

EDUCATION & BUSINESS SYRIA



EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDY

Syria

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Foreword

Many countries worldwide are reinforcing the capacity of their education and training systems to respond to the pressures of globalisation and the challenges of the knowledge society. Closer cooperation between business and education is a vital tool in providing learners with new skills and competencies for work. However, at present only piecemeal information is available on cooperation between the education and economic sectors and the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders.

The Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) has asked the European Training Foundation (ETF) to research education and business cooperation in European Union (EU) neighbouring countries and territories involved in the enlargement process according to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) in order to:

- Draw up an inventory of current cooperation between education and business;
- Identify to what extent EU approaches and policies are relevant to EU neighbours;
- Provide tailored information and recommendations to national policy makers and donors for future programming initiatives and capacity building measures.

For the purpose of this study, the term 'education' includes vocational education and training (VET), within post secondary non-tertiary and HE, including public and private institutions. The term 'business' covers any entity that is economically active regardless of its legal status. This can include multinationals, large companies both public and private, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), micro-business and actors in the informal economy, social partners (employer and employee organisations, civil society organisations and their training bodies) as well as national, regional and local authorities. While the focus of the study is to identify and reflect on policy or strategically driven approaches to cooperation, the study considers education and business cooperation in the very broadest sense, including any kind of relevant policy provision and formalised or non-formalised interaction between an education or training provider and a business organisation.

This paper is the country specific contribution for Syria. It has been produced as a joint effort and follows a study design that consisted of desk research, data exchange with partner institutions, focus group meetings in Damascus in May 2010 and a validation workshop conducted in September 2010. During this intensive consultation process, facilitated by ETF, the main national stakeholders (representatives from relevant ministries, social partners, the education system, businesses and civil society) discussed the current state of play and provided recommendations for improvements. ETF produced the final report on the basis of the key discussion points and messages.

This paper will provide the basis for two ETF studies due for publication in spring 2011. The first will be a regional study of the pre-accession region and the second a cross-country study of education and business cooperation in all countries that are recipients of ETF cooperation.

The ETF is grateful for the opinions shared and insights provided by participants during rich discussions in the many meetings and would like to thank representatives of the State Planning Commission, the Vice Prime Minister of Economy, the Ministries of Education, Higher Education, Labour and Social Affairs, the Arab Engineering Federation, the Central Bureau of Statistics, GTZ, UNDP, the Syria Trust, the Syrian Enterprise and Business Centre (SEBC) and any other institution or person who collaborated with this effort.

A. Executive summary

Syria's 10th FYP (2006-10) set the priorities and targets for change from a planned system to a social market economy. The FYP focused mainly on economic growth, underpinned by the private sector in a leading role, the creation of social safety nets and health and education reform. The Government is committed to education reform and to reducing the mismatch between available skills and labour market needs. The 11th FYP is currently being prepared, moving the issues further on and reflecting

Syria's vision for the future. The Government is expected to sign the EU-Syria Association Agreement which will further support reform.

Higher education¹, VET² and labour laws refer to education for the labour market. Programmes and assessments are undertaken with the international community, including the EU, World Bank, UNDP, ILO or bilateral donors to support socio-economic reforms. Some of these touch on the topic of education and business cooperation but it is not approached in an explicit manner. Governance structures for education are complex with the involvement of many ministries and limited business sector cooperation. All the initiatives undertaken to date have remained at the pilot level and a solid commitment will be needed from the public and private sectors in order to move ahead. The challenges include high youth unemployment and the extensive informal sector, both of which hamper interventions. Other impediments to cooperation between education and business include the lack of trust between the two very different worlds and the absence of an enabling environment in a nation that continues to rely on personal networks rather than institutional commitments. Recommendations given in this report include awareness-raising, regular dialogue, legal reform and education strategies more responsive to labour market requirements.

B. Context and Policy

The Syrian Government recently initiated a series of reforms to transform the public sector-led socialist economy into a social market economy (Aïta, 2005). Government strategies have aimed to reduce the role of the public sector by removing barriers from the underdeveloped private sector in most industries and services in order to create new dynamics for economic growth (Aïta, 2005).

□ Trade liberalization was encouraged by membership of regional free trade mechanisms like the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement and other arrangements with Turkey. The 2010 Doing Business index³ published by the World Bank and International Finance Corporation ranks Syria 143rd out of 183 economies on Ease of Doing Business, although the country fares relatively well in three of the ten criteria (employing workers, registering property and closing business). Syria's ranking has shown a slight improvement in recent years and the new arrangements press Syrian enterprises and employees to become more competitive and to arm themselves with modern skills and competences.

Syria was characterised by a huge informal sector of around 60% in 2010. Aïta (2009) reports that 41% of the Syrian workforce had informal jobs in 2007 with a higher share among men (42%) than women (28%). Lower female informal employment seems to be related to the high share of public sector employment among women. Despite ongoing liberalisation and privatisation reform processes, the formal sector has lost many jobs and most of the new jobs created between 2001 and 2007 were in the informal private economy (Aïta, 2009). This unstructured labour market hampers cooperation with education and the implementation of policy interventions.

Youth unemployment is high, standing at 23.1% in 2008. The education system compounds the situation by failing to provide the skills and competences demanded by the labour market (Huitfeldt and Kabbani, 2006). Syria has a young population with 60% below the age of 25 (around 12 million). Educational attainment levels are low and have little relevance to work, especially at the basic level. The qualifications acquired in school only match the requirements of employers to a limited extent, and personal networks are far more important in finding a job than qualifications (ETF/CBS, 2010). The Government thus faces a two-pronged challenge of increasing levels of qualification in the labour force and the population in general and fostering dialogue between education and the world of work for improved school to work transition.

The Government has signed agreements with international donors who will support the socio-economic reform process. The EU is the main donor in Syria with a total of EUR 97.5 million committed to bilateral cooperation under MEDA I (1995-1999), EUR 189 million under MEDA II (2000-2006) and EUR 130 million allocated for the 2007-2010 period. The State Planning Commission works to ensure synergies between the various activities of foreign donors.

¹ Higher education is also referred to as tertiary education at some points in this paper. This includes universities, technical colleges and intermediary institutes under the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education.

² Vocational education and training includes secondary VET and post-secondary VET. VET schools provide secondary VET, intermediary institutes provide non-tertiary post-secondary VET.

³ See: www.doingbusiness.org

In the field of higher education, major EU initiatives include the Tempus Programme and the Programme for Upgrading the Higher Education System (UHES). A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Ministry of Higher Education and the EC Delegation to improve the quality of higher education and make it responsive to the labour market in 2006. VET has been supported by the ETF Apprenticeship programme (2000) and the MEDA-financed programme for the modernisation of VET (EU MVET, 2006-09, €25 million)⁴ which aimed to improve the responsiveness of the VET and labour market systems to the skill needs of enterprises and individuals. InWenT and GTZ have provided regional capacity building measures with a similar focus. EU policies have inspired education and business cooperation over the last decade but discussions during the focus group meetings and assessment reports (i.e. the EU MVET Programme) give only modest results which have had little follow up after project end.

Socio-economic reform programmes have been complemented by comprehensive assessment of the macro-economic context (World Bank), the investment climate, social protection (World Bank) and labour force (UNDP and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). In addition a national competitiveness report (SEBC and World Bank), a labour demand study (UNDP) and a poverty assessment study (UNDP) have been carried out. These all feed into the new FYP scheduled for consideration by National Parliament in autumn 2010. The need for cooperation between education and business is implicit in these documents.

The 10th FYP is the main policy document stipulating that higher education and VET can make a major contribution to Syria's skills and productivity needs and address the challenges resulting from internal and external socio-economic developments. Higher education and VET laws refer to the importance of education for economic and social growth. There is however no mandatory request for cooperation between education and the world of work.

The vision of the Ministry of Higher Education and the Council for Higher Education highlights the need to 'invest in human resources as a strategic national asset' and for universities to provide a 'competent workforce to meet the demands of the job market'. Reform priorities in HE are expected to focus on the development of curricula responsive to social and market needs and bridge the gap between education outputs and the labour market. The recently adopted VET strategy developed by representatives from education and business under the EU MVET programme states that links between education and business are imperative in achieving good quality and attractive VET. One of the proposed reforms is the establishment of an Independent VET Council to lead policy-making with the private sector.

The recently adopted Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs labour law of April 2010 foresees cooperation mechanisms between education and training institutions and employers in the running of apprenticeships and vocational training centres and in the certification of training. The law also requires enterprises with 50+ employees to allocate 1% of the wage bill for employee training selected and approved in agreement with the trade unions. It is too early to assess the impact of the new law on private sector cooperation with education.

The private sector has been contributing funds for apprenticeships since 2000. Most of the money has been spent on teachers and lecturers in the form of incentives to boost low incomes and increase motivation (EU MVET, EU UHES). Companies have become discouraged from contributing lately as fund accounts have not been published. A National Fund for VET will be established under the planned Independent VET Council to identify and implement different funding modalities.

⁴ EU MVET Programme 2006-2009 (EUR 25 million Euro [EUR 21 million from the EU + EUR 4 million from the Syrian Government] under the State Planning Commission with following main beneficiaries: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Higher Education, and Federation of Chambers). The initiative produced a proposal for a comprehensive sector strategy with the establishment of an independent National VET Authority. Also, 18 VET institutions participated in curriculum development and teacher training in selected areas such as welding, general mechanics and the production of ready-made garments. Capacity building measures were implemented for 41 companies on human resource management functions focussed on training needs analysis. Finally, a strategic plan for improving the services of labour market organisations and a labour market information system have been developed for approval by the national authorities.

C. Methodologies and Approaches

The Council for Higher Education and the Supreme Council for Intermediate Institutes⁵ of the Ministry of Higher Education and the National Apprenticeship Committee and VET Council⁶ of the Ministry of Education are the policy-making bodies. They are each composed of representatives from the public sector and the world of work and they are expected to foster education responsive to the labour market. Discussions during focus group meetings, however, suggest there is little input toward achieving this goal from either side due to the lack of mutual trust. The EU UHES programme seeks a proposal for improvement in the HE sector and the Independent VET Council (approved by the Government in early 2010) is expected to provide a formal structure that will involve social partners and enable the range of ministries to work with business. This body will be placed high within the government hierarchy, just one level down from the Prime Minister, in order to ensure independence. There is currently limited inter-ministerial commitment to its establishment.

In higher education institutes⁷ and vocational schools⁸ innovative and committed individuals seek to foster cooperation between education and the world of work. Some 44% of private sector respondents to the UHES labour market survey (EU UHES 2009) referred to having personal contacts with university lecturers, but none of the public universities appear to have representatives from the business community on their management boards. Increased openness for cooperation with the world of work would be expected from private universities but in fact institutions like the Higher Institute for Business Administration (HIBA), Kalamoun University or the Syrian Arab University are managed by Governing Boards composed of public and private sector representatives. Feedback from focus group meeting suggests that this has not so far increased activities between HE and the world of work.

The Syrian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and in particular those in Damascus and Aleppo have started to act on their role as intermediary services. They have signed agreements for joint initiatives with the HE and VET sectors. They focus on student placements in particular, but also include exchanges of teaching staff, training needs analysis, curriculum development and teacher training. Initiatives are generally small scale and the impact is difficult to measure at this stage. Informal channels and personal networks are still more important than institutional arrangements in achieving reliable cooperation. The SEBC is supporting private sector development and has started to build an efficient network of business support organisations. Cooperation with education mainly takes place with private sector providers and NGOs, and increased links between education and business are being promoted.

Career guidance centres represent a new element that has started to appear in recent years. An advisory centre for the unemployed was opened under a UNDP project in Damascus 18 months ago and another career management centre has been opened at Damascus University. A new Tempus project aims to open career guidance centres in all six public universities in the near future. This topic was included in the EU MVET programme and training on career guidance was provided to employees of labour offices and career counsellors in all 18 pilot VET schools. The NGO sector also provides career guidance services including a business clinic program run by the Syrian Trust Fund. The development of comprehensive career guidance and counselling services is high on the Government agenda, particularly in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education has a proposal for career guidance in the pipeline.

There are a variety of methodologies and approaches for cooperation between education and business that have been tested with the support of the international donor community. These have included labour market reviews and training needs analyses, apprenticeship schemes, business sector input to curricula, awareness-raising for entrepreneurial learning in all sectors of education, entrepreneurs teaching in universities and schools and teaching staff in businesses. These are all pilot initiatives and Government endorsement will be needed prior to inclusion in the 11th FYP and subsequent system-wide implementation. There is limited coordination between the various initiatives.

⁵ The Supreme Council for Intermediate Institutes under the Ministry of Higher Education includes the 16 Ministries involved in post secondary VET. There are 121 intermediate institutes in Syria.

⁶ The VET Council under the Ministry of Education includes the 11 Ministries involved in post secondary VET.

⁷ HE institutes include 10 public universities and 14 private universities (6 are expected to open soon).

⁸ There are 650 VET schools in Syria.

VET, intermediate institutes and their students take greatest advantage of cooperation in the education sector. Higher education graduates traditionally look for jobs in the public sector and have little interest in links with the private sector with the exception of the highly lucrative pharmacy or oil sectors. The situation is further complicated by the fact that universities are not involved in joint research with industry whereas research has been a major driver for cooperation between education and business in Europe.

In the world of work, cooperation is mainly available only for a selected and elite business segment where it covers the related skills needs. Most of these are export-oriented companies with a human resource management culture that is open to partnership. Most companies in Syria, however, are small family concerns of less than 10 employees. Economic constraints mean all the attention is placed on running the day-to-day business at the expense of strategic planning and the needs of the workforce. The huge informal sector has no dialogue with education at all and is completely excluded from the equation.

Systematic data collection and analysis has not been implemented, making it difficult to assess the outcomes of cooperation and identify examples of good practice. Feedback from country representatives given in focus group meetings in May and literature reviews suggest the following pilot HE and VET initiatives could provide good models:

Quantitative and qualitative feedback from the labour market system

The EU UHES Programme and the EU MVET Programme have produced methodologies for regular training needs analysis to bridge the gap between supply and demand sides. The authors of the UHES labour market study reported that many employers were unwilling or unable to participate in the study for various reasons, which may have skewed the outlook toward those that are already interested in the issue. Some employers were reluctant to answer specific questions on issues like the number of employees, possibly due to their failure to comply with Unified Labour Law No.91 for the private sector which demands that all employees must be registered for social insurance. Another initiative led by the Ministry of Industry in partnership with the enterprise community consists of a strategic review of how businesses can improve the quality of the workforce⁹. The central thrust of the project examines how enterprises can systematically track their own training requirements and ensure that details such as skills needs, weaknesses and future skill requirements are regularly shared with the education and training system.

The apprenticeship scheme in higher education and VET

Focus groups considered apprenticeship to be the most relevant and well-known activity of education and business cooperation in HE and VET although this has been a small initiative involving only 48 schools, 700 students and 180 companies - mainly large concerns¹⁰ in sectors of particular relevance to the economy. The apprenticeship scheme has been considered a win-win-win situation for all parties. Employers have gained access to education offers and the future labour force, the Ministries have learned about labour market needs and gaps that put them in a better position for providing tailor-made education for their citizens and both the public and private sectors have shared roles and responsibilities for quality education, competitive employers and skilled employees. Unfortunately, feed-back from focus group meetings suggest that these activities are currently suspended, partly due to the lack of interest from students unable to continue in HE. There is also some resistance to the apprenticeship approach from the business sector. Companies claim students are of poor quality students (no monitoring system is in place from the education or business side) and that the investment they make is lost when students fail to take up job offers at the end of the course of study (often because of military service). A tracer-study by GTZ may provide further clarification of this situation.

⁹ This initiative has been developed within the framework of the Euro-Med Charter for Enterprises supported by ETF

¹⁰ According to the definition of the Chamber of Commerce this is the categorization of companies into small (1-9), medium (10-49), and large (>50)

Entrepreneurial learning in higher education and VET

Syria is fully involved in implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Enterprise¹¹. The assessment exercise led by the European Commission in collaboration with ETF has identified limited development on entrepreneurial learning with respect to both policy and delivery. The Charter includes indicators for entrepreneurial learning that encourage the mainstreaming of entrepreneurship education through compulsory education. This will require a thorough reflection on policy options by all stakeholders, including a clear identification of the implications for curriculum development, teacher training and school management. The assessment already identified a commitment by the education authorities, State Planning Commission and employers to strategically reflect on how lifelong entrepreneurship education and training could be more systematically developed. It is now up to the education authorities to take the decisive steps and see this through.

One notable innovation has been the integration of practice from non-formal entrepreneurial learning into formal education. A module of the SHABAB youth entrepreneurship Project has been adopted as an official part of the Syrian school curriculum and is proposed for delivery in VET schools and HE institutes. The SEBC/ETF SKILLS Business Training Programme is also offered to secondary and HE graduates aged 19 to 25. However, these initiatives are not subject to quality controls and are still in the pilot phase where they only reach a limited number of beneficiaries.

D. Challenges

The current socio-economic environment and the influence of the huge informal sector present challenges to Government policies and strategies on education and business cooperation and prevent them from being of benefit for the country. Efforts are further hampered by the fact that the public sector is still the preferred employer for most Syrian citizens. Reforms will need to accommodate the topic simultaneously in the education sector, labour market strategies and related policy areas. Reaching an agreement on shared roles and responsibilities and cooperation modalities will be a very demanding process.

Analysis of structures and methodologies indicates many obstacles to dialogue between education and the world of work. It shows how difficult it is to bring the supply and demand side together to design a form of education that is responsive to the labour market. The main issue lies in creating trust and understanding between two very different worlds, where business concerns seek quick results and the education sector seeks long-term gains.

Further challenges lie in the development of support structures like the Independent VET Council and in ensuring mechanisms for exchange and cooperation among the various players. A culture of inter-ministerial dialogue will take time to develop. Additionally, representatives of the education sector must be convinced of the benefit of dialogue with the private sector and vice versa. Chambers and NGOs will need to further extend their services to foster cooperation between education and the world of work. Advice and capacity building measures have been partly provided by donor programmes to ensure understanding of the topic and to provide the right skills and competences for representatives in the respective institutions, but these efforts have been insufficient.

The shortage of convincing results from cooperation and examples of good practice does not help the situation. Moving up from the small number of pilot initiatives to a system-wide roll out and the accommodation of lessons learned from this experience will present a tough challenge. Systematic data collection and qualitative feedback will be needed and great efforts required to convince Syrian citizens of the benefits of public-private cooperation. Getting students, parents, education and the world of work on board will be a gargantuan task.

The main challenge will lie in moving from strategies and proposals to a form of implementation that relies on the commitment of public and private sector representatives.

¹¹ http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/international/files/2008_report_charter_en.pdf

E. Recommendations

These recommendations address policy and implementation levels and could be accompanied by capacity building measures (training, advice and sharing of experiences) for those involved in the process.

1. Trust-Building and Awareness-Raising

Trust must be built and awareness raised of the need to build bridges between the worlds of education and work. Measures could include open days and discussion forums at national, regional and local levels, where experience with ongoing initiatives such as student placements, entrepreneurial learning or career guidance could be shared. The roles and responsibilities of respective institutions should be highlighted and discussions held of their relevance for education enterprise cooperation and for attractive HE and vocational education and training. The audience would include VET school teachers, university staff, students, parents and employers. This will encourage dialogue and foster learning on how to move from pilot schemes to mainstream reform.

2. Regular and Structured Dialogue

The Councils under the Ministry of Higher Education and the proposed Independent VET Council could provide frameworks and criteria for regular partnerships between education and the business sector in governance and management (as foreseen in its mandate). They could join forces in policy making, anticipate developments and act proactively, building on the expertise of their members in both the public and private sectors. This would allow for maximisation of the synergies and complementarities of HE and VET policies in a lifelong learning perspective while extending wider outreach.

Specific support structures such as Chambers, NGOs or career guidance centres could further develop the services offered and experience gained so far (EU MVET, UHES Programmes). For HE and VET institutions the expansion of structured and systematic relationships with employers could be pursued. This could include the involvement of representatives of the private sector in management boards or representatives from the private sector in curriculum development and implementation.

3. Law and Strategies

The HE and VET laws would need adaptation to explicitly request cooperation. This would need to be followed by inclusive strategies and implementation plans for the education sector with responsibilities attributed to Government, the education and training institutions and the world of work. The recently adopted labour law represents a move in this direction, but this will need to be followed by an execution policy.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education could commission a study on the use of the apprenticeship fund. Results and lessons learned from this experience could feed into future policies, where the Government could tax education and training activities more favourably for both institutions and individual learners (EU MVET Programme). For HE and VET institutions tax relief could be granted when purchasing or selling materials or delivering training for adults. Financial incentives could include financial support for students during the period of training in the company. Enterprises might be encouraged to contribute in kind or to allow VET and HE institutes to make use of their equipment and facilities through tax benefits.

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