Culture Notes

This is an ongoing column featuring information about cultures and intercultural communication issues. Please send article submissions to the column editor, Karen Gilmartin, at gilmartk@stjohns.edu.

Education and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

by Karen Gilmartin

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees seeking asylum from the events in war-torn Syria exceeds 4.7 million. More than half a million people are of university age, and are in danger of becoming a cohort of young people adrift—a generation with the potential to make contributions to the nations that offer them safe harbor.

Despite the best efforts of contributing nations and their universities, there are still hurdles that must be overcome for current solutions to be truly effective.

World Education Services (WES) published that although new institutions are being established in neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, no tools have been put in place for accrediting or measuring the quality of education being offered. Educational institutions within those nations are working on a remedy for this, but funding and manpower are in short supply.

The lack of academic training has a social/psychological impact. In an article from The British Council website, individuals who cannot access education view the future as bleak; their dismal outlook steers them toward or back into the extremism that triggered this crisis. Also, victims of violence and displacement often suffer from the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome, and this mental anguish delays success in the classroom.

Beyond these issues lie challenges involving Internet access, lost citizenship documentation, and linguistic barriers.

Current responses to the higher education crisis:

- German universities are offering free online courses
- UNHCR continues to fight for refugee funding
- The UK and United States have allowed entry to more refugees in the last year than originally planned at the onset of the conflict
- Canada encouraged individuals to host refugees, with government support (www.wenr.wes.org, 2015)

As explained by WES, “It is necessary for the international community to view higher education as a priority for refugee students, not a luxury.” Without formal tuition, this generation of young people will not be able to work and contribute to their new homes, or return to rebuild and support their homeland.
Further Reading

References
wenr.wes.org/2015/12/the-importance-of-higher-education-for-syrian-refugees/
www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/insight/beyone-aid-educating-Syrias-refugees
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Karen Gilmartin is assistant director of The Language Connection at St. John’s University and has written about immigration topics for Examiner.com. She currently volunteers as director of SIGs for NYS TESOL and is the column editor of Culture Notes for Idiom.
<gilmartk@stjohns.edu>