



The BRIDGE Programme

Unite Lebanon
Youth Project



The BRIDGE Programme¹

Region	MENA
Country	Lebanon
Organization	Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP)
Name	The BRIDGE Programme
Category	Skills development
Start date	2010
	Ongoing
Partners	Leeds University and the Welfare Association
UN involvement	Non-UN
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1. Background and description

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon make up approximately 8 per cent of the country's total population, i.e. 436,000.² For more than 40 years, these Palestinians have maintained a distinct status as 'refugees', with no right to Lebanese citizenship (even for those born in Lebanon and/or born to a Lebanese mother), no state to return to and a very limited right to work. This limbo has made these Palestinians a vulnerable and marginalized population subjected to poor living conditions, lack of access to basic needs and limited access to educational opportunities, with the majority of Palestinians having access only to schools operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The situation is exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for university education, which leads to low employment rates or employment at low-level jobs with limited income which in turn leads to poverty.³ Addressing the Palestinians' educational status is one step forward in the improvement of their living conditions.

¹ Desk Review (May-September 2014); Inquiry form (23 July 2014); Interview (13 November 2014); Write up (22 December 2014); Internal Validation (22 December 2014-4 February 2015); Implementer Validation (11 February 2015); Final validation (October 2015).

² Hammond (2013).

³ Interview with Melek El Nimer and Ester van Der Berg on 13 November 2014.



UNRWA, a United Nations agency dedicated to aiding Palestinian refugees, has a total of 69 schools that are exclusively for Palestinian students.⁴ UNRWA does not provide higher education. In Lebanon, the public education system is often reserved for Lebanese nationals and private education comes with a high cost that refugees cannot afford.

The Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP), through its informal assessments and communications with UNRWA, as well as with other organizations that provide scholarships to marginalized youth in Lebanon, has found that many promising and motivated students do not receive adequate opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential.⁵ One of the contributing factors is that these students are not adequately informed about the diversity and availability of universities and scholarships or the proper application process. In response, the ULYP formed an intensive two-year university preparatory programme, the BRIDGE. The BRIDGE offers underprivileged Palestinian adolescents in Lebanon ages 16–18 years a university preparatory programme consisting of two major components: (1) a university preparatory course (UPC), in which students are taught the skills needed to pass university entrance tests; and (2) counselling sessions (workshops as well as individual sessions) during which students, and occasionally their parents, learn about the importance of attending a good university and the majors and scholarships available.

The programme also engages in follow-up with the students. ULYP follows up with the students' grades and academic

achievements and also offer them career advice – where and which jobs to apply to – as well as academic advice if they wish to continue with their graduate studies.

Organization profile

ULYP is a non-profit organization founded in 2010 with the goal of aiding marginalized populations – underprivileged children, youth and women – by providing them with better access to educational and recreational programmes.⁶ The aim of the organization is “to end the marginalization of underprivileged children and youth in Lebanon and promote unity, respect, and mutual understanding.”⁷



⁴ From the UNRWA website: <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>.

⁵ Interview with Melek El Nimer and Ester van Der Berg on 13 November 2014.

⁶ ULYP, 2014.

⁷ Interview with Melek El Nimer and Ester van Der Berg on 13 November 2014.



2. Goal and objectives

2.1. Goal

The main goal of the BRIDGE programme is to bring together and empower promising and motivated underprivileged youth in Lebanon through a university preparatory programme that introduces them to and informs them about opportunities for pursuing higher education in universities in Lebanon and abroad, supporting them to reach their full potential.

2.2. Objectives

- Provide the underprivileged high school students with all necessary university preparation courses, including preparation for university entrance exams.
- Advise and prepare the underprivileged high school students about university programmes and career paths.
- Guide underprivileged high school students in their university applications.
- Aid underprivileged high school students in their search for university funding and match them with potential donors.

3. Target group

3.1. Age group

Participants of the BRIDGE programme are 16-18 year-old Palestinians boys and girls enrolled in 11th and 12th grades. The programme focuses on this age group as this is the time for preparation for and application to higher education. Although there are no restriction criteria, priority is given to students who have good grades and based on the student's choice of study.

Selection criteria for participants: marginalized background; top of class; proper level of English (students who are proficient can study on their own, students who have a poor level of English are given English language courses to be able to take the SAT exam). The students are interviewed by the ULYP selection committee.

3.2. Gender considerations

Both genders have an equal chance of being selected for the programme. The recruitment of girls residing in rural areas has faced challenges due to parents' fear of allowing their daughters to study far from their home or parents' dismissive attitude towards the importance of education for their daughters.

3.3. Ethnic / disability considerations

BRIDGE has no formal inclusion policy but does not discriminate against ethnicities and disabilities. One 12th grader with a disability participated in the UPC.

3.4. Targeting the most marginalized/ most at risk

Participants are chosen mostly from adolescents residing in Palestinian camps so that the organization can ensure it is reaching the most marginalized. The programme also assists Lebanese students from public schools in smaller numbers.



3.5. Human rights programming

ULYP programmes are grounded on the universal right to education for all children, regardless of race, gender or religion. BRIDGE reflects this principle by facilitating access to higher education for marginalized adolescents in Lebanon.

3.6. Youth involvement

Former BRIDGE students volunteer to serve as focal points at the schools of current BRIDGE students. There are seven fixed focal points in different areas to assist in following up with and reaching out to high school students.

BRIDGE university students also act as tutors and mentors for other university students facing difficulties with a specific course. They also connect older students with first year students who experience issues during the academic year at university. The BRIDGE team at ULYP has established a system to mentor university students as much as possible.

A roster is kept for all the ULYP students who volunteer. Volunteer work can consist of different tasks, ranging from administrative work to helping out at events or assisting teachers in one of the other ULYP programmes. For fall semester (academic year 2014-2015), there were approximately 12 volunteers helping out in the office alone. Each summer, a number of volunteers (Lebanese and international) assist with the counselling. This number ranges from 10 to 30 depending on the year. Most of the volunteers are ULYP university students. The volunteers who help students with their essays are native English speakers (i.e., non-ULYP students).

4. Strategy and Implementation

4.1. Strategies / theoretical approaches / methodologies

Selected participants start the BRIDGE programme as soon as they enter the 11th grade. The programme is two years long. During their first year of enrolment, students attend the UPC, which consists of English language courses, mathematics and test-taking training (SAT I/II and TOEFL), and counselling workshops introducing them to different universities and majors. Depending on the amount of funding received, at the end of this first year ULYP provides the students with the registration fees for one SAT exam.

In the second year, students participate in counselling workshops that teach them how to write personal statements, manage the application process and communicate test scores to the schools they want to attend. Moreover, during individual counselling sessions the BRIDGE team assists second-year participants with university, scholarship and visa applications.

The students acquire the following skills during the UPC:

1. Writing and reading skills – Before the students start the programme course, an assessment test is administered to determine their English level. During and after the course, students take several tests. During the programme, the students also learn how to write a professional essay and how to write a good and coherent CV.
2. Professional communication skills – how to set up a professional e-mail account, email etiquette, corresponding with universities, respecting deadlines. BRIDGE also offers to prepare students





for a professional interview (live or via Skype) in case they are shortlisted for an interview by a university.

3. Social skills – In counselling sessions, the BRIDGE team shows students how they are similar to other students (regardless of their background) and tries to engage them with each other in a respectful manner. They utilize several conflict-resolution methods to sensitize students on the importance of equality and human rights.

4.2. Activities

The UPC sessions are given by trained professional teachers. The classes are usually given in the summer, over a period of 4-6 weeks, depending on the level of the students. In the summer of 2014, BRIDGE had several locations for the SAT training sessions: American University of Beirut (AUB), American University of Science and Technology (AUST), AUST Local Centres (Tyre, North, and Beqaa) and in Dibbiyeh campus.

The university counselling sessions are used to enable the students to explore their affinities and be aware of what skills they are good at, through a series of activities and questionnaires. The students are also introduced to a wide range of majors at universities, and the practicality of each (courses taken and employability options). This section is mainly executed by BRIDGE staff, often simultaneous with the SAT sessions. The team provides any kind of assistance to students when they are applying to universities. The team oversees the entire application process and guides the students.

First-year university students face an especially difficult time during their first

semester. BRIDGE tries to guide them through and keep encouraging them to study hard and express any issues they might have.

BRIDGE recently set up a ULYP graduates workforce for recent graduates or students who will soon graduate. This team searches for available Master degree scholarships and helps students with the scholarship application process.

4.3. Innovativeness

BRIDGE is one of the few programmes that focuses on increasing the chances of disadvantaged youth to attend private upscale universities by building their skills at the school level. This is an advanced approach that is crucial to the improvement of the conditions of Palestinian refugees.

BRIDGE has been particularly innovative in creating a strong, stable network of partners through donor liaison (primarily done by the ULYP founder), thus securing scholarships and entry to universities. BRIDGE works with the Palestinian Welfare Association, UNRWA, Amideast, several international foundations, private donors and many universities (AUB, AUST, Lebanese American University (LAU), Beirut Arab University (BAU) and universities abroad).

The contributions given are on three levels: financial; supportive; and networking. The current networks maintained by ULYP provide the opportunity to spread the message to help marginalized youth in Lebanon. This is done through various outreach activities such as going to the schools and meeting with students, teachers and parents. This network also contributes to improving and establishing new partnerships with universities worldwide.



4.4. Cost and funding

While some donors wish to aid in the operational costs of BRIDGE, other donors provide scholarship funds. Funding specifically for the BRIDGE programme comes from various donors including the Hani Kaddoumi foundation and the Welfare Association. They sustain the UPC and the counselling and outreach activities. Funding for the scholarships comes from a diverse pool of donors, fundraising activities and institutional funding.

Some universities abroad (Eastern Mediterranean University and Near East University in Cyprus, American University of Sharjah in United Arab Emirates, Texas A&M in Qatar, and Bilkent, Bilgi, Koç and Yeditepe Universities in Turkey) offer to pay tuition and dormitory costs, so that ULYP is responsible only for travel and living expenses.

The actual yearly cost of the programme ranges from \$1.2 million to \$3 million. The actual cost is always much lower than the estimated budget due to the financial aid discounts that BRIDGE is able to negotiate with the partner universities. As an example, in 2014, the budget was estimated at \$7.5 million but BRIDGE was able to manage with only \$3 million. BRIDGE shares these savings with its donors in all transparency.

4.5. Sustainability

The BRIDGE programme has operated for five years. The success in sustaining the programme can be credited to ULYP's success in securing a diverse network of donations from various funders (e.g., the Hani Kaddoumi Foundation and the Welfare Association), fundraising efforts and an impressive partnership with various

universities in Lebanon and abroad. These universities, e.g., Leeds University and Duke University, provide the programme with volunteers, further solidifying its sustainability. Volunteers from Duke University present the UPC to the students in the summer at the Dibbiyeh campus.

In addition to partnerships with donors, the BRIDGE programme maintains financial aid discount agreements with academic institutions to ensure that the programme continues to grow and expand.

4.6. Replicability

Currently the BRIDGE programme is being implemented with Palestinian students and some Lebanese public schools; it has not been replicated to any other setting or context. However it would be greatly beneficial if the BRIDGE programme were adopted more actively by the Lebanese public schools as their conditions are similar to those of the UNRWA schools. BRIDGE is currently trying to find funding for this expansion.

5. Evaluation of effectiveness

In 2010, the BRIDGE programme successfully helped 431 students, out of the 1,000 who participated in the programme, to gain acceptance into different reputable universities in and outside Lebanon. Follow-up with these students has shown that many of them pursue their studies and become employed because of their degrees.

In 2014, BRIDGE assisted a total of 981 students (380 university students, 51 graduates, 264 applicants for scholarships and 286 UPC students).



The evaluation of the BRIDGE programme was done through pre- and post-tests with students during their UPC attendance via evaluation forms and discussions with teachers. The impact of the counselling sessions was only evaluated once the students had started applying to universities. The outcome evaluation was documented at the midterm and at the end of the programme in the form of assessment reports.

Results of evaluation

1. Youth in 11th grade are better prepared and equipped to take college admission tests (SAT, TOEFL and IELTS).

At the conclusion of the most recent module of UPC, 80 per cent of the 150 participating students passed the midterm as well as the final test of the previous preparatory course and were deemed eligible to continue to the next level. Moreover, there has been an improvement in the students' English language skills, which is crucial for the students to be able to qualify for both scholarships and for university acceptance.

2. University attendance of marginalized youth increased

By 2014, 350 BRIDGE students were enrolled in universities in Lebanon (AUB, LAU and BAU). The first 40 students to join the programme have already graduated. Before BRIDGE started, AUB counted zero Palestinian students from refugee camps among its student body. This achievement is strongly attributed to the fact that the BRIDGE programme begins to reach out to promising students two years before they graduate from high school. This provides them with ample time to learn the importance of attending university, decide on a university and major and acquire the support of their parents.

Finally, these successes can be confirmed by the popularity of BRIDGE within marginalized communities in Lebanon. The programme is very well known and the BRIDGE team is contacted every day by new students who want to participate.

Current university data (Academic year 2014-2015):

- 158 students at AUB;
- 87 students at LAU;
- 57 students at BAU ;
- 2 students in other universities in Lebanon (AUST and LU);
- 43 students in Cyprus ;
- 12 students in Turkey;
- 10 students in Qatar;
- 5 students at AUS;
- 1 at University College London (UCL) (United Kingdom);
- 5 in the United States (through Hope Fund).

Total: 380 currently in universities (ranging from full scholarship or some sort of financial assistance). (BRIDGE team follow-up with all the current students)

Graduate data:

- 8 graduates from AUB;
- 15 graduates from LAU;
- 14 graduates from BAU;
- 3 graduates from other universities in Lebanon;
- 9 graduates from Cyprus;
- 2 graduates from Hult International Business School, Dubai.





Total: 51 graduates

In 2015, the BRIDGE team expects 94 students to graduate, in addition to some 25 non-ULYP students whom they are helping find Master degree scholarships.

Data on scholarship applicants:

Intake 2013: 143 applicants

Intake 2014: 264 applicants

Intake 2015 (current intake): + 200
(December 2014)

University Preparation Course: (entrance exam training and counselling)

2013: 150 students

2014: 286 students

6. Strengths and opportunities

The strength of the BRIDGE programme lies in its impressive network of universities and funders, which has opened doors to many opportunities that other organizations might not have. Thanks to the various partnerships and donations which cover a large part of the students' tuition and expenses, BRIDGE does not incur any heavy costs. Furthermore, the BRIDGE programme has succeeded in attracting many volunteers, some of them from the programme's partner universities which; this, along with the funds it receives, has helped solidify the programme's sustainability.

Through the results of its evaluation, the BRIDGE programme can be regarded a success. It has established a reputation as a respectable and effective programme which further aids in securing the programme's longevity.

7. Challenges

The main challenge facing the BRIDGE programme concerned the enrolment of girls, especially those in rural areas. Parents of the girls were fearful and uncomfortable with letting their daughters attend universities far away from their homes. It was also evident that some parents do not value higher education and find it unnecessary, especially for girls.

This has been somewhat resolved as parents now are more welcoming to the idea of sending their daughters to study in Beirut or in different regions, and the programme has witnessed an increase in the enrolment of girls. This shift in mentality could be attributed to the success of BRIDGE, which has built a certain reputation which made the parents trust the programme and ULYP more. The ULYP open door policy gives the parents the chance to talk to ULYP about their concerns. They also see more examples of parents sending their daughters to Beirut and abroad.

Although parents usually wish the best for their children and encourage them to obtain a degree, dealing with parents can be sometimes difficult. When parents are reluctant, the BRIDGE team tries to talk with the student and his/her parents to convince the parents that education is extremely beneficial for their child. If they see high potential in their students, they try to motivate them to apply for a study programme abroad. This may be hard for the parents. However, if a student wants to go abroad, the BRIDGE team tries to meet with the parents and explain why it is a great opportunity.

8. Next steps and the way forward

The ULYP BRIDGE programme is in the process of developing a pilot project to reach out to the parents of Palestinian youth in Lebanon. Through information sessions, the BRIDGE team would like to inform parents about employability opportunities for their children and the steps their children need to take in order to register for university. Parents will also be informed about the university options. Because it is very important that the parents support the students in their choices, the BRIDGE team members always urge their students to discuss their plans and ideas with them.

9. Lessons learned and recommendations

The success of the BRIDGE programme has verified the importance and necessity of a strong network and ties with partners and donors. Without the impressive public relations and relationships that BRIDGE has been able to build and secure, it would have been tremendously difficult, if not impossible, for the programme to accomplish and sustain its activities for five years.

10. Components to consider for scale-up in MENA

- (1) The system of outreach to schools;
- (2) The public relations and networking system the programme has established;
- (3) The programme's follow-up system.

Photo credits: ULYP.

11. Resources

- The BRIDGE team has developed a manual on how to teach SAT preparation skills to marginalized students in Lebanon, and the teachers they work with provide them with their expertise and with hand-outs for the students.
- Trial tests that are administered half way through and at the end of the sessions.
- ULYP lends official SAT books to the students and helps them get free access to books to prepare for IELTS/TOEFL.
- The BRIDGE team has developed its own counselling manual which includes several questionnaires (to assess skills, interests, values and abilities) and activities embedded with conflict resolution methods.
- Forms that reveal what the students plan on studying in university and the reasons behind their choice.

12. References

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