



CMIC

MOBILISATION COMMUNAUTAIRE EN CRISE
COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IN CRISIS

التنظيم المجتمعي في الأزمات

Understanding Barriers to Post-Secondary Education among Refugee Learners in Lebanon

Emily Regan Wills and Diana El Richani

Research assistance from Zeina Awaydate, Carolyn Frank, and the staff of LASeR

This report was produced in the course of an action research project on “School to College Transitions among Vulnerable Youth in Lebanon” funded by the Issam Fares Institute of the American University of Beirut.

Introduction

Amid the myriad of new situations emerging out of Lebanon’s years of hosting over a million Syrian refugees, one of the most bureaucratically and socially complex is the dynamics of educating Syrian refugee youth at all levels. While Lebanon was an early leader in allowing all Syrian children direct access to their public school system at primary and secondary levels, major challenges have persisted to school success for refugee children at these levels, leading to only 1.4% of Syrian youth of secondary school age in Lebanon being enrolled in secondary school (El-Ghali et al 2019). Although about 20% of youth in pre-war Syria were enrolled in higher education (for the most part in free public universities), very few managed to successfully transfer into higher education institutions after becoming refugees. Given the low level of completion rates of secondary school, this means that younger generations of refugees are also losing out on being able to continue into post-secondary education.

While the particular dynamics of this situation in Lebanon are influenced by the size of the refugee population, the pre-existing relationships between Syrians and Lebanese, and the structures of the Lebanese and Syrian education systems, they are a broader reflection of the challenges for refugee students globally, particularly in enrolling in higher education. Non-governmental organizations, universities, governments, and foundations have put significant resources into developing programs, including scholarships, preparatory programs, and online learning opportunities, which serve refugees displaced by the Syrian crisis, particularly those located in countries of first reception like Lebanon. Despite the investment in these areas, both secondary school completion and post-secondary enrollment remain low. Therefore, a thorough examination of the barriers refugee youth face in enrolling in

post-secondary education, as well as their circumstances in secondary school, can help in ensuring good fit between policies and interventions and the actual needs of refugee youth.

This report is based in a collaboration between the Community Mobilization in Crisis (CMIC)¹ project, a research/teaching project headquartered at the University of Ottawa, Canada, with partners in Lebanon, Palestine, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Brazil, and the Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LAsER), a non-governmental organization located in Tripoli, Lebanon, which supports refugee and host community youth, particularly in the north of Lebanon, in succeeding in secondary school and enrolling in post-secondary education. This collaboration included a nine-session pilot program jointly developed and delivered by CMIC and LAsER staff working with secondary and post-secondary students to use community mobilization techniques to develop mobilizations that would help address the barriers they have faced or are facing in their educational careers, as well as further data gathering (detailed in the report below) about the broader context of post-secondary and secondary education for refugee youth in Lebanon today.

This report draws from that research, including novel survey and brainstorming session data, to argue that while the programs currently serving refugee learners attempting to achieve post-secondary education in Lebanon are consistent with the global mainstream in the field, they are not adequately addressing the most important challenges that refugee learners are actually facing. While scholarships are an essential part of the puzzle of supporting refugee learners, an overreliance on them produces a situation where many students who would otherwise have benefited from and flourished with a post-secondary education leave formal education before they are eligible for those scholarships. Actors in this field must develop new modalities of assistance in order to address students' key barriers, especially in the areas of language, financial support, and broader social support for pursuing continued education.

Modalities of Assistance: How Can Access Be Improved

Because of the obvious challenges that access to post-secondary education poses for refugee learners, a variety of programs have been developed and tested worldwide to attempt to bridge these gaps. These programs build on the long histories of programs that try to facilitate success in university and other post-secondary programs for students with a wide variety of barriers to access. In other words, we already know many things about how to help students who are first-generation university attendees, who come from low-income backgrounds, are racial, ethnic, religious, or national minorities, or studied at lower-quality secondary schools achieve success in post-secondary education; the question is rather, what particular insights from this field are best-positioned to support refugee and displaced students, particularly those located in host countries rather than resettlement countries?

¹ For more information on the CMIC project, see Regan Wills et al 2020.

Analysis of existing programs worldwide is preliminary, but there has been some movement in this area, particularly spurred on by the obvious connection between universities as implementors of these programs and universities as research-creating bodies. To date, the broadest framework used to analyze these programs is the one developed in Gladwell et. al (2016), a detailed landscape review of all global programs in this field. In their analysis, they develop a five-fold typology of higher education programs for refugees in low-resource environments: refugee and host community-specific programs that are physically present among affected populations, host country scholarship programs that support refugee learners in gaining access to local universities, international scholarship programs that support refugee learners to migrate, temporarily or permanently, in order to study in third countries, e-learning platforms that provide programs directly to refugee learners wherever they are, and information sharing platforms that try to ensure that refugee learners in different contexts can understand the breadth of possibilities for their continued learning (see Gladwell et. al. 2016: 4).

In Gladwell et. al.'s global sample, just over half of all programs examined were either host community or international scholarship programs; approximately a quarter were programs that are physically present with refugee learners, 17% were online learning platforms, and 9% were information portals (3). Each of these different modalities has particular strengths and weaknesses, which impact the ways in which they can help students; for example, "the programmes in Modality A [physically present programmes] can only assist a limited number of students but can offer a high degree of support, whereas the programmes in Modality D [all-online programmes] have the potential to assist a theoretically unlimited number of students, but can only offer a limited degree of support" (55). In addition, each type of program seeks to overcome certain kinds of barriers: scholarships overcome the financial barriers to study, whereas targeted physically-present programs overcome barriers related to student support and the relevance of study, and online programs overcome time and logistical barriers to study, as well as cost-related barriers. Therefore, it is important to understand to what extent the particular barriers being overcome through a given program match the most important barriers faced by students in a given context.

Absent from the framework presented by Gladwell et. al. are what might be called "pipeline" programs, which aim to increase the number of secondary-school students who are capable of enrolling in higher education. While some online and offline refugee-specific programs can adapt their admissions requirements to help students with documentation or certification issues, a major problem identified by actors in the field such as LAsER is the challenge of secondary-school completion for refugee learners. Often, financial necessity leads adolescent youth to work or marriage rather than continued education; at other times, refugee learners need additional financial, educational, or emotional support to succeed in secondary education. (See El-Ghali et al 2019, 19-22 for a comprehensive examination of the pipeline issue at the secondary school level.) Because these programs focus on success in secondary school, they are often not included as a modality of support for success in higher education. However, they are the necessary prerequisite for enrollment, and a strong secondary school preparation is key for success in higher education, suggesting that attention should equally be paid to those

programs in understanding how students overcome barriers to post-secondary enrollment and success.

Landscape of Programs in Lebanon: Beyond Scholarships

Lebanon has been hosting Syrian refugees since 2011, and has permitted refugee youth access to the public education system through high school. In addition, Lebanon has a well developed higher education system, including the public university, Université Libanais, serving over 80,000 students², as well as thirty-six private universities and nine university institutes and colleges³ serving thousands of others. Because of this intersection of high numbers of refugees over a sustained period of time, basic access to secondary education, and the presence of higher education, Lebanon is likely to have a larger number of programs designed to support access to higher education for refugees than countries of first reception which have weaker higher educational systems or segregate refugees out of secondary education. In our research for this report, we identified a total of twenty-five different interventions, organized by universities, local and international NGOs, and the United Nations system, which provide necessary support to refugees seeking higher education. These programs fill the spectrum of programs outlined in the Gladwell et. al. report, including scholarship programs for study within and outside Lebanon and online university-level instruction, while also moving into new areas, such as support for the successful completion of secondary school, mentorship for refugee students, and continuing education certificates. We do not believe that we managed to identify all operational programs; our survey also includes scholarship programs that are open to non-refugee students, although we only included programs for which Syrian refugees in Lebanon would be eligible.

² <https://www.ul.edu.lb/lu/numbers.aspx>

³ http://www.higher-edu.gov.lb/arabic/privuniv/personal_univ.html

Type of Program	Number identified (Percentage)	Names of Program(s)
Scholarship Programs (Domestic and International)	13 (52%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Ghurair STEM Scholars Program • AUB Leadership, Equity, and Diversity (LEAD) programs • AMIDEAST scholarships for Palestinians (including Palestinian refugees from Syria) • AMIDEAST Tomorrow's Leaders Program • DAAD • DAFI • Harvard Arab Alumni Association Scholarship* • HOPES Scholarship Fund • Jusoor Scholarships • LAsER City Fund • Said Foundation* • SPARK • Wheaton Refugee Scholarship <p>(Programs marked with a * are not specific to refugee students, but Syrian refugees in Lebanon are eligible)</p>
Online Learning	5 (20%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Ghurair Open Learning Scholars Program (OLSP) • Heriot Watt University Edinburgh Business School: TheirWorld MBS Scholarship • KIRON • Southern New Hampshire University • University of the People
Completing Secondary School	3 (12%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANERA Non-Formal Education • Jusoor High School Scholarship • LAsER - YESS
Preparation for Higher Education	2 (8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AUB/PADILEIA Foundation Certificate • AMIDEAST English Access Microscholarship Program
Other Modalities	2 (8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPARK/AUB Certificates • Jusoor Academic Mentorship and English Language Training Programs

Figure 1. Programs we identified supporting higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

As in Gladwell et al.'s report, we found the majority of programs offer scholarships (thirteen of twenty-five, 52%). DAFI, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative managed by the United Nations, is of course the most prominent of these programs, working across the world and serving 416 students living in Lebanon in 2018.⁴ LAsER is also a major actor in this field through its "City Fund" scholarship program, which provides students with partial scholarships granted by a partner university and an interest free loan for the remainder of their fees, and which served 133 students in 2018. The American University of Beirut's Leadership, Equity, and Diversity Office hosts three separate programs (which we considered as a single unit for analytic purposes), each of which are open to Lebanese citizen youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as Palestinian, Syrian, and other refugee youth living in Lebanon (and, at the MA level, students from Sub-Saharan Africa for the Mastercard Scholarship Program). These programs have served over 850 youth from these diverse categories. Scholarships provide direct access to higher educational institutions for significant numbers. However, they can only provide access to students who have been admitted or can be admitted to these universities, rather than those who face challenges related to documentation or qualifications. In addition, these scholarships are competitive and require substantial effort to apply, which poses its own barrier to marginalized students.

Online learning is also a prominent modality in Lebanon (5/25, 20%). Organizations like KIRON, a Germany-based NGO operating online courses that can be transferred to local universities, or Southern New Hampshire University, an American private university that offers its Global Education Movement program to refugees through LAsER, implement models that have worked in other contexts of forced displacement and offer them to Syrian students in Lebanon, usually for no cost. Other programs, such as the Al Ghurair Open Learning Scholars Program in collaboration with Arizona State University and the Heriot Watt University Edinburgh Business School: TheirWorld MBA Scholarship offer distance graduate programs for free from universities abroad, to refugees and other marginalized students. These programs either require students to bring their own infrastructure (computers, internet connections, etc) or must build that infrastructure into their operational plan, which provide additional complications to implementation. However, they can harness the best use of technology in order to provide opportunities that would not have been otherwise possible.

We also identified three programs that supported students in completing secondary school (12%), and two (8%) that provided additional support for students preparing for university who might not otherwise have the skills to succeed. In order to enroll in a registered university in Lebanon, students need to earn the Lebanese baccalaureate (also called the General Secondary Education Certificate), or to have their equivalent high school degree certified by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. For students whose degrees cannot be certified, who are struggling to complete high school or who might have attained a baccalaureate or equivalent but have problems particularly with English language learning, these programs make higher education possible. ANERA's non-formal education programs in refugee camps, for

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/5d7f61097>

example, provide teens with English, Arabic, and math courses to help them catch up, and assist them in completing Accelerated Learning Programs to recover lost years out of school, from which they can enroll in Lebanese public schools. Similarly, LAsER's Youth Empowered Syrians in Secondary (YESS) provides academic and non-academic support to students either about to enroll in secondary or enrolled but at risk of dropping out, to help them pass the brevet exams in grade 9 and succeed in grade 10. AMIDEAST's English Access Microscholarship Program and AUB's free foundation certificate in English, Maths, and other topics help students improve in particular subject areas as a precondition to being able to access higher education. These programs work in a variety of different ways and provide different services that may meet the needs of different students, but all have a common core goal of making success more likely, rather than simply providing access.

We also identified two unique programs which served different kinds of student needs. SPARK, a Dutch NGO, partnered with AUB to offer certificates in areas such as early childhood education; these were not regulated degrees, but did offer professional certification for students that might open up career opportunities. In addition, Jusoor, a Syrian led NGO, offers a variety of mentoring and academic supports for currently enrolled students; while these are less structured than the formal programs above, they do provide crucial links for students (as well as fitting into Jusoor's broader programmatic work, which includes university scholarships, scholarships to private high schools, and offering nonformal primary education). While these programs do not provide direct access to regular higher education programs to refugees, they do demonstrate the innovation present in the sector in Lebanon, and the variety of needs that these programs respond to.

Contextualizing the Barriers for Refugee Learners

Practitioners working to support refugee students in gaining access to higher education understand many of the key barriers to access, such as the need for financial support, issues related to documentation, issues related to discrimination from host society institutions, including educational institutions, and the challenges of achieving academic success under conditions of displacement and, frequently, impoverishment. (For a variety of overviews of the issue across time and conflicts, see Abu-Amsha et al. 2019, Anselme and Hands 2012, CLCC 2017, Dryden-Peterson 2012, El Ghali et al 2017, El Ghali et al 2019, Giles 2018, Purkey 2012, Wright and Plasterer 2012.) However, these different barriers do not always work in the same way, or in the same amount to keep students from gaining access and succeeding in higher education. There will inevitably be variation between different contexts of displacement and over time within the same context. Therefore, making sure that the barriers that youth are experiencing are well-matched to existing programs is an ongoing process.

In order to gain new insight into the present situation in Lebanon, we collaborated with LAsER to collect data in two forms on the barriers faced by students either currently in higher education, or currently in high school who plan to enroll in higher education at the end of their baccalaureate. First, we fielded a small-scale mixed-method survey with youth involved in

LASeR's programs in Tripoli, asking them not only to identify the barriers they faced, but also to describe how they overcame or attempted to overcome those barriers. Second, in the course of the CMIC/LASeR pilot program on overcoming barriers to the secondary to post-secondary transition, funded by IFI, we held a problem identification brainstorming session, where youth identified barriers individually and then aggregated them into broader categories. This section reports the data collected from these two methods, providing a new lens on the situation of refugee students in Tripoli.

Quantitative Data: Survey

The joint CMIC/LASeR survey was developed by LASeR and CMIC staff in dialogue, fielded using Google Forms and written in Arabic, and distributed to LASeR's Whatsapp groups in the last week of March 2020. Responses were received from March 22-30. After duplicate submissions were removed, 35 youth and one mother responded to the survey. (The mother's data was removed from quantitative analysis, but her qualitative responses were retained.) The median age of youth respondents was 17, including 25 young women and 10 young men; twenty six participants are in secondary school, seven are in university, and two attend neither. Thirty-four respondents were Syrian, while one was Lebanese. All respondents were from Tripoli or surrounding areas. Of the university students, six are attending private universities while one attends Lebanese University; of the secondary school students, 23 are attending public schools while 3 are attending private schools.

In terms of financial support for their educations, all of the university students are receiving financial support, whereas eight of the secondary school students (31%) are receiving financial support. Five of the university students are receiving full scholarships, while one receives a partial scholarship and one receives both a partial scholarship and a discount from their educational institutions. High school students report receiving discounts on fees from their schools (3), educational loans (2), direct financial support (2), or full scholarships (1). Nine of the secondary school students report receiving financial aid for their education from the UN (including several who indicated they were not receiving financial support); these students are likely referring to the policy of the UNHCR of paying school fees for refugee students. Other secondary school students reported receiving financial aid from their parent's employer or from the school. University students received their support from either the university they were attending or from LASeR. Although the universality of financial support for students pursuing university is a welcome sign, it is likely that only students who obtain funding actually go on to pursue higher education. There may be students who desired to continue on to higher education but were unable to do so because of difficulty connecting to financial resources. Our sample does not properly capture those students; one of the out of school students in our sample was only 16 and in grade 10, while the other had a secondary school degree from Syria they were unable to get recognized in Lebanon, and had attempted to re-complete secondary school in Lebanon before leaving school. Further research is needed in this area.

One element of financial insecurity related to displacement is the need for students to obtain paid employment during their education, either to pay their own expenses (or for spending money) or to support their families. Outside work provides additional constraints on students' time and energy, although earning income can be important for students' self-esteem as well as their and their families' material well being. In our sample, four of the university students (57%) worked, with three working part time and one working seasonally. Three of the working students reported they were working for their family, while one was working for money for themselves; two of the non-working students said money they earned would be for them, while the other said it would be for their family. Nine of the secondary school students (34%) said they worked, 4 seasonally, 3 part time, and 2 full time. Six of the working students reported they were earning money for their family, and three were earning money for themselves. One of the out-of-school students was working part time, for themselves. Future research should inquire about whether students perceive the need to work as making it harder to succeed in school, as well as tracking whether students who work drop out at a higher rate or earn poorer marks.

We asked students to identify their most significant barriers to achieving higher education. Among the secondary school students, 14 students (54%) said English was their primary concern. Eight (31%) said that the difficulty of the curriculum was their biggest challenge, while two (8%) said it was lack of financial support. Among university students, two mentioned lack of funding (29%), one said English (14%), one said unfamiliarity with majors (14%), and three selected "Other." Looking at this data, it strongly suggests that ability to study in English is a major challenge for secondary school students, and that mastering English is necessary for going on to higher education. Challenges in gaining funding to support education figure as much less important, both for secondary school and university students, than support in mastering both the material and the medium of instruction.

Given that non-financial problems loom large in students' minds, we asked students what non-financial supports they had received. Four of the university students (57%) received either academic or language support from their university, which suggests that at least some universities are being proactive in providing these supports to refugee learners. Nine of the secondary school students (35%) received language support, two (8%) received academic support, four (15%) received either psychological or self-improvement support, and four (15%) reported attending workshops. One of the out-of-school students reported receiving language assistance, and the other reported attending workshops. In nearly all cases, LAsER was identified as the provider of these services, which is almost certainly a function of the fact that LAsER distributed the survey, in addition to LAsER's activity in the field.

In order to study not only the challenges facing Syrian learners but to document their resilience, strengths, and adaptation, we asked students if they had found solutions to these challenges. Only one university student replied, saying they had not; fourteen secondary school students responded, with four saying they had found solutions, and ten saying they had not. We asked a subsequent question about where students received support for English learning. Fourteen high school students and one university student replied. Of those fifteen, three took online courses

to improve their English, three took intensive face to face classes, seven worked with friends, one described themselves as 'adapting' over time, and one simply replied that they did not. Further responses on what barriers students experienced and how they overcame them are contained within the section analyzing the qualitative data.

As described in the previous section, there are a wide variety of scholarship and other programs in Lebanon that serve refugees preparing for or enrolling in higher education. Therefore, we asked youth what organizations they knew of that helped students in their position. Because the survey was distributed through LAsER, this sample of youth is more likely than others to know of organizations that support students; however, eighteen youth (51%) said they did not know of any such organization. The other 17 youth mentioned LAsER; in addition, two youth mentioned SPARK, one mentioned CARE, one mentioned DAFI, and two mentioned Ruwwad⁵. This is an intriguing result, because if over half of the youth in a sample solicited by an organization that supplies support to students responded that they don't know of organizations supporting students, it seems likely that a large majority of all students share that lack of knowledge about available supports. One possible reason why youth only know of such a small sample of organizations may be that many programs are only operational in a single region, with many focused on either the Bekaa Valley, where a plurality of refugees are located, or the Beirut-Mount-Lebanon region, which is most accessible to international actors and has the most educational resources. LAsER is focused on Tripoli and North Lebanon, as is Ruwwad. This is an important insight into how the local nature of many programs limits opportunities for supporting students. We did ask students to rate how well these organizations are doing to support students, and they gave them a mean ranking of 4.05 out of 5 and a modal ranking of 5 out of 5, which suggests that, when they know of organizations working to support youth, they are generally satisfied with their work.

This quantitative picture of how students are doing in Tripoli can only suggest some trends and paint the outline of what is happening for these students. In the following sections, we turn to the qualitative responses given by students and the brainstorming session during the pilot programme in order to flesh out the way students understand and overcome these barriers.

Qualitative Data: Survey and Brainstorming Session

In addition to the data that could be interpreted in a quantitative manner above, the survey conducted by LAsER and CMIC included a series of open-ended questions that asked students to identify any barriers they had ever experienced, which were related to key areas we knew from prior experience were likely to exist, such as: foreign languages, finances, the application process and documentation, scholarships, majors and fields, the difference in Lebanese

⁵ Ruwwad offers an innovative scholarship program for students in higher education who engage in community service in Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon. They do not only support refugees, but are operational in Tripoli. More information on their Lebanese programs is available at <http://ruwwad.ngo/where-we-work/2/our-story>. LAsER collaborates with Ruwwad to support refugee students; details at <https://laser-lb.org/ruwwad/>.

curriculum, and racism. After asking students to describe the barrier, we then asked them to identify if they had overcome it, and if they had faced subsequent barriers. This allowed us to better understand the ways students conceptualized their barriers as well as their strategies for resilience.

Beyond the survey, this section also draws from the brainstorming session held during the CMIC-LASeR pilot. At the third session of the pilot program, on November 24, 2019, the participants used a brainstorming technique where each participant listed a series of barriers they had experienced on sticky notes, and then the whole group aggregated them into a series of themes. The participants then used these themes to organize themselves into teams to develop and implement mobilizations to address those issues. (Those mobilizations will be discussed in a subsequent report.)



Figure 2. Participants in the brainstorming session with CMIC and LASeR in Tripoli used notes to write down all of the barriers to higher education that they face. After everyone has written down their major barriers and stuck them on different walls in the room, we organized them in categories.

The qualitative results highlight the nuances in barriers and difficulties that the youth have identified in accessing and continuing their education, especially when bridging from secondary school to university. Since the average age of the youth participants is 17, and the majority of which are in secondary school and come from a refugee setting in Northern Lebanon, the identified barriers were specific to a context of displacement and precarious socio-economic conditions. The main barriers identified in both the problem identifying brainstorming session and the survey were language, financial restrictions, difficulties adapting to the Lebanese curriculum, official paperwork, and the struggle with accessing information on scholarships and identifying which field and discipline are available. The brainstorming activity was incorporated in the early stages of the workshop in order to engage the students in the process of designing

initiatives meant to tackle problems that had identified themselves. However, in addition to the barriers listed above, the young students also face struggles and barriers that any newly admitted student at a university would face. One participant stated that there should be support, not just in language and finance, but also in adapting to a new way of life at university in order to help students know what to expect and, in turn, what is expected from them. The participant brings up a commonly disregarded issue when support for refugees in higher education is usually framed in terms of scholarships and financial support, without much attention going to skills and adapting to the new environment. The majority, if not all, of those coming from a refugee context and from a marginalized socio-economic background, are first generation university students and are therefore limited in the knowledge and experience of campus life. As well, students who do receive scholarships do not stay with their friends and other students from their community as they embark on a new journey to a higher education institution. They would need to seek out friends and community in the new environment, and that may be intimidating and isolating for some. For example, the MEPI — Tomorrow's Leaders Scholarship Program at the American University of Beirut provides their students with support and skills needed throughout their entire undergraduate degree⁶. Although there are some programs that do acknowledge the need for newly admitted scholarship students to gain skills in order to succeed socially and academically at universities, students still feel that this kind of support is not accessible to everyone and that this continues to be a source of concern. Speaking to this concern, CMIC and LASeR attempted to create a creative space within the workshop to have collaborations and connections between students in their secondary school years and those already in universities, both coming from similar backgrounds. When recruiting for the workshop, the age range was meant to give room for those already in university to join in and participate in the discussions and planning towards building community mobilizations.

Concerning financial restriction, students identified in both activities that access to scholarships played a major role in deciding whether or not they will attend university. They framed access to scholarships in terms of finding scholarships, not knowing where to search, and not being aware of the requirements needed to apply. Participants in the survey stated that they were not aware that grades from secondary school were taken into consideration and that some scholarships were in fact only partial while others required language exams. This indicates that students were not aware of the need to be in preparation for scholarship applications during their secondary years and that language and accessibility to the curriculum may hinder their chances in successfully receiving scholarships. The scholarship model then depends on a retrograde system that would categorize students from a very early stage in their academic lives making it harder to access opportunities at later times. As well, success in secondary school depends on language proficiency and adapting to the Lebanese curriculum in terms of language, content, and methods of teaching and learning. A participant stated that in the Syrian curriculum, answers were expected to be repeated and copied from the content, whereas in contrast, the

⁶ More information on the MEPI - Tomorrow's Leaders Scholarship program can be found here: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ccecs/tess/Pages/MEPI---Tomorrow's-Leaders.aspx>

Lebanese curriculum expected students to bring forth some level of analysis. The participant stated that this was a major difficulty for them in adapting to the curriculum.

Another participant said that they place more emphasis on the classes and content that require memorization than those that require analysis. They then would use the better grades they receive from these classes to balance out their average that is hit by the other courses they are struggling with. As well, students have identified that foreign languages play an important role in understanding the curriculum, since the majority of the subjects are not in Arabic, such as chemistry, math, and biology. As well, students identified that language skills were very important in order to take the official Baccalaureate exams, understand questions, and write essays. This was a major barrier identified in the brainstorming session such that almost everybody in the room placed this as a problem in their academic lives.

Another barrier that was almost shared with the entire workshop and that was apparent in the survey, was the problem with paperwork and the equivalency of grades and degrees in the Lebanese system. Some participants stated that they were not able to have their secondary degrees equated or recognized and felt that they were stuck and limited. A student shared his experience with not being able to register at the Lebanese University due to having a diploma not recognized by the Lebanese government. The student said that he found online distance learning, such as the degrees offered by SNHU in collaboration with LAsER, as an alternative path to higher education. However, the options in fields and disciplines were limited and some chose areas of studies not particularly the same as the ones they dreamt of pursuing. The political circumstances in Syria were of course reflected in the education pathways that refugee students face in Lebanon. Some have their Syrian Baccalaureate degrees issued by the Syrian Interim Government, which is not recognized by the Lebanese state, representing political barriers to education that the youth are facing.

The proposed solutions in the survey were in line with their respective problems laid out by the students. Students suggested a push towards the recognition of their Syrian diplomas and have changes in policies and laws that would facilitate getting equivalencies to the Lebanese Baccalaureate. As well, this would include changes in requirements to taking the Baccalaureate exams as a free applicant, for example, such as decreasing the age requirement from 22 to 20. Others stated that having a monthly stipend, having more opportunities to study abroad, and having more options in deciding their field of study would provide great means in overcoming their barriers. Other solutions such as finding the time and quiet place to study, free transportation, and simply not giving up were also suggested by the youth in both the survey and the brainstorming workshop.

Gaps Between Barriers and Solutions

Despite the fact that the barriers to completion of secondary school, success in the baccalaureate exams, and successful enrollment in university for refugee learners are well-known, and that programs have been developed and implemented throughout Lebanon to

support access to higher education for refugees, it seems that students still face a high level of difficulty in managing to successfully transition from secondary school to university. In some ways, this reflects the fundamentally challenging environment for refugees; even if programs exist to help them, they will likely still face barriers related to their experiences of instability and trauma from conflict and forced displacement. But another element of the persistence of the issues comes from the existence of gaps between the specific types and sequencing of barriers to successful enrollment in higher education and the programs that have been developed.

Scholarship programs are an incredibly important resource for refugee learners. Without financial aid, the vast majority of refugee learners would not be able to attend higher education institutions; even the very reasonable fees at Université Libanais are beyond the means of most refugee families (as well as many Lebanese families). In addition, scholarship programs are a very familiar modality of aid for universities and for granting bodies. Most universities have preexisting scholarship programs for high-achieving students who do not have the financial means to pay full tuition; granters like the Mastercard Foundation and AMIDEAST have been running scholarship programs for years, and Lebanese and foreign universities have been accepting scholarship students throughout that time, meaning that it is relatively easy to allocate additional funds and administer a new scholarship program to address refugees. (Obviously, this is still challenging--funding must be found and administration must be done--but little new ground needs to be broken.) This comparable ease probably contributes to the greater prevalence of scholarship programs across cases, including in Lebanon.

However, scholarship programs only matter to students at the very end of their secondary school experience. As our qualitative data shows, even students who want to attend university are not always clear on how their marks in secondary school will influence their ability to gain a scholarship or university admittance, or on the process for gaining a scholarship. By the time a student is preparing to sit the baccalaureate and applying to university, it is already too late for many students to make themselves competitive, or even eligible, for scholarships.

Programs such as the AUB University Certificate or the AMIDEAST Access program help students who have made it to the final hurdle (passing or being prepared to sit the baccalaureate), but who need additional support to be fully prepared for university. These programs provide much needed academic support. However, to get to that point, students need to have passed the brevet d'études at the end of grade nine, enrolled in the general education track, and remained enrolled with passing grades throughout three years of study. Even if they need additional time to pass the baccalaureate exam or have adequate language skills to enroll in university, all of those prior steps also provide opportunities for students to be lost to the vicissitudes and challenges of learning as a refugee.

If we think of scholarships as a bridge to university enrollment, and support programs such as the foundation certificate as catching students who trip on the last step before the bridge, then what goes unaddressed is all of the steps that came before that one, and what pitfalls students will have encountered as they try to follow them. Ensuring that students make it to the bridge

requires interventions of various types along the length of students' academic careers. It also means finding alternative pathways for students who have deviated from that path--whether through falling by the wayside, or taking a route (such as having a certificate issued by the Syrian Interim Government but not recognized by Lebanon) that seemed like it would lead to success, but ended in a dead end. But these programs are substantially more difficult to conceptualize or manage than simple scholarship programs, or even 'catch up' programs at the end of the line. Tackling these issues frequently means making broad-based interventions into the secondary school system, tackling some of the root challenges faced by refugee learners including being behind in language learning, having a lack of space or resources to dedicate to school work, and lacking an understanding of Lebanon's university system, which is extremely structurally different than the Syrian one. It can also mean thinking differently about who deserves or is qualified for a university place, or who has something to contribute through higher education--but trying to make spaces for those learners faces a major barrier from the policies of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, which requires a baccalaureate or an official equivalency from anyone enrolling in university, and does not provide routes to equivalency to non-traditional learners. While programs like SNHU's GEM, which enrolls students who have finished high school but whose certificates are not accepted by the Lebanese ministry, can serve some of these students, limits remain.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the existing programs in Lebanon at this point in time, as well as the data drawn from the collaboration with LAsER, we argue that there must be a fundamental shift in programs that work to support access to post-secondary education for refugees. On a first level, our findings strongly support the conclusions of El Ghali et. al (2019: 35) that "pipeline collapse" must be prevented and that high schools and universities must launch programs to help ensure students can be successful at these levels of study. These programs are as essential to refugee learners' ability to enroll in post-secondary education as scholarships are, and must be highlighted. In particular, support for mastery of the Lebanese curriculum, awareness and real comprehension of the options and processes for education at secondary and post secondary levels, and a real focus on English language learning for refugee learners must be increased throughout the country. Programs such as these will also benefit host community youth, who face similar struggles despite not having been displaced; they should be offered to host and refugee learners alike, in the interest both of equity and of creating stronger bonds and better educational outcomes in refugee and host communities. Universities, international organizations, NGOs, and funders should take steps to focus their interventions in ways that can help prevent pipeline collapse, or to make it possible for youth who have been lost along the way to re-enter formal education.

On a second level, however, we argue that refugee learners themselves are an essential partner in the process of improving their access to postsecondary education. Refugee learners know more about what is stopping them from succeeding in completing secondary school and entering post-secondary education than anyone else and their voices need to be put at the

center of any discussions. In addition, teachers, parents, and directly implicated community workers need to be well-integrated into the decision making process, because their perspectives, experiences, and future behavior are vital determinants of the possible success of any program. It is these actors who are closest to the problem who are best-placed to guide the development of new interventions. All of us who care about these issues and are implementing programs to try to support post-secondary education for refugee learners should center their perspectives in order to produce the best possible outcomes and reduce mismatch between program structure and learner experiences.

Works Cited

Abu-Amsha, Oula, Rebecca Gordon, Laura Benton, Mina Vasalou, and Ben Webster. 2019. "Access to Higher Education: Reflections on a Participatory Design Process with Refugees." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 5 (1): 156-76. <https://doi.org/10.33682/tm40-9q50>.

Anselme, Marina L., and Catriona Hands. 2012. "Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education for All Refugees: Steps and Challenges to Overcome". *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 27 (2), 89-96. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/34725>.

Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium. 2017. *Quality Guidelines Playbook: Lessons Learned Through Contextualized Practice*.
<https://indd.adobe.com/view/4e1bf399-e0c1-4688-890e-f57b90efe1c8>

Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. 2012. "The Politics of Higher Education for Refugees in a Global Movement for Primary Education". *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 27 (2), 10-18. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/34718>.

El-Ghali, Hana Addam, Roula Berjaoui, & Jennifer DeKnight. 2017. *Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Lebanon*. 10.13140/RG.2.2.18247.80808.

El-Ghali, Hana Addam, Fida Alameddine, Samar Farah, and Soraya Benchiba. 2019. *Pathways to and Beyond Education for Refugee Youth in Jordan and Lebanon*. Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut. https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/research_reports/2018-2019/20190305_pathway_to_and_beyond_education.pdf

Gladwell, C., Hollow, D., Robinson, A., Norman, B., Bowerman, E., Mitchell, J., Floremont, F., Hutchinson, P. (2016). *Higher education for refugees in low-resource environments: landscape review*. Jigsaw Consult, United Kingdom.

Giles, Wenona. 2018. "The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project: Enabling Refugee and Local Kenyan Students in Dadaab to Transition to University Education." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 4 (1): 164-84.

Purkey, Mary. 2012. "Paths to a Future for Youth in Protracted Refugee Situations: A View from the Thai-Burmese Border". *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 27 (2), 97-102. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/34726>.

Regan Wills, Emily, Diana El Richani & Nadia Abu-Zahra. 2020. "Building new practices of solidarity: the community mobilisation in crisis project." *Gender & Development*, 28:1, 51-68, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2020.1717174](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2020.1717174)

Wright, Laura-Ashley, and Robyn Plasterer. 2012. "Beyond Basic Education: Exploring Opportunities for Higher Learning in Kenyan Refugee Camps". *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 27 (2), 42-56. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/34721>.