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Businessweek
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From the War Zone to the Classroom, Pursuing Business for Peace

A fellowship program for students from war-torn countries aims to create leaders who will help restore hope and stability in their homelands.



The HEC business school in Paris. *Photographer: Cyril Marcilhacy/Bloomberg*

By Bill Donahue
26 janvier 2023 à 20:00 UTC+1

How do you rebuild a country ravaged by war? Nongovernmental organizations have grappled with the question for decades, as has the World Bank and numerous graduate programs focused on global politics. War often renders governments dysfunctional and weak–incapable of effecting change. In the wake of bombing and combat, private businesses are frequently more

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nimble and better able to muster the vision it takes to, say, keep coffee shops running in Kyiv.

So, is business school the right place to teach students how to foster peace and stability? Adrien Nussenbaum, co-founder of Mirakl, an online marketplace popular in France, believes it is. Nussenbaum this fall gave $1.05 million to his alma mater, the French business school HEC in Paris, to launch HEC Imagine Fellows, a two-year scholarship program that will see students from war-torn countries pursuing a master's in management.

"We can create leaders who will prevent war tomorrow," Nussenbaum said in October as he introduced the program at the annual gathering of the HEC Foundation. "France is the country of human rights," he continued, "and HEC is a temple of education."

To Behishta Nazir, 23, one of four Imagine Fellows who arrived at HEC in September, Nussenbaum's words ring true. A native of Kabul, Afghanistan, she describes the school as a sanctuary. When she was growing up, Nazir says, "bombing was part of daily life. We'd wake to the sound of explosions and then rush off to school or to work. We lived amid war, but we had hope."



Nazir speaking at the HEC Foundation annual gathering in October. *Photographer: G. Maimone/HEC Foundation*

In 2019, Nazir began working with her husband, Matiullah Rahmaty, to run Brightpoint Consulting, an impact fund that he'd earlier started, aiming to stabilize Afghanistan by creating jobs. She helped several small Kabul businesses open and grow, among them Obrang, a design

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agency that now has seven employees. But when the Taliban seized control of Kabul in 2021, Brightpoint ceased operations.

“No one could work,” Nazir says. “Women couldn’t show their faces or travel by taxi. Men couldn’t shave. The Taliban hit people. The whole city felt gloomy and gray and dark.”

Nazir escaped with her husband to Germany and in September she moved to Paris to attend HEC. “When I got here,” she says, “I felt reborn. The hope came back.” Nazir and Matiullah, who’s still in Germany, are creating jobs once again, by finding fellow Afghan refugees remote work with Bulgarian artificial intelligence companies. In December, the duo started offering online classes in Dari, one of Afghanistan’s two official languages, hoping to connect the Afghan diaspora in the US and Europe to each other and to their home country.

A certain darkness still burdens Nazir. “I don't know if I will be able to ever see my dad again,” she says. “I feel like I have aged 100 years in the last year.” But she’s meeting other HEC students and telling them about her homeland and how it needs to build an economy. She’s joined a running club, which would have been almost impossible in Afghanistan. She says she’s hopeful that she will gain the tools needed to help to build a legitimate and sustainable economy in Afghanistan. “The country is beset by unemployment and poverty. That’s why people keep joining the Taliban,” she says. “What we need to do is give them a new way to live.”



The Career Center at HEC Paris. *Photographer: Cyril Marcilhacy/Bloomberg*

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Can a business school bring new life-along with economic security-to a war-torn country like Afghanistan? Yann Algan, the dean of the pre-experience program at HEC and an architect of the Imagine Fellowship, says that while there's "no magic recipe," students can study businesses that have shaped peace. He points to a Beirut-based, for-profit organization called Siren Associates that works with state agencies to foster peace and stability. Siren recently developed digital tools that the Beirut police can use to apprehend thieves who steal handbags and cell phones.

At HEC, where the language of instruction is English, some 200 students will consider such case studies this spring as they take two new elective courses spinning off from, but not financed by, Nussenbaum's Imagine initiative. In Business for Peace & Development, for example, MBA candidates will look at how private businesses might link up with NGOs and foundations in post-conflict nations to support integrated growth, climate, and biodiversity initiatives. In Public Policy & Social Responsibility, students will study child labor issues in developing and war-torn nations and put forth solutions to minimize the prevalence of child labor.

HEC's new offerings are inspired, in part, by similar courses at other business schools, Algan says. "We can't just leave it to the United Nations or the Kennedy School," he says. "We need to help students to see that business is the key determinant of peace in the world."



Zaid Kasem in the library at HEC. *Photographer: Cyril Marcilhacy/Bloomberg*

Zaid Kasem, an Imagine Fellow originally from Syria, believes HEC students already are learning this critical lesson. "There are important social exchanges happening on campus," he says. "The

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future business leaders of the world are here, and I'm talking to them about Syria and Lebanon. If they're able to have empathy-well then, maybe when they open a company, they'll give scholarships or internships to students from war-torn countries."

Kasem completed his secondary and undergraduate education in Beirut, Lebanon. After he finishes the HEC fellowship, he would like to land a job with a consulting company. Once he gains experience, he says he will return to Lebanon, where he believes the opportunities he has had at HEC will have a ripple effect. "I know this, because I've been given an opportunity myself, and now I want to give back. I want to tell everyone there that an opportunity is the thing that separates people from being vengeful and hateful."

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