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Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students:
The Case of Iraq
Policies, Practices, and Perspectives

Hana A. El-Ghali, Aamr Ali, & Nadine Ghalayini
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
American University of Beirut

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Abstract

This report on the tertiary education for young Syrian refugees in Iraq is part of a broader regional study commissioned by UNESCO. The project aims to assess the impact of the conflict in Syria and the results of the crisis on tertiary education in host countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey.

This report presents the findings of an investigation that aims to identify major lines of action in tertiary education in emergencies, namely, legal frameworks and policies implemented by key actors within the sector, and it gives insights into the current status of tertiary education for Syrian refugees and displaced persons in Iraq. The report employs a qualitative approach and intends to explore and understand the challenges and opportunities for Syrian refugee students in accessing tertiary education. The study's findings underline the understanding of the vital role of tertiary education in improving living conditions and giving a sense of hope for the future in the context of protracted situations. The results show that the large number of refugees, who have changed the national demographics within the country, present a challenge for the state and local communities in meeting the needs of both the refugees and the host communities. Several of these challenges pertaining to the education sector are: (1) legal issues including lack of accreditation and citizenship alongside restrictive host country policies, (2) ignorance of university application procedures or lack of academic and career guidance which provide pathways to the labor market or further education, and (3) financial shortcomings. The demand continues to far outstrip the opportunities available. The study offers policy and program recommendations to decision- and policy-makers for the national and international communities, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, education stakeholders and other institutions with the overall goal to improve and guide further practice and research in supporting displaced persons in protracted situations to access tertiary education.

Keywords

Young Syrian refugees, Displaced persons, Higher Education, Tertiary Education, NGOs.

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Acronyms

3 RP	Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan
DAAD	German Academic Exchange Service
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
EU	European Union
HOPES	Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians
IBE	International Bureau of Education
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdish Region of Iraq
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Iraq

Introduction

As the Syrian crisis continues into its sixth year, the future of Syria and its people hangs in the balance. Over four million Syrians are now refugees that have been forced out of their homes, and the majority of them are residing in neighboring countries in the region. A general estimate places the total participation from Syrians aged 18-24 in tertiary education at 20% before the war and less than 5% in 2016 (EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2016). As the protracted crisis continues, refugee youth are facing barriers to access tertiary education in their host countries. The continued disruption of Syrians' tertiary education poses a great threat to the financial status and quality of life for these refugees in both their host country and upon their return to post-war Syria. Moreover, an uneducated "Lost Generation" will not be equipped to rebuild the economic, political, educational, and health infrastructures in post-war Syria. Increasing access to tertiary education for Syrian refugees is of paramount importance if these refugees are to avoid becoming a Lost Generation. As a result, it is important to understand the current status of access to tertiary education for Syrian refugees. Iraq is one of the main host countries of Syrian refugees, providing a relatively safe refuge with cultural and geographic connections for Syrians. Therefore, this study aims to identify policies, practices, and perspectives relative to accessing tertiary education for Syrian refugees in Iraq with the goal of understanding the challenges and opportunities during this protracted crisis. The study will provide key policy recommendations for governments, international organizations, and local institutions for improving tertiary education for Syrian refugees.

Iraqi National Context

Iraq is a nation of approximately 37.5 million people (UNDESA, 2016), a large country of 437,072 square kilometers and bordering Syria, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) in the northern part of the country contains 5.2 million of the national population, mostly ethnic Kurds, and 40,643 square kilometers, bordering Syria, Turkey and Iran. KRI functions as an autonomous region with its own president and parliament within Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2016). Currently, 3.44 million of the population across Iraq are internally displaced persons (IDPs) from both recent violence and from previous conflicts (IDMC, 2016).

Iraq's political and security situation is unstable. A series of wars have plagued Iraq's modern history, with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the First Gulf War (1990-1991), and the American invasion of Iraq (2003-2011). Sunni militant groups have resisted the Shia government since 2011, perpetuating sectarian violence and conflict. Starting in 2014 and as a result of the civil war in neighboring Syria, the armed insurgent group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has conquered large areas of northern Iraq, causing millions of Iraqis to flee their homes to other regions of the country for safety. Fighting continues between government forces and ISIS, among other insurgent groups, and has intensified recently. The crisis at the onset of the ISIS surge in 2014 led to the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki, who was succeeded by fellow party member Haidar al-Abadi.

Economically, Iraq is facing serious challenges. Due to low oil prices, the Iraqi and Kurdish governments have been severely impacted and are unable to support public services effectively. Payments to government institutions and salaries for public servants are delayed, directly affecting the host communities, IDP and refugee populations (UNHCR Iraq, 2016).

Although the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is perhaps more politically stable than the nation as a whole, it has been deeply affected by the combination of the humanitarian crisis as IDPs and refugees have been seeking refuge, the impact of ISIS on regional security, and the budget crisis. The population of KRI has increased by 28 percent in the span of 2012-2015 due to the influx of IDPs and refugees, straining its resources, economy and local population (World Bank, 2015). In particular, unemployment in KRI has increased and wages have been pushed down due to the influx of refugees and internally displaced persons. Moreover, fighting has affected transportation routes and trade, while foreign direct investment has slowed. Additionally, the expected fiscal transfers to the Kurdish region were not made. As a result, economic growth contracted and the poverty rate increased from 3.5 percent to 8.1 percent since 2012 in KRI (World Bank, 2015).

Syrian Refugees Context in Iraq

It is within this context that Syrian refugees started crossing the border to Iraq with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, which interrupted every facet of Syrian civilians' lives. The number of internally displaced Syrians is estimated at 6.5 million, while the number of registered Syrian refugees has risen to 4,806,762 people (UNHCR, September 2016a). The influx of refugees over the past five years has overwhelmed the main host countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, and meeting the needs of the millions of refugees has posed enormous challenges for these Middle Eastern countries. The scale of the Syrian refugee crisis is unprecedented.

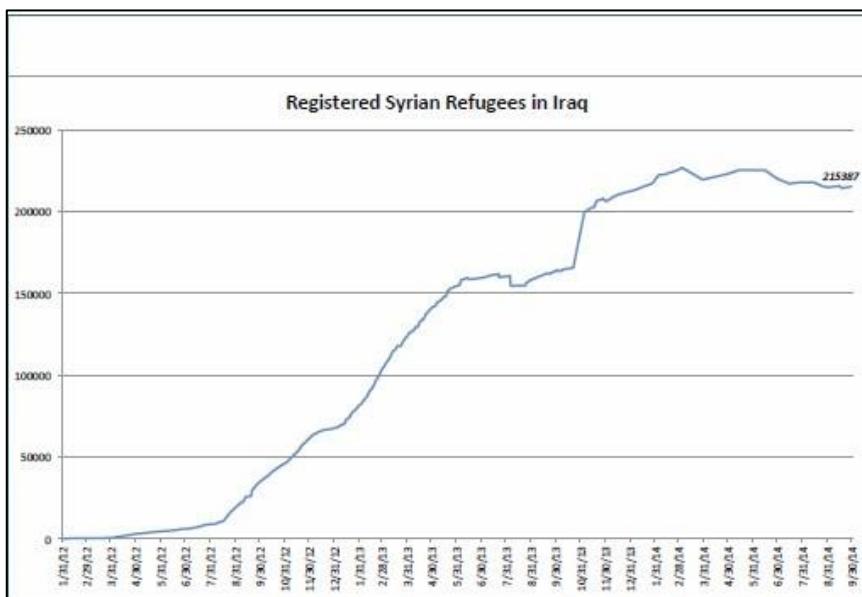
A displaced person or refugee is one that is forcibly displaced "as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations" (UNHCR, 2015). Article I of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) defines refugee as a person who: Owing to a well-founded fear of 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 or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Iraq, however, is not a signatory to the Convention or the subsequent 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

As of December 31, 2016, the UN Refugee Agency reports that 230,836 Syrian refugees¹ have been registered in Iraq, of which 54% are males and 46% are females (UNHCR, 2017). The influx of registered Syrian refugees in Iraq has been increasing sharply since the beginning of the crisis as shown in the figure below.

¹ Data retrieved from <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12667>

Figure 1. Influx of Registered Syrian Refugees in Iraq



Source: UNESCO Education Response to the Syria Crisis, 2015-2016

Among these registered refugees, there are 75,410 households², and 39% of Syrians live in official UNHCR refugee camps with the other 61% in “non-camp” or urban areas (UNHCR, 2017)³. Only about 5% of youth aged 15 to 17 are enrolled in formal secondary education (UNESCO, 2016)⁴. It is further estimated that 42,366 of the registered Syrian refugees are within the ages of 18-24, which is considered the age for university students, out of which 63% are males (UNHCR, 2016). About 97.5% of Syrian refugees reside in the KRI in the north, mainly concentrated in Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Distribution of Syrian Refugees in Governorates of Iraq

Governorate	Individuals	Households	Percentage Total
Kurdistan Region			
Dohuk	81,156	22,859	35.16%
Erbil	111,739	39,325	48.41%
Sulaymaniyah	29,960	10,673	12.98%
Ninewa	1,600	541	0.69 %
Federal Government Region			
Kirkuk	852	301	0.37%
Anbar	4,467	1,136	1.94%
Baghdad	311	154	0.13%
Total Iraq	230,836	75,410	100%

Source: UNHCR, 2017⁵

² Data retrieved from <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103#>

³ Data retrieved from <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>

⁴ Data retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002443/244333e.pdf>

⁵ Data retrieved from <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103#>

Given the concentration of the Syrian refugee population in the Kurdistan region (97.24%), this report will primarily focus on Syrian refugees in KRI. The remaining Syrian refugees in Iraq are located in Anbar province and scattered throughout the country. (UNHCR Iraq, 2016). Such a sharp increase in population has strained the country's limited resources and impacted economic, social, health and education sectors. Although the U.S. government donated 45 million USD in 2013 to ease financial pressure from the influx of refugees, the Government of Iraq distributed only 7 million USD of the aid to KRI, despite the vast majority of Syrian refugees residing there (Ahmadzadeh, Corabatir, Hashem, Al-Husseini, Wahby, 2014).

The shared historical and ethnic identity of the Kurdish people make Iraqi Kurdistan a natural place in which Syrian Kurds would seek refuge (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014). Forty-two percent of the registered refugees in Iraq are under the age of 18, and 55 percent are between the ages of 18-59. The bulk of the migration occurred in 2012 and 2013, with the registered population increasing by over 140,000 individuals during 2013 (See Table 2). In light of violence and instability in Iraq and continued migration, the number of refugees has declined slightly since its peak of 249,395 in July 2016. The majority of Syrians come from the regions of AlHasakeh (58 percent) and Aleppo (23 percent) (UNHCR Iraq, 2016).

Table 2. Population of Registered Syrian Refugees in Iraq⁶

Year	Registered Syrian Refugees	Internally Displaced Iraqi Population	Total Population of Iraq
2012	67,625	2,100,000	32,958,000
2013	210,612	2,100,000	34,107,000
2014	233,625	3,300,000	35,273,000
2015	244,642	3,300,000	36,423,000
2016	239,008	3,344,000	37,548,000

Iraq has maintained an open border policy with Syria and offers residency permits to Syrian refugees (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014; 3RP, 2016). Syrian refugees' right to work with a residency permit in KRI distinguishes the region from most other host countries (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014). Despite the ability to obtain residency permits and work in KRI, the Syrian refugee population is still enduring hardships as they share space and resources with not only local communities but also the millions of internally displaced Iraqis. Debt levels are increasing, particularly for the population living outside of official camps, and housing conditions are often substandard. Issues such as unemployment, food and water insecurity, and child labor are common among the refugees (UNHCR 3RP, 2016).

Syrian refugee youth have been deeply impacted by the crisis and its effect on access to education. Barriers such as family economic hardships, accreditation, curriculum, and physical

⁶ Total population data from UNDESA estimates. Data on registered Syrian refugees from UNHCR. Internally displaced Iraqi population data from Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

access to secondary schools have resulted in low school enrollment. Outside of camps, where the bulk of refugees live, only 46 percent of school-age children attend school, reaching 71 percent in camps (3RP, 2016). In 2014 only about 5% of Syrians aged 15 to 17 were registered in formal secondary school in Iraq (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2016). Young people, and young men in particular, are seeking employment in order to support their families instead of pursuing higher education (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014). Many young Syrian refugee girls are also forced to leave schools due to the inaccessibility of these institutions, primarily due to the unavailability of schools within camps or within close distance to the residency of the refugees.

Tertiary Education for Syrian Refugees in Iraq

Iraq's tertiary education sector has its roots in the early twentieth century with various institutes of higher learning. Colleges taught Islamic studies, medicine, education and more, until the first university, University of Baghdad, was established in 1957. The Iraqi Ministry of Education was established in 1969, and throughout the second half of the twentieth century the number of universities, colleges and technical institutes increased. The tertiary education system was deeply affected by the series of wars in recent decades due to sanctions, economic hardships, brain drain, financial neglect from the government and sectarian purges (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014).

Within Iraq, KRI's tertiary education system arose in this context and was formed starting in the 1990s. Apart from one public university founded in 1968, the rest of the tertiary education institutions in KRI have been established within the last two decades (Invest in Group, 2013). Currently, KRI has 14 private and 14 public institutions recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). High enrollment in primary and secondary education has contributed to increased demand for tertiary education and the subsequent establishment of new institutions. As for the rest of Iraq, students reach tertiary education by completing basic and secondary school and obtaining the Iraqi baccalaureate. At the secondary level, students can follow the general, vocational or teacher training track. The general and vocational tracks conclude with a baccalaureate required for admission to tertiary education. In Iraq, the language of instruction is Arabic. However, instruction is done in Kurdish in KRI (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). Iraq's education system is similar to Syria's, with the main exception being the language of instruction in KRI.

Table 3. Tertiary Education Institutions in KRI

Type of Institution	Number of Institutions (2016)
Public Universities	14
Private Universities (Licensed and operational)	14
Other Institutes	9
Other Universities	2

Source: Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2016

One of the most significant long-term consequences of the Syrian crisis is the disruption of Syrians' education. As of 2015, an estimated 90,000-110,000 out of 450,000 Syrians regionally aged 18-22 years are qualified for tertiary education, which does not include would-be students over the age of 22 (Redden, 2015). Statistics on tertiary education enrollment before the war estimate that 26 percent of Syrian urban men and women, as well as 17 percent of rural men and 15 percent of rural women, studied in colleges, at universities, or had vocational training (Fricke, et al., 2014). A more general estimate places the total participation from Syrians aged 18-24 in tertiary education at 20 percent before the war and less than 5 percent in 2016 (EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2016). Estimates from 2014 depict a plummet in the percentages of Syrian students participating in tertiary education, compared to pre-war statistics. Of the students aged 18-24 and thus eligible for tertiary education, a mere 17 percent of internally displaced Syrians were enrolled; under 2 percent of refugees in Turkey; 8 percent in Jordan; 6 percent in Lebanon; and 8 percent in Egypt (Cremonini, et al., 2015). These low percentages of enrolled students contrast sharply with the number of tertiary education providers in those countries.

Yet the majority of Syrian refugees aged 18-24 years old, as well as Syrian tertiary education students whose studies were interrupted by the war, are unable to access tertiary education in Iraq. There are limited statistics about the number of Syrian students accessing tertiary education in the country. A 2015 estimate placed the number of eligible Syrian refugees at 6,758 but was unable to estimate the number of students enrolled in Iraq (Al-Fanar Media, 2015). Low enrollment in secondary school consequently impacts Syrian refugees' eligibility for tertiary education as the refugee crisis continues. As of 2014, only three Syrian refugees were enrolled at the American University of Iraq – Sulimaniya and seven at University of Duhok (Rasheed & Munoz, 2016), while UNHCR estimates that 250 Syrians are enrolled in public universities in KRI specifically (UNHCR Iraq, 2016).

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Syrians face multiple barriers to accessing tertiary education in Iraq, such as financial strains, language of instruction, certification and others. Iraq has not established a clear plan for integrating Syrian refugees into the tertiary education system, so third party players such as tertiary education institutions and scholarship-granting institutions are essential in tertiary support (Rasheed & Munoz, 2016). Preventing a Lost Generation and ensuring access to higher education for Syrian refugees is of paramount importance in response to this protracted refugee crisis. Yet tertiary education is often overlooked as international aid goes to primary education instead; the Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2016-2017 does not allocate funding for Syrian students beyond the secondary school level. Research and recent literature on Syrian refugees' education in Iraq centers around primary and secondary school students (NRC Iraq, 2013; UNICEF, 2015) which demonstrates a clear need for increased attention to adolescent and adult students within tertiary education.

Specific studies on the access of Syrian refugees to tertiary education in Iraq are lacking. Reports prepared specifically on the multifaceted crisis in Iraq discuss education in general, but do not provide specific insights or recommendations regarding tertiary education (World Bank, 2015).

Others focus primarily on primary and secondary education (Khawaja, 2016; Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2015; Watkins & Zyck, 2014) and some acknowledge the gaps and lack of access to tertiary education (NRC Iraq, 2013). Studies that have been conducted on refugee access to tertiary education regionally call attention to the high percentage of Syrians not enrolled and the various barriers prohibiting access to education while recommending possible solutions (Ahmadzadeh, et al., 2014; Al-Fanar Media, 2015; Cremonini et al., 2015; EU Regional Trust Fund, 2016). These studies primarily focus on other host countries with larger populations, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Ahmadzadeh, et al. (2014) and NRC Iraq (2013) report extensive information regarding barriers to access for Syrian youth to primary and secondary education in Iraq, calling for increased provision of Arabic language curriculum at the primary and secondary level, systems to facilitate academic certifications, and increased funding in general for the education sector in Iraq, particularly in KRI where there is a high concentration of refugees. Rasheed and Munoz (2016) call for the integration of Syrian refugees into tertiary education in the country as a means of peace building across refugee and host communities.

With the refugee situation constantly evolving in Iraq and the region, continued investigation is necessary to understand the reality of policies, practices and perspectives related to access to tertiary education for Syrian refugees in Iraq. This report will build on research previously conducted and attempt to answer the following questions, within the scope of the KRI given the concentration of the refugee population in the country:

1. What are the international, regional, and national legal frameworks and practiced policies for provision for tertiary education for refugees?
2. What are the policies and practices of the different organizations and bodies involved in the funding, planning, administering and providing tertiary education opportunities for Syrian refugee students in Iraq?
3. What are the challenges facing the tertiary education access for Syrian refugee students in Iraq?

Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative approach that aims to gain insight into the perceptions of the study participants and understand intra-subjective multiple meanings of the policies, practices and perspectives with a focus on tertiary education for Syrian refugees in Iraq. Interviews were conducted at several government institutions located in Erbil; institutions of tertiary education across the KRI; and with aid organizations operating in Iraq.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected primarily through interviews with local officials in the ministries of Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research, and international governmental and nongovernmental organizations providing support to refugee students in the province. Focus group discussions were also one of the tools used to generate the data through meetings with Syrian student-refugees and the Syrian students support program in the Kurdistan province. In addition to the interviews conducted, data was collected from documented legal frameworks and policies and procedures, as well as online studies and journals. Thorough desk and media reviews were conducted, in addition to a survey of policies and regulations

governing access of students to tertiary education. The scope of the search is limited to international and local practices related to the provision of aid to Syrian student-refugees in the Kurdistan province given the concentration of the refugee population within the KRI.

Research Participants

The participants interviewed in the present study included three representatives from the Ministry of Education (Department of Studies and Research and the Directorate of Examinations and Equivalence of Certificates) as well as six representatives from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, including general directors; representatives from local universities, particularly ones that have the highest enrolment of refugees in the Region; representatives from international and national NGOs operating within the KRI for the provision of tertiary education for Syrian refugees; and two focus groups of eight students each, one in Erbil and another in Dohuk due to the heavy presence of refugees in these provinces. The Syrian refugees participating in the study were among the students who were seeking to study at tertiary education institutions in the province or are currently studying at tertiary education institutions.

Data Analysis

This study seeks to address the tertiary education for Syrian refugees as follows: (1) legal frameworks and policies practiced to provide higher education for refugees, (2) policies and practices of the various organizations and bodies involved in the provision of higher education and educational opportunities for Syrian student-refugees in Iraq, (3) and the challenges facing policy formulation, planning and implementation in the higher education sector for Syrian refugees. Therefore, the researchers followed an interpretative data analysis approach whereby data was initially prepared, coded and organized into analytically meaningful, and easily locatable segments, and then sorted and rearranged in order to retrieve the segments of the data that provide the proper interpretation of the findings while accounting for both the emic and etic perspectives.

Field Study Limitations

The research team faced difficulties and several obstacles, especially in the field study including:

1. Lack of adequate documentation and regular field studies to provide scientific indicators about the reality of the target population in the province, in Iraq and about Syrian students in Iraq.
2. Absence of an institutionalized system for documenting information about Syrian students in governmental and non-governmental institutions. This challenge was particularly observed in the generation of accurate statistical data on the target population.
3. Obstacles and problems sometimes overstated by Syrian refugees, and also frequent exaggeration of governmental agencies to provide significant services to Syrian students in accordance with government capabilities.
4. Bureaucracy and routine procedures for permission to engage with government institutions in order to obtaining needed information requires several approvals from managers and heads of departments.
5. Irregular office hours due to financial crisis resulting in unpaid salaries to the staff for months, thus reducing working hours from five to two, or three days per week.

Legal Frameworks and Policies

International and Regional Legal Frameworks

The 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the status of refugees along with its 1967 Protocol, represents the foundations of the international refugee system, and provides the legal basis for refugees' support. It constitutes also an essential guiding document for the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Although the many countries in the world have signed or ratified the Convention and the Protocol, there are still forty-three states, members of the United Nations that did not sign or ratify them. Iraq is not a member of the Convention. Adhering to this agreement entails accrual of material and moral obligations and engagements at the international level. Despite the fact that the State of Iraq did not ratify the terms of this agreement legally, many principles of the Convention related to refugees have been implemented across the country, for example: non-discrimination between refugees and indigenous peoples, the right to ownership of movable and immovable, and the right to work. In some cases, Syrian refugees are treated like foreigners in Iraq, for example: in the absence of papers required for study in the Kurdistan region, such as a certificate, or authentication of certificates or other requirements, it is required that the Syrian refugee presents documents that must be stamped and sealed by the relevant governmental departments in Syria, forcing the refugee to take the risk of accessing the unsafe territories or a black market that has emerged for securing the required documents from the Ministry of Education in Syria in order to submit them to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

National Educational Policies and Frameworks

Given the concentration of the refugee population within the KRI, the following discussion will address national policies and frameworks for tertiary education in the KRI.

Policies Adopted by the Ministry of Education Regarding the Syrian Refugees

The Ministry of Education in the Kurdistan Region is directly involved in certifying the academic school records for refugees seeking to pursue their tertiary education studies in the region. The role of the Ministry of Education is most important in providing verification of certificates as the initial phase for students interested in joining local tertiary education institutions. The policy adopted by the Ministry of Education in KRI aims to facilitate procedures for Syrian refugees attempting to access education services within the Region, such as moving from schools in Syria to schools in the Kurdistan region. The Ministry provides equivalency of certificates received from Syria, which allows Syrian refugee students to transfer to schools in Kurdistan, as well as to sit for the baccalaureate examination administered by the Ministry. Nevertheless, Syrian student refugees are treated as foreigners, not as refugees, deeming it necessary for refugees to present all the required documentation to the Ministry of Education as international students in order to process the equivalency and transfer them to local schools. If some academic certification and documents are missing for the student refugee candidate, s/he would be transferred to the Equivalency Commission, where students are assessed on the basis of age and level of education. Baccalaureate certificates are authenticated by the Ministry of Education in the Kurdistan region for students who wish to complete their study locally at the tertiary education institutions. The student is required to secure an

equivalence for the baccalaureate degree, or to certify it from the Ministry of Education, and then s/he will be transferred to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in order to be able to complete other required procedures. The required documents are the original and certified diploma with the name of the student to be listed on the site of the Ministry of Education in Syria so that the student's number on papers submitted to the Ministry of Education in the province matches the student number on the website of the Syrian government.

Policies and Procedures Adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education Regarding the Syrian Refugees

Equivalence of University Degrees

The equivalency of a university degree in the Region is executed by the Department of Equivalence of External Certificates. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research does not consider the Syrians as refugees, but as foreigners or international students. As such, the same identification papers and documents needed for receiving equivalency for diplomas are requested from foreigners residing in Kurdistan. If the Syrian refugee student had completed secondary education in Syria, then s/he is required to secure the baccalaureate diploma equivalence from the Ministry of Education in Iraq, before seeking the equivalency for the degree received from a tertiary education institution in Syria at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Once the baccalaureate diploma is certified, the Syrian refugee is required to present a copy of the original diploma certified first by the responsible authority in Syria, and secondly by the Iraqi Embassy. However, due to the security situation in Syria, the certification by the Iraqi Embassy in Syria is no longer required. Additionally, the student requesting an equivalence for the degree is required to undertake a competency exam at related syndicate, especially for medical specialties to verify her/his competency. Some of the difficulties Syrian refugee students face at this stage are primarily due to the language barrier as competency exams are administered in the English language, while the language of instruction in Syria is Arabic. The language barrier limits the number of students who succeed in the competency exam. Furthermore, a valid permanent residency is required to undertake the equivalence of the certificate. According to statistics related to the department of equivalence of certificates at the Ministry of Higher Education for 2015, the number of equivalence of diplomas were: two advanced diplomas, eight Bachelor's degrees, 74 Master's degrees and three doctoral degrees. Given the financial crisis in the country, only 87 certificate equivalences were processes of the 163 requests submitted to the Ministry of Higher Education.⁷

Table 4. Equivalence of certificates for Syrian refugees in Kurdistan (2015).

Certificate equivalence	Number of certificates
High School diploma	2
Bachelor's Degree	8
Master's Degree	74
Doctor of Philosophy Degree	3
Total	87

⁷ Information on the documents required to receive an equivalence of a university degree received from outside of KRI are found in Annex I.

Hosting

"Hosting" corresponds to a student transferring from one university to another whereby there is an agreement between both universities, so that the student completes his/her studies at the same level, provided that it is recognized by both parties. Hosting Syrian students at universities in the Kurdistan region is not a new practice, however, it is currently being sought without the agreement of the second party, which is the Syrian government. At the beginning of the refugee crisis, the local government of Kurdistan helped the Syrian students and facilitated their transfer to study in public universities across the region. However, once students complete their degree at the university in Kurdistan, the diploma must be certified by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education as a condition for hosting students. Unfortunately, in the absence of the recognition of the Syrian authorities, there are no guarantees that their degrees will be recognized by the Syrian government. According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, there were 18 Syrian students enrolled through the hosting system during in 2014-15. This number dropped to 10 students in the academic year 2015-16. To resolve this problem, the status of Syrian students has been changed from "hosting" to "transfer" students, provided they submit all legal papers to the Ministry of Higher Education while continuing their study at the local universities.

Transfer from One University to Another

Transfer from a University in Syria to a University in the Kurdistan Region

Students who want to complete their studies in the Kurdistan region by means of transfer from Syria must provide legal papers as explained in Annex I. Once a student's academic records is cleared, the Ministry of Higher Education selects the department and the college where the student is to be studying. In most cases, students are retained to the initial stages of the study because of differences in the curriculum between Syrian universities and universities in the Kurdistan region.

Transfer from one University to Another within the Kurdistan Region

The university at which the student is admitted is determined by the Ministry once the student meets the requirements of the study, whether by student "transfer" or "hosting" or "central acceptance"⁸. Students are distributed to universities according to grades, available seats, and the capacity of the university. The capacity of the institutions of tertiary education usually present a limitation in the access of refugees to local universities in Kurdistan as the majority of the students and refugees are present [geographically] in the city of Duhok, and prefer to stay there where their families reside. Additionally, refugees prefer to study at universities in Duhok because of the similarity in the dialect and language used by the local people, as the majority of the population in Duhok speak Arabic and use the Badiniya dialect of the Kurdish language. Moreover, the culture in the city of Duhok is very similar to that of the Syrian refugees who moved there, since it is a neighboring area.

Given the demand for access to universities in this city, especially at a number of public universities, the Ministry of Higher Education distributes the students in a way to avoid overcrowding of institutions. Once students initiate their studies, they are eligible to

⁸Central acceptance is for students who sit for the national examination in Kurdistan and then apply to universities. This process is usually only for local students, with some exceptions for foreigners.

transfer to another institution after completing their first year; they will be entitled to move from one governorate to another geographically (from one university to another), but the Ministry of Higher Education has limited transfer situations by two conditions: disease according to a medical report, or marriage. These cases being few, the transfer issue created a big problem for students, since a student cannot continue his study, so either he will postpone it or drop out of university studies, and these cases are prevalent among student refugees for the reasons mentioned previously.

Central Acceptance

The Central Admission System is the only process for accessing tertiary education institutions, particularly universities, in Kurdistan after completing high school studies, whether it be foreigner or Iraqi students. Students compete within this usual central acceptance system in the Kurdistan region where baccalaureate graduates from this stage (or grade 12), are admitted to this program. Students apply through a website that opens in the midst of the tenth month of almost every year. Students submit all required documents, certificates and degrees through this system. Syrian students enter the competition with students from the Kurdistan region with the proportion of (3 percent) of the total students from the region. For the academic year 2016-2017, the number of students in the final stages of high school in the Kurdistan region was 106, 254. Syrian students are within the pool of students competing with local students. This presents a challenge in securing seats for the Syrian refugees as the seats available at local universities are not sufficient to fill the needs of local students. Syrian students who obtain the baccalaureate from within the region may be placed at local universities in order of precedence of graduation from high school. Some students remain on the waiting list for two to three years before entering the competition of the central acceptance.

Parallel System

Parallel System is a new system introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research where annually, student fees are charged for studying at public universities. It is well known that study at universities and colleges in the region are usually free of charge; this system has made it easier for organizations to support refugee students allowing them to study at public universities.

Additionally, this system was introduced because of the economic crisis that prompted the government in the region to create new programs, including the Parallel System for students aiming to access public universities in spite of their grades being lower than what is required for admission. It is through this system that a student can study in public universities and choose any major of study to complete his/her studies. The Ministry of Higher Education has opened the door for admission of Syrian refugee students by supporting scholarship programs such as HOPES and DAFI. Through these programs, which are supported financially by international organizations, refugee students are having the opportunity to complete bachelors, masters and doctoral studies at local colleges and universities given that tuition fees are paid to cover their enrollment.

The Language of Study and Curricula

In public and a few private universities in the Region, the language of instruction in some disciplines is English. For example, in colleges and universities with scientific disciplines, such as colleges of medicine in all its branches as well as faculties of science, engineering, and other scientific departments, the language of instruction is English. In addition, scientific resources for students' study are also available in English at all universities of the Kurdistan region, and in public universities.

As for the arts and other non-scientific majors, the language of instruction varies, with the majority of curricula and books available in Arabic, while very few curricula are available in the Kurdish language. Although some of the disciplines are offered in English, faculty members tend to use the Kurdish language for lecturing and explanation. In the provinces of Sulaimaniyah and Erbil, lectures are offered in the dialect of Sorani (Kurdish language). As for the province of Duhok, the language of instruction varies between Arabic and Kurdish, but faculty members lecture in the Badiniya dialect of the Kurdish language. Moreover, students learn the English language in all universities and departments according to their specialty during four or five years. "Kordology" is taught as a special curriculum at all universities and in all majors across the region, where students learn Kurdish literature and poetry. Through this curriculum, students also get accustomed to all Kurdish dialects (Badiniya and Sorani), as the curriculum features a mixture of these two dialects, which is considered one of the hardest lessons for Syrian students, because this curriculum is compulsory for all students and disciplines.

Private Universities Policy (non-governmental)

Private universities in the Kurdistan province have varying levels of study. Provision of study in these private universities is made through the Ministry of Higher Education, which is in charge of monitoring private universities including providing oversight of the curriculum offered and admission processes, which are also based on scores similar to the process at the public institutions of tertiary education. Scores accepted for admission of students at private universities are lower than those accepted at similar departments and disciplines in the public universities. The private universities charge tuition fees. A special directorate within the Ministry is dedicated to oversee the operations of the private universities and institutes in the Region. These universities provide support to the government by reducing the enormous pressure of the students on the central admission and by reducing the flow of students to public universities and higher education institutions. Because of the scarcity of support provided to private universities and the high tuition fees, only a small numbers of Syrian refugees have enrolled in private universities in the Kurdistan region, reaching only 206 students during the academic year 2014-2015.

Labor Policy and Employment within the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Regarding Syrian Refugees

Labor policy in the Kurdistan province is a free-market policy. Throughout the last ten years, a large number of appointments have been made in the public sector; but this situation has changed today as a result of the financial crisis, and appointments for all categories and disciplines within the public sector have stopped, excluding appointments in the field of

education, where nearly two thousand educators must be appointed annually to fill vacancies in schools. Obviously, these appointments exclude the Syrians refugees, as the possibility of employment in schools has become practically non-existent. Nevertheless, the situation is different in the private sector, for access to jobs as teachers and instructors in the private universities and schools are available for the refugees. The Ministry of Education oversees the refugees' schools through the provision of executive staff from the Ministry of Education into the refugees' camps, including school directors and associate directors. As for the Syrian refugees who live in the cities, public schools are available and they can study there without any hindrance, but they are not allowed to be hired as teachers in the public schools.

Other National Policies

Residence

One of the most important admission requirements at universities is accommodation. For security and preventive measures when a student submits his/her papers, s/he must have a regular residence address registered at the Ministry of Interior before commencing the study at the university. Also, when a student submits his/her papers to have their certificate authenticated by the Ministry of Education in the Kurdistan region, s/he is required to attach a copy of his legal residence; otherwise, no decision could be taken regarding the student's request.

Scholarship Programs and Practices

International Organizations and Support Programs for Syrian Students

International governmental and nongovernmental organizations are very efficient in assisting the Syrian refugees financially and socially. There are 210 international non-governmental organizations registered in the Kurdistan province; most of these organizations provide humanitarian aid to the displaced and refugees, and the majority of this aid goes to education services offered before the level of tertiary education, such as students in elementary and secondary school stages. There are only two international organizations that provide assistance and scholarships to university students, namely the SPARK organization and DAAD organization along with its programs (HOPES and DAIFI, respectively). Such activities are very limited compared to activities of international organizations that operate in the region and provide financial support in other categories.

DAAD (German) Organization

The German Organization DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) is one of the largest funding organizations in the world to support international exchange of students and researchers. DAAD programs range from summer training courses abroad for graduates pursuing doctoral programs, in addition to scientific visits. The DAAD organization grants scholarships for Kurdish students in Germany coming from the Kurdistan province and also grants scholarships for Syrian students in master's and doctoral programs.

SPARK Organization

This is a Dutch organization working in the Kurdistan province. One of its programs provides financial aid to 270 students per year admitted to the university. The financial aid is restricted only to the months of study and limited to \$280 per month. This aid is distributed to students in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

SPARK Student Support Program

SPARK aims to support higher education for Syrian refugees; the support for the refugee students is done in coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government. The aim is to provide young refugees with needed skills to rebuild Syria in the short term so as to address the urgent needs to improve the Syrian youth opportunities for education in Syria in the long term. The organization also aims at “returning the favor” to host communities in the short term as well as rebuilding the higher education sector in the countries neighboring Syria. This can be executed in various ways. The main focus is put on the registration of displaced Syrians and the students seeking to continue their education. To achieve this, SPARK concluded agreements (indirectly) with about 18 higher education institutions in the region. In addition, SPARK seeks to support local initiatives quickly and to follow up and support students so as to ensure their success and that they benefit from educational opportunities. SPARK also seeks to cooperate with the European Union to establish new Syrian Students’ Unions in addition to strengthening present unions. Within the framework of strengthening students’ capabilities, SPARK looks to build capabilities of several institutes of higher learning in the host countries as well as inside Syria. Finally, SPARK seeks to combine existing and new initiatives by organizing regional conferences on higher education in the region. Spark has adopted a regional approach through cooperation among the branches of the organization in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) and the provincial government to support the Syrian students with scholarships with a monthly stipend of \$280 as a financial aid for every Syrian student studying at public universities in the Kurdistan province. SPARK’s educational programs focus on the local language (Kurdish and Arabic), when possible and on English when needed. There are also additional programs relevant to the needs of the region, such as the work of mechanics, nursing at the vocational level, and banks and project management at bachelor's degree level.

The SPARK Scholarship Program assists students in paying educational expenses within specific educational programs, but also provides support towards living expenses. Education expenses are covered in all countries where SPARK operates, with additional allowances provided in some countries, such as allowances for living expenses throughout the entire year, corresponding to the time period for the educational grant. Grantee students are requested to cover any other expenses from their own resources. Other programs request from the grantees to cover part of their education expenses from their own resources. One can benefit from the educational grant only during the time frame of the scholarship; a time frame that should not exceed one year after the scholarship has been approved. Scholarship winners will be informed about the value of the educational grant upon the announcement of results. For the eligibility criteria for the SPARK Scholarship, please see Annex II.

DAFI Program

The UNHCR (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) has opened, by the end of 2016, in coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan province of Iraq, its scholarship program within the framework of the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund scholarships, known by the German acronym DAFI, and began to receive requests for applicants as of the new academic year 2016-17.

In the framework of the UNHCR Program for Graduate Scholarships, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative will provide support for one hundred and twenty college students of Syrian refugees residing in the Kurdistan province of Iraq, with applicants totaling 97 percent of the total of Syrian refugees in Iraq. This is the first time that such an academic program in Iraq and the Kurdistan province is allowed.

According the UNHCR in Iraq, "the refugee education is greatly affected by the outcome of the conflict in Syria. At the higher education level, only 1 percent of the refugees attend university compared with the prevailing global proportion of 34 percent". The UNHCR asserts that "the Syrian crisis has now entered its sixth year, and it is necessary to forward thinking the emergency response to the needs of the Syrian refugees. And granting the Syrian refugees residing in the Kurdistan province of Iraq a chance to complete their university studies in the host country is a way forward for them. Education is the foundation stone to enable refugees shape their own future and the future of their communities."

The UNHCR-DAFI program covers tuition fees for students admitted along with a monthly stipend, in addition to providing health insurance and guidance services for students up to five years, allowing them to get involved and be integrated into public universities and applied science institutions in the Kurdistan province of Iraq. In agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education, these students are admitted on a new system called the Parallel System, where annual cash money will be paid for university services by the student to enroll in public universities. It is well known that studying at universities and colleges in the Kurdistan province is free of charge. In order to facilitate the work of organizations providing support to refugees and to encounter the prevailing economic crisis, the provincial government created new programs, including the Parallel System for students who intend to enter the public universities with grades less than those required for entry into promising colleges. Thus, admission to these public universities is available through this Parallel System.

The number of scholarships available in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq depends on the available school funding which is offered based on the possibility of admission to academic institutions and the need for financial aid. The UN-High Commission explicitly encourages female applicants and persons with disabilities to apply for these scholarships. Application to scholarships was open between 18 September and 15 October 2016. Interviews of selected candidate students were made through the month of November, to allow for applicants the opportunity to register in the university semester starting from December 2016. The program includes, in addition to the Syrian refugees, the internally displaced Iraqis and vulnerable persons of the host community and some of the students of the Kurdistan province. The

Albert Einstein German Academy Initiative for refugees will provide support to 120 university students from Syrian refugees residing in the Kurdistan province of Iraq. This is the first time that such an academic program is available in the Kurdistan province in response to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The HOPES Program

HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians) is a project funded by the European Union's Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis. It is a joint effort that is implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the British Consulate in the Kurdistan region. This year, the program covers 80 percent Syrian students, and 20 percent displaced people and residents of the Kurdistan region. The program's objective is to increase the refugees' self-independence by providing professional qualifications that can help them find suitable jobs. This includes scholarships for new students and students already registered in universities in the Kurdistan region, in addition to individuals from the community hosting the refugees. The HOPES program is implemented in two stages: university education and post-graduate education. Applicants for HOPES scholarships are encouraged to study branches pertaining to jobs in their original countries at universities in Iraq's Kurdistan region. The HOPES program covers four areas: financial grants, teaching English, providing funds (less than 60 thousand euros) for short projects – from 6 months to one and a half years – that aim to develop skills and holding conferences regarding the affairs of Syrian refugees. The HOPES program also offers 30 scholarships for Syrian refugee students. For eligibility criteria, please see Annex III. However, HOPES have not administered any English language program in Kurdistan so far.

Coordinating the Affairs of Syrian Students Pertaining to Higher Education

There is coordination between international non-governmental organizations and governmental organizations on one hand and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Education on the other. The parties convene every two weeks at the Ministry of Higher Education to discuss ways to find solutions for the Syrian refugee student crisis in the Kurdistan region. These programs are comprehensive and sustainable and are linked to the main national institutions and other UN agencies, in addition to parties active in the development field. They will invest in building national partnerships that will ensure the continuity of these programs in the long run. They will also support refugees by enlisting them in national development programs. Today there are programs that support students including the SPARK, DAFI and HOPES programs and all concerned parties in Syrian students' affairs are actively participating and coordinating.

Types of Support

Support to refugees has been provided in a variety of approaches, particularly when Support is provided for refugee students in two major forms, mainly:

Financial support

This is one of the most important aspects of aid that is be provided to refugee students because it allows them to continue their education. Financial support also includes governmental support for public university students where each Syrian student receives 100 thousand Iraqi dinars. However, this has been stopped due to the financial crisis in the region.

Academic support

Both private and public universities in the Kurdistan region have opened their doors for Syrian students, thus providing academic support for these students through university institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Studying in public universities is complimentary. Books and scientific references are provided to students, in addition to electronic libraries in some universities.

Other Forms of support

The government of the Kurdistan region, represented by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, provides support for students in universities, in addition to the support they receive from international organizations. Some private universities provide support through scholarships from time to time, while other universities provide continuous support. There is a private university in the Sulaymaniyah province that has offered 50 scholarships in the past three years, which is of course a positive development. Private universities can provide scholarships to students through governmental support and support from international organizations, which will help alleviate this aspect of the crisis. Some universities have strong financial potential that enables them to support students and provide scholarships for Syrian refugees.

Perspectives

The differences in points of view between Syrian students and governmental entities concerned in education are as follows:

Students' Perspective towards the Local Government and International Organizations

Most students participating in the study explained that the local government does not provide all the refugee students' needs as it does with the citizens of Kurdistan, although the Kurdish government has set up the process for the refugees to apply for university admission through the same online system that the Kurdish students use. Additionally, they compare their situation with the students in Turkey, whereby the Turkish government has provided special teaching methods and opened up universities to take in the refugee students. It also gave Turkish IDs to refugees and guarantees for students, knowing that Syrian Kurd refugees consider the Turkish government as a foreign government.

As for international organizations, students strongly believe that these organizations can be of further support in their educational endeavors. For example, there are a number of

international organizations that provide support for Syrian refugees, however, this support does not target students. There is only one organization that offers services for Syrian refugee students through financial aid to enable them to continue their studies in governmental universities. This program only covers 3 percent of the needs of Syrian students in the Kurdistan region as only 260 Syrian students who were accepted in universities through the centralized acceptance system actually received this financial aid.

The Perspective of the Government towards Refugee Students

The government perceives its role as a facilitator for refugee students seeking to pursue their tertiary education in the Kurdistan region despite the enormous pressure from the local students in the Kurdistan region, as more than 100 thousand students are competing for the available government seats this year. The government has allocated 3 percent of the seats for Syrian students each year. The government has fulfilled its role towards Syrian refugees by providing complimentary education for students, which is offered through the Parallel System of tertiary education. The government has also facilitated the registration process by forming committees at the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education that handle cases where not all required academic documentations are available and find alternative solutions to verify the authenticity of the papers. This occurs in spite of the difficult economic situation in the region that has impacted the human resources available to address the increased demand in the work load as a result of the refugee influx in the region. Most government employees report that they have not received their salaries for the past six months, but still, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education are trying to offer the necessary services for Syrian students.

The Perspective of International Organizations Working in the Higher Education Field

International organizations working with the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education regard the role of the government as a strong and supportive force for ensuring that refugee students seeking to pursue their tertiary education have the opportunity to do so in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. In spite of the financial crisis and political turmoil in the region, the government provides necessary services and cooperates with international organizations in programs that provide support for refugee students. The amount of financial aid that international organizations offer for refugee students in the Region's universities remains quite low. Expanding support in tertiary education is one of the requirements to ensure that Syrian refugees continue their education as the crisis continues to be a protracted one. Expanding the scholarship programs and international funding opportunities present a pressing need for Syrian refugees. Efforts towards improving the support of tertiary education for refugees has emerged with the launching of the two new programs this year, the DAFI and HOPES programs, which aim to provide funds for more than 150 Syrian students to continue their studies in public universities through the Parallel System.

Challenges and Obstacles

Syrian refugee students face a number of economic, social, political, security and cultural obstacles when seeking to pursue tertiary education in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The Security Situation (terrorist acts)

With all the terrorist acts and the influx of people displaced as a result of ISIS's taking control of vast areas in the north and middle of Iraq, the Iraqi government support for refugees has declined due to a pressing need to address the military operations and the internal displacement of four million people. This has complicated the situation, particularly in the absence of the aid from the federal government of Iraq. The Kurdistan government has become strained in the capacity to provide any mode of support to the refugees seeking to pursue tertiary education, as most government resources have been dedicated to combating the military attacks lead by ISIS.

The Political Dispute and Financial Crisis in the Kurdistan Region

The central government has cut off the share of the Kurdistan region from its overall Iraqi budget. This financial boycott has affected the aid that the regional government used to provide to Syrian refugees with the beginning of the crisis and as soon as the refugees began to arrive to the Region. This financial crisis and the dispute between the central government and the Kurdistan region have affected the monthly allowances for students in public universities and reduced the number of housing that was rented for students as a result of fiscal austerity in the region. Moreover, there is a political and legal crisis in the region and political disputes among political parties, which is known by the "yellow area and the green area," or the ruling Democratic Party which holds the majority of parliamentarian seats and the Movement for Change and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The government performance has affected Syrian students as it is no longer capable of providing the financial support and other necessities to help these students continue their tertiary education.

The regional government in Kurdistan attempted to address this challenge by seeking assistance from the global community and international organizations. The global community responded well and provided some level of humanitarian support. The regional government welcomed Syrian refugee students at local public universities, free of charge. However, in order to obtain greater financial support for the government, this policy was recently modified with the declaration of the establishment of the Parallel System where students are now required to pay annual fees so that they can enroll in the tertiary education sector. Support programs, such as HOPES and DAFI, provide seats for Syrian students in the Parallel System by covering these tuition fees. This approach was undertaken as a result of the fiscal deficit of the government in the Kurdistan region.

The Influx of Refugees Immigrating to Europe from the Kurdistan Region

The mass exodus of people from Syria into Iraq, and especially into the Kurdistan region, led many university students in the Kurdistan region to continue their studies in European countries because the fragility of the political and economic situation. Although it is not clear as to the numbers of students who left local universities in the region, however, it is reported that many Syrian refugee students in the region have quite a number of friends who left local colleges and went to Europe to live and continue their study.

The Difference in Language of Instruction at Local Universities

The language of instruction in Syrian universities is Arabic, in both scientific and literary departments, whereas in the Kurdistan region of Iraq offers a mixture of English, Arabic and Kurdish (the Badini and Syriac) for the language of instruction. In some departments, students study using Kurdish and some classes are offered in the Arabic or English language. In other departments, the language of instruction is exclusively English, for example in the Sciences, Engineering, and Medical Departments. This difference in the language of instruction presents a major obstacle for Syrian refugee students, particularly that it is reported that they do not receive support to help them overcome this challenge. As a result, the students have to rely on themselves to learn the languages of English or Kurdish, in addition to the subject content they are learning at the university.

Curriculum and Teaching Methodology

The difference in curriculum between Syrian universities and universities in the Kurdistan region also presented a challenge for refugee students. At the Ministry of Higher Education, a dedicated committee from different disciplines reviews the academic qualifications of Syrian refugee students and validate the requirements completed. If there is a difference between what is required in Kurdistan and what is completed in Syria, students are required repeat one or more years. However, if there is a substantial gap between what is required and what is completed, then students are required to repeat the whole degree. Although most refugee students from Syria in the Kurdistan region are of Kurdish nationality, they find it difficult to study in Kurdish because they don't know how to read and write in the Kurdish language. Additionally, students in Syria have the choice to attend lectures, whereas in the Kurdistan region, students are required to attend all lectures, and if students are absent for a prolonged period, they risk the possibility of being expelled. In Syria, there are open curricula where students read and prepare for exams from several references; on the other hand, there is one curriculum in the Kurdistan region that students have to strictly abide by. This makes it difficult for Syrian students to cope with the academic requirements within the region.

Recognition of Certificates and Academic Qualifications to Transfer Students between Universities in Syria and the Kurdistan Region

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research along with the Ministry of Education are seeking to facilitate the procedures for Syrian refugees to validate their academic credentials that are obtained from Syria. The current policies and regulations address foreigners seeking to study locally, and do not pay special attention to the "refugee" situation. This has created a serious problem, as the current regulations do not distinguish between international students coming from abroad, such as Turkey, to continue their studies, and Syrian refugees who are required to present all the necessary official academic documentation which can sometimes be impossible to obtain due to the ongoing war in Syria.

The Central Admission Policy of the Ministry of Higher Education

The central admission policy adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education is the only gateway for new students to enter universities in the Kurdistan region. Kurdish students apply online through a system called "Zanko Line" where they compete for a limited number of seats in different departments across the institutions of tertiary education in the region. Given that

there is a high demand for university education, the regional government has facilitated the procedures for Syrian students and has given them a chance to study in public universities through the central admission just like local students in the Kurdistan region. However, only 3 percent of the available seats are dedicated for Syrian refugee students. This percentage is quite low, as in 2015 the number of Syrian graduates seeking to continue their education at the university level was about 7,500 students, but only 261 were admitted. This quota presented an added challenge for refugee students who were competing to enter university. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, the demand for tertiary education is continuously increasing. This may lead to further reducing the quota dedicated for Syrian refugee students from 3percent to 2percent because there are great numbers of students and a limited number of seats [according to the Directorate of Central Admission at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research]. Syrian refugee students compete with local students within the Kurdistan region, however, Syrian refugee students do not apply through “Zanko Online”. A special committee from the Directorate of Central Admission sorts out the applications of refugees and makes a decision based on the scores obtained on the national examination of grade 12 as well as the residency requirement within the region.

The Policies of Public Universities in the Region

Refugees' adaptation to a new society is a challenge by itself, which is compounded with the pressure of entering college, as the students face difficulties with the new culture, language and curriculum. The policies governing local universities do not distinguish between refugees and students from the Kurdistan region. For example, universities don't have any official entities that provide information on how to study and resolve student issues or give information during this time of crisis. University employees don't offer adequate help for refugee students, which constitutes an obstacle in their path of learning.

Equity among Refugee Students in the Kurdistan Region

Refugees sometimes seek equality with the local citizens, but this approach has negatively impacted refugee students in tertiary education. Requiring that refugee students apply through the central admission policy is a challenge by itself, because as mentioned earlier, it reduces the refugees' chances of being admitted into the public university due to the fact that they have to compete with 53 thousand local students from the region. Syrian refugee students sitting for the national exam at grade 12 suffer from a change in curriculum which in turn leads to lower scores, and accordingly lesser chances of being admitted to a public university within the regular stream. This in turn affects the percentage of Syrian refugee students accepted through the central admission policy to continue their studies in the universities of the Kurdistan region.

Financial Aid

Financial support is essential for Syrian refugee students as they are in dire need for books and other resources such as transportation. Financial aid ensures that refugee students continue their studies. The regional government initially provided 100 thousand Iraqi dinars in form of financial aid to refugees, however, this has stopped because of the financial crisis in the country. This support has become more needed with the introduction of the Parallel System, which requires that students enrolled in this system pay tuition fees, most of whom are refugees.

Geographical Distribution of Students and the Language (dialect) Problem

Public universities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq place students according to their geographical location. In some instances, students compete for available classroom seats in certain locations beyond their neighborhoods. For example, a Syrian student residing in Duhok may be admitted to a university in Sulaymaniah if there are no more vacancies in Duhok. This transfer of locations presents additional challenges related to the language of instruction and the dialect used. Syrian students use Arabic, which is not widely spoken in the Kurdistan region, like Sulaymaniah for example. There is also a difference between the Badini and Syriac dialects, which also constitutes an obstacle in communication. According to regulations from the Ministry of Higher Education, students can only transfer from one city to another for two reasons (sickness and/or marriage). Many students prefer Duhok because most of the students speak Arabic and they also use the same Kurdish dialect (the Badini). The geographical location is a very important factor for refugee students' success in universities in the Kurdistan region.

Residency

Having official residency in the Kurdistan region is one of the requirements for admission to local universities, because it means that the legal resident has been cleared by local security forces. Since there is a large number of refugees and displaced people in the Kurdistan region, obtaining the residency card is very difficult. Syrian students receive little help in this regard, and they are treated as foreigners seeking residency rather than refugees in the Kurdistan region. This presents an added challenge in accessing tertiary education in the region.

Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees in Developing a Career in the Kurdistan Region

There are a number of challenges that face Syrian refugees who seek to develop a career in the Kurdistan region, those who carry high university degrees is a challenge in of itself for the following reasons:

First: The chances of getting a job, let alone a government job are almost non-existent. The opportunities will remain scarce even if the political and economic situation improves in the region in the next few years. Therefore, survival in a country with no prospects for economic and political improvement is a big challenge.

Second: There are very few job opportunities in the private sector. The unemployment index continues to rise because of the poor economic situation. Syrians who are university graduates have very limited opportunities at finding a job as opposed to Syrian refugees who don't carry university degrees, given the option of cheaper labor. This leads Syrian students to discontinue their university studies because they will see no benefit if it's not leveraging their socioeconomic status.

Permanent Housing

A number of public local universities offer not only free education, but also internal housing for Syrian students. This internal housing opens its doors during official working hours. There are students who don't have anywhere else to stay and don't have families to live with, therefore, the permanent housing is very important and is considered a major obstacle as it is very hard to find accommodation during the summer. However, some internal housing departments are reported to be of quite poor quality and students cannot live in them.

Aspirations of Syrian Students

Syrian refugee students seeking to pursue their tertiary education in Kurdistan hope to continue to receive support from the international community and international organizations, as well as government agencies. Most of the financial aid currently comes from international organizations in the form of food, medicine and other day-to-day needs. The current financial support in the form of scholarship programs from organizations such as DAAD, HOPES, and DAFI motivates students to stay in the Kurdistan region and not immigrate to European countries. After the war, Syrian refugees will most likely go back to Syria, and having them return to their home with a university degree to rebuild Syria and contribute to its development and growth seems to have a more promising outlook. These kinds of programs are very important because the Iraqi government, including the local government in the Kurdistan regions, is incapable of providing these services to the refugee students. These programs, which are supposed to be implemented in the Kurdistan region, do not meet the needs of Syrian students as they only provide funds for 150 students. This is a low number but it is still considered a good start in helping Syrian university students.

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Academic level

Following are recommendations at the academic level:

1. Provide sufficient financial support for Syrian refugee students which would be enough for them to complete their studies. The current financial support from the SPARK organization and the regional government is only available during the academic year. Many students report that they are forced to leave these scholarships as they seek employment to support their families. Long term funding may be provided to students seeking tertiary education which in turn covers transportation and accommodation in on campus housing year round as these students are refugees who are in many cases alone and without their families, and when they are asked to leave the on campus housing they don't have any other place to stay.
2. Provide scholarships to refugees to study at private universities from international organizations or Western and European governments to prepare students for the post-war era. This initiative should come from the local government in the Kurdistan region in cooperation with private universities in order to enable refugee students to access tertiary education. For example, private universities may have social initiatives. In exchange for classroom seats, universities may receive some incentives from the Ministry of Higher Education or they may receive honors for social responsibility.
3. International organizations can provide support to the Ministry of Higher Education in order to expand the role of university institutions by increasing the quota dedicated for Syrian refugee students. Without this support, the quota for refugee students will remain limited. The local government has not been able recently to fulfil the demands of the universities to expand their capacities to take on more students, due to the severe financial crisis that the government and the private sector are going through.

4. Increase the international support through international organizations and increasing the number of programs that support university students, through both scholarships and stipends.
5. Provide English language classes to Syrian students in addition to teaching them how to read and write in Kurdish (Badini and Syriac). Education in Syria is exclusively in Arabic, however, in order for refugee students to cope with the new culture and new academic requirements at local universities, as well as manage to integrate within the local labor market after graduation, they need to learn both languages, English and Kurdish. Language development will help the refugee students continue their study and become further qualified for employability given their language fluency in languages recognized in the Kurdistan region. It will also help them better adapt with reality and society in the future.
6. Appoint Syrian academics who are competent Syrian teachers who hold Master's and PhD Degrees in universities so that they can help the refugee students as they adapt to the new environment. Such communication allows institutions to identify the areas of difficulty facing students.
7. Establish a special unit within the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to facilitate and expedite the procedures of processing the papers and documents of the refugee students. Furthermore, this unit would address issues beyond technical issues, such as counseling and career guidance. This is important because a lot of students don't know what to do when they face academic, social, political or even economic problems during their studies at the university. This unit would ease the pressure on Syrian students.
8. Develop local universities into multi-dimensional institutions that add to the traditional curricula and traditional teaching modalities that go beyond on-campus offerings. These changes should also include the introduction of dynamic pedagogical practices where the focus is no longer on the professor but rather on the needs of the learner through active, interactive and experiential learning modalities, where students learn on their own or from peers. Such practices are particularly important in the context of refugee tertiary education, as the students are not typical students. It is critical for institutions to evolve and be creative in *what* they have to offer and *how* they offer it. For example, new skills and competencies may be introduced within the curriculum that is offered to Syrian refugee students not only because of their specific needs as learners, but also because of the prospects of employment that would enable them to change their realities of being a refugee. Such competencies include information analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and communication. In addition, developing students' character to encourage their curiosity, sense of initiative, persistence, adaptability, ethical awareness and reasoning are equally essential for refugees. Obviously, emphasizing such traits will strengthen *all* students.

Policy Level

Following are recommendations at the policy level:

1. Encourage coordination between the Syrian government and the government in the Kurdistan region to facilitate procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications for Syrian refugee students. This may be achieved by appointing a commission from the Syrian Ministry of Education in the region to provide all the necessary requirements. This coordination should take place among international organizations, especially the United Nations.
2. Increase the quota for Syrian refugee students in the central admission policy in the Kurdistan region from 3 percent to 10 percent, since there are a lot of Syrian refugee students who cannot pursue their tertiary education studies due to this quota. Furthermore, competition should be limited among the Syrian refugee students themselves and not between them and more than 100 thousand local students from the region.
3. Establish a special unit for all public universities which takes care of student affairs. It can provide counseling for students' problems in public universities given the difference in the curriculum, language and culture from which refugee students come, and which can cause problems for Syrian students in the region's universities.
4. For students who wish to continue their studies in Syria, programs such as SPARK, DAFI and HOPES can provide scholarships, whereas students who wish to continue their studies in the region after they finish high school, they can enter the competition through the central admission. This will provide more opportunities for Syrians when they are separated from the rest of the students.
5. Facilitate procedures for transferring students from Syria to the Kurdistan region. Some unnecessary requirements can be reduced, or Syrian government websites can be used to determine the status of the student, and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education can use them as alternative evidence for academic documentation.
6. Facilitate transfer procedures from one university to another. For example, if a student is admitted to the University of Erbil but they reside in Duhok, this will create transportation problems because it's difficult for students to live away from their families knowing that these students are refugees. According to the regulations from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, students cannot transfer to another university except in two situations, which are illness and marriage. This inability to transfer has led many students to drop out or postpone their university studies.
7. Facilitate the recognition of qualifications of students transferring from a Syrian university to one of the universities in the Kurdistan region. There should be dedicated committees in the concerned Ministries which look into the subjects already completed in Syria, based on the student grades. There are many instances where students had to go back to the preliminary stages of their studies because of the name of the topic or curriculum.
8. Provide a legal framework that recognizes refugees as special students instead of international students. This distinction is important as refugees do not have access to the documents necessary for admission as do international students, which presents a

challenge when applying to admission at the tertiary education level. This may entail the need to develop a national pedagogic assessment for refugees that does not undermine the education certification quality within the country. Such an assessment would replace the need to present certain documents that would allow the refugees to enter into local universities.

9. Develop and ratify the “Arab Convention on Regulating the Refugee Situation in the Arab region” and its adoption. This includes the introduction of a specific provision on the right of education in the current text of the Arab Convention.
10. Ensure that refugee youth are systematically included in national higher education plans and programs and quality data is collected to monitor their participation and educational attainment.
11. Develop policies and legislation that mainstream crisis response in national higher education planning and policy and allow for the inclusion of those affected by crises in higher education institutions in an equitable manner, through policy responses pertaining to language, needed documentation, recognition and accreditation.
12. Expand access to high quality secondary, tertiary, vocational and technical education for refugees, recognizing that post-primary education in all its forms can support transition to work, sustainable livelihoods and durable solutions for displaced persons.
13. Provide work opportunities and jobs in both the government and public sectors, as well as other formal employment sectors. The regional government can pave the way to providing equal opportunities as the presence of Syrian refugees has become a status quo in the Kurdistan region.
14. Develop a Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) to track students' progress and drop out in light of youth mobility. Such a system would include nationals as well as refugees.
15. Provide Syrians with a temporary Iraqi ID. Without this ID, Syrians cannot go out of the closed space provided for refugees nor can they work and study freely.
16. At the beginning of the school year, universities can make an effort to assist Syrian refugee students adapt to the university life, particularly to the language and dialect used locally, in addition to other matters related to study habits. Special care should be given to refugees as they are not local students from the Kurdistan region. Their difficult situation should be taken into account and administrative procedures should be facilitated at the universities.
17. Facilitate procedures for students in the Residency Department, as they are treated like regular foreigners and the procedures take a very long time with no exceptions for refugees, knowing that having the official residency is an essential requirement for applying to universities and has to be presented along with the application. It serves to verify the status of the student from a security perspective.
18. Accept sealed copies of certificates instead of the original ones from Syrian students. As this will bring thousands of students back into private and public universities. In many cases, students have sealed copies of their certificates but they don't have the original copy. They cannot go back to the war and conflict zones inside Syria to obtain such documents, either.

19. Open the doors for studying in Master's and PhD programs by providing scholarships and not just focusing on Bachelor's Degrees.
20. Facilitate procedures for university graduates when they try to get their certificates recognized or when they take the competency test in fields that are studied in English in the Kurdistan region and in Arabic in Syrian universities. For example, university graduates who have a degree in medicine and wish to work in this field have to take a competency test before they can do so. They also have to join the Doctors Syndicate. Passing this test is difficult because of the language barrier.
21. Facilitate procedures for applications to recognize certificates and host transfer students, because it's very difficult to obtain the necessary documentation, such as the grades affidavit, from Syria given the ongoing civil war there. It would be impossible to obtain the necessary documentation from inside Syria.
22. Universities should provide preparatory courses for Kurdish or English depending on the students' needs. Then student can start their studies in the following year. The first year should be for preparation through the establishment of language learning centers in all universities or a center in each province.

Social Level

Following are recommendations at the social level:

1. Provide separate housing and internal departments exclusively for Syrians because sometimes social or cultural problems occur between students from the region and Syrian refugee students due to the difference in their respective cultures. An internal department exclusively for Syrian students can also be established.
2. Facilitate work policies in the government sector to provide job opportunities for Syrians after they graduate from the host country. This will make them want to stay there and not immigrate to European countries. A large number of university students drop out when they don't receive financial support from donors.
3. Hold cultural and social courses for refugees and students in particular to raise their awareness of the risks of committing criminal acts and advising them to stay away from armed groups and organized crime.
4. Encourage Syrian refugees to establish civil society organizations and providing training by international organizations, in addition to preparing them socially and subjectively. In case refugees return to Syria, they can contribute to building a civil society there. After wars and conflicts, the society needs rehabilitation and a modern civil society must be established. The applicable laws in the region allows for refugees to have their own organizations to provide help, collect aid and work with all age groups, including students, to help them in universities and schools. These organizations can serve as a link between students on the one hand and the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education on the other in order to solve issues pertaining to Syrian students.
5. Conduct English and Syriac courses for students, in addition to providing training and preparing students to enter the university. The legal and administrative system in universities in the Kurdistan region should be explained to students before they enter

the university. This can be done in coordination with Syrian youth organizations and support from international organizations.

6. Conduct cultural, social and legal courses to raise awareness about how to deal with society, while analyzing the educational system and the regional government's handling of students and curricula, in addition to explaining the differences and how to adapt with all these matters from preparatory school all the way to university.
7. Assign an employee in each university to work as a social consultant to work out the needs of Syrian students. This person can serve as a reference in case Syrian students face obstacles or problems while communicating with others or in the language of study.
8. Place Syrian students according to their residence areas in the provinces because refugee students cannot stay away from their families. They will suffer from a social standpoint because the student is a refugee him/herself and studying in a place far from home. The economic situation is also a serious problem for students who study in distant provinces because expenses increase and students cannot afford them. There are many cases like this among students.
9. Provide permanent housing or internal departments for Syrian students in universities because there are many instances where refugees don't have families or a place to stay. In this case students will be without shelter. Therefore, permanent housing inside universities should be provided for students who wish to stay in the university even on official holidays.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROCESSES FOR SECURING AN EQUIVALENCE FOR A TERTIARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE DEGREE

It is reported that the following documents are required for refugee students to obtain the equivalence of their degrees in the Kurdistan region if they have graduated from tertiary education institutions outside the KRI:

- An original and a color copy for each of the certificates (Diploma, Bachelor's, Higher Diploma, Master's, PhD, Board, or its equivalent) and certification from the ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Iraqi consulate (in the country awarding the certificate). Syria has been excluded from this requirement because of the security situation in the country. There are other requirements such as competency certificates and official transcripts (if available in the certificate system). Copies of certificates received prior to the diploma being authenticated by the Iraqi authorities in KRI are required except for doctoral and board certification. Additional certificates or the theses (if available in study system) are required to be presented with the university seal (with a 15-pages reproduction of the beginning of the thesis).
- An original copy and a color copy of the high school diploma to holders of Diplomas, Bachelor's, Higher Diploma, and Master's. If the high school diploma is from outside Iraq, a special form must be filled out for this purpose. An official letter from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in KRI is usually sent to the Ministry of Education for equivalence, whereas if the high school diploma is from Iraq, the certificate must be certified from the school where the graduation took place as well as from the Department of Education in connection with the school).

Furthermore, certificates that require equivalence are submitted to the Commission of Equivalence of Diplomas at the MEHSR. Individual interviews may be requested by the Commission. The process of receiving the equivalence of a certificate takes between three to four months.

For the purpose of equivalence of grades, a personal request (printed) must be submitted. The certificate will be presented to the commission. This process takes one to two weeks. And the ministry can be contacted either by e-mail or by phone on the date specified by the employee in order to inquire about the result of the equivalence decision.

After the decision of the equivalence, the employee in charge shall notify the certificate holder, whether by e-mail or by phone, informing him that he can come to pick up the decision of the equivalence. The certificate holder will receive the original certificate along with his thesis (if it had been submitted earlier, as is the case for holders of Master's and Doctoral degrees who have been enrolled in research study system). The holder of the certificate can also obtain two copies of the decision of the equivalence. In case he would like to make an objection to the certificate equivalence decision, he has to submit a formal personal request explaining the reasons for his objection. The request will be submitted to the commission on the equivalence of certificates for review. The certificate holder will be later notified of the result.

ANNEX II: Eligibility criteria to apply for SPARK grant

1. The applicant must have completed successfully the pre-university study (high school or its equivalent) and should not be greater than 24 years old when he applies for the scholarship.
2. The certificate of completion of pre-university phase must be certified by the Ministry of Higher Education (this requirement applies to applicants residing in the Kurdistan province of Iraq).
3. The applicant should be Syrian, and holder of one of the following: a valid ID card, a valid passport, temporary government protection card, a valid residence, or a registration document as a refugee through the UNHCR.
4. A refugee cannot apply for scholarships in the country other than the country of residence.
5. Preferred applicants for SPARK scholarships are those who cannot afford the financial burdens for registration and tuition fees.
6. The applicant must not have requested inclusion in the resettlement program of the UNHCR, or any other organization that has re-localization programs.

Annex III: Eligibility Criteria for the DAFI program

Eligible people who can apply for scholarships

1. Students who are asylum seekers or refugees who want to study in public universities are eligible. The DAFI program will be available for new students and students already registered in public universities. Students can also apply for HOPES scholarships. Beneficiaries of scholarships from other entities are not entitled to apply for this program.
2. Asylum seekers who have successfully completed their secondary education in accredited schools in Syria or the Kurdistan region.
3. Syrian refugees who have completed their university education and obtained a grade higher than 65 percent can apply for a Master's degree by submitting their official documentation.
4. Refugees who carry an asylum seeker ID issued by the UNHCR.
5. Asylum seekers who do not possess any other means for continuing their university education.
6. Individuals who don't have a family member that is a beneficiary of one of the available scholarships.
7. Female refugees and refugees with special needs receive preferential treatment.

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