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## Képzés és Gyakorlat

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# **Képzés és Gyakorlat**

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## **Tertiary Education Initiatives for Educating Syrian Refugees in Jordan – Obstacles and Inappropriate Practices**

*With a high percentage of Syrian refugees population in Jordan aged 18 - 35 years, the number of refugees that are willing to access the job market is very high. Therefore, many organizations try to make these refugees qualified by enrolling them within many educational and training programs in order to enhance their skills, thus make them able to find jobs. However, with the presence of many challenges that are facing Syrian youths in accessing the tertiary education system in Jordan, many organizations that offered scholarships at the tertiary education level couldn't achieve the highest possible number of beneficiaries. Accordingly, this study aims to highlight the obstacles and inappropriate practices of many tertiary education initiatives that led to a low number of beneficiaries, in order to overcome repeating such practices in the future.*

### **1. Introduction**

According to UNHCR data, around 750,195 refugees were registered as residing in Jordan as of September 2020, approximately 88% of them are Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2020). However, due to the previous legislations concerning the free movement of some Arab nationals in and out Jordan, in addition to other Syrians who came to Jordan as economic migrants, either for work or invest before the crisis, the actual number of Syrians in Jordan is higher than the UNHCR registered number. Most of these unregistered Syrians are coming from middle and upper-middle income families in Syria, in addition to business owners who have moved their businesses to Jordan.

Therefore, with a percentage of 30% of Syrian refugees in Jordan are aged 18 – 35 years (UNHCR, 2019a), the number of youths who have been added to those ready to enter the tertiary education programs in Jordan increased since the beginning of the conflict. However, only 4.5% of Syrian youths aged 18 - 24 and living in Jordan, were able to access higher education activities in 2016, compared to 26% access rate among Syrian youths who were within the same

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age group and lived in Syria before the beginning of the war in 2011 (El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017).

The shortage in access was due to several reasons that will be later explained in details, however, the financial ability was a major challenge for the majority of them; resulting in initiating many tertiary education activities by several international and local non-for-profit organizations (NGOs), targeting the Syrian refugees at many levels (certificate, diploma, bachelor, post-graduate), and for different vocational and academic fields.

## **2. Refugees in Jordan**

Jordan is considered one of the most affected countries by the Syrian war, by hosting the second highest share of refugees per capita (UNHCR, 2019b), Jordan has received many refugees over the past nine years, not only from Syria but from also other neighbouring and Arab countries like Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and many others. However, Syrian refugees were the largest group among all other nationals, which have reached as of September 2020, around 660,262 refugees (UNHCR, 2020).

Accordingly, many local and international non-for-profit organizations have been working in Jordan since the beginning of the conflict to support the government and help the refugees at many areas, including; providing basic needs, offering health and educational services, as well as ensuring the security and protection related to refugees. While these services are not only limited to those living inside the camps, as approximately 83.2% of refugees live in urban areas and many of them are living below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2020).

Moreover, as one of the main tasks of these international and local organizations was helping the refugees in accessing educational services at all levels, tertiary education was first included in the Jordan Response Plan (JRP) in 2015 (Ruisi, 2019). Therefore, many organizations have contributed in offering tertiary education programs to refugees in order to make them more dependent and to enhance their skills, thus make them able to find jobs.

However, the actual number of participating organizations was difficult to be determined in this study, due to many reasons, including that they were not all connected to be coordinated through one party like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, in addition to the presence of many local and individual initiatives inside Jordan. Moreover, data concerning tertiary education in specific couldn't be extracted from the data of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) in Jordan, as the official entity which should have all the data related to the activities' budgets and expenditure amounts, however, all

educational initiatives budgets were registered within the same category “Education”, including all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary).

### **3. Tertiary Education for Refugees in Jordan**

Tertiary Education was defined by the World Bank as: “*The education that includes all types of post-secondary education, such as education at colleges and universities which leads to degrees, as well as training that is technical, vocational, professional/para-professional and results in certificates and diplomas*” (World Bank, 2017). Jordan is considered a choice of many students who are coming from neighbouring and other countries in the region every year to enrol at its universities and educational institutions with a numerous of academic and non-academic programs at many levels and specialty areas. With a percentage of 14% of non-Jordanians enrolled in this sector in 2018 (Ruisi, 2019); Jordan attracts youths from different countries to its universities and colleges that are distributed among 10 public universities, 19 private universities, 51 community colleges and 42 vocational training centres, as counted in 2017 (El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017, p.11).

However, despite the previously mentioned facts, the access to the tertiary education system by Syrian refugees in Jordan has been always a challenge, therefore, the significant decline in Syrian youths participation at the tertiary education system before and after the Syrian conflict, raised the concerns about the issue, resulted in including the tertiary education within the Jordan Response Plan (JRP) for the first time in 2015 (Ruisi, 2019). However, the participation percentage of Syrian youths at the Jordanian universities remained low, with only 4.5% in 2016, and 6.5% in 2018 (Ruisi, 2019). While in referring to the situation before the Syrian crisis, 26% of Syrian youths aged 18 – 24, were enrolled within the Syrian tertiary education system before 2011, taking an advantage of the publically available tertiary education (El-Ghali & Al-Hawamdeh, 2017).

International and local NGOs responded to the low participation rate of Syrian youths in the tertiary education activities in Jordan, by launching and offering scholarships opportunities through international donors, some of these opportunities were offered within Jordanian educational bodies, while other opportunities were offered in other countries. The scholarship opportunities that have been offered in Jordan reached 2000 opportunities in 2016 (Sherab & Kirk, 2016), however, the number increased in the last two years as more participating organizations joined with new funds.

#### **4. Challenges in Accessing Tertiary Education for Refugees**

Different previous studies focused on the challenges that refugees have been facing in accessing tertiary education in general, and Syrian refugees in specific. One of these studies titled “*Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Jordan*” explained different challenges such as: financial barriers, legal documentations, and English language requirements (El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017). The study highlighted that the cost of tuition fees of the academic institutions in Jordan was the main financial barrier especially that many refugee youths are the main source of income for their families. The lack of legal documentations was another challenge for many refugees that couldn’t bring their legal documentations, including qualifications, which are required by the educational institutions in Jordan (El-Ghali and Al-Hawamdeh, 2017). Another study titled “Access to Higher Education for Refugees in Jordan” added other barriers such as the low participation level among Syrian refugees in secondary education, which lead to low number of Syrian youths that are qualified to access higher education programs (Sherab and Kirk, 2016).

Additional challenges were mentioned by a study titled “*Challenges Faced by Syrian Refugees in the Higher Education System of Host Countries and How to Overcome Them*”, which can be considered more as inappropriate practices that led to adding future challenges (Ruisi, 2019). The study sees that the mismatch between acquired knowledge and the on-demand skills in addition to the lack of information about the labour market and job opportunities may lead to unwanted results such as competing in a saturated market or creating tensions with Jordanian peers that hold the same qualifications, while other professions remained unfilled with low supply (Ruisi, 2019).

#### **5. Methodology**

This paper focuses on the tertiary education initiatives that were implemented until the mid of 2019, and were targeting Syrian refugees in Jordan. Hence, the paper aims to highlight and investigate the challenges that have been encountered during the implementation of the tertiary educational initiatives through the participating organizations. In addition, the study identifies the in-appropriate practices that have been implemented by the participating organizations, considering the refugees case in Jordan, and whether these initiatives were able to link the program outcomes to the job market.

Therefore, the study is based on an exploratory qualitative approach that relies on:

- Secondary data – through reviewing previous similar studies as well as reports, policies and documents of international NGOs such as UNHCR, UNESCO and others.
- Formal structured interviews with focus groups of representatives of thirty-two organizations that have been offering tertiary education programs at many levels to Syrian refugees. Followed by, formal and informal deep semi-structured interviews with eight organizations, to inspect more details about the implementation process, programs' outcomes, and the actual linkage of these outcomes to the Jordanian labour market.

## **6. Data Collection and Research Questions**

Two different sets of interviews were conducted. The first set was through several structured interviews with focused groups of representatives of thirty-two participating organizations, followed by the second set through deep semi-structured interviews with eight representatives of organizations from within the first set, including the Tertiary Education group coordinators, which were the UNHCR and UNESCO, whom co-chaired and were responsible in acting as a focal point for coordinating tertiary education activities in Jordan, for the purpose of data management of refugees related activities. However, the Tertiary Education group has merged with the Education Working Group in 2019, to provide one forum for all participating organizations to coordinate education related activities at any level or any type, offered in Jordan, and targeting refugees and disadvantaged Jordanians (UNHCR, 2019a).

Moreover, the author is in personal contact with those represented the participating organizations for the selected study period, due to a project where the author formerly performed, therefore, the names of the NGOs would be shown upon formal request to the author's affiliation.

Data analysis of the interviews and secondary data resulted in answering the following research questions:

- What are the main challenges and obstacles that have been encountered in making tertiary education accessible for Syrian refugees in Jordan?
- What are the practices that have been implemented in inappropriate ways and shall be reconsidered for a change in future initiatives? And why?



## 7. Findings & Discussion:

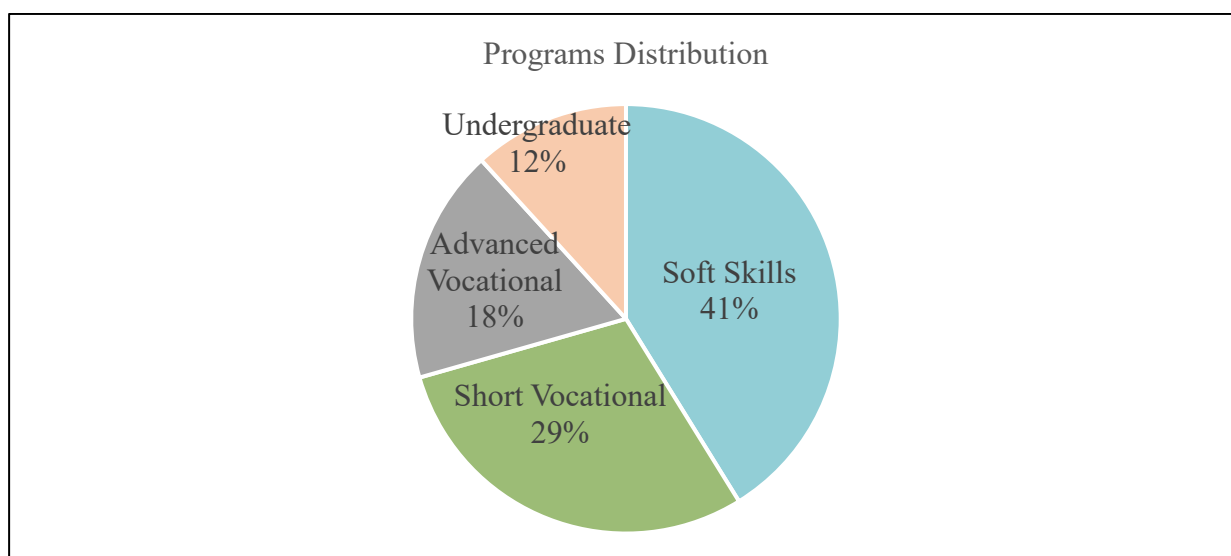
### 7.1. Tertiary Education Initiatives Analysis

The offered scholarships differed in various aspects; financially, level and type of the offered programs, as well as the location of the educational institutes. Therefore, in order to better understand these initiatives and to be able to analyse the data, the programs were grouped according to their types. While most of the participating organizations were specialized in one type of training, some of them offered two types of below mentioned groups:

- Soft skills and short training courses: this group included the highest share of the offered opportunities, as many community-based, local and international organizations participated in delivering courses within this group, which includes a variety of training courses in many different fields; from soft and job related skills to labour rights and health awareness courses. These courses were offered by many participating organizations at different locations in Jordan, including camps.
- Short vocational training programs: these programs were offered by many organizations, and included short vocational courses that aimed to teach Syrian students handicrafts and technical skills, that they can either find working opportunities in the future with employers or work from home. This group included courses like cooking, handicrafts, embroidery, beauty care and many others, and were offered by several participating organizations at different locations in Jordan.
- Vocational training scholarships: similar to the previous group, these courses included several vocational training programs, but they were more advanced and with a length of more than three months. This included several fields like; car maintenance, computer and mobile maintenance, food processing, hospitality and many others. Many participating organizations, like NRC, ACTED, FCA and others, offered these programs in different locations in Jordan including camps, while some of them were also able to offer internships or practical experience with real companies as a part of the programs.
- Under and post-graduate programs' scholarships: these scholarships were offered to cover the tuition fees of university or community colleges programs, while in some cases, stipends were also covered. Syrian students were allowed to apply and enrol at Jordanian universities for mainly the bachelor's degrees, however, in some cases, post-graduate studies were also included such as in HOPES program. Therefore, these scholarships were the most desirable for refugees' youths, which increased the competition over them, especially with the limited available opportunities through organizations, such as

UNHCR through its DAFI program, European Union through many programs like HOPES and EDU-Syria in addition to others. Moreover, some opportunities were also offered through international universities that were located outside Jordan, either in-campus like the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or online such as the EU-funded LASER program and Arizona State Universities.

The distribution of the offered programs through the participating organizations over the above mentioned groups is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: the distribution of participating organizations' programs over the different types of programs.**

## 7.2. Challenges and Obstacles

The Syrian refugees' youths in Jordan have been facing many challenges and obstacles in accessing tertiary education activities in Jordan. Part of these challenges and obstacles were encountered by participating organizations, while others were summarized through secondary data such as the previous studies that were mentioned within the literature review. Therefore, this study has concluded the following challenges and obstacles:

- Financial ability: according to UNHCR's data, approximately 78% of the refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2020). Therefore, as many refugees are there to seek refuge, they would have made a priority of accessing basic life needs for themselves and their families. Which make the access to the educational system in general difficult, and more difficult to the higher education system. As many refugees' youths prefer to work instead of studying to afford life expenses and support their families, which also made the work-education balance almost impossible in many cases.

Participating organizations also confirmed that the drop outs were mainly referred to those refugees that quitted the programs in preference to work, due to the urgent need of income. Despite that these scholarships were offered for free to refugees, many of them couldn't find appropriate time for studying because of the work.

- Limited financial support/ fund: as previously mentioned, many of the Syrian youths in Jordan can't afford the tertiary education tuitions, therefore, they tend to search for scholarships. However, as most of the international funds and donations usually focus on funding primary and secondary education; as first, primary and secondary education are considered an important basic need for children, in addition, the number of children in need for such initiatives is always the highest share among refugees populations.

Therefore, many refugees need to compete over the limited funded opportunities at the tertiary education level. As only in 2016, the number of Syrian youth refugees in Jordan was estimated to be 77,718 refugees, while the offered scholarships at that year were much less, and couldn't be given to all those have applied (Sherab & Kirk, 2016). One example was given for the same year of 2016, as only 5% of those applied to the German Academic Exchange Service scholarship (DAAD), were selected for the program (op. cit. Sherab & Kirk, 2016). While only 438 students out of 1,677 applicants were selected for DAFI scholarships for the year of 2017 in Jordan, which usually offers the highest number of scholarships to Syrian refugees in Jordan (UNHCR, 2018).

Another obstacle that is related to the funded opportunities, is the stipends. While only 8 participating organizations have confirmed distributing stipends to their students, the rest were only positive about covering the transportation expenses if needed. Therefore, as previously stated, these youths would drop out educational opportunities in preference to work as they urgently need an income source. While those entitled to stipends would use them as an income source to support their families and cover their personal expenses. Moreover, the drop-out rates were higher among those do not pay stipends.

- Documentation: many of the refugees who had fled to Jordan, especially at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, couldn't bring their documentations; including personal IDs, school certificates and university documents for interrupted studies. Accordingly, these refugees have faced a problem in accessing higher education.

However, a solution was proposed by participating NGOs, including the UNHCR in implementing a foundation year program ending with a placement test to the policy

makers in Jordan, which is still under study as it might be difficult to implement due to the differences between the two countries curriculums and educational systems.

- Unrecognized high school certificate: in August 2013, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, started conducting the end of the school's grade twelve examinations and offering accordingly the high school certificates "Syrian baccalaureate degree" to Syrian students inside Syria and neighbouring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (UNICEF, 2015). However, these certificate were not recognized in Jordan due to the national agreements between Syria and Jordan concerning the validation of diplomas and certificates by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs only, which resulted in rejecting many of the Syrian students who applied for Jordanian higher educational institutions.

While these certificates have been recognized only in Turkey and France, and in March 2019, several European universities in the UK, Sweden and Germany started recognizing them, according to the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government (ACEI, 2019).

On the other hand, this issue was mainly a concern for the higher education activities, including universities and community colleges. While in the case of vocational programs, most of the participating organizations have confirmed that they do not require high school diploma as an entry document, this was also the case for short and soft skills courses.

- English language requirements: most of the participating organizations that offered programs taught in English language, as well as those offering programs through Jordanian higher educational institutes, have confirmed that many Syrian youths faced problems in achieving the required level of proficiency in English language. Especially those completed their secondary education in Syria. Therefore, many initiatives has also offered English language courses to their students as a part of the program to enhance their level of proficiency up to the required level. One example is in the case of LASER program which was funded by the EU and operated by the British Council in Jordan, that offered English language courses as an initial step of the project, before enrolling part of these students in bachelor and certificates programs through international online programs.

### *7.3. Inappropriate Practices*

On other hand, as the programs differed in various aspects, it was difficult to rank them using the same measurements of success; while retention rate and number of those successfully completed the programs might be considered as important indicators to measure the success of a program, other factors play a role in affecting these indicators such as, the duration of the program, financial support, level of degrees and many other factors. However, these two indicators were very important in concluding a number of practices that were applied differently by participating organizations, causing a variation among organizations in the retention rate (for the students who are still enrolled within the program), and/ or the number of those successfully completed the program, if any.

Therefore, these practices were gathered and concluded in this section as “inappropriate practices”, in order to learn from and overcome in future projects. The concluded practices were:

- Financial Stipends: as previously stated, stipends act an important role in motivating many refugee youths in continuing the program, (UNHCR, 2020) as approximately 78% of the refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line, income is an urgent need to many refugee youths who would consider employment instead of studying. Therefore, as not all scholarships offered financial stipends to their students, this showed a higher rate of drop-outs existed among scholarships that didn’t provide financial stipends in comparison to those did.
- Orientation: most of these scholarships opened the application process online, while some of them offered an orientation either through introductory videos that come within the application platform, or through orientation workshops, other organizations don’t. Leaving the applicants sometimes not fully aware about the scholarships’ details at the application process, may result in unsuccessful application or an early drop-out.
- Data sharing of refugee scholarship holders: (P. Sobhi, personal communication, July 25, 2019) refugee scholarship holders’ personal data were kept confidential and for the use of the scholarship’s provider only, as this was considered as a part of refugees data protection. However, the lack of data sharing among other organizations that offer scholarships resulted in some cases in efforts overlapping. This happen when the same student can apply for more than one scholarship, be accepted, and choose either to continue with multiple scholarships at the same time, or to select one and drop out from the other one/s. Which led to a wasted opportunity that could have been used by another

refugee. This was claimed by few participating organizations that have stated that this was the reason of the majority of their programs' drop outs. One example was related to justifying the drop outs of an online university program in favour of another in-campus university program where degrees are accredited, stipends are given and the student can experience the real university life.

- Certificates' accreditation: the uncertainty about the certificates' accreditation of the projects that were offered through online universities, or other institutions that offered foundation or customized programs to the Syrian refugees who couldn't bring their actual certificates, was one of reasons justifying the drop-outs, whether to join other accredited initiatives, or other reasons, like lack of motivation to continue.
- Uncertainty about future jobs: while only 40% of the participating organizations (thirteen out of the thirty-two) have confirmed that they connect successful graduates to employers, refugees' youths would be concerned about the future recruitment opportunities that they can access, especially that Jordan has applied employment restrictions concerning refugees. Although that the offered employment opportunities by the participating organizations were conditional to the successful completion of the program, and also depending on the employers' preferences and the recruitment process, refugees youths preferred this type of programs, especially at the vocational level. This point will be explained with more details in the next section.

#### *7.4. Linkage to Labour Market Needs*

The main purpose of why people participate in tertiary education activities, is to be qualified for jobs in the near future. Therefore, Syrian refugee youths who have been participating in tertiary education in Jordan, were more concern about having future working opportunities in the country. While returning to their home country is still uncertain, especially that the Syrian conflict is coming closer to its tenth year, Syrian youths are more aware of choosing tertiary education programs that will lead for accessing professions they are allowed to work within. However, as this study was based on assessing past initiatives that happened in the past recent years, not all initiatives were considering this point.

Therefore, as only 8 participating organizations, which reflects a percentage of 25%, confirmed that they offered their programs based on job market needs assessment, the overall outcomes may lead to a critical number of graduates with unwanted professions. Hence, as refugees in general are facing today a challenge in accessing the Jordanian job market due to the labour regulations' restrictions, it's highly important to analyse the market needs, as well as

considering the list of opened professions for refugees access, as Jordan has applied a strict policy by closing a wide range of jobs to Jordanians access only, which was also expanded to include more jobs as of 2019 (MOL, 2019). Therefore, it is not enough to analyse what professions the market needs only, but also to consider what professions are opened to non-Jordanians' access and offer programs accordingly. The closed jobs' list includes fields like administrative, sales, decoration and design (interior and exterior), electrical and mechanical car maintenance, and hairdressing, while another list was made for semi-closed jobs, which can be opened to refugees' access with exemption in special cases upon request, and includes many of the professions that are usually covered within the tertiary education scholarships for refugees, such as engineering, medical, education and vocational training fields (op, cit. MOL, 2019).

On the other hand, thirteen participating organizations, which represents 40%, have planned to connect successful graduates to employers, meaning that not all tertiary education initiatives were implemented to connect refugees to employment opportunities.

## **8. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, several recommendations would be suggested to enhance the outcomes of future initiatives, as most of the selected initiatives were implemented for the first time, the obstacles and inappropriate practices would be eliminated in the next phases. Therefore, the suggested recommendations include:

- Continue the coordination of all tertiary education activities and keep updating the mapping exercise to include all offered scholarship programs, while sharing information of applicants among participants (all organizations that participates in offering scholarship programs to refugees), to prevent the overlap of efforts and to maximize the number of benefited Syrian youths. However, if sharing applicants' information contradicts with the refugees' protection standards, this could be coordinated by one of the UN participants, UNHCR or UNESCO, who can act as a focal point in preventing applicants from benefiting from more than one scholarship at the same time. While keeping the opportunity for refugees in applying for other scholarships, but for other rounds.
- Consider non-Syrian refugees in the scholarship programs, since protracted displaced refugees from other nationalities are also residing in Jordan, and their numbers might increase in the recent years.

- Advise all funding participants to assign part of the funds in order to cover stipends for the refugee youths candidates. This means less number of enrolled candidates, but definitely will reduce the drop-out rate, and give more opportunities to these really in need.
- Keep aware of choosing programs that are allowed for non-Jordanian workers, while keep focusing on the job market needs and job demands.
- Consider international recognition of the certificates obtained, as part of the refugees would seek resettlement in a third country, and coordinate the activities with the needs of these countries. While do not proceed with unrecognized higher education programs that requires the accreditation of the ministry of higher education.

Lastly, tertiary education for refugees can be used as an effective way for covering the country's shortage in labour, by guiding refugees over the needs of the job market, and give them the access to enter the tertiary education system, outcomes will lead for increasing the qualified human resources the country needs, instead of bringing expatriate workforce.

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#### **Glossary and Acronyms List**

ACTED: *Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development.*

DAAD: *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*, the German Academic Exchange Service.

DAFI: *UNHCR's higher education scholarship program, DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative).*

Edu-Syria: *an educational and humanitarian project funded by the European Union*

FCA: *Finn Church Aid*

HOPES: *Higher and Further Education Opportunities & Perspectives – EU-funded project*



JRP: “Led by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, the Jordan Response Platform for the Syria Crisis (JRPSC) constitutes the strategic partnership mechanism for the development of a comprehensive refugee, resilience-strengthening and development response to the impact of the Syria crisis on Jordan”(Jordanian Ministry of Planning, JRP official website)<sup>2</sup>.

LASER: *Language and Academic Skills and E-Learning Resources, EU-funded project and delivered by the British Council.*

NRC: *Norwegian Refugee Council.*

UNESCO: *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.*

UNHCR: *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.*

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