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Syrian Higher Education post 2011:
Immediate and Future Challenges

Introduction

Whilst much of the current literature addresses the external displacement and migration of Syrians in need of education and support, **this policy brief focuses on the current situation of HE in Syria as revealed by university students, administrators and faculty who remain actively engaged in HE in Syria in private and public universities across regime- and non-regime-controlled areas. It draws on their direct experiences and unique insights into the crisis facing HE in Syria at every level.** The reality is stark and includes the politicisation and militarisation of campuses; corrupt governance; cronyism; inequity; violence; infrastructural damage; the catastrophic exodus of expertise; stagnant ideologically driven curricula; outdated textbooks; archaic teaching practices; the absence of applied practices; the loss of research; the devaluation of HE qualifications; and the consequent loss of professional trust and mobility for those both inside and outside Syria.

> **This is a tale of fragmentation, insecurity, plummeting HE quality and integrity, dysfunction – and survival.**

Although corruption and discrimination have long been features of Syria's under-resourced and authoritarian HE landscape, with an embedded security apparatus and the suppression of dissent through detention and disappearances, HE was seen before 2011 as broadly stable and functioning.

The purpose of the enquiry underlying this brief was two-fold, combining capacity-building with research. It sought to grow Syrian qualitative research capacities, through training and action-learning, and to facilitate continued contribution to academic endeavour whilst in exile; as well as to enhance understanding of the challenges facing Syrian academics in exile, and produce a robust report to inform policymakers, planners and funders amongst key respondents to the Syrian crisis.

The enquiry raises concerns about the long-term damage that a collapsed HE sector will do to Syria's social and economic recovery and highlights (a) significant priorities for HE, in which the international community has a vital role to play, and (b) ways in which that role could be fulfilled.

Research Context and Findings

The enquiry was conducted by Syrian academics living outside the country, working with a team of academics from Cambridge University. It builds on a study of HE in Syria pre-2011, conducted by the same team over 2017–18.

Despite the challenges of undertaking research in conflict settings, particularly where people are dislocated and fearful, the research identified three dominant and emerging trends affecting the future of Syrian universities.

Trend 1   Politicisation of HE in conflict

An important trend in the literature since 2011 is the heightened and intense politicisation of HE as a consequence of conflict. It also remains a fundamental feature of sectarian developments. The main emerging issues are:

- **Fragmentation.** The HE system in Syria post-2011 is fragmented and broken in many cases, particularly for those outside the support of the ruling party, in highly conflicted areas of Syria that lack both national and international recognition.

- **Heightened politicisation.** The politicisation of HE is being increased through a variety of means, many of which involve violence. These include corrupt governance structures, the militarisation of students and university practices, and a much stronger security apparatus leading to the fragmentation and/or complete breakdown of HE. Whilst the study respondents and the literature identify varying HE-associated political activity across the country, all HE institutions, whether in regime or non-regime areas, have suffered degrees of politicisation, including increasingly politicised appointments to senior management and academic posts in regime-controlled sites.

- **Human rights violations.** Detention, patronage, disappearances, kidnapping, displacement and murder are changing the demographic make-up of HE and have led to the social distrust of HE institutions as capable of educating students into the future, either as a humanitarian or civic intervention. Across the world, academics and students are seen as capable of significantly influencing wider populations in times of crisis and conflict and targeted as a particular threat; Syria is no exception.

- **Political realignment.** Political realignment has become a major obstacle to broad forms of internationalisation and collaboration. Regime-controlled universities have been forced to curtail their links with Western universities, while reinforcing collaboration with countries supportive to the regime, including Russia, Iran and China. These institutions were seen by the enquiry respondents to be of less value, lacking more 'modern' Western approaches to teaching and research.

- **Extra-state actors.** The interests and influence of regional extra-state actors, insofar as they affect the provision of HE within Syria, contribute to these internal trends, further restricting academic freedom and institutional autonomy, prized by the international academic community.

Trend 2   Curriculum stagnation, constrained internationalisation and the disappearance of research

Syria's pre-2011 attempts at HE modernisation, including reform of ideologically driven curricula and archaic teaching practices, the introduction of greater autonomy and quality assurance structures, met with considerable resistance. Despite the need for investment, there was a sharp decline in HE spending after 2000, as well as a high level of funding inequity across Syrian HE. Whilst the government was increasing the breadth of HE options pre-2011, it was reducing its funding, referred to as a problem of 'quantity over quality'

- **Loss of intellectual capital and under-resourcing.** The conflict has resulted in massive loss of HE expertise and infrastructure, aggravated by the diversion of HE-funding towards the conflict.

- **Stagnating curricula.** The government has tightened its control over HE sites in regime-controlled areas, including the content and delivery of curricula, with a continuing absence of practical application and increasing reliance on rote learning, outdated curricula and textbooks.

- **Diminished teaching capacities.** The loss of expertise, the non-attendance of staff and students due to insecurity, the appointment of recent Master's graduates to academic posts due to the absence of newly qualified PhD graduates, have all resulted in diminished teaching capacities and quality.

- **University accreditation.** The lack of accreditation of universities in non-regime areas has resulted in unrecognised, worthless HE certification for students both inside and outside of Syria.

- **Integrity of HE.** Reports of extensive bribery and cheating, allegations repeated in on-line grey literature, suggest that the war economy has led to increased corruption threatening the integrity of HE. Widespread fake certification has invoked distrust and diminished social mobility.

- **University-research culture.** Respondents spoke of the lack of a significant research culture in Syrian universities pre-2011, aside from that completed for PhDs or for promotion purposes. Limited funding or incentives, coupled with an overload of teaching responsibilities, left little time for research. Post-2011, even this minimal funding had disappeared, while the context itself has made field research almost impossible. Those in non-regime universities also believed their research would not be published, due to the lack of recognition for their institutions. Most participants reported that research had all but disappeared post-2011.

Trend 3 Access, student experience and employability

The experiences of students varied across Syria's universities, relative to location, control, resources and whether private or public, but all reflected the realities of a highly fractured and diminished HE sector, which despite attempted reform before 2011 was still in need of extensive modernisation.

- **Student access to HE.** Access post-2011 increased, as entry requirements were significantly lowered for both public and private universities to counter shrinking numbers, opening up HE to almost all who pass their Baccalaureate. Although security obstacles disproportionately affect access for female students, male student migration and militarisation reversed the pre-2011 60% to 40% male to female student ratio. Post-2011, female students constitute the majority.

- **Security and choice of university.** Despite improved access, attrition rates have soared, particularly in some urban areas, due to rising concerns for personal safety, increasing poverty, fear of detention or compulsory military service, lack of social and financial support and internal displacement. Post-2011, university choice was based on safety rather than quality considerations.

- **Educational quality.** Improved access has come at the expense of quality, especially in non-regime areas. In an attempt to maintain standards, some universities in non-regime areas have introduced additional evaluation tools, such as oral exams.

- **Teaching and learning.** Teaching after 2011 was described as 'traditional, prosaic and poor'. Whilst to some extent the case pre-2011, the loss of experienced staff, the appointment of untrained new graduates, the secondment of staff to teach outside their area of specialisation, outdated curricula and texts, and the absence of applied opportunities, have all resulted in plummeting standards.

- **Infrastructure.** Student respondents spoke about gaps in continuity negatively affecting the learning process, as buildings were unusable or inaccessible and water and electricity supplies often interrupted.

- **Corruption and militarisation.** Other student respondents berated what they saw as a dysfunctional sector, with evident corruption, politically biased HE management, the terrorising presence of security forces on campus and a rapid ongoing deterioration in the quality of teaching caused by the continuing exodus of academic faculty.

- **Progression.** Pre-2011 university programmes were generally seen as poorly aligned with the labour market and still are seen to be so post-2011. The process of transitioning into employment is also hindered by red tape, including the need for security approvals. Job opportunities are scarce across the board and wherever possible, students seek employment abroad, although often lacking the skills to do so. Employment opportunities in non-regime areas are seen as restricted to jobs in the Syrian Provisional Government, humanitarian and international organisations or in high-demand fields, such as education and healthcare, due to the outmigration of large numbers of professionals.

The deteriorating quality of HE in Syria and consequent impact on students will only increase as exiled academic staff are replaced by inexperienced and untrained postgraduate students, and there is an ongoing disconnect between academic study and everyday practice or applied research. Students are ill-equipped for work, which leaves new ministerial, security or scientific roles without adequately trained personnel. High rates of unemployment and lack of job ability or security are both factors that contribute to the re-emergence of conflict and a lack of stability in many post-conflict states.

If Syrian students are to compete amongst their peers and if Syrian HE is to be recognised in the future, current students will need to fill gaps in their learning caused by the disruption of conflict. Future students will need a broader and more comprehensive education; they will need also to improve their levels of English if they are to benefit from scientific journals produced by the broader academic community. Some scholarships and open-learning programmes have been developed in response to the conflict; these need to be made more broadly available, equipping those who remain or are able to return. Such support could impact significantly on the lives of current students, those of their communities and those of future generations of students.

Priority Areas for HE in Syria

The enquiry identifies a number of priority areas for response from the existing government, those of neighbouring countries and the role of the broader international community, including UN and NGO actors, in the current situation.

Security Personnel and International Standards in HE The introduction of civilian security personnel trained in conflict reduction approaches, coupled with broader encouragement to adopt international academic standards of transparency, academic freedom and rigour, could significantly impact on HE governance across the sector, as well as the management of individual universities. Such modernisation has long been encouraged. With the huge involvement of the international community in the conflict itself, and doubtless in any reconstruction effort, there should be further scope for partnership and collaboration over the introduction of international standards for HE.

A Civic Mission Equally important is the focus on a civic or community-facing mission rather than on political alignment and curricula driven by political or faith-based ideology. Internationally, HE is seen to uphold standards of transparency, autonomy, freedom and cultural pluralism, and this will be crucial to any post-conflict Syrian HE sector. National or local organisations can also impact on individual institutions by collaborating on community-facing initiatives, drawing on the support of academics, involving students in community-facing programmes and supporting work-related programmes and internships.

Modernisation and Capacity Building Any modernisation of HE requires additional capacity building for academics in research, teaching and curriculum development, adapted to fit the local context. Academics currently in exile who may return will be able to share new skills and knowledge gained in exile. Collaborations built with

partner organisations would support such capacity building and open-learning or virtual programmes can provide training from a distance. The inclusion of Syrian academics in research partnerships, particularly from non-regime areas where universities are not formally recognised, and the provision of access to academic databases, would counteract some of the frustration felt by academics unable to progress their discipline-related study and work.

The Role of Academics in Rebuilding a Pluralist Society There has been a haemorrhaging of intellectual and human capital and a threat to academics' careers as professionals, and to their cultural identities as scholars capable of educating future citizens of Syria. The clear breach of their long-term safety and security has undermined their ability to work as academics should: with academic freedom, autonomy and substantial up-to-date knowledge of their fields in order to shape the future of the public good in Syria. They are being prevented from contributing to rebuilding society across both regime and non-regime areas, which, in turn, severely limits their role in the rebuilding of a future society based on social trust and the cultural values of co-existence and pluralism. This is perhaps the biggest single agenda item that must be considered by international respondents to the crisis and those concerned with the future stability of Syria and the wider region.

The Stabilising role of the International Community The broader international community has been involved in the progress and outcomes of the Syrian war and will continue to play a role into the future. Currently both public and private universities show evidence of governance strategies that are divided between the regime's view of HE as a state institution with legitimacy assured through a security apparatus and human rights violations, and those who view HE as having a public mission, reflecting civic engagement, employment mobility, and as a crucial space for the development of new knowledge. If HE is to have any chance of operating effectively, there needs to be a unified move towards the latter.

In order to fulfil a civic role, universities will need to adopt international standards of academic freedom, transparency, equality of access, and rigour in setting standards, revising curricula, awarding degrees or conducting new research. **Providing human and financial support in each of these areas offers a real opportunity for the international community to have a stabilising influence in the immediate and the longer term future of the country and the region.**

Policy Recommendations

Recommended areas of support are organised into four distinct areas:

1. internal ministerial and sectoral support;
2. support to individual institutions in Syria;
3. support for academics, both internally and in exile; and
4. support for current and future students.

In each of these areas, there are clear roles for either partnering countries or international infrastructure organisations, NGOs or funding agencies, and university associations and institutions, and these can be detailed as follows:

1. **Ministerial or sectoral support**

   a) To de-politicise the HE agenda and review internal missions and governance structures, particularly in relation to the civic or community-facing mission of universities in both public and private universities.

   b) To encourage the withdrawal of security personnel from campuses and the introduction of international standards of academic freedom.

   c) To lobby for a fairer redistribution of internal financial support and additional external support and a recognition of the importance of HE within the education sector; particularly its role in educating future security and ministry personnel and a generation of professionals and of citizens.

2. **Support to individual institutions in country**

   d) To build internal capacity around the development of competencies and the restoration of standards and to provide financial, material and human resources to individual departments in safe areas, particularly in neglected public universities.

   e) To help build international partnerships with other Middle Eastern countries and associations of Arab universities, and to revive pre-2011 partnerships with Western and European universities, in addition to those developed formerly with the Soviet Union and still existing with Russia.

   f) To develop greater links with employment and labour-market opportunities and structures for careers support that aid the transition from study into work.

3. **Support for Academics, residing inside or outside Syria**

   g) To maintain their academic identity, either in Syria or outside, by providing access to academic databases and journals, access to research funding, discipline-related mentoring support or collaboration in international research partnerships.

   h) To access capacity building and research training, particularly in socially engaged research that could make a significant difference to the reconstruction effort in the future.

   i) To develop alternative pedagogies and teaching approaches, particularly practically oriented and work-related approaches and pedagogies for peacebuilding, such as community-engaged or service learning that take account of diversity and difference and focus on rebuilding trust and accepting cultural pluralism.

4. Support for current or future students

j) In English-language learning, as the language of science, in order to extend access to academic journals and the broader international academic community.

k) To fill gaps in learning in individual disciplines through the development of a range of e-learning or distance-learning programmes and through support for the Syrian Open Education programme.

l) To access scholarships at international universities to complete interrupted studies, particularly at post-graduate level, to enable students and academics to return to populate universities.

m) To identify work- and career-related opportunities in a future Syria that include, but move beyond, the immediate need for humanitarian personnel in peacebuilding efforts and into long-term careers.

n) To facilitate students' return and contribution to the future rebuilding of Syria as the next generation of medics, engineers, teachers, nurses etc.

While the situation is likely to remain unstable for the foreseeable future, such support could impact significantly on the lives of those who remain in exile, those still in Syria, and those who repatriate in time, as well as on their communities and future generations of students.

Consulted or Recommended Sources

For further information and recommendations please see:

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