



## Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

# CREATING PATHWAYS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES – PARTNERSHIP FOR DIGITAL LEARNING AND INCREASED ACCESS

Higher education in humanitarian contexts provides young people with vital continuity in educational development, enhancing their ability to make strategic choices about their futures. Since 2016 over 5.6 million people have fled Syria seeking safety in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and beyond. Many of these refugees, alongside people in host communities, live below the poverty line and face major challenges in accessing higher education.

Part of the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme, the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA) helped refugees and displaced young people in Jordan and Lebanon to access higher education through a unique online and blended learning initiative.

### Participating students were able to access three personalised and flexible learning offers:



Bespoke short courses



Contextualised foundation programmes for university preparation



Study programmes with university credit-bearing courses

### These offers were complemented by support services:



Online mentoring to improve English language skills and support scholarship applications



Peer-to-peer support network linking PADILEIA students with UK university students



LiveChat for academic and technical support



Guidance for transfer into formal higher education



Psychosocial support

### SPHEIR programme management



## Key achievements

### Contextualised offer providing pathways to higher education for refugees

- **A functional and transferable learning ecosystem model providing access to higher education for refugees.** The blended learning model – delivered both online and through study hubs at different locations, including refugee camps, university campuses and bespoke spaces in the community – addressed a range of student needs.
- **Student-centred courses accompanied by effective course facilitation.** This resulted in student satisfaction rates of over 80% and high levels of course completion. Students praised the quality of academic support and its impact on their motivation and personal development.
- **A successful mentorship programme which connected students in Jordan and Lebanon with professional volunteers and university students in the UK.** The mentoring programme helped PADILEIA students with scholarship applications, English language and soft skills. The peer-to-peer network enabled UK university students and PADILEIA students to benefit from academic and cultural exchange: *“Making a connection with my mentee - the opportunity to meet someone in a very different situation to yours is always fulfilling. I think we both gained something from this experience”* Volunteer mentor from Cambridge University
- **Effective transition to online delivery.** PADILEIA’s online support mechanisms and digital foundations enabled a fast response when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. The team provided internet bundles and tablets to PADILEIA students and moved all programmes fully online, whilst maintaining student support.

### Impact on PADILEIA students

- **Raised aspirations of students and increased sense of community.** While courses have supported students to develop their confidence and self-efficacy, the establishment of study hubs provided a space to meet peers and form a learning community. *“As a refugee we do not meet lots of people from outside our community, the programme helped me a lot [to] meet new people and feel part of the society.”* Refugee student at Al al-Bayt University
- **Transferable skills.** In addition to gaining subject-specific knowledge, students gained soft skills – such as communication and teamwork – which will support them in future study and work. 85% of students reported increased digital literacy and English language skills.

### Improved attitudes towards, and capacity to deliver, online learning

- **Capacity development in blended and online learning supported partner universities in their wider transition to online learning during the pandemic.** Staff trained in blended and online learning facilitation under PADILEIA cascaded knowledge to colleagues. *“The training that our instructors received on online teaching within the PADILEIA project has helped us to move swiftly and at very short notice to online instruction in response to Covid-19.”* Ismail Ababneh, Vice President for Administration and Student Affairs, Al al-Bayt University
- **Twelve learning agreements to recognise prior online or blended learning were signed between PADILEIA partner Kiron and universities in Lebanon and Jordan.** In 2019, Beirut Arab University became the first major higher education institution in Lebanon to commit to recognition of prior online study.

## PADILEIA in numbers

8 bespoke short courses designed and delivered to PADILEIA students

More than

12,500

students in Lebanon and Jordan studied on PADILEIA’s study programmes and bespoke short courses online and in the study hubs

444

students graduated from the foundation programmes

1.1

million learners worldwide have enrolled on the eight online short courses developed by PADILEIA

102

students accepted into university to study over 20 different subjects including English language, law, civil engineering, and nursing

58%

of learners who completed PADILEIA courses were female

3,791

hours volunteered to provide tailored support to 365 PADILEIA students

## Lessons learned

### Contextualisation

Learner-centred approaches – including contextualised curricula and wraparound support – are critical in emergency settings, as is responsiveness to regular needs assessments and feedback loops to ensure the ongoing relevance of course content and design.

### Holistic support services

Considering students' overall needs is particularly important when working with vulnerable groups. Provision of psychosocial support, peer-to-peer support networks, and tailored mentoring enables students to access learning effectively.

### Learning ecosystems

Connecting with other actors working with refugees can maximise the value of an educational offer and create pathways to future opportunities. PADILEIA's integration into the learning ecosystem in Lebanon and Jordan enabled it to leverage the networks and delivery capacity of other agencies, particularly for student recruitment, and the project's multiple learning pathways provided students with a variety of ways to engage according to their different needs and aspirations.

### Exit pathways

Where significant barriers to higher education access exist, it is helpful to focus on transferable skills and a comprehensive range of student exit pathways including opportunities for work, volunteering and further study.

### Physical learning communities

Providing access to a physical space and face-to-face support had a positive effect on students from both an academic and psychological perspective. The social aspect of learning was strengthened through in-person delivery.

### Facilitated blended learning

Active facilitation of online learning is crucial to a positive experience. PADILEIA's blended learning format maximised student engagement while tailored capacity building for facilitators maintained a high standard of online teaching.

### Digital inequality

Lack of access to devices and limited connectivity remain barriers to online learning. Providing internet access and appropriate devices enabled students to continue studying during the pandemic. The user experience on different devices is a key consideration in course design and strong support structures can facilitate successful remote delivery.

### Recognition of online learning

Despite a positive shift in attitudes towards online learning in light of Covid-19, further work is needed with universities in the region to encourage recognition of credits gained through online learning and create viable pathways to access for refugee students.

### Access to finance

The lack of available scholarships is a key barrier to university access for refugee students, even when they meet academic requirements. Efforts to increase the number of refugees studying in higher education must consider the availability of financial support.

## Sustainability and scalability potential

- The PADILEIA model has potential for replicability in large population displacement settings and its lessons are shared through education in emergencies networks.
- The value of PADILEIA's courses has been recognised by other universities and NGOs in Jordan and Lebanon, such as the Lebanese American University that recognised students' previous learning on PADILEIA courses with credit transfers.
- The capacity building delivered by PADILEIA has transferred skills into local communities and many facilitators trained under the project, particularly in the Bekaa valley in Lebanon, will continue to apply knowledge and skills gained from PADILEIA.
- The [short courses](#) and the study programmes will remain available for learners globally on the FutureLearn and the Kiron Campus platforms respectively.
- PADILEIA's university partners have strengthened their capacity to participate in international projects - for example, Al al-Bayt University is working with UNHCR in Jordan to build coding and ICT skills for refugees and the American University of Beirut is contributing to a MasterCard Foundation research project in Uganda which draws on PADILEIA's study hub model.

## Partners

The PADILEIA partnership was led by King's College London (UK), working with the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), Al al-Bayt University (Jordan), Kiron Open Higher Education gGmbH (Germany) and FutureLearn (UK).

### Find out more

- [View the rapid evaluation](#) capturing lessons learned from adapting PADILEIA's student offer to enable fully remote, online course delivery in response to Covid-19.
- [View the PADILEIA summative evaluation report.](#)
- [Visit the PADILEIA profile](#) on the SPHEIR website.
- [Visit the PADILEIA website.](#)



# STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION AND REFORM (SPHEIR)

Transforming the quality, relevance, scale, access and affordability of higher education in low-income countries

8 partnerships

58 organisations

16 countries

## About SPHEIR

Strong higher education systems are key for accelerating development, building inclusive societies and promoting sustainable economic growth. SPHEIR was a UK Aid programme (2016-2022) supporting change in higher education to better meet the needs of students, employers and society in focus countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The programme was managed by a consortium of organisations, led by the British Council in association with PricewaterhouseCoopers and Universities UK International.

## SPHEIR's transformational impact

**Quality** – In Sierra Leone, a National Qualification Framework for Tertiary Education set new quality standards for higher education institutions. Across East Africa, a new quality review tool was applied in **21 universities** to improve institutional blended learning capacity.

**Relevance** – In Somaliland and Sierra Leone, **13 degree programmes** were redesigned with contextualised content and practice-based learning. In Tanzania and Uganda, four universities are engaging public and private sector representatives through new Joint Advisory Groups.

**Scale** – **4,470** academic and support staff were trained in curriculum design, student-centred and gender-responsive pedagogy, assessment, blended learning and distance

## The SPHEIR approach

Mutually beneficial partnerships brought together different types of organisations – including higher education institutions, authorities and associations, civil society and private sector organisations – to design and deliver innovative solutions to higher education challenges by focusing on transformative change at individual, institutional and sector-wide levels.

education. Over **77,600** students benefitted directly from SPHEIR, including 12,400 from Myanmar who accessed online courses.

**Access** – More than **12,500** students in Lebanon and Jordan accessed study tracks and bespoke short courses with a further **1.1 million learners worldwide** enrolled online.

**Affordability** – **913** students in Kenya received an affordable loan to start or continue university, of whom **82%** were from the bottom three wealth quintiles and nearly half were the first in their family to progress to tertiary education.

## SPHEIR partnerships

**AQHEd-SL:** Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone

**PADILEIA:** Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access in Lebanon and Jordan

**PEBL:** Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda

**PedaL:** Pedagogical Leadership in Africa in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda

**PfP:** Prepared for Practice in Somaliland

**LEAP:** The Lending for Education in Africa Partnership in Kenya

**TESCEA:** Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa in Tanzania and Uganda

**TIDE:** Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education in Myanmar