from other credible outlets citing this as a widespread issue. Documented instances of gender-based violence have included high rates of sexual assault and harassment, slavery and trafficking, domestic violence, and early marriage.⁶⁷ Women resorting to survival sex has been reported as a way to earn money when no

⁶⁴ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Men age 26-40. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁶⁵ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Scholars at LAsER. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Tripoli).

⁶⁶ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Women age 18-25. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁶⁷ Jones, K. and Ksaif, L. “Struggling to Survive: Slavery and Exploitation of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” *The Freedom Fund* (2016): 5-21.

other viable employment options are available. An assessment by the International Rescue Committee found that, “survival sex, typically linked to women’s and girl’s desperate need to access income to cover the increased cost of living since arriving in Lebanon, was also identified as a type of violence frequently experienced by Syrian women and girls.”⁶⁸

Hypothesis 3: The legal status of refugees in Lebanon is likely a major barrier to accessing higher education. TRUE

The difficulty of obtaining and renewing legal residency permits was brought up as a barrier to education opportunities in four of the six focus group discussions. Over 16% of survey respondents listed lack of legal residency permits as a barrier as well, shown in Figure 13. It is also possible that these numbers were underreported because of a hesitancy to expose one’s illegal status. Proof of legal residency is needed to apply for university admission and financial aid.

Hypothesis 4: Language barriers (English proficiency) likely prevent qualified Syrian refugees from applying to higher education institutions within Lebanon. TRUE

In all focus group discussions, participants stressed their lack of fluency in English as a major barrier to accessing higher education. Only 6% of survey respondents reported being fluent in English. Higher education in Lebanon, with only a few exceptions, is instructed fully in English per government policy. This was not the case in Syria where the language of instruction was Arabic, and English is not widely spoken among the Syrian population.

Though there are programs running to teach English to Syrians, they are not instructed at a high enough level to enable them to become fluent, or study at a technical or advanced level. A participant from the all women UNHCR focus group of ages 18-25 said, “the English that exists is too basic, we need higher levels.”⁶⁹ This was reiterated in the LAsER focus group where participants agreed that they need English instruction beyond a basic level and it would be helpful to have instruction from a native English speaker.⁷⁰ In the survey, however, the majority of respondents selected Arabic as their preferred language of study. This could be because they are not currently fluent in English and cannot see themselves learning in it with their current proficiency level. The focus groups’ preferences primarily centered around the fact that, though learning in Arabic would be easier, they understood that pushing themselves to use English instead would better help them in the job market.

Other Perceived Barriers

Education Proof & Equivalencies

Five out of six focus groups discussed equivalencies as a barrier to accessing higher education in Lebanon. This fell into two categories: Syrian standards are different from Lebanese standards, and Syrians are unable to obtain proof of their past studies. Equivalency documents must be provided by the university, and then stamped by the Syrian and Lebanese governments. In addition to the fact that many Syrian universities are inaccessible because of the war, this process may also put refugees at risk of exposing their lack of legal residency to the Lebanese government.

⁶⁸ “Syrian Women and Girls: Fleeing Death, Facing Ongoing Threats and Humiliation.” *International Rescue Committee* (2012): 3.

⁶⁹ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Women age 18-25. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

⁷⁰ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Scholars at LAsER. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Tripoli).

Lack of Employment Opportunities

Four of the six focus groups discussed the lack of employment opportunities available to them after they graduate and identified this as a major disincentive to invest in higher education. The LAsER focus group discussed hands on training in addition to their current education curriculum as a possible solution that could help them stand out in the challenging job market.⁷¹ In addition, the market analysis exposed other potential employment pathways for those with a tertiary education.

Safety & Security

The majority of focus group and survey participants did not feel their physical safety would be at risk on their commute to attend class, but a few specific concerns are worth noting. Some focus group respondents felt that safety could be a concern if class finished late. However, it was also mentioned that classes should be available outside of the normal workday since many refugees need to work to support their families.

When security was brought up in the focus groups, most participants linked it with the issue of illegal residency. Those who were unable to obtain a legal residency permit felt most unsafe because of the risk of harassment or arrest while passing through checkpoints. A young woman said “when there are three or four checkpoints, we hit the road and pray that no one will stop us and ask us for papers.”⁷² This was especially a concern for men if checkpoints were on their commute to class. Two of the six focus groups specifically brought up the fact that men are more likely to get stopped because they are perceived as more likely to be linked with militants and terrorists.

Q4: Where are the opportunities for universities to fill the gaps in programming or resources?

Hypothesis 1: Universities may be able to use their contacts, resources, and expertise in course development and structure, to develop diploma programs to fit the interests of refugees and needs of the job market. TRUE.

Programs of Interest

The most popular programs of study as determined from focus group and survey responses are: Education, Information Technology, Social Work, Psychology, Film and Photography, Peacebuilding, Nursing, Health/ Medicine, and Media/Journalism. A survey error caused Business and Finance to be left out from the list of program options, but in the open-text “Other” field, there were 22 write-ins for this category, out of a total of 425 responses to this question. While 22 is a relatively low number, it cannot be conclusively determined if this is an accurate proportion of respondents interested in this program because they may not have thought to write it in, in the absence of an existing category.

When broken down by gender, the strongest areas of interest for women were in Education, Social Work, Psychology and Nursing, while men had an interest in Information Technology, Education, Film and Photography, and Peacebuilding. The distribution of responses across the top eight categories falls equally between genders, meaning that offering programs in any of the top categories could equally serve men and women.

When broken down by age group, there were some variations in the programs of interest. Judging by percentage of respondents, not strictly the number, refugees over age 35 were most interested in

⁷¹ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Scholars at LAsER. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Tripoli).

⁷² Focus Group Discussion with Syrian students. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Bekaa Valley).

Education, Social Work and Peacebuilding, while those between 18 and 25 preferred Healthcare, Education, Information Technology, and Media/Journalism. The preferences of the middle age group, those between 26 and 34, fell right in between the oldest and youngest, ranking Education, Information Technology and Social Work as their top three, plus bringing Film/Photography and Literature into the mix.

Program Access

Focus group discussions exposed that many students who currently have scholarships to Lebanese universities are not studying the programs they prefer. This often happens because the scholarships are designated for programs that are typically under-enrolled at the universities. For example, at the university in Bekaa and at LAsER,⁷³ several students were studying Business but wanted to be studying Media, Communications, or Mechanical Engineering, but these were not options for them. Sabah, a young woman in Tripoli, was studying Medical Laboratories but wanted Engineering, while another young man in the same program wanted Information Technology.⁷⁴ Amir had studied Architecture in Syria, but when he came to Lebanon he could not get equivalency for these past courses; he was fortunate because he only lost one year of study and was able to get a scholarship to continue in Architecture. Of the 40 university-age people in the focus groups, nine were studying in the programs they wanted, 10 were studying subjects they did not want, and two could not get into their desired program – specifically Law. Tahir said he had studied Law for five years in Syria, but before graduating he had to flee and now all of his studies are lost.

Blended Learning

People in Lebanon typically have poor internet access and they do not generally view online programs as being academically respectable. However, there is a great deal of interest in blended online and in-person learning programs, with 62.61% of respondents expressing this. Four of the five universities we spoke with also expressed interest in developing blended learning programs. Several focus group respondents did clarify that their interest in a blended program would depend on the topic.

Hypothesis 2: It would be beneficial to Syrian refugee students if a university program offered select courses with instruction in Arabic to help those who struggle with courses in English. TRUE.

The language barrier for Syrian students is significant, having previously studied in Arabic while the university curriculum in Lebanon is mainly taught in English. Most students in the focus groups were strongly of the opinion that Arabic classes would not be helpful—they simply needed more English classes to bring them to a higher level of fluency. Jamal told us, “we want to improve ourselves, not stay where we are. We want to learn languages,”⁷⁵ while Nabil shared, “Arabic classes would be easier, but not better.”⁷⁶ The survey results give a slightly different perspective. When asked what their preferred language of study would be, 76% said Arabic, while 24% said English.

Hypothesis 3: Universities may be able to act affirmatively for refugees, waiving certain entry requirements, and working with the government to push for more open regulations for students to acquire short term study visas. TRUE.

⁷³ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian students. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Bekaa Valley).

⁷⁴ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Scholars at LAsER. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Tripoli).

⁷⁵ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian Women age 18-25. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut)

⁷⁶ Focus Group Discussion with Syrian DAFI Scholars. In-person discussion. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

The universities in Lebanon that have already opened their doors to Syrian refugees have recognized the need to accommodate the extraordinary circumstances that refugees face, particularly regarding documentation (academic and residential), and cost. Most of the focus group participants, plus 144 of 518 respondents to this question on the survey, confirmed that they do not have access to proof of prior studies, either because the universities they attended have been destroyed, or because it was too dangerous to return and obtain the necessary documents. For those students who did have their transcripts, many faced difficulty in receiving equivalencies for the courses they had completed, causing them to lose months or years of prior education investment. Additionally, lack of legal residency is a significant problem for many refugees as it impacts their ability to apply to universities.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research have informed the following recommendations for universities interested in providing programs for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It is crucial to note that any programming for Syrian refugees must also be open to Lebanese and Palestinians within the country as well to ensure a sustainable future. This will help to address hostilities that arise from inequalities in access to services. Unemployment and poverty are high among the Lebanese and Palestinian populations in Lebanon. Providing open access, regardless of citizenship, will counter the perception that only Syrians are receiving benefits.

Offer Courses in High-Demand Sectors

Education, IT, and Social Sciences

The most sought after majors were education, information technology, social work, and psychology. Survey results also revealed a significant interest in programs like diplomacy, gender studies, peacebuilding, global affairs, and international development. These interests intersect with potential employment in the short-term as well as long-term. Syrians have been hired to work as freelancers for international organizations, as social workers or paid volunteers at NGOs, and as teachers at informal schools. The skills that Syrians develop in these fields could be vital to reconstruction post-conflict, as Syria will need educators, project managers, and community leaders to help build sustainable peace. Additionally, freelance and contract work could also come from the media sector in journalism, film, and photography, creating a necessary space for the Syrian voice in storytelling of their circumstances and perspectives surrounding the crisis. Professional and expert curriculum in areas such as advocacy, crisis management, project management, proposal writing, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and peacebuilding may also provide opportunities for Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians to work together on joint solutions to address local community issues.

Instructional Design

Programs in instructional design or educational technology would combine the respondents' interest in education and information technology. Education and information technology were the top two survey choices for fields of study across both genders. This could provide pathways to a new field of gainful employment for those who need it most by providing students with the skills to develop their own online or blended learning courses. Though these do not yet have a market in Lebanon, they have the potential to grow out of the changing landscape and evolution of educational needs for a mobile population.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Focus group participants shared a strong preference for self-employment. There is an opportunity for universities to develop programs that promote innovation and social entrepreneurship to help shift the market to more high-productivity sectors. This could give Syrians skills that are not currently found in the region, which might position them as innovators and give them the opportunity to build businesses.

Technical & Vocational Skills Certification

Many employers report a gap between education and technical or cognitive skills. There is an opportunity to develop programs that address these skills gaps, focusing on core competencies like English language skills, computer skills, program management, and problem solving. These could be short-term, certificate programs, launched in collaboration with a local NGO or university. Any program launched to teach technical or cognitive skills should connect students with employers for internships or short-term on-the-job training.

Make Programs More Accessible

Relaxed Entry Requirements

Many Syrians fled without obtaining their certified school documents. Among our survey respondents, 18% did not have their transcripts, and we believe that this is representative of the refugee population as a whole. Universities should strongly consider waiving requirements for proof of prior studies, relaxing certain entry requirements, or finding alternative means of verifying equivalencies. This could mean developing tests or evaluations that allow students to opt out of courses they have already taken.

Blended Online & In-Person Learning

Survey and focus group participants expressed the value of face-to-face instruction, but also understood that learning online could offer more flexibility in the face of mobility constraints. Offering courses in a blended learning format (partially online and partially in-person) could extend the reach of programs while still maintaining the necessary face-to-face support students desire. If universities or NGOs launch programs that are partially online, they must ensure that students have computer and internet access. While most respondents indicated that they have mobile phones with internet, few had daily access to a computer and internet access in Lebanon is highly unreliable. Universities could partner with companies like Microsoft to provide free computers for students, and BRCK, a Kenyan-based company that built a mobile WiFi device that provides reliable internet access in areas with poor infrastructure.

Gender Sensitive Design

This research was conducted through the use of a gender lens due to the fact that refugees, already marginalized due to their circumstances of conflict and displacement, have these vulnerabilities further exacerbated by other intersecting identities. We found that gender was a factor for men and women. Men reported being targeted as militants or terrorists and having the pressure to provide for their families. Research on Syrian women exposed high rates of child marriage, vulnerabilities to sex trafficking, and labor responsibilities that largely center around unpaid care work and the informal sector. In order for programs to be inclusive, they must use a gender sensitive design so that all refugees can access them by providing resources to address gender-based, or other identity-based obstacles, including disabilities.

Provide Holistic Support

English Language

Focus group participants expressed a strong desire to learn English and that current English programs were not at advanced or technical enough levels to become fluent. Any program should include an English language component to give Syrians the language skills they need to enter the job market in Lebanon. 63% of survey participants ranked themselves at a Basic or Intermediate level of proficiency in English, but they need greater fluency in order to succeed at a higher education level and in the job market. Teaching initial courses in a blended language format could help ease students into learning in English, and make programs more accessible to those who struggle with the language.

Full Scholarships

Survey respondents and focus group participants shared that finances were the biggest barrier in accessing educational opportunities. Men also cited a need to work and provide for their families, which made it difficult to spend time attending classes. Any programs that are launched should include full scholarships that cover tuition, fees, books, supplies, transportation expenses, child care, and a small living stipend. Scholarship opportunities should not be age restrictive.

Psychosocial & Gender-Based Violence Support Services

In addition to the trauma of having fled from war, Syrian refugees within Lebanon are living under an immense amount of stress because of physical and economic insecurity. Their vulnerability leaves them at risk of violence and exploitation, which is exacerbated by gender. In order to succeed as students, they require adequate support to address the emotional, physical, and psychological aspects of trauma.

Tutors & Mentors

Connecting Syrian refugee students with mentors is important to ensure that students have the necessary support to succeed in a higher education program. Having a mentor would help students navigate the complexities of studying while living in a state of uncertainty. Mentors could be previous graduates from the program or current students in similar programs, including in different countries.

Develop Robust Partnerships

Local Universities

Universities outside of Lebanon that are looking to contribute their expertise could maximize reach to vulnerable populations, and ensure that Lebanese and Syrians are involved in program design from the beginning, by developing partnerships with Lebanese universities. The local university could also serve as an on-location resource for implementing student-designed capstone projects that help improve communities. Bringing Syrians and Palestinian refugees together with Lebanese citizens to develop and launch community development projects also has the potential to ease hostilities. These collaborations allow students to connect, humanize the other, and gain understandings of the others' perspectives.

Private Sector

In order to provide pathways from education to economic opportunity, universities should develop partnerships with private sector businesses, especially international companies operating within Lebanon. Multiple interviewees mentioned that since international companies work under contracts with the Lebanese government, they may have more flexible hiring standards and therefore could be a viable avenue of employment for refugees. Businesses could also serve to provide internships and

hands-on learning opportunities for students to help them gain demonstrated experience and stand out when seeking employment.

Local NGOs

Organizations such as the Lebanese Association of Scientific Research (LASeR) provide educational training and scholarship opportunities to hundreds of refugees. Additional university support would significantly increase the capacity of the programs they offer by utilizing technical expertise in blended and online learning and connecting students to peer mentors globally. Basamat for Development is an example of an NGO reaching the most vulnerable refugees, often in remote areas. To support their work, an accredited university could offer teacher training, curriculum expertise, and development of additional programs. Organizations like SPARK, Sawa for Development & Aid, MAPS (Multi Aid Programs), and Alphabet, all have a high caliber of integrity and quality services. Strategic partnerships with any of these organizations could access a large number of refugees, plus Lebanese and Palestinians.

X. CONCLUSION

Barriers in access to education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon range from a lack of job opportunities, which creates low incentives to invest in higher education, to language barriers that prevent Syrians from applying to programs that are mainly taught in English. Perhaps felt most acutely is the difficulty of obtaining legal residency permits, which are needed to apply for university admission, as well as to pass through checkpoints on the way to class. In this midst of these complexities, there are opportunities for universities to make a positive impact in the lives of Syrian refugees, as well as vulnerable Lebanese and Palestinians within the country. The refugees who participated in this research were eager, motivated, and driven to succeed. They were willing to study programs that are not their preference, and motivated to learn English quickly in order to advance. The programs in which they are interested—education, information technology, social work, psychology, etc.—could equip them with transferable skills that have the potential to prepare for employment in Lebanon, Syria, or wherever they resettle.

Universities that desire to play a role in the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon must consider that launching a program in this context is not simple, nor should it be looked at as a short-term commitment as is often the case in humanitarian assistance. NGOs and universities around the world have stepped in to provide higher education access for Syrian students. Researchers have flooded the Middle East performing needs assessments and gathering data. What is needed now is action. Syrians need long-term, sustainable solutions to ensure that an entire generation does not lose hope. As a Syrian professor at the American University of Beirut told us, “People stop because of barriers. But we cannot say ‘because of all these barriers, we cannot work here.’ You just have to keep going.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Interview with Professor at American University of Beirut. In-person interview. (Aug 2016, Beirut).

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