



Rethinking higher education in protracted crises: Policy responses and lived experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

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Abstract

Since 2019, Lebanon has experienced multiple unprecedented, interconnected crises affecting all sectors and social groups. Additionally, the country hosted the world's highest number of Syrian refugees in 2023. While access to primary education for refugees globally has improved over the years, access to higher education remains limited, with enrolment rates significantly lower than those of their non-refugee peers. This limited access is not caused by lack of interest; rather, it stems from the de-prioritisation of higher education in international and national refugee crisis responses. Lebanon represents a complex refugee educational governance landscape, involving domestic, regional and international public and private stakeholders. This article discusses the politics surrounding higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six stakeholders in the educational and humanitarian network and a focus group discussion with five Syrian refugee youth, the article addresses two questions: (1) How do international and local stakeholders respond to structural, financial and political challenges in shaping the higher education response for Syrian refugees in Lebanon? and (2) How do Syrian refugee students experience and navigate the challenges of accessing higher education in Lebanon? Findings reveal that stakeholders should integrate higher education into a long-term emergency response, while accounting for the broader sociopolitical, legal and cultural environment of displacement. A holistic approach is necessary to ensure that refugee youth can pursue a socially just and transformative learning journey, wherever they reside.

Keywords Education in Emergencies · Higher education · Syrian refugees · Lebanon

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Résumé

Repenser l'enseignement supérieur dans des situations de crises prolongées : réponses politiques et expériences vécues par des réfugiés syriens au Liban – Depuis 2019, le Liban a traversé plusieurs crises sans précédent, liées les unes aux autres et touchant l'ensemble des secteurs et groupes sociaux. En 2023, le pays a par ailleurs accueilli le plus grand nombre de réfugiés syriens au monde. Alors que l'accès à l'enseignement primaire pour les réfugiés s'est globalement amélioré au fil des ans, l'entrée dans l'enseignement supérieur reste limitée, avec des taux d'inscription nettement inférieurs à ceux de leurs pairs non réfugiés. Cette situation ne traduit pas un manque d'intérêt, elle reflète plutôt la dépriorisation de l'enseignement supérieur dans les réponses internationales et nationales aux crises des réfugiés. Le Liban constitue pour les réfugiés un paysage complexe de gouvernance éducative dans lequel interviennent des acteurs publics et privés, locaux, régionaux et internationaux. Le présent article se penche sur les enjeux politiques autour de l'enseignement supérieur pour les réfugiés syriens au Liban. S'appuyant sur des entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de six parties prenantes du réseau éducatif et humanitaire, et sur une discussion de groupe avec cinq jeunes réfugiés syriens, il aborde deux questions : (1) comment les acteurs locaux et internationaux répondent-ils aux défis structurels, financiers et politiques pour façonner une réponse éducative en matière d'enseignement supérieur pour les réfugiés syriens au Liban ? (2) et comment les étudiants syriens réfugiés vivent-ils et surmontent-ils les obstacles liés à l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur au Liban ? Les résultats révèlent que les parties prenantes devraient intégrer l'enseignement supérieur dans une réponse long-termiste aux situations d'urgence, tout en tenant compte des contextes sociopolitique, juridique et culturel plus large du déplacement des populations. Il est nécessaire d'adopter une approche holistique pour veiller à ce que les jeunes réfugiés, où qu'ils résident, puissent suivre un parcours d'apprentissage juste sur le plan social et porteur de transformation.

خلاصة

إعادة التفكير في التعليم العالي في الأزمات الممتدة: السياسات المتبعة والتجارب الحياتية للاجئين السوريين في لبنان— منذ عام 2019، يمر لبنان بأزمات متعددة غير مسبوقه ومتداخلة أثرت على جميع القطاعات والفئات الاجتماعية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، استضاف لبنان في عام 2023 أكبر عدد من اللاجئين السوريين في العالم. وعلى الرغم من تحسن الوصول إلى التعليم الابتدائي للاجئين على مستوى العالم خلال السنوات الماضية، لا يزال الوصول إلى التعليم العالي محدوداً، إذ إن معدلات الالتحاق فيه تبقى أدنى بكثير من نظيراتها لدى غير اللاجئين. هذا القصور في الوصول لا يعود إلى قلة اهتمام من جانب اللاجئين، بل إلى تهميش التعليم العالي في الاستجابات الوطنية والدولية لأزمات اللجوء. يمثل لبنان ساحة معقدة لحكومة تعليم اللاجئين، حيث تتداخل فيها جهات فاعلة محلية وإقليمية ودولية من القطاع العام والخاص. يناقش هذا المقال السياسات المحيطة بالتعليم العالي للاجئين السوريين في لبنان. وبالاعتماد على مقابلات شبه مهيكلة مع ستة من أصحاب المصلحة ضمن شبكات التعليم والعمل الإنساني، بالإضافة إلى مجموعة نقاش مركزة ضمت خمسة من الشباب اللاجئين السوريين، يتناول المقال سواكين أساسيين: كيف يستجيب الفاعلون الدوليون والمحليون للتحديات البنوية والمالية والسياسية في صياغة الاستجابة التعليمية العليا للاجئين السوريين في لبنان؟ كيف يختبر الطلاب السوريون اللاجئين تلك التحديات ويواجهونها أثناء محاولاتهم الوصول إلى التعليم العالي في لبنان؟ تكشف النتائج أن على أصحاب المصلحة دمج التعليم العالي ضمن استجابة طويلة الأمد لحالات الطوارئ، مع الأخذ في الاعتبار السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية

والقانونية والثقافية الأوسع المرتبطة بالتهجير. ثمة حاجة إلى نهج شمولي يضمن أن يتمكن الشباب اللاجئون من خوض تجربة تعليمية عادلة ومحوّلة للواقع، أينما وجدوا.

Introduction

Access to higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is limited, with only 6% entering universities, a sharp decline compared to the 25% of college-age Syrians enrolled in higher education before the 2011 Syrian uprising and civil war (El Ghali et al. 2019). Access to universities in Lebanon is highly challenging for Syrian refugees due to many sociopolitical and legal barriers and previous issues in accessing education at primary and secondary levels (Crea and McFarland 2015). These obstacles include financial struggles and soaring living costs; lack of identity documentation, residency permits and proof of previous study; institutional rigidity; the inability of Lebanese higher education institutions to absorb large numbers of refugees (Fincham 2020); and the few sectors in which they are allowed to work.¹

On a global scale, only 7% of young refugees have access to higher education, compared to an average of more than 40% among non-refugee youth (UNHCR 2023). Refugee youth have been vocal for years about their desire to pursue higher education (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). However, it was not until the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in 2019 that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partners decided to incorporate higher education into their emergency response as a global priority, pledging to “guarantee that 15% of refugee youth will have access to the transformative power of higher education by 2030” (UNHCR UK 2022, online).

Almost 14 years into the Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon remains the country that hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR 2023). Since 2019, it has also experienced multiple unprecedented, interconnected crises affecting all sectors and social groups. The Government of Lebanon (GoL) estimates that the country is home to 1.5 million of the 6.6 million Syrians who have fled the conflict since 2011, including 814,715 registered with UNHCR as of the end of December 2022 (UNHCR 2023), along with 489,292 Palestinian refugees as of the end of March 2023 (UNRWA 2023).

Since 2012, Lebanon’s response to the refugee crisis has involved complex partnerships between domestic, regional and international public and private stakeholders (Zakharia and Menashy 2020). Additionally, the ongoing inability of the GoL to put in place a holistic national strategy to manage the refugee crisis has significantly influenced how the international community envisions shaping and implementing policies in emergency and highly politicised contexts (Geha and Talhouk 2019). Consequently, it is essential to examine how the GoL, international organisations and other stakeholders have addressed the challenge of providing higher education

¹ Lebanese authorities have “limited work available to Syrians to the agriculture, sanitation, and construction sectors” (Yasin 2023, online).

to refugee youth in such complex contexts in order to respond effectively to the aspirations of Syrian refugee learners.

This article explores the politics of higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It aims to show how international and local stakeholders respond to structural, financial and political challenges shaping the higher education response for these refugees, as well as how refugee students experience and navigate access to higher education. To do this, I undertook semi-structured interviews with six key stakeholders in the educational and humanitarian network in Lebanon and held a focus group discussion with five Syrian refugee youth.² Four main interrelated themes emerged from the analysis, which I present in the findings section, illustrated by quotes from the interviewees. These themes show how practices within the educational network are leading to negative consequences for Syrian refugee students' pursuit of education. I also examine how donors, policymakers and practitioners can consider higher education as part of their response, while taking into account the broader sociopolitical environment of long-term displacement to better support refugee youth.

Higher education in emergencies and the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon

The international response to higher education in emergencies

Higher education has traditionally been overlooked in emergency responses, with a predominant focus on primary and secondary education (Dryden-Peterson 2012). However, this began to shift with the establishment of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF; UNGA 2016) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR; UN 2018). These frameworks focus on easing pressure on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance and supporting access to education within national systems (UNHCR 2023). Following this, in 2018, UNHCR addressed the issue of higher education for refugees, promising to ensure a target of 15% refugee enrolment worldwide. It did this by setting the so-called “15by30 Roadmap” to align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNHCR n.d., 2024). As the GCR notes:

In line with national education laws, policies and planning, and in support of host countries, states and relevant stakeholders will contribute resources and expertise to expand and enhance the quality and inclusiveness of national education systems to facilitate access by refugee and host community children (both boys and girls), adolescents and youth to primary, secondary *and tertiary* education (UN 2018, item 68, p. 26; emphasis added).

² The data analysed in this article are drawn from my master's dissertation at King's College London, for which I conducted fieldwork in Lebanon during the summer of 2021.

Within this paradigm, UNHCR and its partners developed a strategy for refugee education and higher education: UNHCR's 2019 education strategy, *Refugee Education 2030: A strategy for refugee inclusion*,

aims to foster the conditions, partnerships, collaboration and approaches that lead to all refugee, asylum seeker, returnee and stateless children and youth and their hosting communities, including the internally displaced in those communities, to access inclusive and equitable quality education that enables them to learn, thrive and develop their potential, build individual and collective resilience, and contribute to peaceful coexistence and civil society (UNHCR 2019 p. 9).

UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030 strategy consists of five higher education pathways for optimising, coordinating and expanding opportunities within the field and across a range of partners in the belief that refugee participation in higher education strengthens national education systems to the benefit of both host and refugee communities (UNHCR 2022). These pathways are national university enrolment; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); connected higher education programmes; UNHCR tertiary education scholarships; and complementary pathways for admission to third countries (UNHCR 2023).

The impacts, strengths and limitations of refugee access to education at primary and secondary levels have not yet been sufficiently addressed (Brun 2023). However, there is still a need to critically reflect on and think about to what extent achieving the 15% enrolment rate of refugee youth in universities is achievable, even when access to previous educational stages in emergency contexts has yet to be assessed.

Higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon illustrates this complex interplay of local and global emergency responses. After almost 14 years, 30% of school-aged refugee children (aged 6 to 17) have never been to school, while only 11% of youth (aged 15 to 24) are enrolled in education (UNHCR 2022). This is despite the efforts of both international agencies and the GoL to implement an educational response for Syrian refugee children, prompting the problem of higher education becoming almost impossible to attain for refugee youth residing in the country.

Lebanon's approach to higher education in emergencies

The Syrian refugee crisis has been a burden on top of Lebanon's existing economic and political challenges (Chehayeb 2021), despite the GoL's efforts to accommodate the needs of the refugee community. In 2019, anti-government protests known as the "October 19 Uprising" filled the streets, followed by a historic economic downturn, causing inflation, scarcity of medicines and a severe economic collapse (Zakharia and Menashy 2020; Abouzeid 2021; Chehayeb 2021). The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic resulted in 45% of Syrian refugee children being entirely out of school. This was followed by the Beirut port explosion in August 2020 that further devastated the country's education sector, damaging 94 public schools, 132 private schools, 22 public TVET facilities and 20 buildings of the Lebanese University, the only national and public higher education institution in the country (UNHCR 2022).

Moreover, a growing xenophobic environment fuelled by political leaders blames the economic crisis on Syrian refugees, and frames the refugee crisis as a threat to national unity (Mroue 2023). The long-standing Palestinian refugee experience in Lebanon also influences antagonistic perceptions towards refugees within the community (Hamadeh 2018; Safa 2006). Finally, a divisive political landscape regarding the war in Syria further complicates decision-making processes and intensifies challenges in managing the refugee crisis among Lebanese political leaders (Kelly 2017; Mroue 2023).

It is worth noting that Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 *Convention relating to the status of refugees* (UN 1951) or the 1967 *Protocol relating to the status of refugees* (UN 1967), which ultimately removes the right of Syrian refugees to seek asylum or have any legal stay or refugee status in the country (IRC and NRC 2015). However, Lebanon did sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR in 2008³ (Brun and Shuayb 2020). Several stages were adopted regarding refugee education, starting with an emergency response led primarily by humanitarian organisations, then moving towards a government response and a development approach (ibid.). By also endorsing the GCR, Lebanon chose to follow its four objectives: (1) easing pressure on host countries; (2) enhancing refugee self-reliance; (3) expanding third-country solutions; and (4) supporting conditions for safe returns. These aims are reflected by the integration of refugees into national systems to ensure access to quality education. Lebanon, considered an example of good practices following the GCR (UN 2018), has accomplished a number of improvements:

- *Legal milestones*: Decrees and memos allowing Syrian and Palestinian students to sit for official exams have been consistently issued throughout the academic years.
- *Collaboration models*: Partnerships between international agencies, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and local organisations were established.
- *Targeted funding*: Support for “double-shift schools”⁴ and vocational education programmes have been provided.

However, challenges such as xenophobic discourse from all political parties, restrictive labour policies for refugees and limited or insufficient funding have amplified barriers to the response being efficiently implemented and for refugees to succeed in accessing university.

Most importantly, tertiary and higher education have not been touched upon in any of Lebanon’s educational responses, which have focused mainly on access to primary and secondary education, as can be concluded from the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) programme led by MEHE. Under the *Lebanon Crisis*

³ In this MoU, Lebanon does not consider itself an asylum country and, under its mandate, UNHCR carries out all refugee status determination (Brun and Shuayb 2020).

⁴ In Lebanon, “double-shift schools” use the same school building for local children and refugee students to attend in separate shifts (usually morning and afternoon).

*Response Plan (LCRP)*⁵ led by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), the RACE programme aims to ensure that vulnerable school-aged children (aged 3 to 18) affected by the Syrian crisis are able to access quality formal and non-formal learning opportunities in safe and protective environments. More specifically, this programme, costing USD 634 million, aims to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities by improving the quality of teaching and learning and strengthening national education systems, policies and monitoring, with non-formal education provision considered as transitional to allow Syrian students to enter the formal education system (MEHE 2014). Accordingly, scrutinising the response to primary and secondary education access is an important step in understanding why higher education enrolment has been difficult for Syrian refugees.

At the beginning of the crisis, in 2012, MEHE allowed Syrian refugee children to register in Lebanese public schools. However, it did not at the time comprehend the scale of the need for schooling among the Syrian refugee population, instead blaming UNHCR for conflating the numbers. This stage of the response was led by humanitarian agencies including United Nations (UN) agencies, GoL representatives and local organisations, with almost no Syrian or refugee participation (Brun and Shuayb 2020). Between 2012 and 2013, the GoL decided to take the matter in hand. MEHE implemented afternoon shifts in Lebanese public schools that are only available to non-Lebanese students. Funding for this initiative was obtained from UN organisations. Initiatives like “No Lost Generation”⁶ were established, and students from Syria who are Syrian or Palestinian and possess legal status documents are permitted to sit for official exams in Grades 9 and 12, according to Decree 62 and Memos 2 and 192 (Brun and Shuayb 2020). The GoL aimed to improve Syrian refugees’ access to education by expanding MEHE’s capabilities and eliminating legal obstacles. Nonetheless, it is clear that access was prioritised over quality, failing to address problems impacting educational quality, such as issues with the Lebanese curriculum and the language of instruction, which continue to affect both Lebanese and Syrian students and the dropout rate (ibid.).

Moreover, amid a highly politicised environment that propagates anti-refugee sentiments and calls for the return of Syrian refugees to Syria, MEHE has increasingly required Syrian children to have a valid residency permit to enrol in public schools, despite 80% of Syrian refugees lacking legal residency (Shuayb et al. 2023). Many refugee students have had to choose vocational education over secondary education because of an inability to pay for their residency permit, a legal requirement to enrol in Lebanese high schools.

⁵ “The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) brings together 118 humanitarian partner [and government] organizations to assist more than 3.2 million crisis-affected people living in Lebanon. USD 3.59 billion is required to meet urgent needs and provide protection and immediate relief assistance to 1.5 million displaced Syrians, 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese, 31,400 Palestinian refugees from Syria and 180,000 Palestine refugees in Lebanon, while seeking to mitigate the impacts of the Syria crisis on Lebanon’s infrastructure, economy and public institutions. Since 2015, Lebanon has received over USD 9.3 billion in support for vulnerable people under the LCRP” (GoL and UN 2023, online blurb).

⁶ For more information about the No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative, visit <https://www.nolostgeneration.org/> [accessed 11 April 2025].

This interplay between global frameworks and local realities highlights the complexities of providing higher education to refugees in contexts such as Lebanon. While international initiatives like the CRRF, GCR and UNHCR's 15by30 Roadmap advocate for inclusive and sustainable approaches, their implementation in Lebanon is being hindered by political, economic and social challenges. The absence of higher education in key educational response documents like those of the RACE programme highlights the tendency to deprioritise higher education for Syrian refugees by both local and international stakeholders.

Methodology

This study⁷ posed two main interrelated research questions:

(RQ1) How do international and local stakeholders respond to structural, financial and political challenges in shaping the higher education response for Syrian refugees in Lebanon?

(RQ2) How do Syrian refugee students experience and navigate the challenges of accessing higher education in Lebanon?

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion

My research entailed undertaking semi-structured interviews with six key stakeholders in refugee education in Lebanon, and a focus group discussion (FGD) with five refugee students from Syria. The interviews and FGD were conducted over five weeks between June and early July 2021 in Beirut and Beqaa (a remote area near the border with Syria). At the start of each interview and the FGD, interviewees were provided with an information sheet and informed consent was obtained. I conducted the interviews and FGD in both Arabic and English and audio-recorded and later transcribed them, translating the Arabic interviews to English.

Semi-structured interviews represent a shift from viewing people solely as manipulative data towards conceiving knowledge as being developed between individuals, generally through dialogues (Cohen et al. 2017). The approach is a social interaction phenomenon rather than just a tool or a place to record facts. This style of interviewing helped me as the researcher to learn about what the stakeholders thought, knew, liked, valued and believed about higher education for refugees. Although the points to be discussed during the interviews were pre-prepared, the questions were open-ended, and the phrasing and sequence were adjusted for each interviewee. This allowed for fruitful engagement, understanding and interpretation of the interviewees' assessment of higher education in emergencies. The questions covered key

⁷ This study was submitted for a High Ethical Risk Approval at King's College London as part of my master's dissertation in the Education, Policy & Society MA programme at the School of Education, Communication & Society during the 2021/2022 academic year. It received ethical clearance on 28 March 2022.

themes related to refugee access to higher education policies, such as policy development and institutional role, stakeholder engagement, challenges in policy implementation, and institutional capacity and facilitation.

Additionally, my previous work experience guided my choice of interviewees and facilitated my interaction with Syrian refugee youth. For over four years (2016–2020), I was the project manager of the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA).⁸ Throughout those years, I had the opportunity to be involved in the education sector for Syrian refugees, which allowed me to work and meet regularly with refugee students and key stakeholders focusing on access to higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the region. My previous work has, therefore, informed me about the higher education in emergencies network in Lebanon, and helped me identify key stakeholders for the interview process. Accordingly, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with six stakeholders, with each interview lasting 40 to 50 minutes at the interviewee's workplace (see Table 1).

In terms of the choice of FGD, Laurence Parker and Marvin Lynn (2002) contend that much educational research has ignored marginalised groups by not addressing their concerns or by conducting research on them using culturally inappropriate methods of investigation. My study involved talking to marginalised people who are considered “on the edge” of society (Barron 1999), and one of the main objectives was to shed light on refugee students' lived experiences in accessing higher education in Lebanon. Therefore, the choice of FGD gave the refugee students an opportunity to “tell their stories” from their own perspectives in pursuing higher education (Morgan 1996). As a researcher, during the FGD I relied on group interaction to discuss the predetermined topic and to generate a collective rather than a personal viewpoint. Thus, the refugee students communicated with each other rather than with me, allowing their perspectives to emerge and to precede my agenda as the researcher.

Five Syrian refugee students (four self-identified as female, one as male) aged between 18 and 30 participated in the FGD: two were already enrolled in university, and three had just finished their Grade 12 official exams and were planning to enter university. The age range may be broad; however, in the context of this research, refugee students have their education interrupted by displacement and refuge. Therefore, they are subject to missing several years of education and generally enter university later than “normally” expected. My choice of including currently enrolled students versus ones currently applying to university aimed to

⁸ The PADILEIA project produces and delivers blended higher education programmes to Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities in Jordan and Lebanon. It aims to broaden access to high-quality educational programmes, provide a foundation for further higher education and prepare students for their futures. The design includes three learning formats: short online courses, blended college readiness programmes and classroom-based learning, with a complementary online subcomponent. The project is funded with UK aid through the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) and is a partnership with King's College London, the American University of Beirut, Al Bayt University (Jordan), Kiron Open Higher Education (Germany) and FutureLearn (UK).

Table 1 Overview of interviews

Name of institution	Type of organisation	Role of interviewee	Rationale for inclusion
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	International organisation	National Education Officer	Offers the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship programme for Syrian refugee youth at the Lebanese University (at the time of this study)
European Union (EU) International Agency	International organisation	Anonymous*	Provides scholarship programmes for Syrian refugee youth to continue their postgraduate degrees in Lebanon (at the time of this study)
Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE)	Local stakeholder	Programme Manager of the Programme Management Unit (PMU) for the Reaching all Children with Education (RACE) programme	Supervises implementation of the national educational response in close coordination with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA)	Local stakeholder	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) Deputy Supervisor	Oversees implementation of the LCRP
Lebanese International University (LIU)	Local university	Public Relations and Media Director	Has many Syrian refugee students enrolled across all its campuses in Lebanon
American University of Beirut	Local university	PADILEIA Project Manager	Provides blended and online university preparatory courses for Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon and Jordan

*Note: The representative of this EU agency requested to remain anonymous in this study.

show how the situation of refugees has constantly changed throughout the years, especially since this refugee crisis has been protracted.

The FGD was held for over 45 minutes at a study hub in Beqaa, close to where the refugees live. I had prepared some guiding questions for the FGD to begin and steer the conversation with the students. These questions covered the challenges the students face in accessing and succeeding in university, and their perceptions of who the main stakeholders are that can ease their access to higher education, respond to their needs and provide support. Building on each other's contribution to the discussion, each student had space to share their experiences and opinions regarding higher education access for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In this article, I use pseudonyms instead of real names to ensure anonymity of the refugee students who took part in the study:

- *Maria and Fatima*: Both were enrolled at the Lebanese University at the time of this research.
- *Layal, Ali and Elham*: These three young people had finished Grade 12 at a Lebanese public school and were applying to university.

Thematic data analysis

Using NVivo software, I followed Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's model of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2017), the most widely accepted approach in qualitative research (Cohen et al. 2017). Unlike mere summaries or categorisations of codes, thematic data analysis aims to identify, analyse and report constructed and repeated patterns (or meanings) deduced from data collection that answer a research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-step process: familiarising myself with the data; producing initial codes; searching for themes; re-examining themes; outlining and naming themes; and generating a report on the findings. Consequently, four main themes emerged from the findings:

- multiplicity in coordination;
- ambiguous communication processes and lack of trust among stakeholders;
- funding constraints; and
- highly politicised nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, both nationally and internationally.

Before conducting the semi-structured interviews and FGD, I also reviewed key documents related to the educational response for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, such as the LCRP and RACE documents. This step was essential to examine how officially developed policies and commitments unfold in the implementation of crisis response initiatives. Some of the interview discussions referenced these plans, and interviewees frequently referred to them to illustrate the intentions of international and local stakeholders.

Limitations of this study

One limitation of this research is the small number of stakeholder interviewees and FGD student participants. There is a need for additional research to investigate other important stakeholders who play a significant role in policy recommendations for Lebanese governmental institutions, such as Lebanese General Security, which dictates the legal status of refugee youth and ultimately their access to services; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the leading agency in the recent five-year Higher Education Plan developed with MEHE; and other international agencies such as the World Bank. During discussions with the interviewees, these entities were consistently highlighted as being influential. Nevertheless, the contributions of each stakeholder interviewee, and the testimonies of the students' lived experiences in trying to access university, provide a sense of the complex, multilayered nature of education and higher education in the context of displacement.

Findings

Multiplicity in coordination

When discussing higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, stakeholders predominantly referenced the LCRP and the RACE programme. MEHE introduced the RACE initiative in 2014, which involved freezing non-formal education programmes and implementing school shifts for Syrian children. However, MEHE faced several limitations in implementing RACE, such as the inability to accommodate all refugee children in formal education and restrictions imposed on partnerships with non-government organisations. While RACE focused on primary education, it did not address higher education in its vision (RACE PMU 2018). Discussing the LCRP and RACE documents with the interviewees was crucial for understanding the broader educational framework. This, in turn, helped clarify why access to higher education has remained particularly challenging for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, even after an educational response was established by MEHE and other UN agencies.

Moreover, the lack of clear directives from leading agencies and governmental bodies, as well as UN organisations, led to confusion and challenges in implementing the LCRP and the RACE programme. The RACE Programme Manager shared:

“The RACE document started with the UNHCR; UNICEF was not involved. Although these are two UN sister agencies, there is competition between them. Later, when UNICEF realised that the RACE document targets refugee students within the age of their mandate, they decided to get involved ... So, we started for one year with the UNHCR and then shifted completely to work with UNICEF.”

This highlights the competition and lack of initial coordination between agencies. Similarly, institutional challenges hinder effective coordination within and among stakeholders, notably due to the absence of a dedicated entity for higher education

governance at MEHE, the leading agency for the educational response for Syrian refugees. The UNHCR representative noted:

“You do not have a structure enforced to take a decision. When you are unstable, you cannot make decisions correctly. You must provide stability and governance to avoid opening parallel channels.”

It was also evident from the interviews that there remains a lack of a well-defined strategy for Syrian refugee learners to access university education, despite the experiences and lessons learned from addressing previous refugee crises both nationally and internationally.

Ambiguous communication processes and lack of trust among stakeholders

The communication process among stakeholders has occurred through inter-agency meetings and the dissemination of different circulars (directives) by government ministries every academic year. However, the provision of critical information remains insufficient. The PADILEIA Project Manager noted:

“Not enough information has been disseminated. Most of the information we know is from our students. Not enough announcements have been shared with us. Even when we did our own research, it never reached us.”

The protracted nature of the refugee crisis and the lack of a long-term strategy for higher education have resulted in short-term circulars from the ministries, which focus solely on primary and secondary education rather than developing a sustainable, holistic education plan. This temporary approach has furthered distrust, as the Public Relations and Media Director at the Lebanese International University (LIU) highlighted:

“The circulars were being issued based on the experiences that we were going through. We were going through a new experience, as Lebanon, not only as a university.”

This miscommunication has been amplified by mistrust between international organisations and the GoL, partly due to past mishandling of international funds and government corruption. The UNHCR representative noted that there is “donor fatigue”, while the EU International Agency representative shared similar sentiments about international organisations’ mistrust in the GoL’s willingness to implement changes. On the other hand, the GoL’s scepticism towards UNHCR comes from its mandate to protect refugees. Thus, mutual distrust has affected communication processes. As stated by the UNHCR National Education Officer:

“It will never fly high having UNHCR requesting access to this and that; refugees are stigmatised. We come with a stigma of [being] refugees.”

Moreover, the MEHE representative pointed out distrust towards refugee students due to instances of document falsification to bypass residency issues.

Funding constraints

Financial constraints have been a significant barrier to implementing an effective educational response. Lebanon's severe economic crisis has impacted the daily operations of governmental institutions, with education for Syrian refugees relying heavily on international funding. The EU representative noted:

“There was a readiness to talk and listen, but one problem is the limitation of resources. Everything you do requires resources, and this has become more and more of a problem.”

These financial challenges therefore complicated the implementation of the RACE programme. At the same time, there was growing demand for double-shift schools, with insufficient funding to meet these needs.

Highly politicised nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, both nationally and internationally

The highly politicised nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, both nationally and internationally, further complicates decision-making processes. The EU representative expressed scepticism about the commitment of the international community and the GoL to alleviate the burden on refugee and host communities. This has led to the neglect of higher education for refugees, contributing to a “lost generation”. As the EU representative put it:

“This is the essence of politics ... They always promise something and never keep their promises.”

The absence of a political solution to the crisis and the GoL's stance on the refugee issue have further complicated efforts to prioritise refugee access to higher education. As the LCRP Deputy Supervisor at MoSA recalled, it is doubtful that refugee access to universities will be a priority for the GoL due to the absence of a political solution:

“At the political level, we are being challenged because the refugee problem is also linked to politics. We still do not have a durable solution on track, and we still do not have an action plan for the policy of return.”

The challenges identified from the interviews illustrate the significant impact of inefficient practices within the refugee educational network on shaping an effective higher education response. These practices result from factors such as poor coordination, inadequate communication channels, lack of trust, funding constraints and a highly politicised environment. These barriers contribute to the mismanagement of the educational response, thereby affecting the educational trajectories of Syrian refugee youth across all educational levels. Access to higher education is not an isolated phenomenon but is heavily influenced by prior educational experiences. As a result, Syrian refugee students face considerable difficulties in progressing from

primary to secondary education, taking official examinations and, ultimately, accessing universities.

Perceived consequences of these practices on refugee students' educational trajectories

During the FGD, Syrian refugee students expressed their frustration with the lack of responsive communication channels with key service providers, such as UNHCR, MEHE and MoSA. Instead of receiving direct guidance, they relied on fellow refugees and community networks – primarily through Facebook groups or discussions with family members who had successfully navigated the university enrolment process. While in some instances MEHE, MoSA and UNHCR representatives emphasised the efficiency of their communication processes and implementation partners, the firsthand experiences of Layal, Maria and Elham painted a contrasting reality, revealing significant gaps in institutional support. For example, Layal described the confusion she faced when trying to access university information:

“In the beginning, we called the UNHCR, who informed us that they could not support me in accessing university given that they do not target refugees aged 18 and above. We then called UNESCO, but no one helped us. They gave us a number to call, and no one answered; and if they did, they used to give us another number, and we used to receive the same feedback.”

This cycle of unresponsiveness created a sense of helplessness among the students, highlighting the disconnect between institutional claims of efficiency and the reality experienced by refugees on the ground.

Another major challenge raised during the discussion was the legal status of refugee students, particularly the requirement for a valid residency permit. Decision-making authority on this matter lies solely with Lebanese General Security, which operates independently of other public institutions. Although MEHE has made efforts to facilitate official exam participation by waiving the residency permit requirement, these decisions are often communicated at the last minute, leaving students in stressful and uncertain situations during critical academic periods.

Elham recalled the anxiety she experienced when her school suddenly informed students that a valid residency permit was required to continue their studies:

“In the middle of our academic year, the school supervisor informed us that we could not continue our studies unless we submitted our valid residency permits to the school. If we didn't do so, we would have to drop out. I used to talk to my parents daily about this, and my father told me that I would have to stop my education because it was tough for us to produce a valid residency permit.”

Elham further explained how the uncertainty surrounding her legal status took an emotional toll, making her question whether continuing her education was even possible. Similarly, Maria highlighted the persistent stress of residing in Lebanon without proper documentation:

“What does it mean for someone to reside in a country without a valid ID [identification]? They will always feel insecure. They live with stress all the time.”

As the crisis progressed, refugee students' experiences in accessing education varied depending on whether they had completed their schooling in Syria or within the Lebanese public school system. Those who had arrived earlier, like Maria, encountered unclear and often contradictory guidance regarding university enrolment. Maria recounted how she initially assumed that her Syrian Baccalaureate would be sufficient for university admission, only to later discover the bureaucratic challenges of obtaining an equivalency certificate:

“I was unaware that I needed an equivalency for my Syrian Baccalaureate. I thought I could present my Syrian Grade 12 certificate. I discovered that I had to go to Beirut and get an equivalency for my certificate according to Lebanese laws. I had to send my certificate back to Syria, have it stamped by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then the Syrian embassy in Lebanon, and finally signed by MEHE in Lebanon.”

In contrast, students who had pursued secondary education within the Lebanese system, such as Fatima, were more aware of these administrative barriers. To avoid the complexities of Syrian recognition of Syrian academic certificates, some students chose to sit for the Lebanese Baccalaureate, even if it meant repeating previously completed academic years. However, while this decision helped bypass certain documentation hurdles, it did not eliminate the persistent struggle with securing legal residency permits, which remained a central obstacle for refugee students attempting to access higher education. Fatima described her decision-making process:

“I belong to the group of refugees who completed their secondary education in the Lebanese system. I chose to sit for Grades 10 and 11 in Lebanon even if I repeated the two academic years I had already completed in Syria to avoid working on a recognised Syrian high school certificate. My problems were mainly with the residency permit.”

Discussion

As highlighted in the findings, the mismanagement of the educational response at multiple stages has led to significant negative effects on the refugee students participating in this study, including emotional burden, feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion and insecurity. This directly results from ambiguous communication channels, lack of coordination and insufficient trust between stakeholders and refugees, all of which amplified the students' distress in trying to access university. These failures have led to a situation where the refugee students felt unsupported and uncertain about their future educational paths, creating the risk of becoming part of a “lost generation”.

Additionally, the absence of a higher education response in the LCRP and the RACE programme further exacerbates the problem. As revealed in the interviews and FGD, there is a clear lack of concrete initiatives addressing the challenge of Syrian refugee access to higher education. However, some interviewees mentioned the latest Lebanon five-year Higher Education Plan that was launched in 2021 by MEHE with the support of UNESCO, as a step towards addressing this gap (MEHE 2021). Nevertheless, this plan is focused on a national response to the higher education sector. While it calls for legislative changes and substantial resources and prioritises international competitiveness, it scarcely addresses the provision of higher education for refugees. Despite the growing number of refugee youth eligible and desiring to continue their education, the plan categorises refugee students as international students (*ibid.*). This categorisation effectively disregards their unique educational challenges and the hostile sociopolitical environment that directly impacts their ability to pursue higher education.

Furthermore, the politicised nature of the refugee crisis in Lebanon was a theme that emerged strongly from the findings. As noted by the interviewees, the political context at an international and national level significantly influences decision making regarding refugee education. The government's stance and insistence on returning refugees to their home countries, and the lack of a political solution to the crisis, continue to deprioritise educational needs, let alone access to higher education. This political context is reflected in the structural barriers referred to in the findings, where refugees face challenges in accessing education at various levels due to both legal and bureaucratic obstacles.

Consequently, trust issues between the GoL, international organisations and refugee students is a crucial factor that is preventing the implementation of a coherent sustainable educational response. While the nature of the refugee crisis is protracted and politicised, the degree of uncertainty among displaced youth is alarming. As noted in the findings, students like Maria and Fatima, who navigated complex bureaucratic processes to gain access to higher education, embody the resilience of refugee youth. However, these individual stories should not be seen as exceptions but as evidence of the systemic barriers that need to be dealt with.

Conclusion and recommendations for future practices

This study examined the interplay among stakeholders within the educational network for Syrian refugees, focusing specifically on providing higher education opportunities for refugee youth in Lebanon. It reveals the complexities and challenges inherent in educational policymaking and responses within hostile environments by discussing the case of Lebanon and the Syrian refugee crisis in the context of higher education during protracted crises. There is clearly a need to address and rethink higher education in emergencies from a holistic, long-term approach rather than an immediate relief response (Zeus 2011; Dryden-Peterson 2017; Brun and Shuayb 2020).

As highlighted by the students in the FGD, challenges in accessing primary and secondary education significantly impact their ability to transition into higher

education. A more comprehensive understanding of refugees' educational trajectories, including the material and legal conditions shaping them, is vital for developing pathways that better meet their aspirations and realities. Educational outcomes and policies that fail to recognise the larger sociocultural and political context of displacement risk reinforcing the existing inequalities refugees endure, thereby perpetuating their marginalisation (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2021).

Moreover, the lived experiences of Maria, Fatima, Layal, Elham and Ali demonstrate the agency that refugee youth exercise in navigating the different barriers in their educational journeys. Rather than being passive recipients of aid, they actively engage with the structures around them despite the sense of hopelessness they experience in such a hostile environment. Further research could explore how refugee students' experiences of uncertainty and precarity shape their sense of agency in pursuing higher education, and identify the conditions that enable or hinder their ability to exercise such agency. Addressing how structural and legal barriers intersect with young refugees' aspirations and decision-making processes could offer valuable insights into thinking about and designing more effective higher education policies in protracted crises.

Finally, given the highly politicised nature of higher education in emergencies, further research should examine how access to higher education serves as a means of individual empowerment and a tool for social transformation. This includes exploring how refugee youth envision their futures within their current environments and the role of education in shaping those futures. Such research would deepen our understanding of displacement's political, social and cultural dimensions, contributing meaningfully to discussions on higher education policies and interventions. By ensuring that these policies are contextually grounded and informed by the lived experiences of refugee youth, stakeholders will be able to better support them in pursuing a socially just and transformative learning journey, wherever they reside.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the need to protect the confidentiality of participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of the context and the identities involved. However, anonymised excerpts or aggregated data may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by the relevant ethics committee and in accordance with institutional data sharing policies.

Declarations

Funding and/or Conflicts of interests/Competing interests The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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