Empowering refugees to become civic and economic leaders
Foreword

At the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, SPARK wanted to support young Syrian refugees to continue their higher (vocational) education so that they can be the future leaders that rebuild their country. In Gaziantep, working closely with the University of Gaziantep and its visionary rector, Prof. Dr. Coskun, SPARK enrolled around one hundred students initially. However, whilst this was an important achievement, we soon realised that hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees were still unable to access higher (vocational) education. During our annual IGNITE conference in 2016, we voiced our intentions to provide 10,000 Syrian refugees with higher (vocational) education opportunities, through scholarships and training.

Building on experience with the Gaziantep programme we set out to scale our efforts. With great support from the Netherlands Government, the European Union (MADAD), Al Fakhoora (with funding from Education Above All and Qatar Fund for Development), and the Asfari Foundation we have grow the programme towards 8,000 beneficiaries. The Islamic Development Bank and the Al Nouri Society are now supporting our efforts and our dream of 10,000 beneficiaries is now within reach.

Through a network of over 25 universities and higher vocational schools in the country’s neighbouring Syria we have built a strong partnership to recruit, select and retain our scholarship students to best prepare them for the world of work beyond their studies. However, it is not just about reaching a larger number of refugees. More importantly we have learned (often the hard way) that the quality of our services, the choices of the study programmes we offer, and additional support (besides a scholarship alone) are essential. We set out to research the local labour markets in all neighbouring countries to Syria to determine what study programmes will offer the best opportunities for employment after graduation. We now offer (psycho-social) counselling as well as civic leadership and entrepreneurship training.

We improved our student recruitment, selection and retention efforts. Through hard work, and learning lessons through critically reflecting on our own efforts, we today have a robust programme that is ready for further scaling in the MENA and beyond. This scaling will not be accomplished by SPARK alone and is supported by our wonderful local partners, the universities, the ministries of education, student organisations, CSOs and many actors in the countries we work in. It is these actors that care and have worked hard to make this programme a success and will take it to the next level. Crucially, they are the cornerstone of sustainable progress in the future.

For SPARK, our efforts will now focus on finding solutions on how to connect the planned 10,000 beneficiaries to the local labour markets, start and improve their own businesses and help them prepare for a successful return to Syria to rebuild their country.

We hope this manual will inspire others and will be the first in a series of continually improving versions that will help our team to provide ever better services to our students.

Sincerely,

Yannick du Pont
SPARK Director
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Abdulaziz Omar  
Laboratory studies, Sütçü İmam Ulu, Kahramammas
1 Introduction

The Higher Education Services (HES) programme furthers the basic rights of Syrian and local youth, affected by the crisis, to enjoy access to higher education and empowerment opportunities. With hundreds of thousands of Syrian and local youth applying for a handful of overseas scholarships, new regional approaches are needed to scale up access to higher education, particularly in Syria, its neighbouring countries (Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq) and in Palestine.

Through a holistic approach, the HES programme aims at building a cadre of educated and trained leaders who are civic-minded, intellectually able and professionally skilled to become the community, business and national leaders of the future. The HES programme is implemented by SPARK in the Middle East in close collaboration with government counterparts, higher education institutions, education partners and other relevant implementing partners in programme countries.

The current HES programme aims to support over 8,500 students of underserved backgrounds providing the essential building blocks through economic empowerment, leadership and development to meet their potential and enable them to become more productive members of society. Students are offered 3 years university Bachelor’s degrees (during 4 years), 2 years TVET diplomas and 3 – 9 months TVET certificates in specialised fields of relevancy to post conflict economic (re)construction in Syria and integration in the labour market in host communities.

Providing youth the opportunities to graduate successfully from higher education is one of the aims of the HES programme. The other aim is to provide students with opportunities and skills to be successful after graduation. In the future more and more focus will be on post-graduation support and finding job opportunities for graduates. Focus will be increased on economic empowerment and promoting entrepreneurship of students after they graduate.

What makes SPARK’s model unique?

- Cost-effectiveness and sustainability
  From the very beginning, SPARK’s strategy has been to rely on existing local strengths and actors. For that purpose, SPARK has approached host communities and identified major actors, potential partners and local opportunities. We have acknowledged that each of the countries involved has a strong national higher education system with experience in administering scholarships. Instead of building a new parallel system, we built domestic capacity to operate such programmes autonomously in the future. We have capitalised on the many benefits of relying on local staff, their expertise and familiarity with the local context. Also, our negotiations aimed at reducing tuition fees were supported by a high number of targeted scholarships which all lead to delivering the same outputs with 2 or even 3 times lower budgets in comparison to other comparable programmes.

## Total Scholarships Awarded by SPARK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>BA</th>
<th>TVET Diploma</th>
<th>TVET Certificate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>1004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPT</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>1221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2050</td>
<td>1497</td>
<td>3060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total scholarships awarded by SPARK</td>
<td>6607</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Quality assurance and maintenance**
Each stage of programme design and implementation is accompanied by clear and transparent procedural instructions and guidance, including division of responsibilities, decision-making and supervision. The mechanisms of regular monitoring, evaluating, reporting and internal and external control under the stipulation of an ISO 9001 Quality Management System, allow for upholding and improving a quality attainment over time. Establishing of an optimal system is a work in progress and should continue throughout the entire duration of any programme. Constant adjustments are made to further align and fine-tune performance measurement tools and make them less labour intensive.

• **Flexibility and adaptability**
The programme structure is designed with flexibility to accommodate each local context and/or individual needs. Each of the countries neighbouring Syria have a unique system of policies that have been extremely dynamic during the design and implementation of the programme. It has proven to be essential to make continuous adjustments based on domestic changes to ensure the programme remain relevant and able to perform. Also, the relatively small size of SPARK’s team, ensured efficient decision-making, especially in times when quick decisions were needed to implement rapid answers to various challenges. Owing to such a structure, the model easily responds to different implementation settings without jeopardising coherence of governing principles.

• **Risk assessment and mitigation**
A wide range of preventive and corrective measures have been developed and tested in local contexts. These measures are applied in the planning stage with the purpose of risk-avoidance, but also work as Plan B scenarios in risk-elimination and/or evasion. It also demonstrates how completely unexpected risks can surface while risks that were initially assessed did not materialise. That is why we devote particular attention to collecting, maintaining and updating examples of best practices in the form of lessons learned.

Tareq Shwaheen (Jordanian), Intern at JO Pack, Amman
2 Executive Summary

This manual is based on an unparalleled model of awarding higher education scholarships to refugees in the MENA region. The model is implemented by the Dutch NGO “SPARK”, serving more than 7,000 beneficiaries. The main purpose of this manual is to capture and disseminate the most important features of SPARK’s programme, in order to encourage and support similar much needed efforts.

The manual has been focused on identifying and putting forward those elements that make SPARK’s programme unique and successful. It focuses on practical aspects of establishing and running such a demanding and comprehensive programme in a challenging environment.

Therefore, the manual has been divided into following sections applicable to any scholarship programme: Preparation, Visibility, Selection, Student Services and Monitoring and Evaluation. In its effort to provide instructions (instead of only descriptions), significant attention has been devoted to the preparation segment, being probably the main precondition to any successful programme implementation.

The methodology of each section was to present main activities within a timeframe; identify potentially challenging aspects; provide instructions on how to overcome them; illustrate the instructions with practical real-life examples; and finally include over 60 complementary templates and manuals.

Users of the manual will probably find its Annexes one of the most valuable segments. Enclosed as a list of active links, over 60 Annexes are included as concrete documents necessary for operating a scholarship programme. Ranging from comprehensive hundred-paged manuals to 1-page document templates, each Annex may simply be downloaded, adjusted and put to use. Based on experience, either success or failure, these documents are publicly shared as an open source that any similar scholarship effort can capitalise from.

In its attempt to present a replicable model, the manual is confined to those elements and features that are applicable regardless of setting, programme size or target group. Hence its final segment, the Conclusions, is designed to summarise the most valuable advices coming from experienced practitioners.

Finally, the language of the manual is clear, instructive and sincere. Its structure allows for reading in a chronological order while each segment can stand separately with accompanying Annexes enabling easy access to those interested in any single aspect or phase they find particularly challenging in their everyday work.
3 About this manual

This manual provides comprehensive guidelines on the design and delivery of relevant and efficient model(s) of support to young talented people affected by war, in order to fulfil their potential through higher education.

It outlines objectives, governing principles, procedures and criteria but also makes materials and clear practical instructions available to any subsequent complementary endeavour. It is based on the successes and failures of a programme established by the Dutch NGO SPARK. As it is part of a living programme, SPARK intends to update this manual annually to reflect the lessons learned during each year of operation.

Who is this manual for?
This manual is intended for practitioners – organisations or individuals – who design and/or implement higher education scholarship programmes for underserved youth. Our aim is to present how guiding principles translate into reality when supported with relevant sets of measures. Also, we intend to provide as many practical examples and formats as possible in order to facilitate and encourage other similar actions. Finally, the manual will serve as an internal knowledge sharing platform for the SPARK’s team and a framework for introducing improvements according to lessons learned and best practice examples identified in the course of implementation.

Mission
To ensure the most reliable, effective and responsive model of awarding and administering higher education scholarships to vulnerable refugee youth is in place, creating employment and inclusion opportunities in both host country and the country of origin.

Objectives
To put forward an innovative and holistic model of awarding higher education scholarships to refugee youth in full compliance with their specific needs and circumstances;

To award scholarships according to precise, consistent and transparent criteria;

To award scholarships in a most cost-effective and result oriented manner to contribute to the future economic reconstruction of Syria;

To support and monitor academic progress of targeted students in a way that allows for an effective introduction of preventive measures, tailor-made assistance and individual approach;

To facilitate sharing, learning and improvements based on best practices tested and evaluated by SPARK’s team.
In this segment we will give an overview of preparation and planning, focusing only on those aspects of SPARK's experience that may apply regardless of particular context. Also, we will underline the main steps of practical preparation, especially those that appear to be essential in establishing the effective function of the programmes.

What needs to be examined first?
The main purpose of examination is to identify major strengths and weaknesses of the labour markets, challenges that youth in MENA face in accessing higher education; as well as to map actors and stakeholders that may influence effectiveness of the proposed intervention. Methods employed range from desk-research; beneficiaries’ surveys including interviews with stakeholders and word of mouth evidence, all designed relying on experienced local staff and associates.

Outcomes of any scholarship programme depend on careful preparation, especially when implementation takes place in different countries and targets beneficiaries of vulnerable backgrounds. Undertakings of such a complex nature require preparation that needs to entail various aspects, both internal (setting up an office; legal aspects of staffing; devising operational procedures) and external (examining stakeholders; adhering to local educational systems; investigating policy context).

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increases his/her chances for (self) employment after graduation. Since it is rarely known when refugees can return to their home country, each scholarship programme design needs to commence by analysing both the labour market opportunities in the host country, as well as the home country. That is why we investigate a broad range of factors matching labour market demand to education supply. Also, we seek to anticipate economic development and employment trends in our effort to make long-term effects. And last but not least, we identify and analyse personal features, individual skills and potentials of beneficiaries and include them into this equation.

A labour market survey is developed with a very concrete purpose to identify economic areas offering the best prospects of hiring. It provides clear and concise evidence-based arguments to support the selection of subject areas and learning modalities. The methodology combines desk research, interviews with stakeholders and expert contributions. It is useful to note that it is rarely necessary to invest resources in conducting an entire analysis from scratch and most likely duplicate on efforts by other credible organisations active in the area. For instance, in our work, we could rely on research studies provided by our partners and peers such as GIZ, the World Bank, UNDP, national economic think tanks, UNESCWA, etc. Once the programme was up and running, we updated and complemented existing findings by commissioning additional targeted researches. Good examples are a study performed by WANA in Jordan (attached here¹) and the Syrian Business Association SAID (also attached²).

We cannot stress hard enough how important it is to ensure the labour market survey equally covers employment and entrepreneurship and particularly recognises inputs coming from the side of employers (SMEs, Chambers of Commerce, employers’ associations etc.). The survey also needs to be practical to best facilitate future employment through achieving coherence with legal and policy frameworks governing the area. Final recommendations should be direct, concrete and listing subject areas (even occupations) and learning modalities with best employment potential in the near future.

¹ a study performed by WANA in Jordan
² a study by the Syrian Business Association SAID

For the first students intake in 2015, SPARK performed an assessment based on existing labour market analyses to determine the relevant subjects in support of re-construction, social integration within host communities as well as access to the labour market. Based on this assessment, the higher education Study Programme fields were narrowed down to primarily Agriculture, Engineering, Business and Entrepreneurship, ICT and Educational management fields. The study of studies that formed the basis of our analysis, together with the bibliography used, can be found here³. Please note that this list is not exhaustive but rather as a general guide to five priority areas. Flexibility to accept students in other study fields should be preserved if the relevance can be proven.

2. Student Needs and Capacities
In our opinion, particular needs of vulnerable groups targeted by scholarship schemes worldwide are frequently disregarded in the process of design. The general tendency is to offer scholarships through “one-approach-fits-all” methodology, assuming that all vulnerable groups require similar types of support. However, that is often not the case. Compared to other vulnerable groups, when observing potential students among Syrian refugees, even the number of qualified beneficiaries is difficult to determine. Also, systematised data on their educational backgrounds, acquired qualifications and interest to advance to higher education are scarce; not to mention their thematic study interests. Particular information on beneficiaries collected by SPARK takes into account all of these aspects by asking information to the applicants on such elements during the application process, and through administering different level and type surveys; adding language command; location; financial constraints; family status; motivation; desirable study areas; etc. SPARK semi-annually completes a Baseline Survey, Perception Survey and Progress Surveys, to best monitor progress of the project and measure its quality. By doing so, the very application database gradually becomes an important source of actionable information that informs programme development choices. Data captured on potential beneficiaries are used to determine best options of matching each student with a particular course; university; study level;

³ Labour Market Study with Bibliography used
and types of assistance. This provides for introducing individual needs to general criteria, in a manner that enables flexible and targeted support. A severe limitation is the overwhelming amount of data generated and the limited extent to which donor funded programmes are flexible. Programming sufficient time to both analyse such data and translating it into actual changes in the programme design are essential.

Our advice is to conduct an in-depth analysis of student-satisfaction data first (as Annex 4). Based on this it is possible to identify country-specific, gender-specific and programme-specific areas of improvement to better inform (annual) planning.

3. Higher Education Institutions Mapping and Matching

a. Mapping

Once we have determined which study programmes will be most relevant to the future prospects of the refugee students, in each of the countries a scan is carried out to map the providers. To ensure quality, it is highly advisable to take into account only nationally accredited providers of higher education. Through research of existing information on the HE system’s features; interviews with stakeholders; and interviews with current students/ professors/ management corresponding study programmes are identified and recommended for enrolment. Given the specific target group, particular attention is placed on language of study (Arabic education was prioritised to ensure inclusiveness as only a maximum of 5% of Syrian refugees was determined to have sufficient language capability to study in English or French); duration of study; admission requirements; location of HE institution; relevance and permanence of qualifications; intensity of curriculum; etc. Special attention was given to price negotiation with the providers (negotiate heavily discounted group enrolments), as well as flexibility in admission criteria (since many refugees lack full paperwork). Based on these preliminary findings, final matching between scholarship programme, subject areas and higher education institutions is carried out - as presented below.

b. Matching

SPARK has established a procedure for screening, contracting, monitoring and evaluating local partner organisations, in this case HE institutions. The process normally takes up two months and it should start at least eight months prior to enrolment deadline. The steps for establishing these partnerships with higher education institutions are formulated within ISO 9001 Partner Selection and Contracting Process (to be found as annex 4). With this process, potential partners’ mission, strategy and guiding principles are screened in order to avoid mismatches with SPARK.

The Call for Higher Education Institutions to submit their Letters of Interest is general and open. It describes basic eligibility criteria and requirements for eligible applicant institutions.

Main selection criteria include the following:

- mandatory accreditation of an university/ higher vocational institution;
- value for money (price per unit);
- Arabic is prioritised as a language of instruction;
- flexibility towards Syrian refugees (especially administrative requirements).

Additional screening criteria include:

- Mission
- Strategy
- Guiding Principles/ Work Approach
- Economic/ Business Potential of Location
- Senior Management Commitment
- Availability of working-level HR/contact points
- Own contribution (land, space, financial resources)
- Internal Financial Control of partner (the internal financial administration of the partner should be screened in case the total amount of funds transferred by SPARK to the organization exceed EUR 25,000 per year)
- Willingness to collaborate with other partners/regions

Partner institutions are screened from the point of view of addressing both labour market and students’ needs. In addition to offering the right kind of majors, additional criteria for selection include: admisibility requirements; language of courses; complementarity to accompanying assistance measures; location of school/
university; practical and logistical features (campus; transport; facilities); availability of academic support; student services (student clubs; Alumni; extracurricular activities); course prices; and course duration. Also, readiness, flexibility and commitment of partner institutions are examined and estimated from the point of view of students’ best interests and the effectiveness of the scholarship programme. Practically, we first assess the main location of the refugees; we then speak to the main public and private universities to see if interest exists and under what conditions, and then negotiate with the best prospects. HEIs are either provided with tuition fees for accepted students or, in some cases, with equipment they need within the amount of the accumulated tuition fees. It is our practice to have a Board of Directors (BoD) to approve the partnership on the basis of the screening phase. Upon approval, SPARK and the partner organisation sign an agreement (sample MoU is attached) stipulating rights and responsibilities of both sides involved, including monitoring, evaluating and reporting requirements. The partnerships are regularly evaluated on an annual basis, and the MoUs are reviewed according to the evaluation results and recommendations.

b1. Administrative matching
From experience it is important that matching between scholarship and university admittance criteria needs to be done in the beginning. The entire application procedure (including application forms) needs to be adjusted to ensure the scholarship application captures the enrolment criteria of the local universities. For each of the countries, it became rapidly evident that the admission criteria to higher education for refugees, as well as the level of flexibility to allow for exceptions, widely differed. So, application procedure in each country has to undergo re-examination and even revision in order to meet the requirements of the local context. This eliminates chances for disappointment later-on when students are awarded a scholarship but then being rejected by universities.

b2. Decisions on quotas – per study course
The quotas are mainly decided by HEIs in consultation with SPARK about study areas of particular interest identified through a Labour Market Survey. In some countries, quotas are developed jointly by SPARK and universities; or in the case of Turkey, jointly with Government and SPARK. In rare cases (such as one university in Lebanon) the offered quota is general (total number of reserved seats for the students who obtained SPARK scholarships) and the final choice of a study major could be individually determined to reflect a student’s wishes and interests.

4. Policies, Stakeholders and Government Relations
In efforts to create influence through higher education, a strict observance of local educational system, policies and governance structure is necessary. That being said, sometimes our intervention creates or initiates policy change, which is where real impact happens.

For example, it was excellent that we had a number of Syrian students allowed to enrol into Gaziantep University to study in the regular Turkish programmes as early as 2014. However, it did not take long for the university rector to realize that the Syrian refugees lacked sufficient Turkish language skills. In response, he initiated a policy change under the Turkish national higher education system that allowed

2 Sample MoUs with HEI
many Turkish programmes to be taught in the Arabic language. This policy change has in the end a more significant impact on the access to education of all Syrians than SPARK financing a limited number of scholarships. However, by prioritising scholarships in Arabic language programmes, we were able to back up the policy change, creating a highly visual impact.

Sometimes, even smaller scale intervention brings about significant results. On many occasions, we have managed to negotiate with universities to alter their intake examination requirements to facilitate refugee enrolment, as some of these students lack access to their former educational documentation due to the conflict. An intervention of this kind appears to be straightforward but it actually facilitated many successful enrolments. This also happened in individual cases; for example when age criteria took into account difficult situations that prevented students from timely enrolment or regular studying periods.

1. Development of Student Information System (SIS)
We cannot overstress the crucial importance that having a functional IT system has on safe, accurate and cost-effective delivery of envisaged results. It is one of the features of SPARK’s programme without which other elements would not work as effectively. Designing and testing of such a system needs to be a priority from the onset. Indeed an effective IT system needs to be operational before the scholarship programme starts. It has to be built in a way that enables effective collection of programme data to allow for structuring according to project design.

SPARK’s Student Information System (SIS) was established in 2016 to facilitate the entire process of student scholarship awards, from application and enrolment to student complaint and monitoring data. Since its establishment, it has been continuously developed and up-dated. Its functions are many and respond to different needs of different users, namely:

• it is the application portal – potential students apply by uploading requested documents;
• it creates and keeps each student’s full academic dossier: application documents, selection information (grading), placement contracts; follows academic progress and status, including participation in extra-curricular activities;
• it is also a way for students to communicate with relevant SPARK staff, as all students have access to the system. Students can file a case/complaint through the SIS, which allows the programme staff to follow up more effectively with their beneficiaries.
• it allows for financial tracking (amount of scholarship and the donor), so it is highly recommended that a financial reporting function is included in the system, enabling increased financial control, transparency and accountability.
• It enables filtering data by various criteria and extracting information for planning, monitoring and reporting purposes (Annex: SIS outlook). Therefore, it is a mandatory requirement to closely align the M&E system with SIS in order to allow programme main indicators to be measured real-time and online. For this purpose, all relevant indicators should be agreed upon and incorporated into SIS even before the programme starts in order to automatize and provide for efficiency and accuracy of reporting.
However, it is unreasonable to expect such a comprehensive software platform to solve all your problems and run smoothly and accurate absorbing all programmatic requirements. As any on-line user oriented interface, it depends on the human factor. Therefore, we have developed a SIS manual elaborating and explaining all steps and procedures in a uniform way. Also, all staff using SIS should receive comprehensive training. Additionally, it is recommended that regular meetings are set up between the ICT department, M&E department and a representative of the programme. During these meetings emerging problems (like the ones listed hereafter) can be discussed and addressed. For speedy implementation of decisions the Programme Manager should also attend to authorize any far-reaching changes. Frequent updates sometimes launch a chain of events affecting data not necessarily in the same categories (our categories are annexed here) and also generate a demand for a change in usual upload practices. These changes should be updated in the SIS manual and clearly communicated to all staff using SIS. We at SPARK have endured a number of challenges with SIS and we still do. Here is some advice to any scholarship provider:

- Align SIS functions to project design (indicators in particular)
- Assign different donors (if your project is co-financed)
- Regularly train your staff on SIS – especially at times of introducing updates
- Keep SIS up-to-date – all data in SIS needs to be almost instantly uploaded – to reduce workload in data processing

2. Preparation of procedures; standards; manuals; documents

When a project implementation team is separated across more than one office (and even across a country), it is essential to make sure all activities and processes are done in the same way and with the same level of attentiveness. Therefore, substantial effort should be made during the inception phase to unify procedures and processes through articulation and dissemination of manuals, rulebooks and staff operational training as well as guidelines establishing a uniform approach at each stage of programme planning and implementation in all countries involved.

A challenge in the programme was to get the national programmes initiated quickly. As each team was locally focussed, in the beginning they were operating sometimes in more isolation than was desirable from a learning point of view. Therefore, a strong regional team was added that now ensures a positive dissemination of lessons learned in one country to the other. The lessons range from the practical, such as using the same templates for student contract or MoUs with universities, to building an integrated online application and student management system. At the end, each template still has to leave space for local adjustments as legislation (and languages) between the countries vary. A major adoption was to quote good practice of universities reducing fees, or governments being extra helpful in order to motivate and inspire their peers across borders to do even better than their counterparts in neighbouring countries.

For the purpose of achieving and maintaining the same quality standards, SPARK’s team has over the years developed comprehensive instructions - the following list is just an overview:

1. Selection Phases – application; interviews;
2. On-line application Form
3. Verification of documents – training and manual
4. SIS placement procedure
5. SIS Instructions – New Academic Year
6. Customer Satisfaction Procedure
7. Manual for each host country on required application documents and verification
8. Guidelines for student communication: standardised FAQ; standardised communication channels; and compliant mechanism
9. Financial procedure linking a monthly stipend to attendance
10. Efficient payment methods
11. ISO Scholarship Matching Procedure
12. Partner Selection and Matching Procedure
13. Data Protection Policy
15. Handbooks - On-line Application Form
16. Verification of documents – training and manual
17. SIS placement procedure
18. SIS Instructions – New Academic Year
19. Customer Satisfaction Procedure
20. Manuals for each host country on required application documents & verification
21. Guidelines for student communication
22. Financial procedures in determining monthly allowance
23. Efficient payment methods
24. ISO Scholarship Matching Procedure
25. Data Protection Policy
Z-drive
One of the simplest tools for information sharing and keeping all offices running under the same operational modalities is the establishment of a joint drive folder (we at SPARK call it Z-drive) containing all relevant project documents, contracts, guidelines, templates, reports, etc. All offices basically conduct the same/similar activities, and we recorded plenty of time saving by replicating templates of documents serving the same purpose (such as training agendas, information letters, press releases, participants lists, evaluation sheets, etc.). It is important to regularly update Z-drive, upload or remove documents and inform others on any changes implemented.

3. Staff training
Once again, unified procedures and operation protocols reduce workload and improve cost-effectiveness and quality of produced outputs. Importantly, understanding why things are done in a certain manner leads to committing and creating a sense of ownership among staff members. This becomes crucial where multi-country staff is involved. SPARK designs and delivers many staff training courses, provided mainly in-house (by other experienced senior staff members). External expertise is also commissioned where required. In any case, up-to-date training materials are always used. Here is a non-exhaustive list of staff training we strongly recommend is undertaken. This is in our opinion a good starting point to any organisation aiming at supporting staff performance at levels desired for efficient and unified delivery of outputs:
- Financial administration and control training
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting training
- External Communications training
- SIS training
- EU project implementation, finance, report writing and compliance
- Programme Specifics
- Quality Assurance (Z drive, ISO guidelines) awareness training
- Psychosocial support and referrals
- Partner capacity assessments (5C model)
- Desired skills among staff would vary from team to team but ideally any scholarship provider should pay attention to include the following capacities in the team: strong management and representation skills, strong programme management skills and expertise in the area of higher education, strong finance skills, strong monitoring and evaluation skills, strong reporting skills, strong communication and donor relations skills and strong interpersonal skills. See Annexed sample staff training materials.23

A prime success driver of the programme has been organisational flexibility. To have a small agile team starting up the programme has helped rapid decision making and an ability to close deals rapidly without being hampered by too many layers of decision making. This shows the added value of an NGO such as SPARK vis-a-vis larger NGOs or state/international bureaucratic organisations. This has to be balanced with the need to ensure compliance with local legislation and donor requirements, and a manageable workload for staff. A small dedicated compliance team operating from the beginning and separate from the implementation team is more effective, ensuring speed whilst having solid checks. As the integrated team previously had to do both at the same time, this caused delays in implementation.

4. Engagement of volunteers
Relying on volunteers to assist in programme implementation has proven to have many benefits in SPARK’s programme. Volunteers help reduce staff workload and they also bring in local knowledge and first hand experiences - especially in higher education system (most of them are students), local employment practices and community routines. Also, their language command (we choose them to be native Arabic speakers) helps to overcome language barriers. Volunteers provide tremendous support to SPARK staff in all the countries. Due to the small teams we employ, volunteers are responsible for support on several of the daily activities and tasks.

Their main tasks include:
- Administrative support;
- Uploading and maintaining data in SIS;
- Student intake: including verification of online applications, phone interviews and facilitation of leadership assessment days; and collecting/scanning and uploading student contracts;
- Student communication: including phone calls and follow-up with underperforming students;
- Student outreach: inviting students for...
upcoming activities and following-up with students who didn’t attend;
• Logistical support during events and activities such as seminars, orientation sessions and training courses.

Our volunteers mostly work on an on-call basis. They are selected through interviews based on interest in and commitment to SPARK’s programme, as well as language skills. The latter is particularly important in the case of Turkey, where all volunteers are native Arabic speakers to ensure strong communication with beneficiaries and to overcome the language barrier between local staff and our students.

Volunteers receive a monthly remuneration based on an hourly/daily fee and travel allowance. The total amount is calculated based on timesheets, which are signed by the responsible project coordinators who supervise them. The amount and structure of the fees are determined per country and subject to local laws. For the same reason contracts are also drafted locally and reviewed by lawyers within the countries as regulations differ significantly. The standard contracts contain clauses of rights, regulations, tasks and responsibilities; but also on safety, insurance, health and confidentiality. (Annex. Standard contract™)

The volunteers are trained by local staff on the key components of the programme and the usage of the SIS system, when asked to assist on a specific activity they receive a briefing detailing what is expected of them during the day. We have experienced that most volunteers are very committed, with many of them continuing to work for SPARK for more than a year, some have even been involved in the programme since it started.

4.3 Visibility and publicity

Adequate time publicising the opportunity to continue schooling is very important for achieving a sizeable turnout of applicants. When working with vulnerable target audience such as ours even more time and effort is required in order to make sure that the right message reaches a substantial number of potential users.

Therefore we have developed various means of reaching out to as many beneficiaries as feasible. Please note that this section only contains information on communicating the opportunity and that various channels of exchanging information between supported students and scholarship providers is presented in sections to follow.

Outreach activities should start 6 months prior to enrolment, and last for at least 2 months.

Web platform
An on-line platform should be established at the onset of the programme. It should serve as a main communication platform gathering and intersecting all other tools for exchanging information during programme. In our case, it is spark-syria.eu where all relevant information on the programme, its current activities and partners may be found. It also provides useful information, tutorials and explains procedures for potential applicants. When the website was reopened in spring 2016, it registered more than 19,000 applications for the 2016/17 intake. The primary language of the website is Arabic (as this is the mother tongue of the applicants), alongside an English version.

Publication of Call(s)
The selection and placement procedure starts with a publication of a call, containing specific details on scholarship purpose, target group(s), criteria and deadlines (see attached Call Publication Template 25). Also, it announces dedicated areas and information sessions but also information contact points (see also Press release template attached 26).

Social media announcements
Building an on-line community is a complementary way of distributing the Call through as many channels as possible. It normally starts with already identified

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24 Standard Contract for Volunteers
25 Call Publication Template
26 Press release template
partners, other scholarship providers, CSOs, HEIs, student groups, media; nowadays it relies on generations of previous scholarship applicants/recipient who share information to their peers or other community members.

**Off-line promotion**

It may be considered unexpected, but in our experience, promotion on the ground has proven to be even more important than online! This is probably one of the most valuable practical communication advices any provider should have in mind when setting-up a scholarship programme. Why is that?

Firstly, online promotion risks that information gets mostly concentrated in certain online communities, thus appearing to favour certain communities or entire geographic areas. Also, it may create a substantial advantage for the better off refugees that not only have better access to hardware but to Internet connectivity as well. Secondly, off-line communication entails “real people exchange”, tangible visuals, and a chance to instantly clarify information and alleviate unsubstantiated concerns. With this target group, face-to-face contact is more reassuring and it increases their much-needed confidence necessary for applying. Therefore, significant efforts are invested in order to reach the most vulnerable refugee population (often lacking Internet access and/or timely information). In our experience, the best way to do this is to conduct a traditional promotional campaign and information sessions taking place in camps, mosques and neighbourhoods, but also in HE institutions. In this process it was essential to build a strong network of local organisations engaged as communicators (annexed as List of local promotion partners per county 27). These networks are constantly being expanded.

CSOs, universities, higher vocational schools as well as existing scholarship holders are supported to conduct part of the campaign and are provided with promotional materials (flyers; posters; off-line application with instructions; examples of communication messages; etc. Annexed here as Campaign sample materials 28).

**Help-desks**

Helpdesks are physically established in each country, in SPARK’s offices or at universities. SPARK trains its staff and volunteers to provide helpdesk services and information under the same procedures and protocols. Besides the traditional guidance on how to submit a valid application, they are becoming increasingly involved in student counselling and relations. Thus, they are playing a key role in monitoring student attendance and preventing drop-out. A regional coordination hub is set up to coordinate a central FAQ overview to ensure unified messaging. This hub also analyses all student complaints and integrates them into reports as well as white papers for further dissemination.

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27 List of local promotion partners per county
28 Campaign sample materials
4.4 Selection and placement procedure

In this section we will describe details of the selection process, from basic criteria to final placements. In addition to explaining the sequence of steps, we will also focus on time and resources necessary to perform tasks in an efficient and standardised way.

SPARK has designed a comprehensive 4-phase selection process respecting criteria relevant for its target group. It combines checking administrative eligibility, assessing overall applicant’s competences and valuing leadership and entrepreneurship abilities. Given the background of our beneficiaries, we try to limit the influence of the fact that they have been relocated under extreme circumstances in assessing their potential to successfully continue education.

The selection process takes up to 6 months (from the announcement, collecting application, verification and final placement); so make sure to commence this process at least 6 months before the enrolment deadline.

Selection criteria
The selection criteria have been developed in consistence to our overall aim: to support access to education and employment of young people who underwent extremely stressful relocation, loosing almost any chance to continue their schooling without systematic assistance. Therefore, our selection criteria are unique and not mainly relying on high school marks and knowledge testing. However, in order to secure admission, we also had to be realistic in defining these criteria and enlist fulfillment of (mainly administrative) requirements posed by the higher education institutions. Having all of the above in mind, we suggest the following selection criteria to assess applications:

Eligibility criteria
- Applicant should have successfully completed secondary education and is not above 24 years old by the time of applying for the scholarship (exceptions have been introduced).
- Applicants should have an Equivalent Certificate issued by the Ministry of (Higher) Education of the current country of residence.
- The applicant should be Syrian or Palestinian and a holder of a valid ID Card or valid Passport or a temporary governmental protection ID/ Residency Permit or completed registration with UNHCR as a documented refugee. Also, the scholarship programme admits 30% of the host community students, according to agreements with governments. This is not feasible in all cases (for instance in KR-I), so some exceptions apply depending on country context.
- Applicant should apply for SPARK scholarships available only in their current country of residence. This has created substantial debate as it excluded other refugees and IDPS living in the same dire circumstances in the same locations. Hence in Iraq IDPs were admitted later into the programme upon consultation with the donors.
- Applicant does not have sufficient financial means to pursue higher education.
- Applicant has not been approved for any type of resettlement, either the UNHCR or any other resettlement organization. This criterion has been introduced to help prevent a scholarship recipient abandoning their scholarship/ study programme when he/she is resettled.

Selection Criteria
1. Motivation
The applicant has to demonstrate a solid link between his/her educational background and the selected course and
be motivated to actively engage within the community. It is graded from 0 to 30 points, according to Grading matrix Motivation.29

2. Dependents/financial situation
Financial situation is graded from 0 – 30 points according to Grading Matrix Financial Situation and Special Needs.30

3. Special needs
Special needs are graded from 0-10 points according to Grading Matrix Financial Situation and Special Needs.

4. Academic profile: average school grades (from 0 to 30 points)

Vulnerability Criteria
1. Syrian/ Palestinian Refugee
2. Living at a camp
3. Have disability/ chronic disease/ special needs
4. % for the disabled and orphans
5. 50% gender balance
6. his/her parents are divorced/ widowed/ deceased/ or detained
7. Having children
8. Having siblings younger than 6 years old
All criteria are accompanied with a precise number of scoring points, elaborated in Grading Matrix (Annex) 31.

Phase 1. On-line Application
In the first stage of the selection process, applicants are requested to fill in an online application form32. Due to the importance of selecting candidates based on specific eligibility criteria, the application stage is given a weight of 100 points. This is the first phase of elimination for candidates. Applicants must meet the basic eligibility requirements before they can move into the second phase. The application form also contains a short section aiming to assess potential leadership skills. However, it must be noted that it is extremely difficult to assess both existing leadership skills and leadership potential from a written application. Hence the need for the leadership assessment camp, which allows for candidates to be observed taking part in various team activities to evaluate their leadership potential in more depth.

For applicants, the on-line application form creates the first impression and awareness of the type of scholarship programme they are applying for. Careful consideration and completion of the online application is an integral part of the journey towards understanding and ownership of the programme for successful candidates. All criteria are graded automatically, according to grading matrix (Attached).

Application data collection and administration
The application process has been thoroughly described in the Selection Handbook (Attached). What is important to note, is that applicants need to be provided with clear guidance on how to apply.

For instance, SIS shows that many applicants fail to provide mandatory information, such as the names of their parents. Therefore, we recommended to add the option ‘Not willing to provide this information’ in SIS. When this is selected a pop up message shows, informing the applicant that this will influence their application. The benefit of having this option is that staff do not have to spend time in seeking additional information from applicants and that applicants understand that filling in the application form fields is mandatory.

The system provides for automatic checks where possible (for instance, eligible countries of origin). However, there are elements of application process that require very precise individual checks performed by staff strictly abiding to detailed instructions (for instance, when establishing validity of ID cards or equivalence of provided certificates).

The application process takes up to 4 months; on-line application and verification usually take 2 months; while student selection needs 2 months, taking place 3-1 month before the actual commencement of the study year.

The application data processing goes through the following phases:

1. Data verification (age; country of residence; status; nationality)
   Whenever the applicant is not eligible for one of these criteria, his final status will be automatically changed to ‘Not Eligible’. Candidates that are automatically found non-eligible are not verified.

2. Documents verification
   It includes confirming that the following documents are valid and respond to eligibility criteria: ID card, High school diploma, Equivalent certificate and...
Language certificate (IELTS/TOEFL/TOMER).
When application passes through all these steps it is marked as ‘Eligible’ or ‘Needs Attention’ (This Status has been activated in case any of information needing attention and clarification by supervisors.)

3. Sending emails
Status information emails are sent automatically with predefined text messages depending on the type of information communicated. Standard Emails to applicants are annexed here.

Phase 2 - Phone interviews
The Phone Interviews was the standard element in the selection process until the 2018/19 intake. Now it has been abandoned in some countries due to being costly and has been successfully incorporated in face-to-face interviews during LADs (as explained further). In countries where it still takes place, phone interviews results make up for 20 points of the total score and all applicants take it.

The interview last for about 20 minutes, and is semi structured. The same grading matrix is used by all interviewers (attached here34). All interviewers complete Training of Trainers in the course of preparation (Sample training agenda is attached35). During this training, they learn about the structure of the interview, practice with the grading matrix, and are made aware of the basic principles of transparency and equal treatment. Also, they are trained in how to communicate objectives and an outline of the scholarship programme. It is extremely important to share and monitor whether the same standards and criteria have been observed by all interviewers. In SPARK’s case, a Handbook on Interviews has been developed regulating that uniformed procedures are followed with no exception. Moreover, the coordinator is present during all the interviews. A certain percentage of the recorded interviews are randomly monitored and actions are taken in cases where scores significantly differ.

Similar to other selection phases, phone interviews also play an important role in assessing the level of alignment of the applicant with the overall objectives of the scholarship programme. The interview is an opportunity to discuss the general requirements and expectations of the programme with the applicant. This is also something interviewers need to be carefully instructed about during training.

The interview is divided into six sections, as listed in the attached Interview Questions.

Phase 3. Leadership Assessment Days (LADs)
The leadership assessment days constitute the second phase of the selection process, take up 30 scoring points and constitute an extremely important component of the overall selection process.

After completing an online application form successful applicants will be invited to go through to the next stage of the selection process. As a rule of thumb, not more than 50% of students who participate in the leadership assessment days will be selected to receive scholarships, to ensure resources are allocated to the best performers.

NOTE
The leadership assessment is designed to assess students’ potential leadership skills by determining if they have the values, qualities and attributes needed to become positive, inspirational economic and civic leaders. It is not designed to assess if they already have the leadership skills the programme is committed to delivering to them.
The leadership assessment ensures that successful students, on entry into the scholarship programme are aware from the onset of the type of programme in which they will be involved. The assessment days essentially offer the first taste of the type of programme they are applying for. The leadership assessment has been designed to take all participants through a series of various Individual and group activities. Each section has distinct objectives, designed to allow evaluators to observe and assess participants on specific behavioural attributes. The entire process with elaborate instructions has been captured in a LAD Toolkit designed by SPARK. Evaluators will be observing the participants and allocating marks on specific attributes relevant to each section.

The Leadership assessment is broken into five sections (Lessons Plan is attached *):
1. Icebreaker
2. Individual exercise
3. Group activity - community problem

Evaluators will only be observing students and allocating marks during sections three and four. The other sections are designed to create a positive atmosphere, help participants relax and act naturally, and encourage shy or more introverted participants to fully participate. They generate an opportunity for candidates to reflect and take something positive away from the experience, regardless of being successful or not.

What are we looking for?
Our vision, from the leadership & development component of the scholarship programme is, “To provide students with the skills, knowledge and practical experience needed to become self-advocates, inspirational civic leaders and positive global citizens of the future who can guide their families and communities towards cohesion and prosperity.” An individual who, essentially:

- Displays altruistic qualities;
- Acts in the broader interests of the community (in any position they hold, including family, business, community);
- Aspires to transform their local communities into better places for all community members;
- Makes decisions that benefit present and future community members;
- Harnesses and engages the skills of the whole community;
- Motivates and engages others in their society;
- Looks for the common good.

How do we assess these qualities?
The best way to assess the above attributes and qualities is to design scenarios and activities that will enable evaluators to observe candidates’ behaviour, as behaviour is in part a reflection of their character. Evaluators will be looking for various ways in which a participant displays the possession of each of these qualities. Conversely, by understanding what we are not looking for, evaluators will also be aware of how they should allocate marks and grade candidates. The Assessment Template for Scoring carefully guides the entire grading process.

NOTE that candidates are most likely to have suffered severe trauma and are currently living withdrawn or hesitant to take part in activities at the beginning of the camp. However, the facilitators will be aware of this and, during the icebreaker, are responsible for making the participants feel comfortable. They will also continue to encourage participants to ‘be themselves’ throughout the camp.

Phase 4. Entrepreneurship Attitude Test (EAT)
The Entrepreneurship Attitude Test has been made part of LADs. It comprises over...
40 different types of question and self-evaluation statements divided into 6 separate sections (sample form is enclosed\(^\text{42}\)) with overall maximum score of 20 points. It is a standardised 40-minute test assessing motivation of applicants to start business of their own, whether there is an inclination towards entrepreneurship and to what extent this inclination is supported by an entrepreneurial mind-set. Its score is then added to the final score. Scoring is guided by the Grading matrix\(^\text{43}\), as attached.

**Final scores**

Final scores are calculated automatically by adding overall applications score, leadership assessment score and entrepreneurship attitude test score. The maximum total number of points is 150 (or 170 where phone interviews are still in place).

**Placement**

Once the selection process within SPARK is done, the applicants are graded against their overall scores. This is the stage where the number of points per candidate has to be matched with particular educational profile/

study major offered by partner institutions and universities. The placement process needs to happen at least 1 month prior to beginning of the school year. The potential students (total available seats in partner institutions) are identified according to highest scores, with a number of them being kept on a reserve list.

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Please note that all scorers above a predefined threshold should be kept on a reserve list. In some cases, HEIs may expand quotas for various reasons resulting in more students being admitted against a very steep deadline, and you need to react by offering the right candidates in order not to miss such valuable opportunities.

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The first step in matching a student to a major is to identify 10% of disability and orphaned candidates and then the equal representation (50:50) of female and male is respected. In the next stage, the quotas per study major provided by universities are respected and matched to the highest scoring students who identified the same major in their wish list. In addition to being assessed according to their abilities and background, applicants have a chance to identify fields/study majors of interest. The wish-list contains 3 study majors offered by partner universities as part of SPARK’s programme. The scholarship applicants indicate the level of course - BA, VET or short-cycle - together with the course major and host-university in the application form. These data are matched with pre-defined HEI quotas per major.

It has been observed that in most cases student’s wishes fit into determined quotas per university and major. Once selected for scholarship, students enter the university enrolment procedure.

It is at this stage that sometimes they get rejected. As a rule, it happens due to administrative reasons (incorrect or invalid documents and certificates or students who have already applied for admission to the same university) but sometimes universities are not satisfied with the correlation between a student’s educational background and a desired university major.

In all of these cases, it is SPARK’s practice to re-initiate the placement procedure by eliminating the problem by selecting a different study major, a different university or different study level and course duration. Challenges are evident when this shift requires travelling to another city and/or having to attend a different course (for instance, students tend to favour BA courses to other types of studies).

4. Placement/contracts with students

Students sign placement contracts as annexed. The procedure is completed by an Award Ceremony to be organised in the last month before the schools year starts.
4.5 Student Services & Affairs

Provision of timely and adequate support to students in the course of their studies is important in achieving the main outcome of a scholarship programme. In this segment we will focus on presenting the most functional support services SPARK has developed over years. Also, we will discuss the best methods of delivery of such services, including efficient monitoring and improving within available time and resources.

The student services and affairs component of SPARK’s programme entails a range of measures and activities facilitating student enrolment, academic performance and integration. This programme component becomes additionally valuable when having in mind the vulnerability and diversity of the target group. Student affairs in such cases should focus not only on ensuring that students are fully supported during their studies; but that universities and other partner institutions reinforce capacities to deliver well-developed support programmes and to provide counselling. To ensure access to needed support for all the students, capacity building of partners and SPARK staff in regard to topics related to student affairs has become a regular practice. The main aim of this programme component is to alleviate some of the primary challenges vulnerable students face, most notably, different educational backgrounds, lack of legal documentation, language barriers and traumatic experiences potentially affecting academic performance.

Over time, the student services have been slightly restructured, within the ‘on-going student support’ component. A few new indicators have been added to better reflect the amount of contact between the beneficiaries and SPARK. Among others, dissemination of information on programme activities and relevant academic information has been intensified. To this end we have started implementing quarterly orientation sessions in all countries. During these sessions students are informed about upcoming activities and if necessary changes in their scholarship. 

Student services are provided to enhance student wellbeing and decrease the chance of drop-outs by addressing factors which could affect student performance. In order to effectively design student service packages within any scholarship programme, active cooperation with host HEIs needs to be envisaged and regulated. In the case of SPARK’s programme, MoUs with partner institutions stipulate regular sharing of transcripts of grades and attendance sheets (as annexed 45). It is very important that MoUs stipulate the timely obtaining of academic records as mandatory, since it is of the utmost importance to creating effective support measures in each individual case. Data obtained from HEI are subsequently entered into SIS in order to monitor and report on student performance. In addition, underperforming students are directly contacted in order for the right measures to be identified and applied.

The exact content of student services is designed in line with a Baseline Survey investigating student expectations and needs and additionally adapted following the semi-annual Progress Surveys. For each Programme activity a satisfaction survey is developed and administered providing valuable inputs to programme quality, development and reporting. For instance, language support and summer courses have been introduced as a direct response to identified student needs. In the figure below you can see how student services and affairs are structured within SPARK’s model: Figure 2: 45 Sample MoU

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**Academic Advising**

- **SPARK**:
  - Academic advising incorporated in orientation sessions & SIS questions.
  - Tracking SIS & End of semester check-ins.
- **HEIs**:
  - General student counselling, student support desk.
  - B-annual reporting to SPARK.
- **External experts**:
  - Face-to-face meetings.

**Academic Information**

- **SPARK**:
  - Orientation sessions, speaker events & phone and SIS questions.
- **HEIs**:
  - General student counselling, student support desk.
Different types of student services may be classified as follows:

1. On-going student support
   Student counselling
   In order to support students in achieving their maximum potential and mitigate potential drop-outs, SPARK staff and partners maintain regular and close contact with students and provide on-going support. In addition to clear and strong communication channels, support includes scholarship and academic related orientation and Q&A sessions. Furthermore external factors that may influence student performance, such as legal difficulties, are mitigated by providing access to legal services, via a referral system.

Academic advising
   Regular orientation sessions are organized quarterly to provide students with up to date scholarship and academic related information as well as resolve particular student issues. During these sessions students are encouraged to reach out to SPARK staff and academic counsellors working in their respective institutes for academic advice or questions. The initial orientation session (held in the beginning of each study year) focuses on provision of information on study programmes, institutional processes, policies & requirements. Orientation sessions at the beginning of each study year are held to ensure students know what is expected from them and can plan their involvement accordingly.

   Underperforming students are followed-up by SPARK staff at the end of each semester; students in need of additional attention in this regard will be identified based on several benchmarks such as a low GPA, number of credits obtained or classes dropped. The underperforming students will be offered various types of assistance, including complementary and remedial courses.

   In Lebanon we developed a SpotCheck Survey to find out why attendance rates were dropping. It has become a practice in order to collect more information on sometimes very practical reasons for students to attend or not to attend complementary of remedial courses offered. Ways to increase students’ interest and attendance came out from analyses of data collected through this survey.

   In addition to knowledge courses, students have highlighted the need for acquiring basic skills and competences such as: study techniques, academic writing, presentation skills, and time management. In response, we have made acquiring of these skills as part of their learning, through different activities.

   Complementary education courses
   The majority of students come from different educational backgrounds and systems which may cause academic challenges and hamper their study progress. Therefore students will be supported with complementary education courses:
   • Language support courses (English, Turkish & Kurdish);
   • Remedial courses;
   • Summer courses.

Complementary education courses are provided based on student needs and courses available within the country context. Remedial courses provide additional support to underperforming students or for prospective students to fulfil the requirements for enrolment. Interest in these courses has never declined with several university programmes including summer, remedial and to some extent English courses in their curricula. By including students in these existing programmes we have been able to make more effective use of resources and when necessary, we have supplemented these existing services with additional educational support courses. For example in Lebanon and Jordan summer courses are credit bearing that will allow students to rectify any delays in study progress during the summer.

Summer Courses Lebanon and Jordan
   Summer Courses in Lebanon and Jordan are a standard component of higher educational curricula and are considered as regular semester (one of the three annual semesters) offered to all the students. The summer semester is actually an excellent opportunity for students to take the exams and speed-up their academic progress or to re-take courses and exams they failed over the year. In both instances, summer semesters are valuable to vulnerable students who struggle with regular attendance or

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46 Orientation and Q&A Sessions materials

47 SpotCheck Survey
complexity of lessons and need to expand their knowledge and complement academic records. The learning outcomes of the summer semester are valued and credited with no distinction to other semesters’ outcomes. The summer course requirements have been described in our guide Organising a Summer Course 48.

In addition, SPARK has opened various channels for direct communication between students and designated staff. These channels are diversified to facilitate different students’ inquiries and enable access to information at any time and any particular situation. In addition, precise protocols have been developed for processing and addressing different types of student inquiries.

**Student communication channels**
Availability of timely information has proven to be one of the most important features of a successful scholarship model. Vulnerable students are not always in a position to use the same communication channels as others, or in some cases they prefer one way of communicating to another. Also, SPARK often needs to conduct quick surveys or launch a campaign in order to communicate various aspects of its programme (from educational content to logistics). Effective communication becomes essential for obtaining quality and satisfactory responses that guide implementation of activities. Therefore, the following communication channels have been developed:
- SIS
- Phone
- Email
- Whattsapp & Facebook groups
- FAQ
- Student representative meetings & student associations
- Quarterly orientation sessions
- Q&A during activities

**Online communication channels**

**SIS**
The student information system (SIS) has multiple functions, in addition to facilitating scholarship applications and gathering student data, the system also provides students with the opportunity to ask questions and file complaints in direct communication with SPARK staff. All students have been granted access and received login and information on how to use the platform. Through their personal profiles students can ask questions and immediately direct those questions to a specific staff member.

Furthermore, SPARK staff will log incoming requests (received by phone or email) in the SIS system, noting the type of questions posed (academic, scholarship, family etc.) as well as the type of support provided and follow-up actions planned, also indicating the current status of the action (follow-up or resolved). Additionally, also indicating the responsible staff member who dealt with the issue. All actions will be added in SIS, in order to immediately link outstanding issues and questions to specific student profiles. Finally this will help to provide an overview of types of issues dealt with by SPARK staff as well as the time spent by SPARK staff on individual student support, and will allow us to track which students are currently in need of additional support.

Since we consistently started tracking student cases follow-up in SIS at the end of 2017 we have received and tracked 730 cases in SIS. Cases are categorized and labelled based on the most prominent questions and issues faced by students (a.o. health, family, academic, stipends, etc.) Cases can be received through all communication channels described in this overview, however students are encouraged to use either SIS or email, as a written request can easily be followed-up by different staff members. Tracking cases in SIS was originally implemented in Lebanon at the end of 2017, and was then rolled out in other countries.

**Regular phone contact**
The majority of SPARK offices have specific phone numbers which students can call during office hours to ask questions or discuss issues. Additionally SPARK’s staff calls underperforming students at the end of the semester to discuss the reasons for their underperformance and potential steps or support required to address this. When students call to ask questions they are also requested to send an email to the office specific inbox, in order to facilitate better follow-up by the entire team instead of only the staff member who answered the phone. Finally the office phones are being used to invite students for activities either through calls or text messages. At particularly intensive periods (such as
application or enrolment deadlines), staff receives so many phone-calls that they have to enlist the assistance of volunteers. Note: The anticipated peaks of phone-call inquiries have to be addressed by the timely selection, engagement and training of volunteers.

Office email
All SPARK offices have country specific office email addresses (Lebanon@SPARK, Turkey@SPARK, etc.) which students can use to contact staff with questions or outstanding issues. The country email inboxes are the main channel for collecting and addressing ad hoc student questions and requests. Students who contact the office by phone are also referred to the email. All staff members in the offices have access to these boxes, while specific staff members are assigned to address particular requests related to different programme segments. The email addresses are also being used to invite students for activities (in addition to calling them) and to send them links for surveys to evaluate activities.

Whatsapp & Facebook groups
In some of the countries students are connected to each other and SPARK staff members through WhatsApp (Lebanon, KR-I, Jordan) and Facebook groups (Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey), allowing them to directly pose questions to each other and SPARK staff. Additionally these platforms are being used to submit student surveys, to get feedback and input on activities as well as notify students on relevant upcoming activities or academic/scholarship related information.

FAQ
In addition to the country specific scholarship information general scholarship related information can be found on the SPARK website, for these purposes a FAQ covering the most common topics and questions regarding the scholarship, requirements and support services, is currently being developed and contextualised by the different country teams.

Complaints procedure
A complaint mechanism should be available to allow the applicants and existing scholarship students to enter a complaint or suggestion for improvement of functioning. It has been elaborated and standardised in Complaints Procedure providing thorough procedural instruction and definitions.

The goal of the complaint procedure is:
1. To increase the overall service level provided to the client.
2. To encourage continuous improvement at SPARK.
3. To maintain a good reputation among our clients.
4. To gain insight into the type and severity of the complaints and thereby to enhance the overall level of quality provided by SPARK.

A complaint is viewed in SPARK as valuable information about how activities can be improved in order to meet the wishes of the client:
- The client is motivated to inform SPARK about its activities.
- The client trusts SPARK that the complaint will be dealt with appropriately and that measures will be taken in order to improve the service provided by SPARK.
- The client knows something that SPARK does not know; something has gone wrong.

Therefore it is of the utmost importance that the complaint is dealt with unambiguously, according to the prescribed rules, by the responsible SPARK staff member.

At the outset of the programme, it has proven to be hard to deal with all complaints. Due to implementation overload, offices often reacted late to complaints, leading some complainants to reach our directly to SPARK BoD or donors. Therefore, it is very important to predict this mechanism and make clear instructions on how to handle different information gained through complaints.

However, currently we are in the process of de-centralizing this procedure by having each country office receiving and responding to complaints through SIS. Additionally and as mentioned above, each country office will communicate a QA document with students, providing more information to questions that students most frequently raise in their complaints. This de-centralisation is expected to promote efficiency in handling complaints and prevent delays in responses. Also, the de-centralisation is expected to create more awareness amongst our students on how they can express their complaints.
The ISO 9001 Complaints Handling procedure as mentioned in this document will stipulate such de-centralisation, but also place complaints handling controls and connect the handling of complaints with programmatic/organisational learning.

SPARK is receiving complaints from its scholarship recipients, through the following three channels:

- Through SIS, where the scholarship recipients can file a complaint/case;
- Through local offices’ emails, through which scholarship recipients send an email with their complaint;
- Through the general spark@spark-online.org inbox, through which scholarship recipients send an email with their complaint.

The responsibility of handling complaints is with the programme’s country managers who delegate to designated programme officers the handling of their in-country complaints. A Quality Assurance Expert closely monitors the entire process. Additionally, SPARK is currently publishing country-specific FAQ documents, which provide information to scholarship recipients in key areas and issues. These areas and issues have been identified through analysis of complaints by scholarship recipients.

Through the implementation of our ISO 9001 Complaints Handling process we identified that the vast majority of complaints by our students refer to their monthly allowances and to how they can receive information on their scholarships. Given these, we have implemented the following:

- The SIS functions have been upgraded in order to enable a more robust management of the distribution of monthly allowances to our students;
- The SIS functions have been upgraded in order to allow a more efficient handling of student’s cases and complaints;
- A per-country QA document will be communicated shortly to each country’s students, which provides answers to the most frequently asked questions/complaints.

Dealing with complaints locally
In addition to the centrally organized complaint procedure an important part of the local student services is dealing with complaints and day-to-day student requests. Therefore we are currently in the process of developing contextualized FAQs and a local policy for dealing with complaints. This intervention is necessary since the majority of complaints are received locally through the various country email addresses and online platforms. For the most part these complaints are small and directly related to organizational topics, such as the payment of stipends, incorrect data on SIS etc. The general policy will still be implemented and followed, in order to safeguard privacy and impartial follow-up.

Offline (face-to-face) communication channels

Student representative meetings & students associations
Countries with a large number of scholarship students (Lebanon + Turkey) have appointed student representatives. These representatives have been selected through student elections and include both male and female representatives from different majors. SPARK members meet with the representatives on a monthly basis to discuss re-occurring and more structural issues faced by students. These representatives have been selected through student elections and include both male and female representatives from different majors. SPARK members meet with the representatives on a monthly basis to discuss re-occurring and more structural issues faced by students. Additionally SPARK works with student associations and organizations in regard to outreach and the promotion of activities.

Q&A during activities and orientation sessions
During all SPARK activities a Q&A moment is organized, to give students an additional opportunity to ask questions to SPARK staff, questions can be related to the activity they attended as well as more general. Additionally SPARK is always well represented during activities by both staff and volunteers to talk to students and provide information when necessary.

2. Psycho-Social Support and well-being
In cases when scholarships are provided to...
vulnerable beneficiaries, it is fair to anticipate that a significant number of scholarship recipients do require expert attention in the domain of psycho-social support. Thus we advise setting-up a strong referral system in which students in need of such support will have access to professional quality services. As PSS related are often seen as sensitive and in many cases even taboo, students need to become more aware of psychosocial indicators and are encouraged to reach out to professional services when needed. This is best done through PSS awareness training or similar informative sessions (depending on the sensitivity of target group). In the case of SPARK’s programme, a functional assessment survey has been developed to assess student well-being, and piloted in OPT before implementation in other countries (ANNEX PSS Assessment 51). The survey is anonymous and solely aims to gather information on psycho-social well-being among our students. Integrally, workshops on stress management and coping mechanisms will be implemented in all countries. During workshops, contact information will also be provided in case students want to reach out for additional support, either through SPARK or the HEIs.

Referrals
As a rule, scholarship programme organisers do not have PSS experts within their teams. However, necessary support activities often require expert support, particularly the PSS and legal components. This is also true for SPARK, so we have developed a referral system for legal and PSS cases, based on external expert support but also on enhancing capacities of local organisations. Partners and organisations for referral are selected locally to support on these two components while requests are being tracked in SIS to give an indication of the number of students in need of this type of support. To be able to better identify needs, both SPARK staff and HEI local points have received expert PSS training (Agenda is attached 52). Also, a PSS satisfaction survey has been developed and administered with the purpose to closely monitor this complex feature of our programme.

3. Student affairs capacity building to universities
In order to be able to respond to student needs, capacities of all actors involved have to be aligned with overall guiding principles and unified procedures. Therefore, it is recommended to check the capacities of local partners and recommend improvements (additional training, staffing and knowledge sharing) where relevant. For this purpose, SPARK has developed a 5C model (Annexed 53) according to which capacities of partners are assessed and enhanced.

In a nutshell, local CSO partners, as well as university and higher vocational institution partners will be assessed against a baseline presented at the outset of the programme along the lines of the “5 Capabilities” (5C) framework for assessing the organisational capacity of civil society organisations.

The 5C model is an assessment tool, however the bigger goal resulting from it is to develop tailor made capacity building activities for each partner involved. The main focus has been on Higher Education partners although we are also including local CSOs.

According to our standard practice, a satisfaction survey is conducted amongst both local partners (CSOs and Universities) as well as beneficiaries twice a year. The outcomes of the Survey are used for improving the provided services and determining the quality of the local partners. Several modules of training enable local partners to run their organizations more effectively, also financially, apply results based management, build networks, improve their communication and develop their primary processes that focus on supporting and facilitating studies, and later employment.

Building the capacity of partners is an integral part of the student service package since the local points at the HEIs are in constant contact with students, additionally many HEIs are already providing a wide range of services to their students. Building and strengthening these structures is not only essential for the support of students within this programme but also a sustainable way of ensuring student support beyond the scope of the programme. Furthermore the 5C approach allows us to track to what extent partner institutions have increased their capacity during the
programme’s implementation. This also means that we can integrate clear plans of what we expect our partners to deliver in contract renewal negotiations, as well as enforcing stronger consequences when partners are not living up to our standards.

4. Allowances
Additional and complementary way of supporting students is through provision of allowances (monthly amounts covering expenses such as public transport, food or study materials). Obviously financial stipends are essential for refugees to be able to study. Most of them actually work full and part time to provide not only for themselves but for their extended families and a financial stipend alleviates the financial pressure (although students often continue part-time working to provide for the wider family). In setting the amount of the monthly stipend SPARK benchmarked against other providers, ran a survey amongst refugee students and spoke to UNHCR officials dealing with cash and food assistance to refugee communities in the countries. This led to a decision to provide an amount of approximately 167 euro a month per student. Continuous discussion surrounds this amount as it is higher than some other providers but lower than others. Any scholarship provider should carefully examine the amount paid to students and find a delicate balance, since the total amount spent directly affects the number of beneficiaries supported.

In the case of Turkey, inflation of the currency led to a situation where at the beginning of the programme the SPARK monthly stipend was lower comparing to several other large providers, whilst it actually became higher in 2018. There was a discussion internally whether to diversify the amount per country as based on purchasing power, but it was decided to retain one average amount regionally to avoid very complex calculations that with the changing exchange rates in all countries, would also create very complex accounting work.

In addition to monthly stipends, students are provided with transport allowances, or in some countries, transport has been jointly organised. This has proved to be essential in some cases as transport obstacles can greatly influence overall class attendance.

NOTE
Determining which manner of allowance transfer is most cost effective and efficient requires serious investigation and knowledge of the local banking market. At the inception of the programme, in several countries SPARK provided allowances in cash. This was quickly abandoned as it created a risk for staff (violent theft for example) and a much higher risk with fraud than digital transfers. Research was conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and KR-Iraq that found that not all digital banking services are available to refugees. In Turkey, where refugees can open a bank account, we opted for the cost efficient route of a monthly bank transfer. In Lebanon, we were able to work under an agreement UNHCR had concluded with a bank for credit cards, but abandoned this when a much more cost efficient deal with Lebanon post materialised that we still use. In Jordan, a recent mobile phone innovation, enabling mobile phone e-wallets, was chosen as a fast and cost-efficient disbursing method, while in KR-I the option of credit cards was followed. In the end, important factors affecting a final choice of payment was that it had to be digital (hence easily traceable with a lower fraud and heist risk) combined with low transaction cost, both in terms of cost per payment to the bank and in human resources needed to administer the system.

5. Drop outs and Replacements
No matter how well designed, any scholarship programme must recognise that a percentage of enrolled students will, for a variety of reasons, discontinue their studies before graduation. This percentage grows in relation to the vulnerability of students, complexity of learning environment and the inflexibility of legal and administrative requirements. From SPARK’s experience and data captured in the SIS system, the main reasons for student drop-out in the past year were: failing to meet academic requirements, financial pressure, resettlement and a change in the student’s family situation (marriage/ pregnancy). Student services are put in place to support students in their studies and with any personal difficulties they might encounter, all aiming at retaining students in the programme. It all helped in maintaining the overall drop-out rate at less than 10%.
Drop-outs have been particularly high in Lebanon due to the lack of a legal status for Syrians. Since 2015 it is no longer possible to acquire an UNHCR refugee status, which means that the majority of students do not have a formal legal status in the country, resulting in them not being able to move freely, particularly in areas with a lot of checkpoints such as Bekaa. Because of this students sometimes choose to end their scholarships early. Additionally students in Lebanon do not receive any governmental support in comparison to countries like Turkey, which increases their desire to resettle. In Jordan it is possible to obtain a refugee status, however similar restrictions to the labour market and a lack of government support results in relatively high resettlement rates.

Although some of these factors will always be out of the organiser’s control, measures need to be in place to timely mitigate them. In our case, we did our best to strengthen student services at the different Higher Education Institutes we are working with. Also, following data analyses, we decided to incorporate topics such as stress management and academic orientation more prominently in existing activities. Furthermore, students are monitored more closely by labelling questions and follow-up action points per category in SIS. This data will be used to facilitate additional academic support or direct referral if necessary.

Cancellation
Cancellation applies to students for whom SPARK has decided not to continue the scholarship. There could also be various reasons for cancelling a scholarship from SPARK’s side such as failing academic requirements, not having reported having already another scholarship, or not attending classes without a valid reason.

Student replacement
In order to mitigate losses caused by drop-outs and cancellations, a mechanism to address replacement has been developed. Early drop-outs have been replaced by new students; however towards the end of the programme student replacement will be limited and eventually stopped altogether. The following structure for replacement has been implemented. After students drop-out or their scholarship has been cancelled they are replaced in the new semester with new students. The number of replacements is determined per degree type based on the following formula:

\[
\text{OVERALL TARGET} - \text{NR STUDENTS GRADUATED} = \text{NEW TARGET} - \text{NR STUDENTS ENROLLED} = \text{TOTAL NR OF REPLACEMENTS NEEDED}
\]

For example:

\[
400 \text{ BA (overall)} - 60 \text{ graduated} = 340 \text{ (new target)} - 300 \text{ (enrolled)} = 40 \text{ replacements needed}
\]

Afterwards the same selection procedure as for the regular intake takes place and finally students are placed in line with the overall programme ratios (for example - 70% Syrian and Palestinian, 30% host community etc.).

NOTE
Depending on the duration of a scholarship programme, at one point drop-outs or cancellations can no longer be replaced by new first year students. Therefore, new replacements should be selected among students having an adequate number of years remaining for completion of studies. Also, in order to mitigate financial liabilities, SPARK recommends signing students’ contracts with maximum one year duration and a clause ‘based on donor availability’. At the same time, SPARK is engaging in discussions with the donors to ensure sufficient new means are programmed beyond a current donor horizon - to at least allow for the effective graduation of any current batches. In the case of multi-country projects, it is also necessary to note that students should only be replaced in countries where the final target has yet to be achieved.
5 Monitoring and evaluation

The SPARK’s Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Learning Department (PMERL) gathers data to measure performance. This data are also incorporated into SPARK’s practices and used as guidance in continuously improving the quality of its work. The M&E activities are designed to collect, structure, analyse and finally translate monitoring findings into programme improvements. In this section we will try to present our experience focusing on methods and tools that have provided the most valuable results. Also, we will try to explain the best methods of using M&E findings for programme improvements and for achieving both effectiveness and efficiency.

Any scholarship project is, by definition, focused on the design and delivery of individualised support services to vulnerable beneficiaries over a substantial period of time. The success of such projects almost directly correlates with the ability to closely and regularly observe achieved effects and propose corrective measures where relevant. Therefore, serious attention should be devoted to M&E in project design and delivery. In addition to this there should be sufficient time and budget for planning and executing M&E activities.

Monitoring and Evaluation is organized in our programme, as per ISO 9001, in the following structure:

- In the initial phase of the programme we developed a monitoring protocol based on the proposal/contract which consists of key indicators (KPIs);
- By monitoring the KPIs of this protocol we steer the progress of the programme;
- In specific intervals the programme team compiles monitoring data and evaluates the programme (this is done through surveys and evaluations);
- Based on programme management data and monitoring and evaluation data we report back to the donor;
- By compiling all monitoring and evaluation data and reports we implement programmatic learning.

The monitoring and evaluation protocols should be developed as early in the inception stage of project implementation as possible (at least 3 months before the programme starts). Also, all reporting requirements should be agreed upon during inception, including templates, timeline of activities and division of responsibilities. All staff involved in project implementation should be trained in conducting monitoring and evaluation activities (at least 1 month before implementation). This becomes particularly important when multi-country projects are concerned, having more than one field office engaged on joint assignments. The timely introduction of uniformed procedures becomes crucial for accurate reporting and designing and implementing improvements based on monitoring and evaluation findings.

Monitoring and evaluation are done both externally (by external independent consultants) and internally (through data collection and analyses by SPARK’s team). External consultants are engaged bi-annually, and the produced report contains programme delivery findings but also lessons learned and recommendations on future improvements (Annex. External Evaluation Report).

Internal evaluation is done through administering surveys; in addition to a more general Baseline and Progress Surveys, each activity is accompanied by satisfaction surveys. Overall satisfaction is measured and compared to a targeted satisfaction rate set as high as 90% by the project documents. Note: The targeted satisfaction rate of 90% is rather high and at times challenging. It serves as a desired objective, but anything above 80% has to be considered an outstanding achievement.

The SPARK’s M&E team monitors data, performs surveys and evaluations and organises the transfer of knowledge (training courses and workshops), and useful information acquired by monitoring, to other team members. Also, regular reports to donors are delivered according to reporting matrices. An area that needs constant attention is the dissemination of monitoring results and practices to other team members. The follow-up actions based on gathered data and translating recommendations into actions.

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can become challenged due to workload and constraints in resources. This becomes especially relevant in the areas of staff capacity building and learning. The M&E team is often conflicted with many roles and areas that require involvement, and therefore often needs to confine its efforts to data gathering and analyses for the purpose of reporting to donors as its priority function.

Regular work improvements are made possible through connecting M&E functions with planning and learning in order to disseminate recommendations and lessons learned into future projects but also in staff’s everyday operations. This is done through information sharing, organising internal training and using standardised tools and unified procedures. For instance, a Lessons Learned Database has been developed allowing access and contribution by all SPARK staff members. The items listed in the Database are filtered by theme and focus area and currently it features 56 different active entries. Also, regular bi-weekly meetings are organised, gathering M&E staff and programme and financial officers for the purpose of joint activities planning, information sharing and discussing lessons learned.

In large multi-country projects with many beneficiaries/scholarship recipients, administering and gathering considerable quantities of data is a necessity. It can become almost impossible without having developed IT tools facilitating effective input and analysis of collected information. Having a platform such as SIS is a precondition to the accurate delivery of results but only if the system mirrors the reporting templates (i.e. the data filters replicate indicators). When such a system is in place and handled by trained staff applying uniform procedures, the overall workload is reduced to reasonable size. Otherwise, the threat of overburdening field offices with data processing may seriously jeopardise both the quality and the schedule of delivery of outputs. For instance, SPARK’s current scholarship programme operates under 180 indicators measured at different outcome levels. Monitoring and reporting according to such an extensive grid of indicators would be impossible without a proper IT system in place.

The data have been collected according to developed indicators measuring effects at the levels of ultimate outcome, intermediary outcomes and outputs. The following channels have been used:

- SIS - it allows for filtering data by various criteria and extracting information for planning, monitoring and reporting purposes. The M&E system is closely aligned with SIS as it facilitates KPIs to be measured real-time and on-line;
- Baseline and progress surveys measure student attitudes, motivations, and expectations, satisfaction and needs and are done and compared bi-annually for the project purposes;
- Perceptions surveys are there to measure the student’s points of view as well as the appreciation of the larger programme impact (including the impact on educational institutions) their expectations and the quality of offered support;
- Satisfaction surveys constitute a mandatory element of any completed programme activity with a focus on content, logistics and specifics relating to the programme activity.

SPARK strives to build a more coherent and effective planning, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning framework, while still keeping it cost-effective and flexible. To that end, the following ways to further empower current M&E structures may be considered as guidance to any scholarship programme:

1. Build a well-established M&E framework that explains how M&E is envisioned within the scholarship programme and that shapes out a clear structure (this includes clear steps and description about planning, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning).
2. Deliver training and constantly improve capacities of the local teams in terms of M&E, data analysis, data reporting and information management.
3. Support the idea of having a pool of volunteers from the local communities to strengthen the local capacities and real learning.
4. Enhance the idea of community participation through strengthening the role of the student committees, organising quarterly learning sessions with the students, community and the project main stakeholders.
5. Strengthen the evaluation aspect of the project on the community in general and the students in specific - for example, to what extent the project achieves its outcomes and the SPARK mission to help students become leaders in their communities.

Financial Monitoring and Controlling

SPARK’s Controlling Unit provides support and advises M&E and Programme/Project Managers in preparing donor compliant reporting, checks M&E and QA strategies and budgetary expenditures and the progress of key and organisational KPI. The ISO 9001 Internal Audit and the Root Cause Control processes (annexed here 63) stipulate these.

Furthermore, SPARK’s Finance department closely monitors the budget expenditure process. This monitoring of the expenses is being conducted according to the organisation’s established Finance Procedures (ISO 9001 Financial Administration and Controlling Process 64).
# Conclusions and Recommendation

In this easy to read abstract, we would like to emphasise the most important recommendations that come from our practice. We will focus on advice to other aspiring or current scholarship providers, categorised according to what we have singled out as the most relevant features of any successful scholarship programme.

## Cost effectiveness

- Do not duplicate existing higher education systems (institutions or programmes) - instead, work with them and empower them
- Create a complimentarity of funds in order to be able to support more students
- Negotiate with HEIs to reduce tuition fee
- Engage local expertise where relevant. Rely on local actors
- Unify procedures. Organise information sharing and try to replicate successful operational models and templates where applicable (especially when running a multi-country programme)
- Small teams can be very effective when supported with adequate tools and operational models
- Engage volunteers and train them properly. Rely on their assistance but also on their local knowledge
- Have IT system automatise as many actions as feasible – not only data processing, but also communication and information sharing, outputs creation, allocation of resources, office management and coordination, etc.

## Quality assurance and maintenance

- Invest time and effort in creating unified procedures, instructions and guidance
- Design and approve M&E actions and procedures in a timely fashion. In our experience, the Monitoring Protocol should be prepared at least 3 months before the implementation starts
- Use IT tools for collecting and administering data - it takes time for these tools to be properly developed but it pays off greatly
- Incorporate the Monitoring protocol in the Programme’s data collection system (such as SIS) at least 1 month before activities start
- In parallel, staff should be trained in understanding and performing M&E tasks using designated measures and templates and be competent to classify, store, extract, analyse and report data according to M&E requirements
- Regular meetings amongst all programme staff and representatives of the finance, communications, monitoring and planning departments ensures adequate information sharing on any changes within the programme enabling the M&E staff to change procedures if necessary
- Pay attention to put forward comprehensive but a realistic number of indicators – operating against a large number of indicators creates additional workload
- Targets should be attainable and reasonable – looking good on paper does not mean it will work in reality
- Allow for time and resources enabling dissemination of M&E findings into everyday practice; create exchange channels between M&E and programme staff
- Always incorporate Lessons Learned and Recommendations in M&E reports and make sure they reach staff in regular intervals
- Create open sources where any staff member can share recommendations and instructions based on experience

## Flexibility and adaptability

- Enable your team to function under strict but easy to adhere to procedures
- Create quick and efficient decision-making cycles involving only key actors
- Keep flexible elements in the project design in order to be able to provide tailor-made support when needed (such as shorter vocational courses, post-scholarship interventions in the labour market or different remedial/complementary courses etc.)
- Keep a record of best practice and lessons learned and share them across borders and among staff
- Predict remedy and correction tools (such as reserve lists, replacement options, transfers, referrals etc.)
- Include local actors to help you achieve results with less effort and more local relevance

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- Predict remedy and correction tools (such as reserve lists, replacement options, transfers, referrals etc.)
- Include local actors to help you achieve results with less effort and more local relevance
• Always know your country context
• Do not be reluctant to introduce modifications to your programme - sometime it requires donor consent or negotiations with governments or universities. Make time for such interventions as they will help save time in the long run
• Keep all stakeholders involved and invest in creating a sense of ownership – having them on board and ready to show flexibility in well justified cases is sometimes the only way of achieving results

Risk assessment and mitigation
• “When you are standing in a room staring at the dangerous bear in front of you, you will not notice the man with an axe approaching from behind”.
• Have a clear risk section developed and risk mitigation measures in place, and have it before the programme starts
• Be aware that many of the predicted risks will not materialise, while unexpected risks suddenly occur that are even more threatening to the programme
• Have risks and mitigation measures elaborated, but be very agile and ensure new risks are identified, acted upon and shared
• Make risk mitigation analyses a regular part of each periodic donor report (for instance, semi-annually)
• Conduct risk-based internal audits once per year to assess compliance with risk areas in your programme
• Introduce preventive and remedial measures
• Devote a section in Lessons Learned to risk mitigation
SPARK’s mission is “to develop higher education and entrepreneurship to empower young ambitious people to lead their conflict affected societies into prosperity” and continues to reflect the organisations raison d’etre, through higher education, entrepreneurship and micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) development.

Founded in 1994, SPARK is an independent, not-for-profit international development organisation with more than 100 staff working in seventeen countries including in the MENA region, Africa and the Balkans. In Europe SPARK is working with refugees in France, Germany and the Netherlands together with its head office in Amsterdam. SPARK’s activities take place in highly complex environments including transitional and fragile conflict affected states (FCAS) that involves economic, social, and political change.

SPARK works closely with a range of local partners including chambers of commerce, universities, vocational schools, governments (both local and foreign), business institutions and civil society organisations to build co-operative, locally-sustainable networks of support for promising entrepreneurs.

SPARK promotes local ownership of projects, which is essential for continuing support beyond SPARK’s presence in that region and SPARK focuses on achieving a wide impact, linking local, regional and international partners to build strong networks of support, resources and services.
6 Annexes

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2. Study by the Syrian Business Association SAID
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