

Special Report **Investing in Education**

**Education**

## Refugee students battle barriers to learning in Lebanon

Pupils and teachers have made extraordinary efforts but Covid has exacerbated crises in the country



Refugee Zeinab al Awad, 18, studies at a centre run by Relief & Reconciliation for Syria in northern Lebanon © João Sousa, for the FT

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Like many students around the world during the Covid-19-era school closures, Zeinab al Awad has struggled to keep up with her online classes. But in Lebanon, where the 18-year-old Syrian refugee is in her final year of secondary school, there are further challenges, including chronic electricity shortages and internet failures.

“Sometimes the internet would cut out for a whole day and I would have to go back the next day and watch the recording and ask the teachers about it,” Awad says.

Despite these difficulties, she is preparing to sit her graduation exam this year and is applying for a scholarship to the American University of Beirut.

“My intention is to continue and become a doctor, God willing, and help those in need and go back to rebuild my country as it was,” she explains. “And to support my parents and give them a good life and allow my [younger] siblings to continue their education.”

**Most of Awad’s Syrian classmates have dropped out one by one, to work or marry, or because of problems accessing online classes**

Awad’s success so far is rare among Syrian refugees in the region, particularly in Lebanon, the country with the most refugees per capita in the world. And it is particularly unusual in the pandemic. Most of her Syrian classmates have dropped out one by one — to work, like her older brother, or to marry, as some of her school friends did aged 14 or 15. Others left because of problems accessing online classes. Many will not return when

schools reopen.

Hasan Nabulsi, a spokesman for the Middle East and north Africa office of the UN Children’s Fund (Unicef), says that, before the pandemic, some 750,000 school-age Syrian refugee children were out of school across the region, and another 2.4m children were out of school in Syria. Reasons include economic pressures, lack of space in local school systems, security concerns and bureaucratic hurdles to registering.





Zeinab al Awad: 'My intention is to continue and become a doctor . . . and go back to rebuild my country as it was' © João Sousa, for the FT

Lebanon was already in political and economic crisis before the pandemic. The Lebanese pound has lost nearly 90 per cent of its value since October 2019, and the [UN reported](#) that 89 per cent of Syrian refugees in the country are living below the extreme poverty line. Last August, a warehouse full of ammonium nitrate ignited in Beirut's port, causing one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in modern history, killing more than 200 people, wounding thousands and damaging large swaths of the city, including schools.

"I think it would be very difficult to disentangle Covid-19 from the other crises . . . in Lebanon," says Nathalie Lahire, a senior economist with the World Bank working on education in the Middle East and Northern Africa. "However, the combined effects on learning loss are significant."

Across the region, about 55 per cent of students who were enrolled in school before the Covid pandemic hit have had access to distance learning, [Unicef reported in November](#). In Lebanon, the education ministry said the proportion of students able to take part in remote learning was about 50 per cent. Online learning tools had been little used in Lebanon before the pandemic, particularly in public schools.

While remote study has been effective in some cases, Lahire adds that, "the results are mixed, with more than 20 per cent of public schools [in Lebanon] not having access to any form of online learning".

For refugees, the problems have been more acute. Last year's UN vulnerability report found that only 17 per cent of Syrian children aged six – 14 in 4,563 households in Lebanon had been able to take part in remote classes.



Syrian siblings outside their tent at a refugee camp in the Lebanese town of Aarsal © Marwan Naamani/Alamy

Apart from digital access difficulties, online classes for many “second shift” students have been suspended altogether because teachers were on strike over unpaid wages. While some Syrian children were enrolled in classes alongside Lebanese students in public schools, most attended specially designated afternoon classes that were held after the regular sessions — a programme that was launched in 2013 with international funding.

Meanwhile, school closures also led to the suspension of a special accelerated learning programme that is currently the only way for Syrian children who have been out of school for several years to get enrolled.

More than a year into the pandemic, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has not released an official distance learning plan, although a draft was circulated. Lahire says this offered some promising strategies — particularly in the use of technology — for schools that are lagging behind. Ministry officials did not respond to requests for comment.

**She cried a lot when she stopped school. She wants to go to school**

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**Souad Kadi, mother of Nuha, 13**

Problems of access appear to be reducing enrolment rates among refugees. There are some 190,600 Syrian children registered in Lebanese public primary schools this year, down from 196,238 in 2019-2020, which was already below the 206,061 the year before. Only about 6,400 Syrian students are enrolled in secondary schools.

Souad Kadi, a refugee from Idlib living in the Baalbek area on Lebanon's eastern border, says her daughter, Nuha, 13, is among those who have fallen through the cracks.

Nuha used to attend the public school in a neighbouring village, but stopped two years ago because the family could not afford transport. With schools closed, that is no longer an issue, but Nuha has been unable to take part in online classes because the family lacks internet access.

"She told me this year many times that when the school isn't online, she wants to go back," Kadi says, "She cried a lot when she stopped school. She wants to go to school and learn, but the situation is what it is."



Pauline Semaan Abboud of Peace & Reconciliation for Syria, who teaches and supports refugee students in Zeinab's village © João Sousa, for the FT

For some Syrian students who have been unable to enrol in public schools, or who have struggled with the curriculum, supplemental education programmes run by NGOs and informal initiatives have helped to keep them in learning.

When refugee student Awad first came to Lebanon, at the age of eight, her parents were able to enrol her in the local public school in Bqarzla, the village in northern Lebanon where they settled to work in the olive orchards. But, like most children from Syria, Awad struggled because she did not know the Latin alphabet or French — the school’s main language of instruction.

Fortunately, a small non-governmental organisation called [Relief & Reconciliation for Syria](#) had opened a centre in the village, where groups of volunteers provided after-hours homework help and remedial French lessons, along with Pauline Semaan Abboud, a Lebanese teacher who also teaches French in the public school. During the school closures, Abboud has continued to work via WhatsApp to explain lessons.

Unicef’s Nabulsi says such programmes are important in filling the gaps in national education systems. But, ultimately, he believes national authorities and international organisations need to work to strengthen teachers’ capacity in formal school systems, and to develop lessons learnt in the pandemic — including addressing the digital divide.

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“It’s an opportunity now to invest in digital learning and to increase and improve the access of children to these resources,” Nabulsi says, adding that this could include radio and television. These tools can “complement and support teachers even after the Covid-19 pandemic and can support learning at home”.

However, investing more in education for refugee children — and, particularly, in potentially costly programmes to increase access to digital devices and the internet — may be an uphill struggle at a time of donor fatigue. At last month’s fifth annual Brussels Conference to raise funds for the response to the Syrian crisis, international donors pledged €5.3bn — some €1.6bn less than last year, which was already down on the year before.

Despite the many competing priorities in the region and beyond in the aftermath of the pandemic, Nabulsi says the international community should not lose sight of the refugee students who are at risk of being left behind.

“These children will be a lost generation unless they’re given the education and unless they’re supported — and they deserve this support,” he says.

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