

Inflation Hits Students Hard

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(25-Jul-08)

Yousuf al-Nabulsi, a 21-year-old geography student at Damascus University, has found a way of saving money – he only eats two meals a day.

Nabulsi, who lives in a rented room an hour away from Damascus, comes from a poor family and has been hard hit by the spiraling cost of basic items like food and fuel.

He has reduced the quality of the food he eats to “anything that staves off hunger”.

“The high costs make it difficult for me to pay for my basic needs,” he said. “It’s causing me a lot of problems, both for studying and living.”

Inflation has had a major impact on those attending Syria’s universities, and they are struggling to get by, according to education experts and students.

The International Monetary Fund projects an annual inflation rate of seven per cent for 2008, the same as last year, but other economists say this estimate is on the low side. The London-based Economist Intelligence Unit, for example, believes inflation will come close to nine per cent in 2008, and could jump even because of the recent cuts in government fuel subsidies.

The government heavily subsidises education. Annual fees at state-run universities, which require high exam marks for admission, are only about 20 US dollars. Private universities often charge thousands of dollars a year.

The worst affected students are those like Nabulsi who study away from home and now face increasing costs for transport, food and study materials.

Researchers at Damascus University have found that fewer young people from the eastern provinces, where poverty levels are high, are attending college, and they attributed the decline to the state of the economy.

Nabulsi comes from Qamishli in northeastern Syria, and says he has stopped going home every week because trip now costs him about 20 dollars, compared with 13 dollars earlier this year when petrol prices were more reasonable. He spends about 160 dollars a month on housing, transport and food.

According to the government’s State Planning Board, the average Syrian’s income is 4,400 liras per month, less than 100 dollars.

Students have to shoulder many other expenses such as books, stationary and printed lecture papers.

According to a university bookshop owner at Damascus University, the prices of these items have doubled.

“The price of paper has risen with the cost of electricity, and so have our staff wages, he said. “So we’ve had to raise our prices.”

Rather than pay for photocopying fees, students are sharing material or copying it out by hand, the shopowner said.

The government offers student loans of 26 dollars per month through the academic year, on top of a nominal grant of 14 dollars for the whole year. Students studying certain subjects such as medicine are entitled to additional subsidised loans.

Nabulsi says his loan covers very little, but Mohammed Wanous, director of the student loan fund, said even the minimum loan “is enough for university students and helps them complete their studies”.

Wanous added that the government was looking at other ways of helping students such as subsidising book purchases.

For many students, education is worth the sacrifice.

Fatin Jasim, 20, comes from Der al-Zur province and is in the first year of a history course in Damascus. Her father is a farmer of modest means, so she survives by borrowing books from a relative who is studying at the same college but only attends class on exam days.

“Despite the difficulties, I won’t give up my place in the university,” she said. “It’s a precious opportunity.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

Location: Syria

Focus: Syria

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