Questions for the USAID University Scholarship Program
RFA number USAID/Egypt RFA-268-12-000001

1. RFA Page 4, Paragraph 2, bullet 3:
   "Scholarship target only students who demonstrate high financial need, and whose parents do not earn any substantial subsidy to cover for educational costs. Financial need shall be determined based on detailed financial aid applications that weights family revenues versus expenditures, number of family dependents and school/university age children, and ownership of hard assets. The offeror is recommended to detail the financial need and hardship criteria to be eligible to benefit from the program. Illustratively, financially needy students for the purpose of this program are those whose familial net balance of revenues minus expenditures is less than one third of the university's tuition, have limited ownership of hard assets and do not benefit from any substantial subsidy to their education from private or public sources."

   Comment: The RFA gives the explanation of financially needy students for the program; however it is very specific, and due to cultural habits the above definition cannot be applicable to all students. For example: The RFA indicates familial net balance of revenues minus expenditures should be less than one third of the university's tuition. This is not a consistent way of determining need especially that each university has its own different tuition fee rates. Therefore, a student can be considered needy in one University but not needy in another.

   Question: Can the University use its own already set up Financial Aid regular rules and procedures, which are reconcilable with the terms of the RFA, to determine who is a needy student?

   Answer: The RFA does not provide an explanation of financial need; it provides an example ("illustratively"). The university may propose its own definition or procedures to determine financial need as long as these procedures are clearly explained in the application, are uniformly applied to all students and set a clear reference to be used. It is not enough to state that the university will assess financial need based on certain indicators. The indicators need to be clearly defined: if one of the indicators is income, what is the income bracket that qualifies for financial need.

2. RFA page 4 end of page, and page 5 top of the page:
   "Selection of scholars shall take into consideration the widest regional, confessional and gender representation. The implementing partner shall account for including representative(s) of USAID/Lebanon to participate in the selection and approval process of scholars."

   Question: What does that exactly mean? Does USAID want to be part of deciding on the selection/approval process or does it want to be part of the interview to select candidates? Please clarify what is meant.

Answer: USAID should be included in the final selection process of candidates; i.e., selecting the final scholars from a larger pool of shortlisted candidates. USAID does not need to be included in the individual interviews, though it could participate as observer. USAID should be on board of the final selection committee that actually approves as well the final list of students.

3. RFA page 4:
   "Candidates shall demonstrate the potential for leadership and civic engagement by listing in details the activities they engage in and the names of organizations and associations they volunteer with or work at in their communities . "

   Question: Can the "potential" of candidates also be determined through aspiration, charisma, and other qualities revealed in the application and/or interview process?

   Answer: It is up to the applicant to determine the ways to assess leadership and civic engagement in addition to the criteria listed in the RFA. The applicant must provide the methodology in the application.

4. RFA page 5 – section 4 – para 3:
   "The applicant could offer the opportunity to scholars to enroll in a teaching diploma, in which case the applicant has to explain the process in the application."

   Comment: The 'Education major - Teaching diploma' is a 4 year program (excluding preparatory year), and is among the choices of majors for the students.

   Question: What do you mean by 'process in the application?' Please clarify. The above major is a regular major offered by us.

   Answer: if this major is a regular one offered by the university, then there is no particular process for a teaching diploma. The university needs though to mention whether they will include "education" as a major in their application or not.

5. RFA Page 5 - Section 4. Admissions and Academic Considerations
   "Candidates will not be offered a scholarship for a major they did not explicitly select on the admission application"

   Question: What if the scholar discovered his/her passion, and hence desired major, after being accepted?

   Answer: No scholar will be offered a scholarship upon enrollment in a major that they did not explicitly select in the admission applications. A student cannot apply to computer science and suggest as second choice business, and get admitted by the university in economics. The applicant has to provide due guidance and advice to the students concerning their choices as per RFA page 7, sub-section 8. The applicant has to duly assess as well the rationale for selection the major as detailed by the candidates in their admission applications. If a change of heart occurs in prospective semesters, i.e., after the first semester of enrollment, the terms of changing majors apply as required by the RFA and detailed on page 5 sub-section 4.

At the same time, the RFA page 5 - last para, and page 6 first para states:

"Scholars will be allowed to change to a major that has prospects of meaningful employment."

Question: Does the above mean that new/changed majors will be allowed, only if the budget is available?

Answer: Only majors that the university will provide under this program are available to scholars. The applicant has to provide a detailed account of the majors that will be offered for scholarships as per RFA page 5 sub-section 4.

6. RFA page 6, para 1:
   "The implementing partner will be encouraged to the extent possible to send scholars one full time semester to another leading not-for-profit university based in Lebanon preferably already implementing the University Student Assistance Program"

   Question: Does this apply to any Lebanese university which has been the recipient of either USAP I, USAP II or this USP?

   Answer: It applies only to universities already applying the program in both phases, and not possible recipients under this current RFA.

7. RFA page 6, para 2:
   "Scholars are expected to sign memoranda of understanding with the university that define fully and clearly their rights and their responsibilities under this program. The applicant must define the eligibility requirements to continue the scholarships, change majors, register in a double major, or pursue a major/minor or teaching diploma in the application, and delineate any specific cases of deviation while maintaining academic integrity. These requirements should be reflected fully and clearly in the memorandum of understanding."

   Question: Do the responsibilities include the financial reimbursement if any of the students quit university for a reason or another? This is not clear and we need USAID's feedback on it.

   Answer: Yes, this could be included. It is up to the applicant to determine valid cases of reimbursement to USAID as per terms of the RFA. The RFA provides accounts when USAID should not be charged for additional costs such as changing majors or failure. Deviation from these cases could lead to reimbursement.

8. RFA Page 6 section 6: Comprehensive Scholarship Program: para 2 –

“The full scholarship support includes tuition, housing, books, stipends and medical insurance.”

Question: No laptops are included above; can we include them in the budget so that students will have similar benefits?

Answer: a laptop may be included. The applicant has to clearly indicate the ownership of the laptop and terms of this ownership.

9. RFA page 6 section 6, para 2:
“The need for housing will be determined on a case by case based on mitigating factors such the applicant’s residence location compared to the university campus, associated transportation costs, ease of transport and disruption of the work schedules of parents who might be forced to provide transport. The implementing partner must demonstrate the benefits of such decision in the application.”

Comment: The budget will include the budget line item for housing for all students as it all depends on the students’ residency location.

Question: If the scholar is not residing on campus, will the award cover transportation to and from student’s place of residence [which might be at relatives or friends’]?

Answer: The budget line item, as per comment above, will be assessed as part of the financial evaluation of the cost proposal, its effectiveness and realism. As for providing transport allowance, USAID will assess the effectiveness of such measures in its evaluation, while keeping in mind that scholars are provided as well with a stipend.

10. RFA page 7 para 2:
“The applicant should define in the application the applicable terms to withdraw from courses or failure of courses including the implication on costs paid by USAID.”

Comment: We will apply our own financial aid eligibility rules and procedures regarding 1) GPA grades, 2) Repeated course, 3) Probation and suspension rules etc. in case the student dropped out for academic, disciplinary or personal reasons.

Question: When the university applies its own financial aid rules and regulations, then any student who is out of the program will not reimburse anything. The remaining funds will be allocated to other students, if needed. Do you approve?

Answer: The RFA terms are clear as per quote above. The applicant has to provide the detailed account of these cases in the application. USAID review for approval or rejection will be part of the application technical evaluation.

11. RFA Page 7, middle of the page:

"Multiple implementing partners may be chosen under this program. As such, each implementing partner shall establish vital networks of collaboration, exchange and sharing with the other implementing partners and target universities- managing or implementing this program. The applicant must clarify in the application how this will be achieved."

Question: We need a clarification on what is expected from us?

Answer: the applicant has to devise ways to collaborate with other implementing partners and refer to these in the application. USAID will evaluate these responses in the application as part of the application review. This collaboration can range from joint promotion of the program to full collaboration in selecting scholars, or holding joint community based projects for scholars. It is up to the implementing partner to determine these collaborations on the basis of their comfort and capacities.

12. RFA page 7 – item 7
"Leadership and active engagement: Applicants should devise ways to enable scholars to participate in civic engagement in groups, and individually in community projects at their respective home-towns. A very small amount no more than $3,000 per scholar shall be dedicated to fund such initiatives….
…USAID will actively participate in the selection and approval of sub-grants to that respect. Applicants are encouraged to devise creative ways to create an alumni chapter of scholars, maintain and sustain it."

Question 1: Should we confine funding of community projects to individuals with a ceiling of USD 3,000 or should we favor the group work and the collective thinking/ developmental work?

Answer 1: It is up to the applicant to determine the nature of community projects and the preference of individual projects versus group ones as long as due justification is provided. However, the applicant has to account for that sum of money per scholar and not by project.

Question 2: Is the approval of the USAID representative a must in the selection of sub-grants? Can we consider the USAID representative only as an observer?

Answer 2: USAID approval is a must. USAID will not be an observer.

Question 3: Can these be integrated within a course, or as a capstone project? Must all projects network with a "local non-state actor"? Can you provide more information on this requirement?

Answer 3: Community projects could be included as part of a course as long as this course is practical, requires field work and the community project constitutes part of the grade evaluation and course completion. All projects must network with a local non-state actor such as a non-governmental organization, local advocacy group, a school, a local dispensary…

Question 4: What if more than one scholar from the same hometown will be receiving the USD 3,000? Will the amount of USD 3,000 be paid to each of the scholars, and the benefit is for the same village/town?

Answer 4: Yes, the amount is per scholar, and hence the benefit will be larger for the same hometown, village.

13. RFA page 8, section 10 para 2:
"Staff costs shall be proportional as well to the number of scholars enrolled during the last year of the program; i.e. if only 15 scholars are enrolled during the 6th year out of 60 scholars (25% of the student population), then the implementing partner shall charge only 25% of the supporting staff cost to that respect. Key personnel positions will be reduced to the strictly necessary."

    Comment: The costs associated directly with the students will decrease (faculty, mentors, and part timers); however, it is not possible to reduce all key personnel positions proportionate to the number of students, as some will still be managing the program as a whole and will be responsible for preparing and submitting the necessary and required reports.

    Question: What is your feedback on the comment above?

    Answer: the applicant has to provide due justification in their budget notes. USAID will evaluate the justification for cost realism and effectiveness.

14. RFA page 10: para 2:
"A cost share of at least 30% of the total budget is desirable."

    Question: This seems high a percentage for a not-for-profit university to absorb. We believe 20% cost share is a reasonable allocation and appreciate your consideration. Will you reconsider?

    Answer: The terms of the RFA are clear and require at least 30% cost share. If the applicant intends to submit a different cost share, the new cost share will be evaluated by USAID for compliance with the terms of the RFA, realism and effectiveness.

15. RFA page 10: para 2:
"Universities are encouraged to waive their entrance exam fees (English or qualifier test) for scholarship candidates as means to enable highly financially needy students to apply."

    Question: Can the above be a part of the cost sharing?

Answer: these costs could be covered by USAID or cost shared as long as the student does not cover the entrance exam fees.

16. RFA page 10 para 3:
"Tuition fees supported by USAID shall not be subject to annual increases. Alternatively, universities are encouraged to admit 15% more students compared to the proposed cost".

    Comment: The tuition is subject to annual increases due to the inflation and costs associated with education in the country. All previous grants and projects took the inflationary cost into account when budgeting for projects extending over several years.

    Question: Can we absorb the increase within the University's cost share suggested above (item 14), not to exceed 20%?

    Answer: The tuition annual increase can account towards the cost share. The applicant has to provide a clear indication of prospective annual increases and their estimated amounts over the years. The cost share percentage, 20% or otherwise, will be evaluated by USAID as per terms of the RFA.

17. RFA page 12 first para:
"The budget detail will be required for both the USAID-funded portion of the program and cost share portions, if any, of the program. If the applicant proposes expending more than $300,000 of USAID funding during a single fiscal year of the applicant, the applicant must include funds within the budget to contract an audit."

    Question: Is the $300,000 the correct amount or $500,000 as in past grants?

    Answer: the $300,000 is correct for non-US organizations, $500,000 for US organizations.

18. On page 3 of the RFA, it is stipulated that 'the target universities should have at least the following credentials… satisfies similar requirements needed for American accreditation; as such the university shall be either accredited as an institution at large by an international body… or **actively seeking such accreditation**'. May we ask you to clarify the meaning of the last clause in bold? Since 2004, we have been slowly but actively planning to apply for NEASC accreditation. Between 2007 and 2008 we decided to freeze the candidacy application. We are currently working internally on some processes before seeking re-approaching NEASC, which we hope, will be in 2013. Is this considered actively seeking accreditation?

    Answer: Actively seeking accreditation, being with NEASC or a similar accrediting body, means that the university is currently actively engaged in discussions with the accrediting body to secure accreditation, and has completed at least one of the required steps towards accreditation, and is intending to pursue the further steps consecutively. If the talks with the accrediting agency and the accreditation process are frozen since 2008 as described above, this means that the university is not currently actively seeking accreditation; unless the university can demonstrate, if requested, that it is really actively working on closing recommendations that came out of the self-study in 2007-2008 in order to approach NEASC prospectively; i.e.. The new manuals, handbook and faculty that the university is working on are all NEASC requirements identified in the self-study and need to be completed as part of the candidacy eligibility prior to re-approaching NEASC.

19. On page 3 of the RFA, it is indicated that the target university 'has already a yearly operating budget at least four times larger than the requested amount in the application'. Can you confirm that by this it is meant that the yearly operating budget is at least four times larger than the requested amount in the application **per year**?

Answer: *The target university should have an operating budget at least four times larger than the total budget that the university is asking for to cover expenses of the entire program; i.e., if the university is asking for $3million in total funding, the university should have an operating budget of at least $12million*

20. On page 4 of the RFA, it is mentioned that the students eligible under the program should 'earn their BACC-II successfully during the year of recruitment under the program'. What about students who earned their BACC-II in the previous year but were not able to afford to go to university so are not pursuing their higher education?

Answer: *The RFA targets only most recent graduates of the BACC-II, namely those who graduate during the year of recruitment. Students who graduated in previous years cannot benefit from the program. The RFA clearly states that* "Graduates who earned their degree earlier will not be eligible."

21. On page 5 of the RFA, under the diversity considerations headline, it is stated that scholars need to come from different geographic regions and confessions'. Is there a minimum limit of areas students should come? Shall we consider geographic diversity by district or by governorates? How about confessional diversity, are minimum proportions in which the students should be distributed? Should this diversity be insured in number of applications or number of selected students?

Answer: It is up to the implementing partner to devise plans for representation and outreach as long as the RFA requirement is maintained, namely: "Scholars will represent the country from both urban and rural areas, with the widest social and geographic representation." The smallest unit to be considered for ensuring geographic diversity is to be determined by the implementing partner whether on the basis of governorate or district, as long as the plan ensures widest representation. USAID is clear with regard to confession that "students shall be chosen regardless of any religious affiliation or related factor." Scholars should be diverse, but no specific proportions should be allocated to any confession. Finally, the diversity should be ensured first in the number of applications received and ultimately in the final selected scholars. A diverse pool of applicants ensures a diverse pool of selected scholars.

22. On page 6 of the RFA, it is encouraged of implementing partners to send scholars one full semester to another leading not-for-profit university. How do you plan to account for differences in tuition rates from the sending institution to the receiving institution? What if the agreement is made between partner institutions but the logistics and preferences of students do not allow for such an exchange, is this accounted for?

    Answer: Implementing partners are encouraged to pursue this task though not required. Differences in tuition rates should be accounted for in the application on the basis, preferably, of pre-arrangement with the other host university. It is up to the implementing partner to devise the methodology to ensure the success of the exchange, including the means to promote the exchange, the message that will be conveyed to promote the exchange benefits, the restrictions that govern the exchange depending on the major, year of study, program requirements and student exchange.

23. On page 8 of the RFA, under the Program Management section, if we decide to send a proposal to offer scholarships to a small number of students, does this justify the cost of hiring a recruiter, and a head resident? In other words, what is the minimum number of students we can plan to select in order to launch in this program?

    Answer: *It is up to the implementing partner to devise a sound management plan that meets the requirements of the program and ensures the capacity to implement it. USAID will evaluate applications based on the RFA evaluation criteria taking in consideration cost realism and effectiveness. The size of the program management should be realistic, effective and reflects a reasonable level of effort that matches the scale of the scholarship program.*

24. On page 10 of the RFA, it is stated that ‘tuition fees supported by USAID shall not be subject to annual increases’. Does this apply for the entire duration of the project i.e. 6 years?

    Answer: Correct, this applies to the entire duration of the program.

25. On page 10 of the RFA, it is stipulated that ‘ Universities are encouraged to waive their entrance exam fees (English or qualifier test) for scholarship candidates as means to enable highly financially needy students to apply’. Will USAID cover these exam fees for applicants?

    Answer: These costs could be covered by USAID, or alternatively could account towards the cost share.

26. On page 10 of the RFA, it is stipulated that 'Services provided usually by university staff, advisors, or faculty to regular students as part of the university regular academic work shall not be charged towards the program and cannot be counted as cost share.' Do application fees and registration fees fall under such services?

    Answer: Application and registration fees do not count towards these services. These services include illustratively regular academic advising, alumni relations, regular career guidance offered to all students, university regular orientation, enrolling in established clubs, university student elections…