Syrian
Higher Education
post 2011:

Immediate and
Future Challenges

Foreword

Most people are all too aware of the physical devastation wrought by the Syrian conflict that has raged since 2011 – hundreds of thousands of people killed, towns and cities reduced to rubble, millions internally displaced as well as over five million who have been forced to seek safety and sanctuary in neighbouring countries and beyond.

The damage done to Syria's intellectual and cultural life and capital is less immediately visible, but no less devastating to the country's future prospects. Schools, universities and teaching hospitals have been targeted and destroyed. Teachers and academics have been forced to flee, their schools, their universities and their homes. Most are now cut off from their past lives, left to fend for themselves, without opportunities to which their hard-won skills, knowledge and expertise could contribute, but which are now ebbing away.

Rebuilding an autonomous effective system of higher education in Syria will be a key part of the country's wider recovery and reconstruction process. As this Report makes clear, there will be many physical, organisational and policy challenges, but the first step towards overcoming these challenges is to understand them better. I therefore welcome this Report as an important contribution to this process, in which Syrian academics and researchers themselves have been essential; and congratulate the University of Cambridge faculty members and their Syrian colleagues who have worked together to produce this report, as part of the wider Syria Programme run by the London-based Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), with the generous support of its funders.

I also applaud this unique British organisation that is working to sustain, nurture and connect this vital part of Syria's intellectual and cultural capital. It needs support.

This same team of researchers again commissioned by Cara has already delivered a study on the state of higher education in Syria before 2011, which forms the baseline for this latest work. The recommendations of this second Report are robust and clear. Their implementation will require effective long-term cooperation between the authorities in Syria and in neighbouring countries, and the active and committed support of many different international organisations and specialists. I urge all concerned to come together now, to start to take this vital work forward.

Lord Mark Malloch-Brown
Former UN Deputy Secretary General and Chair, International Crisis Group

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Executive Summary

This report details a collaborative enquiry, carried out by Syrian academics in exile in Turkey and academics from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, into the state of Syrian higher education (HE) post-2011. It was designed as a learning activity and a collaborative study and included two capacity-building workshops on data collection, research ethics and qualitative research methodologies run by the Cambridge research team members for their Syrian colleagues. Each contributed their unique knowledge, understanding and expertise to the undertaking, critical to which was the Syrian co-researchers' reach back to former university colleagues and students still active in HE inside Syria. The Syrian and Cambridge team members jointly conducted the enquiry over a 12-month period, between 2017 and 2018.

The nature, complexities and characteristics of undertaking research in conflict settings, particularly where people are dislocated and fearful, constituted a challenging learning experience for Syrian and Cambridge researchers alike.

Due to the absence of reliable data on the state of Syrian HE post-2011, the literature review made use of grey literature[1] reports on Syrian HE and where possible, some first person accounts that were reported through media outlets as well as in research reports. We have endeavoured to choose reports that are from reputable sources but are fully cognisant of the limitations of such an approach and have sought where possible to corroborate these.

The enquiry drew on four sources of data:
* a review of existing academic and grey literature, the latter drawn from news outlets, NGO reports, and commissioned HE research reports on Syrian HE post-2011;
* 117 remote interviews collected by Syrian co-researchers, with university staff and students still actively engaged in HE in Syria;
* two focus group discussions; and
* personal testimonies from 19 Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey collected by the University of Cambridge team.

The aim of the study was to build qualitative research capacities of Syrian co-researchers through training and action-learning, to facilitate the continued contribution of Syrian academics to academic endeavours whilst in exile, to enhance understanding of the challenges facing Syrian academics in exile and to produce a robust report to inform policymakers, planners and funders amongst key respondents to the crisis on significant future priorities for HE. By building on a study of HE in Syria pre-2011, conducted by the same team in 2017, this report aims to provide a picture of the current state of the Syrian HE sector following this protracted period of conflict.

Although the pre-2011 Syrian HE sector was subject to attempts at reform, it remained badly in need of modernisation and, since the war, has become fragmented and dysfunctional, particularly for those outside the support of the ruling party and in highly conflicted areas. The research identified three dominant trends, many elements of which existed prior to 2011, and all of which have been exacerbated by the conflict.

Trend 1 Heightened 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. Whilst HE is by no means the only site of heightened political conflict, war-torn countries are fragmented and dysfunctional across many sectors. The study pinpoints key areas for consideration, as these impact on the fundamental integrity of HE into the future. The main emerging issues are:

* **Fragmentation.** The HE system in Syria post-2011 is fragmented and broken, particularly for those outside the support of the ruling party, in highly conflicted areas of Syria that lack both national and international recognition. This fragmentation is evidenced in the destruction of HE facilities and infrastructure; the militarisation of campuses; the forced displacement of students and faculty; the lack of qualified teaching staff; failed or non-existent accountability structures; and the disruption of education and academic mobility.

* **Corruption and militarisation.** 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.[2]

* **Heightened politicisation.** The heightened politicisation of HE 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, displacement[3] 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. Academics and students are seen as capable of significantly influencing the wider population in times of crisis and conflict and are targeted as a particular threat; Syria is no exception.

* **Political realignment.** Political realignment had become a major obstacle to broad forms of internationalisation and collaboration. Regime-controlled universities have had to curtail their links with Western universities, while reinforcing collaboration with countries supportive of the regime, including Russia, Iran and China.

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1 Grey literature typically represents reports conducted by agencies (e.g., UNESCO), media reports and on-line reports from charitable organisations. It is referred to as 'grey' because it may not have been peer-reviewed in a blind format. This will be particularly so for on-line reports. However, because of the current conflict in Syria there is a very limited number of peer-reviewed published accounts about HE, as this would require doing research inside Syria. This is currently very challenging as the conflict has undermined the potential for peer-reviewed research in HE. It is common in these cases to rely – where it can be corroborated – on grey literature.

2 Mitchell (2017)

3 Qayyum (2011).

These institutions were seen by respondents to be less beneficial, since they lacked the more 'modern', democratic and transparent 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,[4] met with considerable resistance in many parts of the Syrian HE sector. Despite the need for investment, there was a sharp decline in HE spending after 2000, estimated as one of the smallest shares of GDP in the world. Syria's public spending per capita in HE in 2011 was still well below the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average, with 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'. Increasingly complex reform challenges face Syrian HE post-2011.

- **Loss of intellectual capital and under-resourcing.** The conflict has resulted in massive losses of both HE expertise and HE infrastructure, aggravated by the diversion of already limited 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. In universities in non-regime areas attempts were being made to modernise the curriculum and secure research funding in the hope of restoring mobility for students.

- **Teaching and learning.** Teaching styles after 2011 were described pejoratively as 'traditional and theoretical', and 'prosaic and poor', and while this was to a considerable extent the case prior to 2011, the drop in teaching quality has been aggravated by the loss of experienced qualified staff, the appointment of untrained newly graduated students, the need to second staff to teach subjects outside their area of specialisation, increasingly outdated curricula and texts, and the continued lack of applied opportunities.

- **Diminished capacities and quality.** In addition to the loss of expertise, constrained mobility and non-attendance of both staff and students, due to insecurity, has led to cancellation of lectures and examinations and diminishing teaching capacities and teaching quality. With the loss of experienced faculty and the absence of PhD graduates, academic posts are being filled by recent Master's graduates, appointments facilitated and formalised by the introduction of a new regime decree in 2017.

- **University accreditation.** The lack of accreditation and recognition of universities in non-regime areas, which are still delivering the regime curriculum, presented further

difficulties for staff and students, providing certification that is unrecognised both nationally and internationally, despite efforts amongst some in non-regime areas to maintain teaching standards.

- **Integrity of HE.** Reports of extensive bribery and cheating, allegations that are supported by on-line grey literature, suggest that the war economy has led to increased corruption threatening the integrity of HE.[5] The war has also led to widespread fake certification, which has invoked wider international distrust and diminished social mobility for all those who either sought to obtain or carried HE credentials from Syria. Credentials are threatened, unrecognised internationally and undermined by corruption and education interruptions, leaving students and many academics, both inside Syria and in exile, facing greatly constrained 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 experience of students varied across Syria's universities, relative to location, control, personal safety and security, resources and whether private or public, but all reflected the realities of a highly fractured and diminished HE sector, which despite some move towards reform pre-2011 was still in need of extensive modernisation at the outbreak of the crisis.

- **Student access to HE.** Access post-2011 increased, as *Mufadala*[6] averages were significantly lowered for both public and private universities to counter the decreasing number of applications and competition for available places. Almost anyone who passed the Secondary School General Examination (*Baccalaureate*) could now pursue HE. Diminished competition has resulted in students having more choice over their subject of study, especially in non-regime areas. Pre-2011, there had been discernible patterns of state control dictating or directing students' life paths by controlling their university and subject choices (Buckner 2013).[7] Whilst greater choice in subject orientation may have emerged after 2011, the fragmentation of HE has meant that HE quality was either substantially diminished or non-existent. Although security obstacles disproportionately affected access for female students, male student

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4   See Dillabough et al. (2018a).
5   Kirdar (2017); Sottimano (2016).
6   *Mufadala* is the main method for admitting students into universities in Syria, whereby university applicants within a high-school cohort compete for available seats in three faculties of their choice, based on their cumulative high-school exit exam scores and the capacity of each programme. Following the Mufadala, a number of majors required discipline-specific exams in addition to the school leaving certificate.
7   See Central Bureau of Statistics 2004–9.

migration and militarisation reversed the pre-2011 60% to 40% male to female student ratio,[8] with female students now constituting the majority of students inside Syria.

- **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, students' choice of university was more influenced by safety and security considerations than by the pursuit of quality.

- **Educational quality.** Improved access has also come at the expense of educational quality, especially in non-regime areas, with a deteriorating economic situation and difficulties faced in securing the required admission documents from regime-controlled areas. In an attempt to maintain standards, public universities in non-regime areas have introduced additional evaluation tools, such as oral examinations.

- **Infrastructure.** Student respondents spoke about gaps in continuity negatively affecting the learning process as lecturers were unavailable or buildings unusable or inaccessible, coupled with interruptions in water and electricity supplies. Reports of less dire conditions at private universities in non-regime areas could reflect positive student attitude rather than improved material circumstances.

- **Progression.** A major criticism of Syrian universities pre-2011 was the lack of training offered to support student transition into employment. University programmes were seen as poorly aligned with the pre-2011 labour market and have remained so post-2011, with ever-diminishing employment opportunities. Labour-market alignment appeared to be particularly weak in non-regime areas. In addition, students deemed the process of transitioning to the labour market to be hindered by red tape, which included the need for security approvals. Job opportunities were scarce across the board and wherever possible, students sought employment abroad, although often lacking the necessary skills to do so. The absence of any centralised planning in non-regime areas contributed to a situation in which finding employment locally was almost impossible, regardless of discipline, with employment opportunities seen as being 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 out-migration of large numbers of professionals. Securing work elsewhere was equally difficult, because university qualifications from non-regime sites were not recognised either inside or outside Syria.

Recommendations

This report makes recommendations on priority areas for response from existing government, UN and NGO actors in the current situation, those in neighbouring countries and from the broader international community.

Ministerial or sectoral support and support to individual HE institutions:

- To de-politicise the HE agenda and review internal missions and governance structures, with a focus on equal access and the civic or community-facing mission of Syria's universities.
- To seek the withdrawal of national security personnel from campuses and develop and implement high standards of academic freedom and associated forms of accountability, including external reviews of accountability from a diverse set of HE actors with expertise in transparency, academic freedom and accountability.
- To build capacity around the development of competencies and the restoration of standards and to provide financial, human and material resources.
- To develop and re-engage in international partnerships with other Middle Eastern, Western and European universities; and to develop global ties with international HE charities and universities able to collaborate and coordinate future responses to the HE crisis in Syria and widen public awareness.
- To pursue links with employment and labour-market opportunities and develop structures for careers support and continuing education, development and mobility.

While it is important that university staff and students are kept safe in a fragile context, it is recommended that state security forces are replaced with civilian security personnel trained in conflict reduction and peace-building approaches. Such desecuritisation of HE, combined with the adoption of international academic standards of transparency, academic freedom and rigour, could significantly impact on the governance of the HE sector, as well as the management of individual universities. Such modernisation has long been encouraged.[9]

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.

There is also a need to introduce and formalise codes of conduct that respect international human rights for HE staff and students who remain inside Syria, as well as for those who are living in exile seeking employment and education mobility as a result of the conflict.

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 and political pluralism, and this will be crucial to any post-conflict Syrian HE sector.

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8   Dillabough et al. (2018a).
9   See Dillabough et al (2018).

National or local civil society organisations can also impact on individual institutions by collaborating on community-facing initiatives, including, amongst others, peace and co-existence education and trauma counselling, drawing on the support of academics, involving students in community-facing programmes and supporting work-related programmes and internships.

Support for academics residing inside or outside Syria

- To support initiatives to safeguard the security of academics still working in Syria and of students who are still enrolled in HE.
- To highlight the importance of academic, rather than government, control over curricula.
- To develop alternative curricula, pedagogies and teaching approaches and training to build capacities.
- To support programmes that will nurture and sustain Syrian academics in exile, including fellowship and scholarship schemes supporting temporary or longer-term academic placements and knowledge transfer for those unable to return at this point. This applies to academics in exile across the disciplines seeking education and employment mobility but would be of particular value to those from lab-based disciplines, who lack the infrastructure to continue their applied work and to early career academics, who would benefit from PhDs.
- To support programmes that will facilitate research collaboration and the building of professional connections between Syrian academics, both inside and outside Syria, and with colleagues from the wider regional and international academic and scientific communities. This would mitigate professional isolation and support continued academic development and active contribution to addressing the challenges facing Syria.
- To support mentoring and capacity-building programmes, central to which is English language training, as the *lingua franca* of the academic and scientific communities, as well as facilitating access to academic databases and journals.
- To provide research training, particularly in socially engaged research, to enable Syrian academics to fulfil their vital roles in the rebuilding of Syria's HE, research and social sectors, and in helping to develop a stable pluralist society.

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.

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 limits the potential for rebuilding 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 stability of Syria and the wider region, who recognise the vital role that Syria's academics have to play in Syria's future.**

Support for current or future students

- To support English language learning, as the language of global knowledge transfer, in order to extend access to academic journals and cutting-edge scientific knowledge, and to the broader international academic community.
- 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 a Syrian Open Education Programme.
- To lobby HE institutions and governments to provide financial support and academic pathways for continuing educational opportunities for students in Syria, in exile or during resettlement.
- To access scholarships at international universities to complete interrupted studies, particularly at post-graduate level, to enable students to return to populate universities in the future.
- To identify work- and career-related opportunities in a future Syria that include but move beyond the immediate need for humanitarian personnel in peace-building efforts into long-term careers.
- To create HE employment opportunities that would attract the most qualified Syrian young academics back from exile, including reassurance of academic freedom and safety from political persecution.
- To take the necessary measures to reduce unequal access based on political affiliation, sect, region or personal connection and introduce a model of affirmative (or positive) action promoting improved access to education and employment opportunities for members of marginalised groups, particularly women with limited financial resources and no links to the centres of political power.

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 and to improve their levels of English if they are to benefit from scientific journals produced by the broader academic community. There are currently scholarships and open-learning programmes that have been developed in response to the conflict, and 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.

Introduction

The war in Syria has generated the 21st century's worst humanitarian crisis, with as many as 300,000 Syrians killed and half the population displaced. This violence and insecurity have also had a devastating impact on professors, university students, and the country's education sector. Before the conflict, Syria boasted one of the Middle East's largest and most well-established higher education systems. War, however, has decimated the university system inside the country, and amongst the refugees are an estimated 2,000 university professionals and a minimum of 100,000 university-qualified students.[10]

Syria is in the seventh year of an immensely complex conflict and a devastating humanitarian crisis. The crisis has impacted substantially on HE within the country and beyond its borders, not just in other states in the Arab region but in Europe also.[11] As a consequence, HE is not only highly fragmented and at substantial risk of collapse in some areas but is facing deep divides across Syria as territorial powers are realigned, disputed and transformed.

This enquiry sets out to assess the impact of the conflict on post-2011 HE in Syria and to make recommendations for its future. It draws on interviews, focus groups and surveys carried out with academics and students, both those still active in Syria and those in exile. It also draws on published academic research, more traditional research reports, (although limited in number) and on grey literature, news reports and a sister report on pre-2011 HE in Syria[12] completed in early 2018.

The nature, complexities and characteristics of undertaking research in conflict settings, particularly where people are dislocated and fearful, constituted a challenging learning experience for the research team, as did the absence of relevant reliable data on post-2011 Syrian HE. The literature review therefore includes first-person accounts from NGO and online reports conducted by agencies (e.g., UNESCO) in addition to more rigorous research. While every attempt has been made to choose reputable sources, the authors are aware of the limitations of such an approach and have sought to corroborate any data recorded.

The results presented, and the recommendations made, reflect available data at this time.[13] In instances where the research team felt that some scepticism was required, this has been indicated in the text. It should be emphasised that any conclusions drawn represent the views of the people interviewed and cited and should not be seen as a definitive, overall statement on the state of Syrian HE as a whole.

The findings of the enquiry, presented in Section 3 alongside a summary of the pre-2011 context, suggest that while HE is a site of conflict and politicisation, it is also facing radical transformation, including the prospect of complete decimation or fragmentation and substantially diminished capacity. By comparing the situation both prior to and since the outbreak of conflict, this report attempts to identify the key regional, national, and international challenges facing Syrian HE in the future.

10   Brookings Institution (2016).
11   Watenpaugh, Fricke & King (2014).
12   See Dillabough, et al. (2018).
13   See Dillabough et al. (2018); Barakat & Milton (2015).

Summary of Research Methodology

An approach to capacity building and research

This section outlines the main research methods used and the methodological issues that arose; these emulate those of the sister report on Higher Education (HE) in Syria pre-2011.[14] The whole project had three clear goals: to develop the capacity of Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey to undertake qualitative research; to undertake a joint assessment of the state and conditions of HE across Syria pre- and post-2011; and to make recommendations for its future.

The enquiry was conducted jointly by a group of UK and Syrian academics, referred to here as 'the researchers' or 'the research team'. The term 'co-researchers' is used when referring just to the Syrian members of the team, with 'Cambridge researchers' used when referring only to the UK team members from Cambridge University. The term 'respondents' is used to refer to anyone who was interviewed in the research.

Building the capacity of displaced Syrian academics to undertake qualitative research is of considerable importance, not just to support the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, to facilitate continued academic contribution whilst in exile and to build professional connections as researchers, but also to develop skills that might be deployed in the job market whilst in exile.

Undertaking any form of enquiry in a severe conflict environment can be highly complex and dangerous for those involved, especially those in exile. It places particular demands on the design and conduct of an enquiry, as well as the people involved. It also impacts on the extent to which data can be verified or checked. Where there are discrepancies, this has been indicated, with, as far as possible, known scholarship cited alongside data collected for this project.

Overall design

Two four-day workshops were held in Istanbul in 2017. The first (3–6 June 2017) addressed the nature of qualitative research and the proposed study methods. Timelines, mappings and the instruments for interviewing were constructed collectively with the 21 participating Syrian academics and co-researchers. Qualitative interview training was provided by the Cambridge team over the course of the workshop, which included interview and note-taking skills. Allied ethical issues, such as confidentiality, risk and consent were also discussed at length and respondent-consent forms developed. Interview schedules were drawn up and documentation that could be used to enrich the project was identified.

Between the two workshops, the co-researchers conducted a series of interviews with HE staff and students who remained in, or had recently left, Syria. The key selection

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14   See Dillabough et al. (2018).

criterion for respondents[15] was that they should have very recent or current experience of HE in Syria. Interviews were carried out remotely with those in Syria and face-to-face with those in Turkey.

The second workshop (15–18 July 2017) involved reflection on the research process, data analysis, coding and writing up.

Research in the context of conflict and exile

Undertaking research in this context presented the research team with fundamental challenges, including of a philosophical, methodological, practical and ethical nature.[16] A number of key issues emerged that had to be addressed.

Philosophical and methodological issues

The research team needed to view the current Syrian context from an historical and geographical viewpoint and ensure that it was understood from regional, national and global perspectives, mindful not to conceptualise HE from a single historical vantage point or to superimpose external, Western ideals.[17] It was important to gain access to the full breadth of Syrian HE experiences, and to Syrian reports of actual professional behaviour, study documents or website descriptions taken from Syrian university webpages, as well as to seek out a much more expansive international literature.[18]

Respondents reported that regime and university documents were not always reliable sources of data. It was important to view them alongside other evidence or testimony and not to accept them unquestioningly.

Barakat (1993) argues for a second condition for conducting and conceptualising research in the Arab world: the need to view Syrian society as changing rather than static (regardless of politics), and to see these changes as a series of pressure points, critical events and endogenous and exogenous shocks that played some part in the enhancement or diminishment of Syrian institutional life; this includes the quality of HE.[19] Barakat writes that:

> the forces of change are explained in terms of internal and external contradictions, renewed historical challenges, encounters with other societies, the discovery and development of new resources, and invented or borrowed innovations. In this process, the West has served more as a challenge than as a model to be emulated.

A major aim of this enquiry was to identify the forces of change and potential shocks to the system and region, building an approach that addressed such issues in the broadest sense. A further aim was to ensure that HE was viewed in relation to existing Syrian power structures and their relationship to HE. Garnering some understanding of this was crucial. A final issue was that the prevailing conditions of conflict, increased suppression of civic debate and the varied forms of patronage in the Arab world had resulted in substantial feelings of fear and alienation amongst Syrian academics in exile, requiring careful consideration of research methods.

Planning the workshop also required careful consideration of the disciplinary perspectives of co-researchers and their areas of expertise. The majority were from the natural sciences and applied fields of study, with little, if any, previous training in, or experience of, undertaking qualitative research.

Ethics, anonymity and confidentiality

It was vital to uphold high ethical standards and core principles of justice, public responsibility and respect, particularly in relation to the Syrian university staff and students interviewed, and to maintain respect for cultural identities and autonomy at all times.[20] Respondents were fully informed of the purpose of the research. In view of the context, attention to confidentiality, anonymity, trust and security concerns in all aspects of the research, was crucial. Ethical considerations also arose in relation to institutions, funders, project partners, recruitment 'gatekeepers' and family and community members. The research team sought to navigate these issues and resolve conflicts by drawing on recognised academic standards, such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for research ethics, and by having full discussions on the ethical aspects of the work at every stage. A substantial amount of time was invested in on-site problem-solving approaches amongst research team members and in debriefing on how to respond to ethical challenges throughout the process.[21]

Practical restraints – matters of trust

Matters of trust were omnipresent and applied to both the Syrian co-researchers and their interviewees. Key factors impacting on the interviews were: the fears, hesitation and lack of trust experienced; how respondents imagined they might be viewed both within and beyond the Syrian borders; doubts about the potential usefulness of the research being conducted; and anxiety about the lack of knowledge of research methods whilst conducting the enquiry. In Syria, asking questions could be perceived as interrogation and security-service related. This is not unusual in conflict-associated research and in highly controlled HE contexts, where security and risk are central experiences. Finding innovative ways to establish reliable evidence was an important consideration.

Practical issues arising from the context

In light of the security issues surrounding interviewing and despite the fact that the interview schedules were designed for use either face to face or remotely, the majority of interviews were conducted through written questions and answers in order to ensure anonymity and protection of all concerned. Interviews were conducted either directly through the web using digital apps, or by emailing the interview schedules for interviewees

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15 See Table 2.1
16 Mauthner, Birch, Jessop & Miller (2002).
17 Barakat (1993); Buckner (2011).
18 We wish to remind readers that all sources were critically assessed. We are aware that national or official documents (including university website descriptions) must be evaluated within that context for credibility. This is why our documentary analysis of literature was as wide as possible, given the scope of the project.
19 Sutoris (2016).
20 See ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2015).
21 Neale & Hanna (2012).

to answer in a voice recording or in writing. Syrian co-researchers reported that, when they took notes during interviews, the respondents' answers were often very brief. They were not able to apply all the techniques learned in the workshops and felt uncertain about how to address this without more experience. Ideally, interviews would have been conversational in orientation rather than straight-forward questioning. Researchers were also aware of the underlying fears and background experiences of respondents who were coping daily with the threats of a conflict environment. This understandably will have had an impact on respondents' ability to express their views frankly.

Sending an interview schedule in the form of a questionnaire is a significantly different approach to an open-ended interview format, in which the interviewer might change the order of questions or probe more deeply in response to unexpected topics arising. This shift showed a lack of initial understanding about using qualitative methods. The second workshop resulted in a fruitful discussion about the nature, character and formulation of questions, as much had been learned from conducting the enquiry.

Summary of methods and sample

Table 2.1: Methods used

Two capacity-building workshops:

Workshop 1. Qualitative research and interviewing techniques: Maps and timelines exercise following an ESRC 'timescapes' methodological approach[22] (details of the methods are provided in Appendix A);

Workshop 2. Reflection of process and data analysis: summary of Arabic language documents; and workshop participants' writing on themes developed during the first workshop and literature review.

– Interviews with 19 displaced academics currently living in exile.
– Focus groups with displaced academics and students.
– Interviews with 117 staff and students inside Syria from 11 Syrian universities.

The sample consisted of 117 interviewees who were working (41 staff) or studying (76 students) in 11 universities (seven public and four private) in Syria, which were located in regime (eight universities) and non-regime (three universities) controlled areas, and 19 interviewees who were displaced to Turkey. The 117 interviews inside Syria were conducted by 11 Syrian co-researchers and collected by digital means (apps or email). The 19 interviews with displaced Syrian academics in Turkey were conducted by the Cambridge researchers. Two focus groups were also conducted, one by the Cambridge researchers with 12 of the displaced Syrian academics and one conducted remotely with students in Syria by a co-researcher. The number of interviews carried out by each Syrian co-researcher varied from two to 17.

Table 2.2: Number of staff and students interviewed in Syria by university type (public/private) and gender

University type	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Public	31	4	35	48	22	70
Private	5	1	6	3	3	6
Total	36	5	41	51	25	76

Table 2.3: Number of staff and students interviewed in Syria by area (regime-controlled/non-regime controlled) and gender

Area university is located	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Regime controlled	24	3	27	36	20	56
Non-regime controlled	12	2	14	15	5	20
Total	36	5	41	51	25	76

Respondents in Syria

For the project as a whole, the representation of universities varied greatly. For example, there were 35 respondents in one university (uni 4: 10 staff and 25 students) and for another university there was only one (uni 3). There were 35 staff and 70 student respondents from public universities and 6 staff and 6 student respondents from private universities respectively.[23] There were 27 staff and 56 students from regime-controlled areas and 14 staff and 20 students from non-regime-controlled areas.[24]
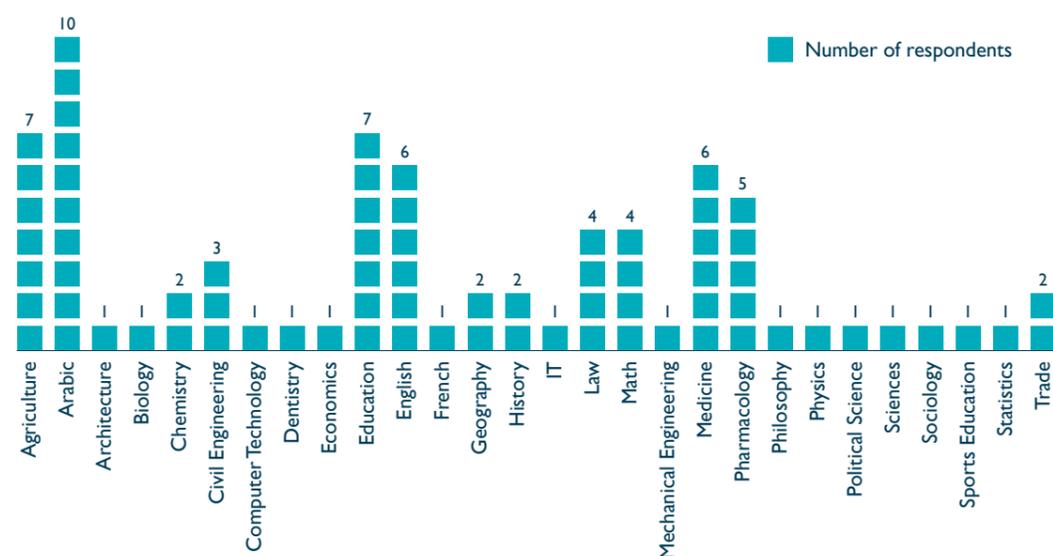
The student respondents from Syrian universities represented 28 disciplines, detailed in Graph 2.1. The 40 university staff respondents, who replied to the questions regarding the state of HE post-2011, were drawn from 14 disciplines, detailed in Graph 2.2.

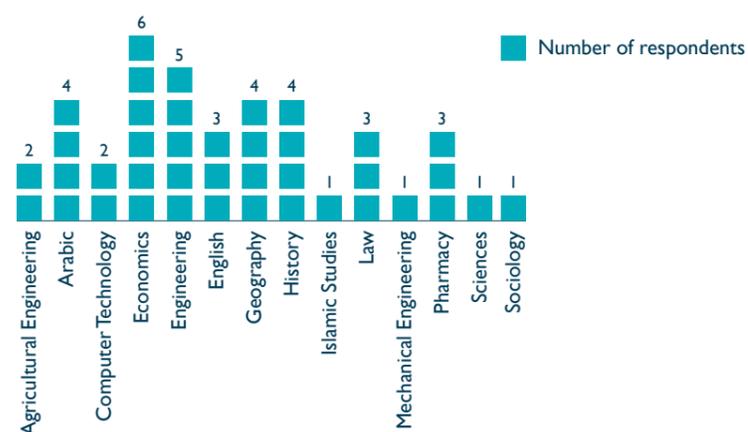22   Hanna & Lau-Claydon (2012); Neale (2012); Neale and Hanna (2012)
23   See Table 2.2.
24   See Table 2.3.

Graph 2.1: Number of student respondents by discipline (in Syria)

Number of respondents

10 — Arabic
7 — Agriculture, Education
6 — English, Medicine
5 — Pharmacology
4 — Law, Math
3 — Civil Engineering
2 — Chemistry, Geography, History, Trade
1 — Architecture, Biology, Computer Technology, Dentistry, Economics, French, IT, Mechanical Engineering, Philosophy, Physics, Political Science, Sciences, Sociology, Sports Education, Statistics

Graph 2.2: Staff by discipline who responded to questions on post-2011 HE (in Syria)

Number of respondents

6 — Economics
5 — Engineering
4 — Computer Technology, Geography, History
3 — English, Law, Pharmacy
2 — Agricultural Engineering, Arabic
1 — Islamic Studies, Mechanical Engineering, Sciences, Sociology

Respondents outside Syria

The 19 displaced Syrian academics, all male and residing in Turkey at the time of data collection, specialised in 14 subjects, mainly within the natural sciences. They had previously worked in three public universities in Syria, although several had also worked in private universities, which was a widespread practice in Syria. A number had sought scholarship or professional development or employment opportunities outside Syria, with a few still studying or working outside Syria in 2011. In each case, their regime scholarship or fellowship payments had been halted. At the time of data collection, some respondents were unemployed, whilst the majority of those in work had been unable to acquire work in their fields of specialisation. They are referred to in the text as Interviewee 1 to 19.

Co-researchers' reflections
Conducting research on HE in Syria

Security

The main challenges to conducting research were associated with security, the threat to one's own or to that of others. Syrian co-researchers reported that they had experience of post-crisis-related research being undertaken by organisations such as universities, NGOs and government agencies which they felt had been carelessly constructed and potentially dangerous to those involved, and where respondents had not been adequately consulted or debriefed. There were clear feelings of mistrust around this crisis-related type of 'research', which is unsurprising, given the conflict each had lived through.[25]

Viewing research as a legitimate and serious endeavour

Many potential respondents were highly sceptical of the value of research, believing that little or nothing could result from their efforts and involvement. They had experienced repeated broken promises from external parties in the past. Syrian co-researchers reported that many civil society organisations had taken advantage of the particular situation of university staff and students to achieve their own ends, which had resulted in few tangible benefits for them and other respondents. Those interviewed reported a loss of trust in such organisations. The co-researchers believed this to be a notable factor that had impacted on, and sometimes lessened the success of, the interviews they had undertaken.

Quality of the data

Issues around the quality of the data were discussed in the second workshop. One researcher observed '(there is an) essential problem here […] Most of these students are inhibited by fear, and consequently they give standard or idealised responses even when they don't believe them.'

Another said of their respondents:

> They often gave answers in which they did not believe, for example, in response to the question on the conditions of university accommodation, they cited eight students being housed in one room, which they would only have been able to get through personal connection. There were no services. They even had to buy drinking water by the gallon. And yet, they claimed that the accommodation was excellent as if they were living in a resort. The problem is with their mindset rather than whether their answers are right or wrong.*

Researchers were aware of the social pressures on respondents to answer in a particular way.

* The quotes highlighted in blue are the most representative quotes from literature and research interviews.

25   See Jebril (2017).

Learning as a researcher

Many co-researchers felt that they had learned a great deal about the processes and practices of qualitative research and particularly about the processes of interviewing and analysis. They believed that the experience of conducting interviews had enabled them to hone their skills and engage in time-management as well as the interview process. Some acknowledged that the process of qualitative data collection and analysis was both valuable and rigorous. The human aspects of qualitative research – where one listens without judgement to stories and feelings – were appreciated. For some, this appeared to be a liberating experience they had not encountered before. A workshop participant related that:

> In Syria, where I was a faculty member at a government university, academics learned to repress, because we were subjected to coercion from someone above us. And this was projected on to the way we dealt with students. Through these interviews, we learnt how to listen to the burdens of others. This was not the case in our time. This is important to me personally and professionally. (Workshop two discussion)

SECTION 3

What We Know About Syrian Higher Education (HE) Findings of the Enquiry

Introduction

Beyond the ubiquitous effects of the conflict itself, HE has been substantially affected by the political divisions between regime-controlled and non-regime-controlled areas in core areas of governance, decision-making and mission statements.[26] Whilst much of the post-2011 literature addresses the external displacement and migration of Syrians in need of education and support, there are very few reports focusing on the internal status and conditions of HE post-2011.[27] A particular absence is a first-person Syrian perspective that can be supported by reliable evidence.

In Section 3, therefore, we concentrate on examining Syrian HE by drawing on the direct experiences of university staff and students who have remained actively engaged in HE within Syria post-2011, from the perspectives of institutional survival, safety, functionality and fragmentation. Although narratives of exile in which Syrian academics and students share their journeys and speak of survival in host countries are included in Section 4, here we ask what elements of HE, if any, continue to function in any conventional fashion and, where possible, we seek to identify patterns of differentiation in HE across the national sector since 2011. Our data emerges from those we interviewed and others who were part of the project in various ways. We then assess the data against cognate information in the literature.[28]

The principal factors that have shaped and characterised HE in Syria since 2011 have been reviewed and the following three main trends identified:

- **Trend 1**   Heightened politicisation of HE in conflict;
- **Trend 2**   Curriculum stagnation, constrained internationalisation and the disappearance of research; and
- **Trend 3**   Access student experience and employability.

For each of these trends, we provide a summary of the pre-2011 investigation we conducted for Cara.

Trend 1 Heightened politicisation of HE in conflict

Summary of findings before 2011

Our earlier investigation of HE pre-2011 showed a system attempting to move towards greater autonomy and some restricted modernisation of university practices.[29][30] Whilst corruption and security have long been central features of the HE landscape, before 2011 HE environments were seen as broadly stable and functional. However, inequalities were on the rise, with an increased questioning of quality, governance and missions, and growing political and economic grievances amongst both the student and the wider Syrian youth population.[31] Reforms were seen as difficult to achieve because of resistance to any widespread liberalisation of the HE system, a firm authoritarian and centralised governance structure, and a failure to realise reform potential due to a substantial decline in HE financing and the absence of sector-wide evaluation.

Before 2011, there had been a long history of detentions, harassment and targeting of anti-regime university staff and students. Although these stark features of Syrian HE were seen as less pervasive between 2000 and 2010, there is substantial documentation of Syrian human-rights violations against students and academics dating back to the 'Corrective Movement'.[32][33] The key point here is that from 2000 there had been hope of positive HE reform, whereas the reality was that expansion took place at the expense of quality and equity, with market pressures and principles becoming a central feature, whilst government investment in public HE institutions diminished. This drove a wedge between elite students, particularly those in urban areas with access to capital, networks and finance, and those on the periphery who tended to be in the North East and rural areas of Syria.

High levels of preferential treatment were identified as one of the main forms of inequality experienced by students and staff seeking greater educational and career mobility within the HE system.[34] Corruption, which included bribery and bias in grading, was another feature of the HE landscape.

Whilst both Syrian scholars and Syrian students provided conflicting accounts of HE resources and infrastructure, many suggested that, although private universities had greater resources and catered to more affluent students, public universities were still

26   See Watenpaugh et al. (2013, 2014).
27   See Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
28   It is important to note that data pointing to highly functional HE in Syria are often reported by the MOHE or by universities themselves, which are often unreliable sources of data.
29   We wish to clarify that 'modernisation' is a term commonly used by think tanks and quasi private organisations such as the World Bank to indicate degrees of quality and ranking in HE. It is not our intention to follow suit but rather to indicate what the literature reported about the status and conditions of HE prior to the conflict. Modernisation is a term inherited from Western notions of financialisation and we are not wishing to characterise Syrian HE before the conflict as somehow 'not modern'.
30   Hardy & Munns (2015); Hassan Sheik (2013); Al Hessan (2016); Azzi (2017); Beck (2010); Beck & Wagner (2010); Borghi, Mainardes, & Silva (2016); El-Hassan (2013), Mualla (2010).
31   Buckner (2013); Dillabough et al. (2018); OECD (2016).
32   The term 'Corrective Movement' is used in official communications in Syria to refer to the military coup undertaken by Hafez al-Assad in 1970 and the ensuing program of reform.
33   Human Rights Watch (2016a, 2016b).
34   Alodaat (2013).

deemed the more prestigious. Many also pointed to an expanding, albeit stagnating, system, with little capacity for civic growth, with limited funding for HE research and innovation, in which the security forces played an escalating role. We identified a clear link between resources and quality of teaching and learning in HE. At the same time, despite an emphasis on reform, there was a sharp decline in HE spending in Syria after 2000, when it became one of the smallest proportions of total government spending and share of GDP in the world. Studies reported that from 2001 spending on education briefly increased, reaching a plateau in 2003, but largely benefitting primary and secondary schools rather than the HE sector.[35] The pre-2011 report highlighted that public spending per capita in HE in Syria in 2011 was still well below the OECD average.

Heightened politicisation of HE in conflict post-2011

HE institutions are inevitably shaped by historic political contexts including internal conflicts, regional tensions and wider extra-territorial political conflicts beyond state borders. They also, as Watenpaugh, Fricke and King (2014) have noted, play an important role in shaping the nature and character of the conflict, whether through student protests or in redefining the very meaning of academic and student life in Syria (e.g. Free Syrian Academics).[36][37] Importantly too, in Syria, spiralling internal political conflict has had an enormous impact on the capacity and functioning of HE institutions and on the lives and livelihoods of students and their teachers.[38] In 2018, it seems clear that the students and academics in HE institutions must be placed at the forefront of humanitarian and international HE agendas since HE institutions have the capacity to contribute to stabilising security inside Syria.

Under the broad heading of politicisation are a group of distinctive but related factors. Our approach is different from those reports whose main aim is to examine the challenges HE actors face as a direct result of displacement into exile.[39] Here we seek to assess the role of the conflict on HE inside Syria, and have examined the politicisation of HE through four facets:

1. mission, governance and decision-making, particularly in relation to security and the transformation of HE;
2. challenges to the physical safety and human rights of HE staff and students;
3. threats to academic standards and credentials; and
4. fundamental problems for HE resources and infrastructure resulting from the conflict.

To these notionally internal trends have to be added the interests and influence of regional extra-state actors, insofar as they impinge on the provision of HE in Syria.[40]

Mission, governance and decision-making

> *There has been a decline in the level of education in Syrian universities, especially in locations of fierce battles such as Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Deir el-Zour and Raqqa, as many university professors have left the country. In some of these universities, available lecturers are now limited to graduate students.*[41]

In light of the intensified conflict and the entrenchment of new territorial divisions across Syrian HE today, the concept of an effectively nationalised public and quasi-private system of HE is losing its significance. This is largely because the conflict has led to struggles for institutional dominance and survival, and to the associated emergence of new institutions in both non-regime areas and regime-controlled areas.

A further problem for institutional survival is the vast number of internally displaced university staff and students resulting from HE closures, fragmentation and disintegration, all of which are linked to the conflict.[42][43] In consequence, 'some UN agencies [are] largely operating in coordination with government ministries and security authorities, and many NGOs, where possible, [are] working directly with local communities in rebel-held areas, or with ministries of the Syrian Interim Government, established by the Syrian National Coalition.'[44]

The work of Hinnebusch and Zintl (2015), Milton (2017), Milton and Barakat (2016) and Altbach and De Wits (2018) demonstrates that fragmentation and decimation are constricting both social trust and faith in HE credentials. Successive NGO reports make it clear that HE has become a largely neglected sector since the onset of the war in Syria, due to the channelling of public sector finance to the military, for the cost of the war economies, and to the primary[45] and secondary education sectors.[46] It has also become a site of what Watenpaugh, Fricke and King (2014) identify as the para-militarisation of university campuses. They write:

> Last Spring we received reports from Syrian students in Lebanon about the paramilitarisation of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS), a Ba'ath-

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35   There is no reliable data on investment in private universities.
36   Established in Turkey, the Union of Free Syrian Academics is a group of academics who supported the development of the Free Syrian University aiming to support university students and academics whose education and employment were interrupted by the Syrian war.
37   Al Hessan (2016); Tinti (2017); Human Rights Watch (2017).
38   See also Altbach & De Wits (2018).
39   See Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
40   Important too are the roles played by a number of Western and Arab governments, by UN agencies and by national and international NGOs.
41   Al Monitor (2014).
42   See also Al Monitor (2017).
43   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
44   Butter (2016, p. 3).
45   Culbertson & Louay (2015).
46   Aras & Yasun (2016).

party affiliated and pro-regime student organisation. The students indicated that the NUSS, at times wearing insignia, were patrolling Syrian university campuses, guarding the university gates, and monitoring fellow students for political activism or disloyalty. Syrian students and faculty in Turkey also reported this development, describing it as a broader infiltration of Syrian university campuses by the security apparatus.[47]

This intense politicisation of HE through militarised governance has been marked by the strengthening of the regime's desire to retain power over all institutional sectors and regions of Syria, and a massively increased level of security control supplemented by systematic intimidation;[48] the reversal of any potential pre-2011 attempts to achieve a more 'modernised' autonomous form of governance in HE;[49] and the assertion of new political ideals through HE institutions in non-regime-controlled areas.

One participant commented as follows on HE in the non-regime-controlled areas:

As for HE before 2011, both public and private universities were working under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education. The strength of the university depended on how old the university was, such as Damascus or Aleppo University [...]. The same rules applied to all universities. However, after the revolution, in the liberated areas, public universities were no longer under the control of the regime. So, the reality of the public university changed [and these were more democratic]. The only problem in the liberated areas is the fact that success depends on personal efforts where academics try to carry on education in the buildings formerly used at the time of the regime, to allow the students to continue their education. Yet these efforts have lacked the support of any formal body or organisation. (Focus group discussion with academics)

Whilst pre-2011 data points to a stagnated HE sector with low levels of transparency and autonomy and high degrees of resistance to HE reform and modernisation by 'old guard' elites, the new post-2011 forms of HE politicisation reflect divisions within Syria across ideological divides, linguistic orientations and expressions of cultural identity. These novel expressions of rights and orientations relate particularly to areas no longer deemed regime strongholds or regime-controlled areas (although excluding any ISIS/ISIL held areas).

There are ongoing strains between regime-controlled HE and political desires in non-regime areas to operate state HE institutions as a necessary and urgent means to meet student needs and to achieve positive educational development in a time of war. Whilst increasing formalisation of institutions continues in non-regime areas of Syria, there is a reported lack of centralised and supportive governance. It is also reported that short-term responses to humanitarian needs have overshadowed responses to long-term HE needs.

Particularly important for understanding HE governance during the conflict has been the literature on leadership in HE, the security apparatus and war economies.[50] This literature suggests that university appointments in regime-controlled HE sites since 2011 have been linked ever more closely to the regime in ways not seen before 2011,

with some former security officials taking on leadership roles. It has also been reported that newly appointed leaders of regime-based HE institutions have emerged from Syrian business elites in the private HE context.[51] In regime-controlled areas, there are signs that governance and decision-making form a unified process which involves a substantially heightened autocratic approach to HE governance alongside a purge of those leaders and scholars who have shown signs of dissent, followed by mass HE appointments of regime supporters to leadership positions.[52]

One of our respondents reported the following:

In 2012, I was informed by the Air Force Intelligence in Syria that I should report to an intelligence branch in Aleppo because of an account that states that I was speaking up about injustices committed against activists and students. I took one night to think about this and decided to leave the city of Aleppo immediately. The security situation was very dangerous and the circle of protests was spreading like an oil stain. We received news about the detention of a number of academics from our university…two academics were assassinated. The Mukhabarat[53] assassinated them and then blamed the other side claiming that unknown fictitious groups were responsible for these assassinations. The regime plays these cards to increase popular support. (Interviewee 2)

Similar outcomes have been reported by Watenpaugh, Fricke and Siegal (2013) in Jordan where they interviewed Syrian students and academics in exile, living in camps along the Jordanian border, who reported mass violations of human rights through assassinations of academics and violent intimidation through both official and unofficial security figures and groups. The Mukhabarat and other groups such as the Shabiha[54] were seen as responsible for kidnapping and torture. Governance therefore emerged as a form of militarisation, premised on fear and insecurity.

Such governance strategies point to the fundamental conflict 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,[55] reflecting civic engagement, employment mobility, and as a crucial space for the development of new knowledge. Our interviewee went on to say:

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47   Watenpaugh et al. (2014, p. 12).
48   Tintl (2017).
49   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Zintl (2015).
50   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
51   See Dillabough et al. (2018); Sinjab (2017).
52   See also Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Zintl (2015).
53   *Mukhābarāt* is the Arabic term for intelligence or intelligence agency. The term is sometimes used negatively, connotating repression often by means of secret police or state terror, in Arab countries.
54   Loosely translated 'spirits', 'ghosts', 'shadows', or 'apparitions', this word refers to groups of armed militia or thugs operating in support of the Assad regime.
55   The public mission of a university represents a focus on public engagement and wider questions of citizenship through academic freedom. This aspect of a university's mission refers directly to the role of the university in cultivating, for example, a public good, reducing poverty and inequalities and in creating climates of political stability through problem-solving, critical thinking and user engagement.

> Upon taking decisions to leave, we went to a nearby town which had been freed from the regime but where the security situation was dire. […] We all then went to the border passage where the regime had no presence. It was a freed region. In the same year, Sept 2013, many Syrian academics established the Union of Free Syrian Academics. (Interviewee 2)

Concerns about heightened security and its role after the onset of the conflict were pervasive and desires for a different kind of HE were often articulated:

> The [university] mission needs to recognise the needs of society, receive students and arm them with knowledge relevant to the needs of society to achieve comprehensive development […]. (Uni 4_staff 7_M)

We asked our respondents: 'What decision-making bodies exist at the university?' and 'What kind of decisions do they make and why?' They replied: 'HE decisions mostly emerge from the security apparatus that is completely unrelated to education. Even the President of the university cannot make a decision without consulting the security apparatus. […].' We also asked: 'Have universities' governance, management, mission and values changed post-2011?' The reply was:

> They have changed so much. The political decision-maker is no longer interested in the universities or their tools, and decision-making has clearly moved into the hands of the security apparatus. The university has lost many of its values; there is no respect for freedoms and no separation between academic work and conditions in the country. The university has become like any other institution where there is no sanctity or safeguarding for the student and teacher. […] After 2011, decisions were increasingly affected by the interference of the Ba'ath Regional Command, National Security Bureau and other security organs. (Uni 4_staff 7_M)

Altbach and De Wits (2018) have corroborated such findings and Watenpaugh, Fricke and King (2014) further supported the argument that such forms of governance, infiltrated by the government and backed by the security forces, have culminated in disrespect for and distrust of HE in Syria.

Another respondent pointed to the ineffectiveness of the university during the conflict:

> The university is effectively only carrying out the work it is assigned for 40% or 50% of the time. The Rector would have in the past been appointed by the Ministry of Education. […] But now decisions are issued by the university administration solely in accordance with the security situation […]. (Uni 7_staff 3_M)

In other words, a smaller body of decision-makers, substantially tighter security regulations, fear, intimidation and infiltration, alongside a tighter architecture of intensified security-related appointments, are features of post-2011 governance and decision-making.

Decision-making was also heavily affected by heightened forms of autocratic practice within HE itself. For example, despite earlier decrees supporting greater university autonomy, one respondent (uni 7_staff 4_M) reported that, 'decisions concerning the university [should be] the university's responsibility but the party always intervenes.'

And another reported: 'I have seen no change except for more security interventions in university administration [… we need complete] removal of security branches from the university' (uni 10_staff 3_M).

Some on-line reports suggest that elements of the pre-conflict HE structure, for example, in Central Damascus, Sweida, and Quenetra, have survived and continue to function, albeit not without challenges.[56] A conversation between a Syrian journalist from Syria Direct, Al-Haj Ali (2016) and a student, Gharib [a pseudonym], who has remained in Syria to complete his studies, included the following:

> On the outside, university life in Damascus today looks normal. But any student who was here before […] 2011 or prior to that knows that it isn't normal at all. […]. You see things you shouldn't be seeing at a university, like people in military uniforms everywhere. University enrolment is constantly decreasing as young people abandon their studies or flee the country. Depression hangs in the air and clings to university-aged young people today, it's hard to concentrate. All students are under psychological pressure. […] Any student who's opposed to the regime risks arrest if somebody informs on them […] Education at Damascus University today is in a terrible state. Many professors have left the country. Others have been fired, for various reasons – corruption, so-called political reasons, *et cetera*.[57]

Many university employees have also seen their salaries substantially diminish. The Syrian state has had to garner economic support from UN agencies and national allies to support government ministries. Due to an increase in military spending there has been a decrease in public finances.[58] There are also signs that individuals within HE have supplemented their incomes through participation in the war economy, including moving the conflict and military directly into universities either by bribing students and faculty to support the regime or by using security informers to ensure students comply with security demands for information.[59] This kind of governance represents what is often referred to as the crony corruption of HE, reflecting the regime's governance strategy in regime-held areas. Also important is the impact of the security apparatus on staff and student livelihoods. There has been a demand to be partisan and loyal to the regime:

> Positions are appointed through the Party and security branches, often based on favouritism and special justifications. Decisions are taken by security bodies who have a list of names for such appointments. Things were different before 2011 in terms of order, mission, management and values. After 2011, the university became a monopoly with the goal of serving those loyal to the system and enabling students to serve within the army and security in order to protect the homeland. (Uni 10_staff 4_M)

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56   See Butter (2016, p. 6); Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
57   See Syria Direct, Al-Haj Ali (2016).
58   See Altbach & De Wits (2018); See also Kabbani & Salloum (2011); Kabbani & Kothari (2005); Kabbani & Kamel (2007, 2009); Sottimano & Selvik (2008); Street, Kabbani & Al Oraibi (2006); Polk (2013).
59   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).

Another staff member reported that:

> After 2011, the situation didn't change much, either in the areas controlled by the regime or in areas controlled by the Free Army. Collective favouritism and loyalties remained […]. Governance was often based on loyalty to an interest group or the financier and supporter of the educational institution. Decision-making bodies are split between the formal, such as the university board, and the reality of those close to particular interest groups (sectarian or partisan). (uni 10_staff 5_M)

Importantly, many respondents held values and ideals that stood in stark contrast to the highly controlled autocratic governance structures. For example, a university staff member stated that the university mission should 'contribute to the advancement and building of society through the provision of scientific programmes and the development of scientific research and knowledge'. […] and should 'show respect for the established values of the country and its heritage, and cultural diversity.' […]. Missions should be concerned with the 'dissemination of knowledge and providing a link between the university and the community' and university governance should represent 'institutional work within the team through transparency […].' Appointments should 'reflect scientific and administrative qualifications and decisions taken through a sequence of autonomous bodies (Department/ Faculty/ University).' When asked whether there had been any substantive change in the status of governance since 2011, the respondent remarked: 'Corruption remains widespread and frames all financial aspects of reconstruction and development,' (uni 7_staff 1_M).

Another important aspect of this sub-trend was the kinds of patronage described by virtually all participants in the enquiry. HE governance was reported, for example, as mediated by patronage arrangements between business elites and the regime's support for allied entrepreneurs, particularly in the private university sector. It should be noted that such claims in relation to financing can be identified only anecdotally, though they are evidenced in the war economy literature.[60] Sottimano (2016), for example, writes: 'Regime cronies, whose fortune and fate were bound up with the regime, stood firmly by their patrons ostensibly accepting that the unrest would soon end.' They continued to finance much of the regime-controlled private HE sector.[61] Mazawi (2011) has also suggested, albeit indirectly, that the demands of the war economy on HE had created a novel set of opportunities for exploiting HE as a kind of frontier zone for financial benefit, undermining good HE governance.

As previously noted, much of the financing for education has been directed to emergency funding for primary and secondary schools, a decision influenced by much higher anticipated 'rates of return' than those for HE; by the belief that primary schooling was essential to the future political and economic stability of Syria; and by the fact that, in post-2011 circumstances, investment in HE was peripheral to state sector rehabilitation.[62] The consequence is that in terms of funding, HE has been left behind.[63]

Challenges to the rehabilitation of HE are exacerbated by the regime's political desires; the lack of recognition of minorities (including the displaced from Iraq and Palestine); internal displacement of Syrians; massively heightened levels of national poverty not seen in decades; ethno-religious conflict; extra-territorial alliances; regional tensions;

international interventions; the role of ISIS/ISIL; and the vast and rapidly changing demographic composition of many areas across Syria since the onset of the conflict. Together, these factors have greatly complicated any 'post-war' HE restoration efforts.

Syrian scholars had a new vision for the university of the future. One respondent, for example, commented: 'we want to separate politics from our universities. We don't want war any more. We need to educate people to be able to live well and have meaningful lives,' (Interviewee 17). 'We need to bring war to an end and remove the political party from the university,' (uni 4_staff 1_M) and 'the most important step should be to separate the university from regime politics and the security authorities must be prevented from intervening in university management.' At the same time there was deep regret that no such initiatives existed (uni 4_staff 1_M, uni 4_staff 2_M). Shifting HE demographics, which include moving populations within the country because of intense conflict or the siege of HE buildings, and academics and students in exile, have intensified desires for de-politicisation, as well as for the rebuilding of social trust and the cultural values of co-existence and pluralism.

Non-regime HE developments

The conditions and status of HE in the non-regime areas are less good because at the time of the enquiry intense levels of conflict and violence remain. Consequently, there is scarcely any robust literature documenting HE governance and decision-making in these localities. On-line news reports suggest that in some areas there are simply no operational universities due to lack of financial support, ongoing conflict and bombings, lack of accreditation, safety concerns and the associated challenges of delivering aid support to the HE sector.[64]

Where rigorous post-2011 literature does exist, it does not amount to any nationwide assessment of the impact or effects of new, more transparent and autonomous forms of governance.[65] The grey literature suggested that any potentially pre-2011 positive governance in Syrian HE has been substantially undermined because individual leaders and developmental coalitions have failed to effect change in the face of powerful structural constraints to reform, finance and qualification.

There has also been a lack of coordination. Our enquiry suggests, however, that there are some signs that the governance of HE in the non-regime areas has, in principle, been designed to meet student needs and to redress political imbalances associated with pre-2011 HE regime governance practices.

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60   Milton (2017).
61   Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); UNDCP (2017).
62   See Milton (2017); Times Higher Education (2013).
63   See Kabbani & Salloum, 2011; see also Kabbani (2009); Khalifa & Ayoubi (2015); Khalifa & Mahmoud (2015); Mazawi (2005, 2011).
64   See Syria Direct, Al-Haj Ali (2016).
65   See Al-Maaloli (2016); Al-Shalabi (2011); Arab Network for Quality Assurance (2012); Ayoubi (2010); Azmeh (2017); Buckner (2011); Hassan Sheik (2013); Wagner (2010); Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c); Dillabough et al. (2018); Devarajan (2016); Kayyal (2010); Mazawi (2005, 2011).

As a participant from a non-regime-controlled area reported, the mission of 'the university is to scientifically build humans and promote graduates' scientific and cultural knowledge to qualify them for the labour market,' and that 'after 2011 the process of education came to a stop as result of the Syrian revolution. Lately, universities have been opened in the liberated regions and their main mission is to revive hope for students who were deprived of education and supply the labour market with new graduates under the new changes […]'.

Yet these newly founded institutions are not without their challenges:

> After 2011, the universities were few in number in the liberated regions and appointments were made based on the availability of qualified and competent persons. It is worth mentioning that the number of academics still in Syria is very small because of forced migration linked to the political and economic instability of Syria.' (Uni 5_staff 8_M)

Others shared the need to have national coordination models for HE.

A staff member in a non-regime area described one of these institutions to us: 'The university […] seeks to ensure education for students in the liberated regions who cannot travel to the universities of the regime. […] Teachers against the regime are reconnected with the university. The University Council and the Higher Education Council pass all the decisions related to university management.' But these efforts are not without their challenges: 'A lack of recognition may lead to frustration and loss of hope. We may not be able to conduct research because publishers do not acknowledge our university,' (uni 5_staff 1_M).

Another account from our enquiry documents this institution's social mission. It develops qualified persons and 'scientific services to society and […] is managed by efficient employees according to a strong autonomous but internally controlled system' and […] 'appointments are based on experience and competency'. […]

Governance 'has changed since 2011 because the revolutionary principle was followed and relations with the regime were severed but the curriculum adopted by the universities in the liberated regions remained those of the regime. […] Our work is based on academic principles and mutual respect between the administration and the teaching staff [and] is adopting a similar approach to the highest-ranking universities of the world. […] The quality assurance of my work improved as a consequence of high levels of mutual respect. […] Before 2011 treatment depended on favouritism and party committees but now it is based on experience and competency' (uni 5_staff 3_M).

However, challenges do remain and there was a clear acknowledgement of the complexity of conducting HE in a conflict zone. 'There is the fragility of society and the absence of leadership to work in the liberated regions,' (uni 5_staff 3_M). However, others stated that there are 'qualified persons and specialists in all aspects of society' and 'an open and continuously renewed system that constantly aims for development,' (uni 5_staff 4_M). Another account suggested that the 'liberated university curriculum is educational, informative and enlightening' and 'is managed by specialists in every department' and appointments are […] 'based on their qualifications'.

Another participant stated that appointments were no longer dependent on party membership (uni 5_staff 6_M). It would seem that, at least from 2014, there were attempts at establishing new HE pathways, focused on the civic engagement of HE seeking to respond through humanitarian action to the protracted conflict in Syria.

The stress on challenges has not undermined hope for a new vision for HE in non-regime areas: 'Although this is a difficult and a fateful phase, there are academics who are doing their best, using their experience and skills to realise progress in HE and to develop a scientific foundation of knowledge […] to match rapid developing technological and scientific progress,' (uni 5_staff 8_M).

Purges, detention, disappearances and violence

> *In many ways, university education for Syrians was linked to social mobility and the attainment of middle-class status. The promise of HE is a critical element of the populist social contract that buttresses an otherwise authoritarian regime.[66] As a consequence, university education was a way to compensate loyal segments of Syrian society. Were faculty too open in criticising the regime […], it could lead to expulsion, harassment by the secret police, imprisonment and even torture; for men it also could result in the revocation of military deferments. For that reason, students generally did not engage in activities that could be deemed anti-regime. Criticism of the regime and dissent amongst faculty were equally rare. […] [67]*
>
> *In general, Syrian universities are used to produce quiescence and political support and serve in many ways to foster indoctrination; academic freedom in the Syrian academy is non-existent.[68]*

In a report for the Brookings Institute on the Arab World, Barakat and Milton argue that HE is often an unrecognised casualty of war.[69] In this section, we discuss the part played by the security apparatus in purging, detaining and/or kidnapping students and faculty (and their family members) against a general background of extreme levels of violence.[70] This is attested to in a number of sources, both published and on-line. For example, a Times Higher Education report written by the British Council's Sally Ward (2014) described the challenges faced by students and university staff in confronting overwhelming dangers in pursuit of their university education alongside fears of infiltration by the security apparatus within university spaces.[71]

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66   Heydemann & Leenders (2014); Hinnebusch (2012); Leenders (2013a, 2013b, 2013c).
67   Barakat & Milton (2015, p. 1).
68   Watenpaugh et al. (2013).
69   Barakat & Milton (2015, p. 1).
70   Noteworthy is that evidence for this trend is reported substantially across a range of literatures and by respondents in our enquiry.
71   See also Watenpaugh et al. (2013); Butter (2016); UNHCR (2016, 2017).

Students and academics are presented in this literature as targets for militants seeking to influence the political practices of a wider population of students and civic actors. Some of these students and faculty have reportedly been forced into military action since 2011 and others have fled to avoid military service.[72] Devarajan (2016), from the Brookings Institute, also reported that violent extremists have exploited universities to engage in the recruitment of students for the military. Such sources make it clear that HE has been substantially affected by the conflict.[73]

Those who remain in HE as students or employees risk danger and the threat of dismissal, expulsion or detention and torture.[74] Clarke-Saddler (2017) reported, for example, that in 2013 life for students and faculty inside Syrian HE was becoming increasingly untenable and that many individuals were being purged from the system. Turkmani (2016) reported that in January 2013 a bomb struck Aleppo, killing 87 people, and that many students and staff were forced to flee to Jordan.[75] She wrote that the 'Syrian HE system is in meltdown … students and academics have fled the country, are targets for militants, kidnapping is on the rise because they have relatively high salaries and influence, a number of the universities have been forced to close, whilst those that remain are barely functional.' Similar observations were supported by our interviewees. Interviewee 19 recalled that:

> A Syrian aircraft bombed the Faculty of Architecture and students were killed. We are only scholars [and not politicians] in the Faculty of Humanities and we made a statement against aerial attacks and bombing churches and historical places in Aleppo. We were summoned to the Security Centre and interrogated and pushed to make a counter-statement declaring that we were misled, which was irrational.

The reported use of universities as sites of intense policing and warfare also emerged: 'The military police came and took them [academics and students] from the university. What is more important is that universities were transformed into military barracks.' We went on to ask our respondent: 'So you had army personnel at the university?' They replied: 'There were members from Security Forces that attended the university and observed students and teachers. And the administration of the university provided them with reports or names of personnel or students who opposed the regime,' (Interviewee 19).

The nature and character of intimidation and the scale of security infiltration was corroborated by another interviewee: 'You will be controlled in everything you do in your life by the secret services and the regime, […]. And there is also infiltration within the academy itself,' (Interviewee 7). Such infiltration is not new. It has been practised in Syrian HE before the onset of the conflict and in other similar autocratic regimes.[76]

The literature on the nature of the security apparatus in HE indicated that academics in Syria were targeted from the beginning of the uprising because some were seen as vocal opponents of repression.[77] We were informed through focus groups that faculty and students at the University of Aleppo were cut off from other cities, arrested at checkpoints and experienced high levels of intimidation, detention and harassment. Students were also forced to negotiate highly dangerous checkpoints manned by regime troops or IS militants to move from eastern Aleppo to the west side of the city, where the university was located.[78]

We also learned from focus group participants that academics within particular Syrian territories controlled by ISIS/ISIL were only allowed to work at universities if they conformed to Sharia law.[79] They experienced extensive and violent intimidation to ensure these requirements were met. 'Militants replaced science and maths courses – which they considered against the teachings of Islam or simply not useful – with courses on Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and on the Quran.'[80]

In the course of a conflict such practices are designed to inculcate both fear and complicity amongst students and faculty, with any perceived dissent heavily monitored. Yahia and Turkmani (2011) in particular have pointed to the pervasive fear that such targeting engenders and its impact on research cultures that were already stagnating because of a dearth of both intellectual capacity and research funding. The combined challenge this has represented for the integrity and quality of HE was reported by one of our interviewees: 'The reality of education is that it is very poor because of the terrible destruction that affected the universities, the difficulties of travel, the division of the country and the lack of research funding. We hope to support HE in order to rebuild Syrian society. […] Most academics have been pursued by the Syrian regime because of their role in the Syrian revolution. (uni 6_staff 1_M)

A 2013 University of California Davis report indicated that many students and academics were highly politicised as a result of the combination of grievances they had suffered: 'University students and recent graduates, especially those with advanced social media skills, were often at the forefront of organising demonstrations on and off campuses,' (p. 9). […][81] 'Student leaders and their families were harassed by secret police; others were jailed and some killed while in custody.' (p.9). […] and 'as the war itself expanded, especially to the cities of Aleppo and Homs, Syrian students faced increasing security concerns on campus' (p. 10). The report highlighted the fragmentation the war had caused across the HE sector and the new forms of associated corruption that have ensued. It also indicated how internal displacements and security fears restricted access to HE, primarily through checkpoint policing practices: 'At these checkpoints, civilians and their vehicles are searched and their papers examined, and students and faculty can be detained or arrested at the soldiers' discretion or secret police […].' (p. 10). The report also drew attention to the plight of female students and the particular concerns for their safety when being scrutinised by soldiers manning the checkpoints (p. 10).

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72   See Devarajan (2016).
73   See Barakat & Milton (2015); Altbach & De Wits (2018); Clarke-Saddler (2017).
74   As reported in Yahia & Turkmani (2011).
75   See also Luo & Craddock (2016); Marcus (2016).
76   See, for example, Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
77   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Goodman (2016).
78   Sheikh (2016).
79   See also on-line literature such as the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund (2018), Sheikh (2016).
80   See Sheikh (2016) for further corroboration.
81   Watenpaugh et al. (2013).

The politics and policies of intimidation have generated both visible and less tangible impacts that are felt at the level of educational and human wellbeing, both of which are undermined. Watenpaugh, Fricke and Siegal (2013) concur: 'The practice of disappearing' predates the Hama Massacre of 1982, which resulted in the murder of 10,000 to 30,000 Syrians. The number detained during the rule of Bashar al-Assad has grown dramatically. From 2011, human-rights groups report that well over 10,000 people were allegedly missing or had been placed in custody since the protests began, many of whom were thought to be academics and students. Although this figure will be out of date, new figures are difficult to ascertain. The British Council's John Law (2016) argued that HE integrity has been consistently undermined by a seemingly endless conflict between groups and the growing and intensifying security control and violence. Numerous references in our enquiry were made to 'absolute security control' (uni 1_staff 1_M), corruption and 'random arrests' (uni 10_staff 4_M). This is how Interviewee 16 recalls the traumatic event experienced by his colleagues:

In 2012 I heard from my colleagues in our laboratory that there were soldiers who came to our university, broke down the doors, destroyed everything and hit everybody there because they had protested against the regime.

Another report of violence directed towards an academic staff member was recalled by Interviewee 6:

One of the professors was dragged away by two security officials in front of the students. That professor was taken to prison and charged because of his political views.

The general atmosphere within universities was of pervasive fear, in which 'anyone working at the university is stopped from communicating with anyone outside,' (Interviewee 3). This heightened insecurity has undermined university staff's morale and motivation to carry on: 'The absence of principles has negatively affected my performance and I have lost initiative and stability,' (uni 2_staff 4_M). Widespread corruption has also ensued: 'All means of fraud are exercised openly and exposed due to the absence of control,' (uni 10_staff 4_M).

Conflict, corruption, undermined credentials and the diminishing quality of HE: findings after 2011

Other effects of the conflict include the undermining of the quality of HE offered to students; interruptions to degree completion; educational stagnation; and the undermining of both student and staff credentials. The lack of continuity has led to interruptions in educational trajectories; constraints on internal mobility; a lack of recognition of certification both within and beyond Syria; and extended lengths of degree study inside Syria, as well as to the postponement or non-completion of exams.

This is not only a problem in Syria; it is also experienced by students and faculty who are in exile. The literature also evidences the stagnation for academics and the lack of career mobility.[82] Displaced academics are at substantial professional risk, as their working lives and ongoing development as scholars have been suspended. The resultant loss of

intellectual capital results in limited mobility and severely interrupted or prematurely terminated career trajectories, in some cases permanently. Academics are also central to Syria's cultural development and heritage, a critical element of this loss that must not be overlooked.

These observations demonstrate the fundamental loss of 'social and cultural capital' that would have been acquired had faculty and students not been internally displaced or forced to flee. They show the power of wartime economies to encourage and facilitate HE corruption as well as fraudulent activity both within Syria and abroad. The experience of forced exile also means that it is harder to achieve new credentials, to gain re-accreditation or access to university education as a consequence of a range of impediments, including linguistic challenges, legal status barriers and funding difficulties. The on-line literature echoes this, with references to a lost generation at every level of the education system.[83]

Educational career interruptions for young men, as the largest group of displaced students and faculty, are widely cited. Participants also highlighted the significant loss of mid-career and senior male academics as bearers of intergenerational knowledge for students and early career scholars alike.[84] There are, however, far fewer references to the loss of career opportunities for women or female academics, which are also highly likely to be compromised, particularly if women are now single parents living in poverty and out of school and education.[85]

One consequence of both internal and external displacement has been that many students and academics seek out fraudulent degrees or attempt to obtain fake certification. In focus groups with participants in a liberated region of Syria we learned more about this issue:

In the […] liberated areas, there is a very strong desire from the academics to start correctly and they have even set criteria for HE depending on the resources available to them. At the beginning, there were some problems, such as fake Baccalaureate certificates [for entry into university], which impacted on the quality of education, but then we collected the formal list of [secondary school graduate] names from the Higher Education Ministry to allow us to exclude them. For university staff, there is a database that can be checked. So, this matter has improved […] and we have managed to get very good results as free academics. We chose only free academics so there are no [regime] insiders or spoilers. (Focus group discussion with academics)

82   See Avery & Said (2014). Powerful reporting on those who are externally displaced in neighbouring countries has been done by: Watenpaugh et al. (2013); Watenpaugh et al. (2014); Turkmani, Ali, Kaldor & Bojicic-Dzelilovic (2015); Turkmani & Haid (2016); See also Yavkan & El-Ghali (2017).
83   Marcus (2016); Milton (2013); Barakat & Milton (2015); Milton & Barakat (2016); Watenpaugh et al. (2013): Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
84   Milton (2017), Milton & Barakat (2016).
85   This is a significant area of needed research but is virtually non-existent or being conducted outside Syria in smaller scale projects.

The same respondent stated that: 'The [free] academics running the university checked all applicants' documents to see if they were teaching at universities and to assess whether their documents were original or not. If fake, […] we publicly exposed them. This is a simple example of a strong will to build something correct in the liberated areas,' (focus group discussion with academics).

Similar challenges were reported elsewhere but were more broadly seen in relation to general HE corruption and war economies both inside and beyond Syria's borders: 'After 2011, there were some universities that were created randomly. [Essentially] it was fraud, cheating for commercial gain. Their sources were not even known,' (focus group discussion with academics). Another participant also told us that: 'This happened in Idlib and the Western Aleppo countryside. But also, most of these fraudulent commercial centres were located in Turkey.' When asked why this happened, one interviewee stated that it was 'entirely for commercial gain' (Interviewee 7). Another interviewee stated that: 'They exploited the needs of the Syrian students,' (Interviewee 8).

Another report, concerned with HE teacher certification, identified fake certification amongst teachers who were trying to gain employment in Turkey. In relation to the quality of school provision for Syrian children in Turkey, one interviewee reported that:

> In Turkey my colleague held a meeting where he gathered all the teachers and tested each one by one and checked their certificates. There were about 260 fake certificates. They told the Turkish government but the Turkish government didn't do anything. (Interviewee 16)

In a later communication we learned that while the Turkish government's neglect of complaints concerning fake certification was a problem initially, it later adopted a system to allow verification of Bachelor's and HE certificates.

Other aspects of quality were also diminished as a result of the conflict. Interviewee 19 reported that:

> 'Teaching continued but with varying degrees of quality. The number of students [substantially] decreased, as did the number of teachers […] because they were recruited to the military [...] leaving a shortage […]. So, the whole academic process was affected.

This problem also extended to the formal examination process and who was or was not qualified to adequately assess the students: 'Before the crisis, members of the postgraduate examination boards were chosen from all over Syria. Now the examination boards are from the same university and may include unqualified members or members from different disciplines,' (uni 4_staff 10_M).

Teaching has also been negatively affected by the loss of specialised and highly qualified academics: 'The most highly qualified can easily find work abroad, but they leave gaps [that are] likely to be filled in unsuitable ways. European countries have offered many grants to Syrian academics,' (uni 4_staff 10_M).

Staffing issues after 2011

Comparison of the situations pre-2011 and post-2011 shows that staff capabilities had significantly deteriorated (uni 11_staff 1_M). Interviewee 2 shared concerns about the diminished quality of postgraduate education:

> This stage of education, which is the link between undergraduate education and academic careers, is now completely missing. It is a very delicate stage. They haven't taken anyone in graduate studies in six years of war. (Interviewee 2)

Syrian universities are coping with the problem of staff shortages by appointing recent graduates to teaching positions: 'A recent graduate with no experience was appointed as a lecturer,' (uni 9_student 1_F). Minimum qualifications for lecturers were lowered from a Master's to a Bachelor's degree and for [senior academic positions] from a PhD degree to a Master's degree (uni 4_staff 4_M). According to a staff member from a private university in a regime-controlled area 'most new employees after 2011 were accepted because there was no competition,' (uni 8_staff 4_M).

The student/teacher ratio after 2011 remains unclear. According to one respondent, the ratio is dependent on the subject:

> It varies from one college to another, ranging from a professor for every five students at the College of Petroleum Engineering to a professor for every 155 students at the School of Law. (Uni 10_staff 2_M)

It would seem that in both public and private universities in regime-controlled areas the student numbers are dependent on the number of qualified staff and that new laws were being introduced to respond to these challenges: 'Due to severe decreases in the number of PhD students, a new law will allow a university to accept 10 students for each [employee with a] Master's,' (uni 8_staff 4_M). This work was corroborated by a report written for Al Monitor (2014) on education under attack. This report suggested that many professors had moved abroad, which forced universities to hire those holding only Master's degrees leaving the quality of HE much diminished.[86]

Infrastructure and resources

A final aspect of the politicisation of HE is the strain on, and destruction of, HE infrastructure and resources. However, the stability of HE seems to vary in relation to the region and location of HE institutions and the capacity to resource them. For example, participants and respondents suggested to us that some private institutions were still functioning well in regime-controlled areas and that public institutions in regime-controlled areas had been less affected by the conflict. This differentiation in functionality was also evidenced in some reports (see Yahia & Turkmani, 2011).[87]

Although the literature is again not robust, with mainly reports and journalistic accounts of the damage to infrastructure,[88] data that focused on infrastructure and resources after

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86   See Al Monitor (2014).
87   Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
88   Turkmani, Ali, Kaldor & Bojicic-Dzelilovic (2015); Turkmani & Haid (2016); Turkmani (2016).

2011 highlighted the substantial destruction in Syrian universities and cities. Reports of destruction of university buildings and student accommodation were extensive, as well as reports of power cuts and water shortages:

> In some cities, there was no electricity at all and the people depend on private power generator to get electricity during the day. The internet was also badly affected because of phone-line cuts. Some people used to go to special centres that provided satellite internet. This is in the liberated areas outside the control of the regime. (Interviewee 9)

Others said that: 'Electricity is available for a maximum of six hours a day. […] with extensive periods of water cuts,' (uni 4_staff 10_M). Also: 'There were no materials to do experiments with, nothing was available, water, electricity, so many difficulties,' (Interviewee 16). Student accommodation was both a target of war and, sometimes, a refuge for displaced groups. For example, Interviewee 4 told us that student accommodation was either destroyed by bombs or occupied by students and staff displaced from other regions. This same interviewee told us that university staff 'decided to sometimes live in student accommodation because travel had become incredibly difficult as result of heightened security,' and that 'a large number of students lost their accommodation,' (uni 4_staff 5_M).

Commenting on the extent of destruction, a staff member from university 7 claimed that: 'Resources […] have fallen by 40%,' (uni 7_staff 3_M). Another student from the same university gave us this account:

> The facilities are so bad that the teachers have to shout at the students so that they could hear them in the [lecture] hall. Only one hall with a projector existed. There are so many students that we spend most of our lessons standing for more than two hours. The microphones in the university don't work either so that wasn't a solution. (Uni 7_student 1_M)

And another student from the same university stated that:

> There is no modern equipment, just boards and pens. There is an internet service but it has poor coverage. Student accommodation is available but no sports or recreational facilities are available. (Uni 7_student 2_M)

We also had reports that when fighting in this region had lessened, some university staff – those previously relocated to university campuses in other regime-controlled areas – were sometimes able to return to their main university campuses:

> Many universities moved to new temporary buildings because of the fighting, so the labs lacked the material and instruments required to do experiments. It was a disaster, but now the Ministry of Higher Education has asked those universities to return to their permanent buildings. (Uni 8_staff 4_M)

Staff members from one private regime-controlled university painted a very different picture:

> Firstly, the university's financial resourcing is excellent. All required lab equipment is available and all equipment and instrument needs are addressed. Secondly, the internet is available, at least for teaching and admin staff. There is also a huge computer hub for students. Thirdly, lecture theatres are very well equipped with boards and projectors. However, the sports facilities are only available on the main campus, which the university has had to abandon as result of the crisis, although sport activities continue in some halls in the nearby town. (Uni 9_staff 1_M)

In providing an account of the needs of universities in non-regime-controlled areas, the same interviewee told us that different universities inevitably have different needs:

> Idlib University is in the same building it occupied when under the total control of the regime, so it is in a good shape. The Free Aleppo University, however, has no buildings, so they co-opted schools to give lectures there. For the International Sham University, there are no real buildings […] only fabricated metal container-type buildings where they have lectures. (Interviewee 16)

Reports on the state of resources and infrastructure from non-regime universities are limited. One student claimed: 'There is some internet, cabins as lecture halls but no computer labs, libraries or science labs,' (uni 5_student 3_M). An interesting insight emerged from a female student who was highly critical of the conditions inside the cabins, reporting that lectures are conducted in small 'cabins that make you suffocate and lose concentration. There are no printed reference books. References are electronic,' (uni 5_student 4_F).

Not unlike many of the NGO reports and reports documenting the crisis in HE since the onset of the war, interviewees and respondents urged the international community to call for the reconstruction of Syrian HE and to provide urgent international aid and support. Key issues were the re-distribution of finance for HE inside Syria and external funding, as these were the two key areas where many reported a major shortfall. One respondent addressed the international community as follows:

> [We are] requesting that international organisations and governments of donor countries expedite the provision of funding for the reconstruction of war-damaged universities and the replacement of education equipment. (Uni 10_staff 2_M)

Summary of findings after 2011

A key trend in the literature and data collected for this project is the heightened and intense politicisation of HE after the onset of the conflict. However, the HE landscape is constantly changing. For example, HE activity in sites controlled by the regime faces fewer challenges when compared to other areas of the country. There are also varying forms of political activity and ideological commitments relative to HE, depending on whether areas are under regime control or not. HE students and academics are reported to be targets of the regime because they are seen to be influential at times of crisis and conflict. This is particularly the case with students. Clearly, HE is not the only sector facing substantially increased politicisation and conflict, as many sectors in countries or regions at war are

fragmented and dysfunctional. However, in this section of the report, we have identified key trends demanding attention. Addressing them will shape the fundamental integrity of HE in the future. They are:

- A concern over the heightened politicisation of HE through a variety of war-related mechanisms, many involving violence. Examples include corrupt governance structures, the practices of militarisation of university campuses, and a highly intensified security apparatus leading to, in many cases, the decimation of HE, its fragmentation or dysfunctionality.

- Increasing detentions, novel forms of patronage, unprecedented human displacement[89] and murder of students and faculty are all evident. Taken together, these factors are converging to create climates of fear and distrust in HE. Internal and external displacement are also transforming the demographic make-up of HE and undermining its capacity to fulfil national obligations to the state and labour market and its public mission. The conflict has also encouraged the practice of widespread fake certification, which has led to further distrust of Syrian HE at local, regional, national and global scales. There is also substantially diminished mobility for all those who either sought to obtain or carried HE credentials from Syria, or who failed to access HE or complete degree programmes. Substantial features of this post-2011 landscape include vast and rising unemployment, poverty, protracted internal and external displacement and stagnation. There are clear signs that this will only worsen as the conflict persists, as UN agencies and responding nations retreat and key sector alliances and support structures are further diminished. Reports of human-rights violations continue to mount, creating anxieties and social fears on a scale not evidenced in Syria since the end of the last century.

- Published data and insider accounts now exist, showing a widespread 'brain drain', including the loss of the generation of academics and educated citizens needed to lead Syria into the future. Those leaving for career reasons have been joined by those fleeing for reasons of safety. Individuals' credentials and careers have been threatened and blighted. Careers and credentials are seen, both within the country and beyond its borders, as undermined by interruptions and corruption, leaving many academics and students facing greatly constrained social mobility. Those who are in exile face a loss of professional identity and hope for meaningful academic careers. This creates a dual form of exclusion for the internally and externally displaced.

- Perhaps the most significant issue is the degree of insecurity and risk that academics and students are currently confronted with.[90] The ability of both to operate with academic freedom and scientific and intellectual autonomy, in order to create cutting-edge knowledge in their fields, is vital to maintaining politically stable and progress-oriented states and labour markets. Instead respondents point to a fragmented and decimated Syrian HE system in many parts of the country, particularly for those in non-regime and highly conflicted areas. Key academics, with a vision for upholding quality or progressing research, have been lost or rendered inactive. This is also the case with educators or researchers who might play a significant role in post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction, and in fulfilling the public or civic role of HE.

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

Teaching, research and internationalisation before 2011

In our earlier report, documenting the status of HE before the onset of the crisis, we were unable to identify any substantive robust studies of teaching, curriculum and assessment, other than single case study sites that sought to evaluate the quality of HE pre-2011.[91] We did, however, report on attempts to improve teaching quality and assessment through new governance strategies, which were seen as largely unrealised. There were clear signs that teaching was characterised as poor quality; there was little reported incentive to improve it; curriculum was deemed to be outdated; and rote learning was commonplace.[92] Respondents in the pre-2011 enquiry identified the following issues as central: large classes (between 200 and 300 students at any one time); ideologically driven teaching supporting Syrian government alliances; and the poor quality of interaction between staff and students. Overall, respondents also associated constrained resources with lower standards of teaching.

Reliance on 'officially approved' textbooks, rote learning and recall was thought to undermine knowledge innovation and more novel discipline-related developments. There were substantial references to diminished textbook quality, suggesting that textbooks were poor, and some debate emerged between respondents about the value of textbook learning and the use of textbooks in classrooms. The main issues raised about HE textbooks were that they were only updated every 10 years, were always published in Arabic and were ideologically driven, and so undermined critical thinking. These findings were corroborated by on-line reports by academics in exile[93] and by scholars specialising in comparative education and development studies in the Middle East.[94] The following excerpt refers to what Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015) identify as the complexities underlying the politics of Arabisation in HE textbook use:

> Producing textbooks for the university is part of the extensive policies of Arabisation. Although Syria often boasts at regional and Arabic conferences of its capacity to provide 'Arabised' sciences, in engineering the science produced shows mixed results at best and in some cases disastrous outcomes. Arabisation aims to make knowledge accessible to all strata of the population, not just to a small 'colonial' elite. Nevertheless, in the case of engineering education,

89   Qayyum (2011).
90   See Watenpaugh et al. (2013).
91   See Dillabough et al. (2018); see also Buer, Wagner & Gausch (2010).
92   See Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c); Hanafi O. (2011), Hanafi S. (2011); Hanafi S. (2015); Mazawi (2005, 2011, 2015).
93   See Barakat & Milton (2015).
94   See Altbach & De Wit (2018); De Wit and Altback (2016); Mazawi (2005, 2011). See also Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c); George (2003); Zahler (2012); Lesch (2012); Hanafi S. (2015).

Arabisation policies produce professionals handicapped by the scarcity of translated books. Further, engineers experience great difficulty in remaining professionally up to date. As a result, the Arabisation of the sciences, while promoting an agenda of 'decolonisation', paradoxically reinforces Syria's dependence on the former colonial countries in terms of the engineering sciences and technological knowhow. This problem may go unsolved, given the limited financial resources of scientific fields.[95]

In the pre-2011 enquiry,[96] respondents' views on the wider matters of teaching, curriculum and assessment varied across regime or non-regime-controlled areas and public or private universities. Those from regime-controlled areas tended to view the quality of teaching before 2011 as high, whereas those from non-regime-controlled areas emphasised the ideological and political characteristics of teaching, curriculum and assessment as 'rigid', 'dogmatic' and based on rote learning rather than application.[97] Indeed, some participants made reference to the need to challenge dogmatic forms of learning and widen democratic mindsets through autonomous and critical thinking and the participation of diverse social groups. All pre-2011 enquiry respondents agreed that the level of practical application of any curricular learning was poor, a view supported by HE scholars[98] who also noted the reliance on static forms of teaching (e.g. textbooks) at the expense of practical application. Respondents also described lack of research and field-trip opportunities as major obstacles to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. It is noteworthy that the concern over research and practical opportunities was reported by all respondents.

Our pre-2011 enquiry,[99] also documented the Syrian Higher Education Ministry's attempts to increase HE internationalisation strategies, and there are ministry decrees supporting the drive for such internationalisation. Indeed, Buer et al. (2010) have reported on the formation of European HE partnerships and collaborations, including with DAAD and the British Council at the start of the first decade of the 21st Century.[100] However, many attempts at reform did not start until the middle of that decade, a number of which were deemed ineffectual, due to senior [academic] leaders' resistance to the modernisation of the HE sector.[101] The outbreak of the conflict undermined some of the efforts whilst making it impossible to assess others.

The pre-2011 report[102] also highlighted substantial differences in terms of research spending and research cultures across the sector, with some institutions reported as conducting significantly more research than others, such as business schools or civil engineering departments for example. There was also a paucity of research opportunities, little access to international research databases and variable valuing of research. The research agenda was also seen by many as highly regulated through government interventions.[103] The key obstacles said to have impeded the development of robust research cultures were limited research funding; an overemphasis on teaching; a lack of collaboration with foreign universities; and inadequate or non-existent forms of research training. There were also concerns about the lack of social science and humanities research programmes addressing wider civic and social needs in Syrian society.

Many lecturers did not undertake research beyond their doctoral studies and were therefore seen as ill-equipped to provide up-to-date knowledge in their subjects. Reasons identified for this were lack of incentives to conduct research, reduced HE sector spending, and limited financial stimuli to engage in any external investigations into the quality of research publications.

Teaching, research and internationalisation after 2011

Curriculum stagnation
Outdated curriculum and changes in the medium of instruction in regime-controlled universities

It's not higher education any more. No qualified academics and no real students. (Interviewee 13)

On-line reports from human-rights groups and a few key research reports point to the impact of the conflict on classroom cultures, students' wellbeing, and a diminished curriculum.[104] These reports highlight issues such as large class sizes, problems sitting exams or forced mobility to re-sit exams, diminished teaching, bombing during exams and teaching by poorly qualified individuals (including members of the security apparatus and students) due to the detention or forced exile of qualified academics.[105] Research conducted by Watenpaugh, Fricke and King (2014), interviewing mainly Syrian students in exile in Jordan, points to the diminished social trust and reduced credibility of HE after the conflict, with few or no resources for teaching support.

Poor or non-attendance was often reported by participants and in on-line reports.

In the majority of cases the lectures do not take place because the security situation either prevents the teacher or students or both from reaching the university. (Uni 4_student 23_M)

The Syrian Network of Human Rights (2012) reported that lectures were often cancelled, or, in some cases, students were told that despite the bombing of the university exams could not be cancelled or would have to be retaken at a much later date. Many students could not make journeys through checkpoints or battlefields to reach their universities.[106]

95   Hanafi O. (2011, pp. 19-20). See also Hanafi & Arvanitis (2015).
96   Dillabough et al. (2018).
97   The influence of censorship and self-censorship in responding to the researchers, especially among respondents in regime-controlled areas, should not be discounted in explaining the discrepancy between regime and non-regime area perceptions.
98   See also Milton (2017, 2018).
99   See Dillabough et al. (2018).
100   See also Ward (2014).
101   See Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c); TEMPUS (2010).
102   See Dillabough et al. (2018).
103   See Yahia & Turkmani (2011).
104   See, for example, Syrian Network for Human Rights (2012); Yahia & Turkmani (2011); Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
105   See Syrian Network for Human Rights (2012).
106   Watenpaugh et al. (2014).

A staff member from a non-regime-controlled university reported that the conflict shifted HE priorities away from quality and towards 'accepting as many students as possible and freely granting them qualifications despite deteriorating knowledge and teaching methods,' (uni 5_staff 9_M).

As in the pre-2011 enquiry,[107] respondents' views about the value of the curriculum diverged significantly. Participants in non-regime-controlled areas were more likely to be critical of the curriculum. As suggested earlier, this is more likely to reflect greater freedom of expression and opinions varied from subject to subject.

A small number of respondents viewed curriculum as 'good' (uni 1_staff 1_M) or 'excellent in terms of content and scientific material' (uni 10_staff 4_M, uni 7_staff 2_M). However, a majority identified various shortcomings in curriculum, including outdated content: 'The curriculum is not poor but old and in urgent need of modernisation. Many useless topics should be removed,' (uni 4_staff 10_M).

Another staff member from the same university viewed the quality of the curriculum as 'good' because it was based on 'translated English, Russian, French and German textbooks' (uni 4_staff 4_M). However, both agreed that curriculum and textbooks require 'continuous modernisation' (uni 4_staff 4_M). There was some evidence of curriculum integration, which was due to staff shortages and viewed as 'minor amendments' in a deteriorating HE situation (uni 4_staff 7_M).

Students echoed staff's concerns about an outdated curriculum, 'more than 20 years old' (uni 4_student 25_F). They were hoping 'to see modern curriculum and greater student participation,' (uni 4_student 17_F). Some voiced dissatisfaction with curriculum overload 'especially in the first year' (uni 10_student 9_M and uni 7_student 8_M), and others argued that degree lengths should be shortened from four to three years (uni 7_student 8_M).

A major curricular change in private universities post-2011 was a reported shift from an English to an Arabic medium of instruction and curriculum integration, which largely related to staff shortages (uni 8_staff 3_F).

Attempts at curriculum modernisation in non-regime-controlled universities

Curriculum stagnation is not confined to regime-controlled HE contexts. Universities in non-regime-controlled areas also experienced the challenges of an 'old curriculum' (uni 5_staff 6_M). This reliance on outdated material in non-regime-controlled areas related to the fact that 'Universities in the liberated regions were still using the regime curriculum,' (uni 5_staff 3_M). Low student and staff attendance were also an acute challenge. To address this matter, universities had in some cases resorted to on-line teaching through various platforms, including social media (uni 5_staff 2_M). Importantly, some displaced academics were participating in this effort by offering on-line teaching and supervisions to Syrian students in non-regime-controlled areas. However, on-line teaching was not viewed by our respondents as a particularly viable solution 'because the internet is not available most of the time' and on-line teaching is new and not widely accepted across Syria as a culturally relevant teaching norm (Focus group discussion with academics).

Students in non-regime-controlled universities shared similar concerns about curriculum, describing it as 'overloaded and boring' (uni 2_student 1_F).

> The curriculum is huge and above the capability of students, particularly in the [college name] where there are 27 subjects to be covered in any one academic year. (Uni 5_student 3_M)

Others reported that elements of the secondary school curriculum were being used, which 'they had already studied' (uni 5_student 2_M).

In common with our pre-2011 report, discussions about teaching and learning in regime-controlled universities emphasised that: 'Methods of teaching depended on resources,' (uni 1_staff 1_M). The majority of respondents described teaching styles after 2011 as 'traditional and theoretical' (uni 4_staff 9_M), and also 'prosaic and poor' (uni 11_staff 1_M).

> [Teaching] is aimed at getting through the curriculum rather than giving students information and assessing their understandings, because of the low turn-out. (Uni 11_staff 1_M)

Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the distribution of photocopied lecture notes instead of the delivery of actual lectures (uni 7_staff 3_M and uni 4_student 23_M). Others, however, sought to dissociate themselves from 'traditional' teaching practices:

> We received our education in a traditional style, but when we began teaching we chose to use modern methods of teaching and connected the lectures to real life experience using pictures and real-life examples. (Uni 4_staff 7_M)

Some respondents reported instances of using technology and interactive approaches.

> Many academics are attempting to develop their abilities and keep up with the technological developments such as the use of computers and projectors during lectures. (Uni 4_staff 9_M)

However, it was seen as difficult to sustain such approaches because:

> Before 2011 I used to concentrate on application and field studies. But due to the security situation and the inability to carry out field studies I turned to the theoretical aspects of the discipline. (Uni 4_staff 5_M)

Many scholars reporting on HE from exile corroborated the inability to apply knowledge due to limited or scarce resources and capacity after the onset of the conflict.[108]

Students' perspectives on teaching were consistent across the cohort. The majority viewed teaching as a form of 'dictation' (uni 4_student 18_M), 'just feeding information' (uni 4_student 16_M) and lectures were 'dull and theoretical' (uni 10_student 9_M). Students from universities 6 and 7 substantiated these claims.

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107 Dillabough et al. (2018).
108 Law (2016); Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Milton (2017); Watenpaugh et al. (2014).

There is a professor who speaks for two hours. Students are given a course of dozens of pages without any explanation. The course is always delivered without giving actual lectures. […] all colleges use a curriculum that imposes the teaching of nationalism […] the curriculum relies on a book written by the teacher and the materials are imposed on students for monetary gain. (Uni 7_student 1_M)

In some lessons the teaching is very poor […] we are still using blackboards and chalk […] a lot of theory and little practice. (Uni 6_student 1_M)

At the same time, a small number of respondents praised the current teaching practices as 'good technique[s]' (uni 10_student 6_F) as well as 'fun and well-coordinated' (uni 10_student 12_F). One student attributed the advances in teaching to smaller class sizes.

The teaching is very good and it's as if we were in a private university; the attendance does not exceed 20 students and this is enough for the good performance of lecturers. (Uni 10_student 1_M)

However, a student from a private university attributed the success in teaching to practical application.

The method of education in the [name of college] is particularly successful because the student is exposed to training and fieldwork. (Uni 8_student 2_F)

Personal evaluations of teaching in non-regime universities were similar to teaching practices in regime-controlled universities. A number of respondents emphasised that teaching remained 'very traditional, very backward' (uni 5_staff 9_M) or 'traditional, with no modern technology or projectors' (uni 2_staff 4_M):

After 2011 teaching styles became very mundane and the goal was to complete the curriculum and exams regardless of whether or not the student understood or gained the required skills. This was particularly so because attendance is poor. Most students sit the exams without attending classes so that the exam is merely a process of memorising and regurgitating memorised content. (Uni 5_staff 9_M)

At the same time, some respondents reported that teaching styles in non-regime universities were 'good' (uni 2_student 7_M) and 'modern and interactive' (uni 5_staff 7_M).

Whilst few students in our enquiry spoke directly about the political framework of these institutions, one student from a non-regime-controlled university contrasted teaching in his university with the perceived situation in regime-controlled universities. Teaching in a non-regime-controlled university was viewed as 'very good and much better than in the universities of the regime' (uni 2_student 5_M).

HE teaching and learning constraints: the lack of practical application of curriculum in regime-controlled universities

After the onset of the war, staff and students reported an increasing concern about the lack of practical application, which represented a major obstacle to high-quality teaching. A staff member from university 1 confirmed that they are 'no longer capable of carrying out experiments' (uni 1_staff 1_M) as materials had been destroyed or were non-existent. A student from university 4 echoed this concern by asserting that there is 'absolutely no connection between the curriculum and practical life' (uni 4_student 25_F). This problem was widespread across regime-controlled universities:

Most students agree that the practical training is weak and the student does not acquire good work experience until years after graduation. (Uni 7_student 1_M)

Another major tendency, also referenced in the pre-2011 report, was to construe curriculum in terms of 'quantity versus quality'.

The theoretical part of the programme is excellent in regards of quantity, but the quality is backward and not compatible with modern sciences and scientific research. (Uni 4_student 22_M)

This formal classification and tension in Syria is well documented in the literature both before and after the onset of the conflict.[109]

Respondents reported that 'employment opportunities play a huge role in selecting a programme' for both male and female students (uni 10_staff 1_M). For example, one response suggested that: 'Medical programmes and applied sciences are more popular with male students,' (uni 4_staff 10_M).

A positive trend that was broadly shared, barring one university (university 4), was that relationships between students and staff were perceived as satisfactory. In the majority of cases the relationships were described as 'excellent' (uni 10_student 3_M), 'respectful' (uni 10_student 6_F), 'based on understanding and respect' (uni 10_student 9_M), representing 'brotherly relationships' (uni 3_student 1_M), 'very good and transparent relationships with no complaints' (uni 2_student 5_M), confirming that students 'are treated with respect' (uni 5_student 4_F).

By contrast, the majority of students in university 4 described the relationships as 'very formal and bad' (uni 4_student 16_M) or 'very bad' (uni 4_student 25_F). Some students saw university relationships as highly militarised, comparing that of university staff and students to those of 'an officer and a soldier' (uni 4_student 22_M), where staff 'deal with students from a position of superiority' (uni 4_student 25_F). Others shared that: 'Some of the lecturers forced students to detest the programme and the college,' (uni 4_student 24_F).

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109   See Dillabough et al. (2018). See also Buckner (2013); Kabbani & Salloum (2011).

Assessment, examinations and diminished HE integrity

Some of the grey literature – particularly first-hand accounts from university students who remained in Syria – highlights a significant undermining of HE assessment procedures.[110] Much of this relates to the role of the conflict in undermining safe examination conditions. The Al Fanar Media Reporting Team (2017) shared a first-hand account from a doctor who was accepted for medical school at the onset of the conflict:

> The city was at the centre of the uprising that led to Syria's continuing civil war, and conditions there were already starting to deteriorate, as violence flared between government troops and armed opponents. The university, next to the Baba Amr neighbourhood, one of the most affected parts of the city, kept classes going, but had to make accommodations for the many students who found it difficult to attend. Six years later, Homs is calm, though much of it has been destroyed. [Student X] didn't leave the city during the years of fighting, and last month he took the national final exam to graduate from medical school. 'The first year at college was very difficult,' he said. 'We weren't attending classes and we couldn't do the first-semester exams.' The war has caused a massive shortage of medical equipment, doctors, medicine and electricity throughout Syria. Physicians for Human Rights, a New York-based non-governmental organisation, estimates that nearly 800 medical personnel have been killed. Over half of Syria's 30,000 doctors are thought to have left the country since the conflict began. Many medical-school students have dropped out.[111]

These conflict-based challenges lead to substantial fears around exam completion, social trust and the value and integrity of any associated credentials.

> When a poor student arrives to sit an exam they feel like they have entered a security department. The student is overcome by fear […] instead of being able to deliver information about his or her understanding of the subject. There is no credibility in the way we conduct examinations now. (Interviewee 19)

Apart from well-documented fears,[112] unfair examination practices were also reported. Some reported that assessment 'can sometimes be unfair when examination questions are leaked to some' (uni 4_student 23_M). Bribery and cheating were extensively reported, a reality supported by on-line grey literature suggesting that the war economy had led to substantial corruption threatening the integrity of HE examinations and associated qualifications:[113] 'Bribery and exam fraud are very widespread. Some even obtain their university degree through this method,' (uni 7_student 1_M). It was also reported that: 'Many students cheat as it has become easier to do so than before,' (uni 7_student 8_M).

Constrained internationalisation

After the onset of the conflict, it became clear that Western countries were not going to provide avenues of financial support to fuel the war.[114] Syria's government was forced to engage in a realignment of support structures in order to maintain power, which became a major obstacle to broad forms of internationalisation in regime-controlled universities. They were forced to curtail their links to Western universities and reinforce collaboration with HE institutions in countries supportive of the regime, including Russia, Iran and China. The Syrian HE sector was also subject to sanctions imposed by France, Germany and the UK, amongst others. Participants in our enquiry reported that one of the major challenges for universities in non-regime-controlled areas was their lack of international recognition, which meant that their staff, students and graduates were unable to publish or pursue careers abroad.

Beyond these political realignments and lack of international recognition, constrained financial resources and 'weak English proficiency' (uni 7_staff 2_M) were deemed major challenges for any kind of international collaboration. One staff member emphasised the need to raise the English language proficiency in both schools and universities and to challenge what Hanafi (2015) refers to as the 'politics of Arabisation':

> I believe universities need a new revolution and real financial and moral support […]. It is necessary for students and teachers to learn English, because it is the language of science. […] It is very important that Syrian universities promote their support for the language and also to concentrate on English in schools before attending university. (Uni 7_staff 2_M)

In light of the realignments of national affiliations and conflict-related regional divisions, pre-2011 reform-related international collaborations between Syrian and Western universities were reported as severely constrained. This remains the case in both regime- and non-regime-controlled universities. Instead, 'international collaborations and exchanges with Iran, China and Russia were being developed,' (uni 5_staff 9_M).

> Before 2011, the university had formal exchanges with France, Egypt, the United States, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. After 2011, these destinations changed to Russia and Iran. (Uni 10_staff 2_M)

A reliance in Syrian HE on graduates from the former Soviet Union was criticised by some staff and students, arguing that its modalities of teaching and learning were reliant on rote learning and inadequate for modern universities. The main argument was that 'developed' countries were better able to assist Syria in realising reforms. This argument was also supported by many scholars in exile who documented such collaborations.[115]

> The education system must be separated from the government and rely on teachers from developed countries, not only on graduates of the Soviet Union. (Uni 7_student 1_M)

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110   For example, Al-Fanar Media Reporting Team (2017); see also Young-Powell (2017).
111   Al-Fanar Media Reporting Team (2017).
112   See Young-Powell (2017).
113   See Dillabough et al. (2018); Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
114   See Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015).
115   Buer et al. (2010). See also Barakat & Milton (2015).

Disappearance of research

Another theme to emerge from this post-2011 enquiry was the disappearance of an already restricted research culture, including reports of the complete absence of research as a consequence of the conflict (uni 10_staff 4_M).

> Research has virtually stopped because of the lack of equipment and raw materials, as well as electricity, after 2011. (Uni 7_staff 1_M)

Those working in regime-controlled universities also reported that: 'There was no interest in research after 2011,' (uni 1_staff 1_M); or that: 'There is no research any more,' (uni 4_staff 1_M). The wider war economy – coupled with damage to infrastructure and facilities – was seen as making effective research programmes impossible. Institutional survival was the reality of everyday life in Syrian universities.[116]

As two respondents reported, 'researchers usually fund their own research,' (uni 4_staff 5_M) and 'research is an individual effort fully financed by the researcher,' (uni 2_staff 4_M).[117] For the vast majority of respondents, research training was seen to be available 'through personal efforts and the theoretical information learnt during bachelor's and postgraduate studies' (uni 10_staff 2_M) rather than as part of a wider and supportive research culture. There was minimal reference to research conducted by governmental agencies:

> The university is responsible for funding research. Unfortunately, the amounts allocated are small. There are other institutions that fund the research carried out by their employees and I find their funding to be much better than the university's, although it should be the other way around. Those institutions are not independent of the state. (Uni 4_staff 6_F)

Other scholars[118] argue that the loss of research after the onset of the war was due to the channelling of funds to the military. Our enquiry also pointed to a 'shortage of research specialists, as well as a lack of resources' (uni 4_student 23_M). Whilst the gains achieved though robust research cultures for postgraduate studies were widely acknowledged, in some cases, students reported no exposure to research whatsoever whilst studying: 'I studied for five years at the university and I don't know what scientific research is or how it is carried out,' (uni 4_student 25_F).

Staff members also shared concerns about missing infrastructures and the personal cost of doing research: 'There is no real research infrastructure,' (uni 9_staff 1_M) and 'To publish in [an international] journal you should pay 500 US dollars and this is too expensive for most of us,' (uni 8_staff 4_M). Consequently, 'Research is usually published in local journals as there is difficulty in publishing internationally,' (uni 7_staff 2_M). A general agreement also existed that: 'Research is totally ineffective because it does not deal with real problems. It is conducted solely for the purpose of academic promotion, so most research does not serve the state, society or the production [of knowledge] and the economic sectors,' (uni 5_staff 2_M).

After the onset of the conflict, non-regime-controlled universities faced additional burdens because of their lack of international recognition, 'leading to frustration and a loss of hope' (uni 5_staff 1_M). Staff members were not carrying out research 'because publishers do not acknowledge our university' (uni 5_staff 1_M) despite 'ambition to publish, there are no journals or publishers' (uni 5_staff 2_M). Those working in non-regime-controlled areas were seeking access to research funding at the time of this enquiry, but had yet to succeed:

> Currently the university is searching for funders to establish a research and study centre of positive value to society but has not found anyone yet. (Uni 5_staff 1_M)

Summary of findings after 2011

The story of teaching, internationalisation and research in Syrian universities after 2011 is one of loss, increasingly constrained and diminished resources, high levels of frustration and despair. Staff and students in regime- and non-regime-controlled areas alike have been left to cope with major aspects of the crisis in fragmented HE environments with the loss of teaching staff, research and resources. Institutional survival seems to be central but the social conditions (large class sizes, diminishing credentials, and limited or no resources) of HE operations have stripped many of their educational and research opportunities, as well as their safety. In such circumstances, alongside the war economies currently in operation in Syria, the practices of bribery, exam fraud and corruption are becoming widespread. Taken together, these factors further undermine the integrity of HE and fuel social distrust with many reporting that HE is 'not HE any more'.

At the same time, there are stories of hope and innovation, where some university staff are striving to modernise the curriculum, identify sources of research funding and restore pre-crisis life, safety and educational opportunities for students they had before the crisis. The positive relationships between students and staff, reported in all but one university, also provide some sign that human relationships remain grounded in forms of social respect, despite the perilous state of HE in many parts of Syrian society and its highly fractured character.

The international collaborations with Western and European universities that existed before 2011, have been lost as a result of political realignments and the regional divisions created during the conflict. This remains the case in both regime-controlled and non-regime-controlled universities. Whilst regime-controlled universities develop new international collaborations and exchanges with Iran, China and Russia, non-regime-controlled universities are striving for international recognition, without which they cannot conduct robust research, publish internationally and award degrees that are recognised inside or outside Syria.

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116 Using research for promotion purposes was also reported (University 4_staff 10_M). One staff member admitted that: 'It is quite rare for a professor or a doctor to conduct research unless it is for promotion purposes,' (uni 7_staff 2_M).

117 There were also reports that European Union funding as well as French government funding continues to be available in some universities to do research on a selective number of topics.

118 Altbach & De Wit (2018); Kabbani & Salloum (2011), Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Yahia & Turkmani (2011)

Trend 3 Access, student experience and employability

Admission, retention and student experience amidst the conflict[119]

> *In a crisis like Syria, the whole academic community is displaced, not just the students. They lose their infrastructural and institutional backing. How do you replace Syrian HE institutions and infrastructure and what needs to be put in place to restart that HE network?[120]*

Summary of findings before 2011[121]

While the literature on admissions before 2011 showed that decisions were based on the average score of the high-school certificate (Baccalaureate), data collected for this enquiry revealed admission inequalities related to students' political affiliations and geographic location.

Access to HE based on ruling-party affiliation, unequal geographies and the challenges associated with poverty in rural areas, were the main concerns arising in this enquiry, leading to rising social tensions and divisions. With private universities allowing lower entry criteria, and public universities offering fee-paying options for students unable to meet academic admission requirements, a sense of inequality of access was increasingly evident. HE programmes were open to both men and women with the representation of male to female students in Science programmes estimated at 60% to 40% respectively.

Quality was seen as the strongest determining factor in selecting a university, although proximity sometimes outweighed quality. Regional disparity was also discussed, with eastern parts of Syria receiving substantially less financing than other areas and HE entry requirements lower than those in major cities.

Retention was not a concern before 2011, but the experience of students was marked by discontent, largely due to the control exerted by national security forces over their lives. Private universities were said to provide more support to students than public universities.

The interview data suggested that employment opportunities in Syria before 2011 were few. Systemic discrimination, based on personal connections and political affiliations, and a lack of attention to the role of the university in preparing students for the labour market were the main challenges when it came to graduate employability, and brain drain was on the rise. Private universities reported receiving more support in accessing the labour market than their public university counterparts.

Developments after 2011

A major theme in the literature on Syrian HE after 2011 is that student experiences are marked by discontent.[122] The nature of the discontent is reflected in: student and staff accounts describing concerns over a dysfunctional sector; the ongoing and associated problems of internal student displacement; political grievances with HE management; the role of the state and security apparatuses in limiting students' political freedoms and autonomy;[123] and the vast and rapid deterioration in the quality of teaching.[124] A massive 'brain drain' led to the appointment of unqualified professors and teachers to fill the gaps where possible, and classes being cancelled or reduced. Physical infrastructure was also damaged and there were growing concerns around displacements, as well as lack of classroom space.

Loss of expertise was one of the most significant factors contributing to the deterioration of HE from the students' perspective, a direct result of intimidation, displacement, forced exile, disappearances and deaths. Quayyum (2011), for example, argues that 'this overall strategy of intimidation has led to "brain drain" as large numbers of highly educated Syrians flee to other countries', some now working at other universities or forced into exile and unemployment or detained or missing as a consequence of security threats.[125] Mitchell (2017) has also reported on the loss of academics and students and highlighted the role of international institutes in supporting those forced into exile.[126]

Concerns about brain drain were also reported to us directly by participants and respondents. For example, respondents claimed that university teaching staff are 'currently 50% under the required number' and that: 'Approximately 60% of teaching assistants and professors have left the university,' (uni 7_staff 3_M). A key factor influencing the decision to migrate to non-regime-controlled areas was fear of conscription in regime-controlled areas (Interviewee 6). Another group of 'lost' academics were those who were, at the time of the conflict, on exchange or professional development programmes abroad (uni 4_staff 10_M).

However, a large majority of those seeking employment or HE abroad were impeded by issues related to citizenship status, the finances available in other countries, their legal status as refugees and access to language skills and credentials.[127]

Such trends, often referred to within academic literature as 'push factors' or endogenous pressures, and corroborated across the grey literature, in published documents, on-line citizen activism, and reported by those in in exile,[128] led to heightened tensions

119 Since the outbreak in violence in Syria in 2011, there has been limited scope for independently researching and verifying any facts, events or circumstances in Syria.
120 Alfred (2017).
121 See Dillabough et al. (2018).
122 See Buckner (2013); Turkmani & Haid (2016).
123 Chinkin & Kaldor (2013).
124 Buckner (2013).
125 Quayyum (2011) Note. This is an on-line report and there is no page number
126 Mitchell (2017).
127 Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
128 Turkmani (2016); Buckner (2013).

amongst students, and between students and some staff, resulting in group-specific political, cultural and economic grievances. For example, discontent drove students to organise in informal groups and many then dropped out, or felt pushed out, because of their grievances.[129] Respondents reported that they would not attend regime-supported institutions that were dysfunctional, and even less transparent than before the war, and refused to re-register. Their argument was that they would rather 'miss a year than pay a regime that suppresses and kills fellow Syrians'. Such student grievances also exposed the death of any potential for a civil society and called for new civic spaces of legitimacy to overcome the longstanding problem of constrained political autonomy. These challenges are reported as having substantially increased over the first year of the conflict.[130]

Admission and access

> *Once-flourishing universities have lost professors, students and facilities to violence.*[131]

HE in Syria was expanding on the eve of the conflict in 2011, with some 350,000 full-time undergraduates and more than 8,000 lecturers and professors. Although figures vary it is estimated that around a quarter of young people were going into HE. Five years later, around 2,000 academics and hundreds of thousands of students are living in exile in Turkey and Jordan. Many more are lost among the millions of internally displaced Syrians.[132]

Admission criteria remain generally transparent in both regime-controlled and non-regime-controlled areas, but exceptions based on party affiliations continue to be widespread in regime-controlled areas. Such extra-academic influences on admission decisions are now systemised, with seats officially allocated for relatives of injured or deceased pro-regime fighters.[133]

Mufadala averages were significantly lowered in both public and private universities, as a lower number of applicants led to less competition for the available places. While the brain drain affected both faculty and student populations, reduction in programme capacity was slower than the fall in student numbers. As a result of reduced demand, minimum admission score requirements were lowered for most disciplines and almost anyone who passed the Baccalaureate became eligible to pursue HE. The effects of this opening up of admissions were exacerbated by widespread cheating in secondary exams reflecting 'a huge problem in standards and ethics' (uni 4_student 25_F).

Public universities in non-regime areas were using oral examination[134] as an evaluation tool in the admissions process in addition to high-school exit exam marks. This shift in capacity relative to student numbers also had the effect of increasing their 'choice to study their preferred topic' (uni 5_staff 8_M), as long as they achieved the required minimum score, and increased access in non-regime-controlled areas. Scientific colleges required a minimum of 66% whereas for the Humanities the pass mark was 56%.[135] 'Before 2011, university was for those with high grade-point averages and for the children of influential people,' (uni 5_student 3_M). This is seen as one of few improvements since

2011 in non-regime-controlled areas: 'Although the situation was better before 2011, it is now much easier to enrol at university because the required grade point averages are now lowered,' (uni 5_student 6_F). Despite this general trend towards improved access, a few accounts showed a continuing problem. Universities were trying to re-establish themselves and secure the resources necessary to continue to provide educational programmes. However, access to university was still challenging because of the rise of university fees and difficulties in securing the required [admission] documents (uni 2_student 4_M).

Financial hindrances to accessing university education were a concern in non-regime-controlled areas. There was a demand to support education that is free of charge or at reduced fee levels, because charitable organisations mostly backed religious education (uni 2_student 4_M) and the UN was only backing regime-controlled areas, claiming: 'It can only work with a small number of partners approved by President Assad.'[136] There were accounts of students being relieved of some of the financial burdens, such as transport, which was secured by the provisional government. 'Before 2011, travel expenses and rescheduling exams were paid by the student, now the university bears all the expenses,' (uni 5_student 8_M).

Choice of university and discipline

Student choice of university in Syria is currently influenced by safety and security considerations rather than the pursuit of quality. In select disciplines, pursuit of quality or access to the preferred discipline seems to continue to supersede geographic considerations. For example, students interested in, and qualified for, medical school continue to prefer Damascus University or Aleppo University for their quality. Those not admitted to study in their own city are willing to travel to other parts of the country to study a desired discipline, since average admission requirements vary by region (uni 7_student 8_M). Finding accommodation close to the university can be a determining factor in this and remains difficult, due to high demand. There is also evidence that students are going for alternative university options in newly established universities in non-regime-controlled areas, either because of forced mobility or due to a desire for ethnic and political recognition.[137]

Unlike other pre-2011 or post-2011 data on choice, data from university students in non-regime-controlled areas overwhelmingly pointed to personal preference as the

129 Turkmani (2016); Yahia & Turkmani (2011); Buckner (2013).
130 Turkmani (2016), Munoz & Rasheed (2016).
131 Alfred (2017).
132 Hicks (2016).
133 See for example in Appendix B, Ministry of Higher Education Legislative Decrees No. 44, 2013 and No. 293, 2016. As well as documents titled 'Ministry of Higher Education (2016). Places reserved for the families of martyrs for the academic year 2016/2017' and 'Ministry of Higher Education (2016). The relatives of martyrs from the internal security forces registered in open education programmes are included among those eligible for the reduced fees.' http://mohe.gov.sy/mohe/index.php?node=5622&nid=5001&m=1&p=1
134 This is enabled by improved faculty/student ratio.
135 Other accounts mention 70%, 65% and 60% but this minor variation could be due to fluctuation from year to year.
136 Hopkins & Beals (2016).
137 See also Glioti (2013).

prime determinant of choice of discipline. This observation is aligned with previous findings on increased access to HE. Location, family situation and financial circumstances were mentioned as key factors in other accounts. In private universities in non-regime-controlled areas, although 'transport is now more available and the number of students… has risen', the choice of university was mainly based on geographical proximity and safety, 'unless the student's financial situation enabled them to prioritise quality' (uni 2_student 1_F). Also, for some students, 'international ranking, research, and the academic ranks of the teaching staff' (uni 2_student 4_M) were important.

Security obstacles to access were amplified for female students. Despite this, due to migration and militarisation among men, women still made up the majority of students in Syria post-2011, leading to a reversal of the pre-2011 gender balance, with female students now making up 60% of the overall student body. Gender balance continued, however, to vary across specialisations, with a concentration of women in the Arts and Humanities across regions and institution types. Even in non-regime-controlled areas, where female students are excluded from some departments, the gender balance still favoured women. In regime-controlled areas, female students from low-income families with no regime affiliations were at the greatest disadvantage. They ended up with particularly weak options because 'limited income [forced them to choose] the closest university regardless of quality' (uni 4_student 21_M) due to their chances of securing university accommodation being reduced in a favouritism-based HE sector: 'After 2011, access to university for supporters of the regime became very easy. In addition, a secondary diploma was available in exchange for money,' (uni 7_student 1_M). Observations about the position of female students are supported by the literature, which points to their unique disadvantage, generally silenced or subordinated.[138]

Commuting to university seems to have improved in recent years within non-regime-controlled areas, as these student accounts testify: 'After 2011 it became very difficult to get to the university because of the security situation but now [since 2014] it is very easy,' (uni 2_student 10_M); 'Transport is available and good,' (uni 2_student 2_M).

Difficulties in accessing campus, closure of some universities (e.g. Furat), safety concerns, lack of work opportunities within Syria, migratory aspirations, and deteriorating learning conditions and standards have resulted in a proliferation of on-line postgraduate education (Interview 11). Also notable was an influx into on-line education as a more accessible alternative to public universities and a cheaper alternative to private ones 'over 200,000 students were said to be enrolled in on-line education in the 2013–2014 academic year,' (uni 10_staff 2_M).

Retention

Despite easier admission, one of the most devastating effects of the war has been students' inability to continue their studies. Both the literature and our own data show that attrition rates are high across the board. Retrospective analyses of the Syrian revolution have focused on 'push' factors that caused youth unrest within Syria. Unemployment, corruption, the restriction of political freedoms and economic stagnation are all cited as contributing forces.[139] Such analyses focus on the interaction between young people and these structural forces, but fail to account for larger global dynamics.[140]

A former director of the Middle East division at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has explained that: 'The recent uprisings were not just a rejection of leaders. They were a rejection of an archaic and dysfunctional social contract that left citizens dependent on their states.'[141] One reflection of this rejection, at the start of the Syrian uprisings, was students organising into informal groups to drop registration, losing a full academic year.[142] As a result, demand for registration at the university decreased significantly during that first year, but student interest grew rapidly thereafter, as it became clear that the regime would not fall any time soon and that students must continue to work towards completing their education.

Beyond such early attempts at civil disobedience, in regime-controlled areas attrition is attributed to concerns for personal safety in a deteriorating security situation. It is also attributed to increasing poverty, which diverts families' focus towards short-term sustenance and survival, and avoidance of the additional expenses that HE entails.

Internal displacement has left many financially destitute. These young people are demanding education, yet their aspirations are stymied through internal displacement and endemic corruption, and through being displaced to parts of the country where they can avoid death but are unable to pursue opportunities, particularly as border conflicts intensify and pathways beyond Syria may be more dangerous than in 2016.

Several students attributed dropping out to fear of detention or compulsory military service, resulting in some students transferring to universities in non-regime-controlled areas. Persecution based on personal belief is reported (expulsion from university, detention or imprisonment) as a problem that 'increased significantly after 2011' (uni 4_student 16_M). Also, 'time to graduation increased as students deferred repeatedly to avoid military service until they were able to leave,' (uni 7_student 9_M, uni 10_student 2_M).

In non-regime-controlled areas, obstacles to student retention include: a deteriorating security situation with constant instability; bombing; checkpoints; and lack of social and financial support and funding. Political persecution is a grave concern to some: 'If the person is not wanted by one faction or side, he will definitely be wanted by another,' (uni 5_student 4_F).

Financial limitations are often an obstacle to learning: 'Frankly, students have a love for learning, but their financial situation may be an obstacle to their education. At one point I terminated my education for financial reasons and returned to it when things got easier,' (uni 2_student 10_M). Financial support for universities is weak (uni 2_student 2_M). Some students were unable to afford even the reduced fees or needed to work rather than study in order to support themselves and their families. Some believed that: 'The first key initiative to improve university education is to bring registration fees down to a symbolic amount, thus enabling all the youth to study,' (uni 2_student 3_F).

138   Anderson (2011); Asher-Shapiro (2016); Buckner & Saba (2010), Buckner (2013); Chinkin & Kaldor (2013).
139   Heydemann & Leenders (2013); Leenders (2013a, 2013b).
140   Anderson (2011), Chinkin & Kaldor (2013).
141   Buckner, Beges, & Khatib (2012, p.8), quoting Abdulwahab Alkebsi Director, Middle East and North.
142   Turkmani (2016); Turkmani, Ali, Kaldor & Bojicic-Dzelilovic (2015).

Student experience

The literature points to infrastructural shortcomings, including lack of space, as critical factors that have a negative impact on students' learning. Kirdar (2017, p. 102) cites a former Minister of Higher Education, who announced in 2013 that the Ministry of Higher Education and its colleges had suffered losses and damage amounting to more than half a billion Syrian pounds (about 5 million American dollars) in value. Universities in various provinces suffered problems that resulted in their students transferring to universities in major cities, such as Damascus and Tishreen where the university received about 40,000 transfer students.[143]

An official from a university in Damascus, who spoke to Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, explained that damage to HE was both material and psychological. The material damage includes the destruction of infrastructure for universities, colleges, institutes and educational laboratories. Meanwhile, the psychological damage lies in the difficulties that students face in continuing their education including direct or indirect threats, military enrolment, or internal displacement.

According to the same source, low attendance, reduced school hours and student interaction were a result of the dangers involved in travelling from home to university, including kidnappings and killings, as well as increasing transport and school-supply costs. He added that: 'The Ministry of Higher Education has issued decisions that allow students to attend classes or sit for exams in any university they like, provided it offers their academic major. These decisions were made due to the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, of continuing studies in some of the colleges and universities in areas where war has destroyed the buildings.' The official also noted that the Syrian authorities 'are allowing students to take exams multiple times, contrary to the usual laws. These exceptions aim to facilitate education but will affect both performance and quality.'

Data collected during this inquiry suggest reduced academic rigour and a generalised sense of fear amongst students. Student satisfaction levels were low, which was attributed to a wide range of factors including: 'ongoing corruption in the country' (uni 4_student 15_M); a 'low number of academics' (uni 4_student 18_M); a 'theory-focused teaching system' (uni 10_student 9_M); 'lack of resources' (uni 4_student 20_M) including those related to daily life, like water and electricity (uni 4_student 25_F); and a 'poor security situation' (uni 4_student 25_F). Student motivation and morale were also reported to be extremely low (uni 4_student 24_F).

Corruption was endemic in Syria well before 2011, for example, 'students paying a certain amount of money to pass an exam or a phone call done by a powerful person ordering a professor to permit a student to pass an examination with no serious test'.[144] It is no surprise that, after the war, the situation deteriorated.

International exchange opportunities were rare after 2011. Where they continued to be provided in regime-controlled areas, students were sent to Arab countries, Iran or Russia (uni 1_staff 1_M, uni 4_staff 1_M), countries that are chosen not only for the obvious political reasons but also because of a 'lack of funding and the refusal of many countries to grant students a visa' (uni 4_staff 4_M). As before the conflict, there were accounts of such opportunities being restricted to groups that were close to the centres of power

(uni 2_staff 3_F). Non-regime-controlled universities held some exchange agreements with Turkish universities (uni 2_student 6_M). Studying abroad, in Turkey or Europe, as a result of personal initiative, was common (uni 4_staff 7_M).

To address the issue of diminishing standards and lack of student preparedness for HE, some charities offered intermediary learning programmes, although restricted to regime-controlled areas. Funding from charitable organisations was deemed non-existent in non-regime-controlled areas (uni 4_staff 1_M).

Somewhat higher satisfaction levels were reported at private universities in non-regime-controlled areas (uni 2_student 7_M; uni 5_student 2_M, uni 5_student 6_F, uni 2_student 10_M, uni2_student 3_F). Where student satisfaction was low, it was attributed to 'internal tension in the liberated areas and lack of resources' (uni 2_student 11_M). And where it was high, it was attributed to 'exceptional and rare' faculty members (uni 5_student 6_F).

With concerns over safety some students only attended the final examination and, although thousands of internally displaced students in camps continued to attend lectures at public universities, the lectures themselves were sporadic, reflecting security conditions (Interviewee 17). To address such concerns, some private universities relocated to safer rural sites (Interviewee 1).

Whilst many of these observations are based on accounts that describe the whole period between 2011 and 2017, there was some talk of improvements at the time of the interviews, including in relation to security (uni 7_student 3_F) with one student saying the situation was now 'almost normal' (uni 7_student 4_M).

Graduate employability

The demographic literature reports a youth bulge, with an average age of 17.9 to 27. In 2009, around 36% of the population was aged less than 15, projecting a growth in demand in ensuing years[145] that the Syrian HE system was in no position to meet.

During the Arab Spring, students and graduates who participated in protests against their governments associated their own economic hardship with the government's macroeconomic policies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of protest participants in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen were unemployed young people, dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity for political and economic participation. As noted, some have argued that the Arab Spring was a rejection of the entire system of state-led development.[146] Changes in HE policy, grim employment prospects, corrupt appointment processes, fees and the low quality of education added to political grievances and exacerbated political unrest, resulting in 11 million displaced persons by 2015.[147]

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143 Kirdar (2017, p. 102).
144 Bacci (2009, p.6).
145 Bacci (2009).
146 Al-Momani (2011).
147 Syrian Refugees (2016).

Significant elements of the literature suggested that an autocratic regime has also led to an autocratic HE system. There has been a failure to incorporate the aim of youth mobility[148] leading to demands for greater democratic accountability and reform that would foster an education system able to empower graduates in their struggle against unemployment and corruption.

Work opportunities

Not surprisingly, job opportunities were scarce and the already limited coordination that had existed prior to 2011 to connect graduates with the labour market had disappeared. 'Students before 2011 were assigned to state institutions or private companies for work, but today no coordination exists,' (uni 7_staff 3_M). In regime-controlled areas there is a perception that this is especially true for members of the Sunni community who were [now] being recruited for military service once they had graduated (uni 7_staff 3_M). However, in certain sectors, such as healthcare and education, the mass emigration of practitioners has meant that new graduates in those sectors could find work more easily. But overall, the following summarises the dominant view of graduate employability in regime-controlled areas:

> Opportunities are very few at the present because of the security situation and compulsory military service. Most students are recruited the minute they graduate unless they escape abroad. Some are appointed to government jobs and the top students are sometimes able to find work. But overall opportunities are scarce. (Uni 4_student 23_M)

In non-regime-controlled areas there has been a sharp decline in work opportunities in cities after separation from the regime. These areas were in a state of war and the absence of regional-level centralised planning contributed to a situation in which finding employment after graduation was almost impossible for many disciplines (uni 2_staff 1_M). Participants in these areas speak of 'severe suffering' (uni 2_staff 2_F) and of a dire shortage in work opportunities locally as many employers have closed down their operations (uni 4_staff 6_F, uni 4_staff 7_M, uni 6_staff 2_M). Graduates are unable to secure work elsewhere because qualifications from the 'liberated areas aren't acknowledged outside' (uni 2_staff 4_M). Thus, employment opportunities were restricted to jobs in the Syrian provisional government (uni 5_staff 1_M) or humanitarian and international organisations (uni 4_staff 6_F, uni 5_student 4_F, uni 5_student 7_M, uni 5_student 8_M). There were however jobs for fresh graduates in the fields of education and healthcare, due to the emigration of large numbers of doctors (uni 8_staff 4_M) and teachers (uni 5_student 4_F).

In addition to the absence of employment opportunities, or perhaps because of it, universities continue to offer little or no career services to support students' transition to employment.[149] Both public and private universities in regime-controlled and non-regime-controlled areas played little or no part in helping students access employment opportunities. Many programmes were seen as poorly aligned with the labour market and students deemed the process of transitioning from HE to work unacceptable because of 'red tape and dependency on government support' (uni 4_student 15_M), as well as on favouritism, connections and security approvals (uni 4_student 17_F, uni 4_student 18_M, uni 4_student 22_M, uni 4_student 25_F).

Staff in the private sector had slightly more positive views on graduates' ability to make the transition into the labour market, whether inside Syria or internationally. Some believed that students benefited from opportunities to 'develop relevant skills' and from 'a strong link between programme[s] and the labour market' (uni 8_staff 2_M). As a result, unless they preferred to continue with postgraduate studies, students were believed to be ready to enter the labour market after graduation (uni 8_staff 3_F).

A number of students in non-regime-controlled areas believed universities' role in finding employment was significant, but for the most part, it was seen as: restricted to 'hiring the top three students from every cohort,' (uni 2_student 3_F); hindered by the scarcity of projects and work depending on the graduate's specialisation (uni 5_student 1_M); or limited to the few disciplines suffering human resource shortages (uni 5_student 1_M), notably education and healthcare. Some universities ran programmes related to the job market. For example, they taught topics or trained students in technologies that responded to specific employer needs (uni 2_student 3_F).

Overall, views on universities' involvement in helping students access employment in non-regime-controlled areas varied. Some thought they offered help 'to a good extent' and that programmes were 'relevant to the labour market' and degrees were 'passports to the job market' (uni 2_student 11_M). Others found that universities were 'not involved in helping students secure work opportunities and that students able to secure work abroad would travel,' (uni 2_student 1_F).

With a severe shortage of opportunities locally, students tended to seek employment abroad – in the Arab Gulf States and North America – or postgraduate education – mostly in Europe (uni 4_student 10_M, uni 4_student 11_F, uni 4_student 13_M, uni 4_student 14_M, uni 4_student 21_M, uni 4_student 12_M). In non-regime areas, many students contemplated travelling to Turkey as a 'Muslim country that supports the revolution' (uni 5_staff 4_M). But there was a view that despite scarcity of work opportunities, most students were more likely to remain in Syria. Some attribute this to the impossibility of obtaining visas (uni 2_student 3_F); others think it is because their certificates are not recognised elsewhere – 'Internationally I don't think our degree is of any value,' (uni 5 student 4_M). Ultimately, 'whether the student remains in his country or travels depends on finding work. If they were to find a suitable opportunity in their own country, they would not resort to travel,' (uni 2_student 3_F).

Training, career services and graduate competencies

The absence and importance of practical training were highlighted on several occasions:

> Most students emphasise that practical training is weak, and that students don't acquire real work experience until years after graduation. The reason is that there is no practical training system outside the university which is based on companies' needs, except in fields such as medicine, oil and teaching. (Uni 7_student 1_M)

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148 See Buckner (2013), Hinnebusch & Zintl (2015); Kabbani & Salloum (2009, 2011).
149 Mualla (2002).

In non-regime-controlled areas, the connection between public universities, the community and the labour market seemed particularly weak 'What students learn differs from the experiences and skills they need after graduation,' (uni 4_staff 7_M). Curricula were perceived to be outdated and divorced from the changing needs of society (uni 6_staff 2_M). Although there was some talk of attempts to link the university with the local and international labour markets, the process of post-degree employment was generally seen as neither transparent nor fair.

Similarly, in regime areas, employment was seen to depend on connections with those who have influence over the government (uni 2_student 11_M) and was subject to a number of non-merit-related considerations (uni 2_student 2_M), although others found the employment process to be fair (uni 5_student 6_F, uni 5_student 8_M) because it depended on the students' efforts (uni 5_student 7_M). A small minority of students in regime-controlled areas (less than 10% and with a particularly high concentration in university 10) found the transition process into employment fair and transparent. The same group also found work opportunities to be excellent, which contradicts the views of the vast majority of students in regime-controlled areas. This may relate to the specific context of that particular university, which is clearly not representative of the general trend in the country. Work opportunities in the private sector were seen to 'require further knowledge and more experience' but career 'trajectories [in both public and private sectors] were ambiguous and the only route is via university education' (uni 11_staff 1_M, uni 10_staff 3_M).

There was a general sense, especially in private non-regime-controlled universities, that while graduates were adequately prepared for the local labour market, they did not always meet employment requirements internationally: 'There is an increasing gap between the Syrian students' professional and scientific experience and work requirements,' (uni 4_staff 10_M). Although most students seemed to 'prefer to go abroad' (uni 4_staff 2_M) there was a concern that, after 2011, international perceptions of Syrian students' competences were damaged by reports on the deterioration of the education system as a result of the war (uni 10_staff 2_M). Obtaining a visa was difficult (uni 6_staff 1_M), even 'impossible' (uni 4_staff 4_M), but those who were able to 'sought to migrate to Europe' (ibid).

In closing, it is worth noting that, while there are 'major difficulties' (uni 2_student 1_F) and institutions are trying to operate in a context affected by armed conflict and constricted by high levels of unemployment and a livelihood crisis, a positive narrative about employment prospects emerges from student responses in non-regime-controlled areas. This is reflected in a sense of personal responsibility and an attitude of rising up to the challenge, perhaps influenced by a recaptured sense of agency or a shared determination in the face of political upheaval and livelihood challenges as reflected in the following quotes: 'I am convinced that the experienced can prove their worth,' (uni 2_student 10_M); 'with serious work and perseverance it is possible for a student to secure work and to reflect a positive image of his/her university… The university exerts efforts on all levels to qualify the student and send him to the work market,' (uni 2_student 10_M); 'Syrian students are proving their worth in work wherever they go,' (uni 2_student 4_M); 'a good student is always successful [in finding employment],'

(uni 5_student 2_M); and 'a student becomes successful when he is in command of the knowledge he gained from his study and works by it,' (uni 5_student 3_M).

Summary of findings after 2011

With *Mufadala* entrance exam levels significantly decreased for both public and private universities, almost anyone who passed the final secondary school exam was now eligible to pursue HE. Improved access, however, came at the expense of quality, which some public universities in non-regime-controlled areas attempted to counter with the introduction of an additional oral entrance exam.

Despite improved access to HE, attrition rates were soaring. This was due to rising concerns for personal safety; a deteriorating economic situation resulting in increasing poverty; fear of detention or compulsory military service; lack of social and financial support; and internal displacement. Difficulties in securing the required [admission] documents from regime-controlled areas created further obstacles.

Although for some the overall drop in registration resulted in greater student choice in respect of their area of study, especially in non-regime-controlled areas, for most, the choice of university and academic discipline were now more influenced by safety and security considerations than pursuit of quality. Security obstacles to access were amplified for female students, although they made up the majority of students post 2011 due to migration and militarisation among men.

The student experience was marked by discontent. Infrastructural gaps negatively affected the learning process. Other concerns abide, including a dysfunctional sector, festering corruption, a generalised sense of fear amongst students, internal displacement, political grievances with HE management, the terrorising presence of security forces in HE spaces and the extensive and rapid deterioration in the quality of teaching exacerbated by a massive brain drain. The expression of higher satisfaction levels at private universities in non-regime-controlled areas, should be seen as a reflection of attitude rather than as evidence of improved material circumstances.

Job opportunities were scarce across the board. The absence of centralised planning in non-regime-controlled areas contributed to a situation in which finding employment locally was almost impossible for most disciplines. Securing work elsewhere was hindered by the lack of recognition of university qualifications from non-regime-controlled areas, restricting employment opportunities to jobs in the Syrian provisional government, humanitarian and international organisations and high-demand fields like education and healthcare.

Universities offered little or no career support to help student transition to employment. Programmes were seen as poorly aligned with the labour market, particularly in non-regime-controlled areas where the links to the labour market seemed especially weak. The process of transitioning from HE to the labour market was further hindered by red tape, favouritism, and security approvals. Despite this, there was also a sense that students were adequately prepared for the local labour market, although not for employment abroad, where more opportunities were available. Wherever possible, students tended to seek employment abroad.

The Testimonies of Displaced Academics

The forced displacement of higher education communities is another form of human loss with a long-term impact on the sector's quality. The Arab region has suffered some of the worst forced displacement episodes in recent history, affecting academics disproportionately.[150]

Introduction

This section is based on the interviews with the 19 displaced Syrian academics and discusses respondents' journeys into displacement, their experiences of exile and questions of professional and civic identity before and after the crisis.

The 19 displaced Syrian academics, all male and residing in Turkey at the time of data collection, specialised in 14 subjects, mainly within the natural sciences. They had previously worked in three public universities in Syria, although several had also worked in private universities, which was a widespread practice in Syria. A number had sought scholarship or professional development or employment opportunities outside Syria, with a few still studying or working outside Syria in 2011. In each case, their regime scholarship or fellowship payments had been halted. At the time of data collection, some respondents were unemployed, whilst the majority of those in work had been unable to acquire work in their fields of specialisation. They are referred to in the text as Interviewee 1 to 19.

Not all the respondents left Syria in 2011. Some left one or two years into the crisis. Yet others had left very recently; in some cases, less than a year before the data collection. In what follows, the respondents share their circumstances and the decisions leading to displacement, their expectations, regrets and achievements post departure and their hopes for the future of Syria, the Syrian people and their own families.

Respondents' testimonies

Before the crisis: pre-2011

For many, reflections on the time before the crisis in 2011 included memories of professional fulfilment, a sense of unity, community and relative financial stability; although this perception differed depending on the region of Syria, place of employment and roles. At the same time, respondents reported that there had been signs of growing dissatisfaction about injustices and corruption, which were widespread at the time. Some of these views are expressed below.

'I found myself in teaching.'

The feeling of professional fulfilment was evident in two responses: 'I very much enjoyed teaching because I found myself in teaching,' (Interviewee 14) and 'I feel that I have to help [the] Syrian people. I was granted [the opportunity] to get a PhD, to learn something new and return to Syria to share this knowledge….' (Interviewee 13).

'We lived in unity.'

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150   Baraket & Milton (2015).

Several respondents nostalgically contrasted current circumstances with their life in Syria before the crisis: '… we don't live as well as we lived before….'

> Before the crisis, I usually went to work at around 7.30am, until 2pm or 3pm…. After that I would go home, take lunch and go for a walk with my family. I had a second house with a swimming pool in the countryside. We'd go there to swim and eat kebab. We lived well and calmly. We were a happy family. We loved each other. We were happy. (Interviewee 14)

The same respondent continues his recollections:

> Before, we all lived in unity, no one was bothered about other people's nationality or religion…. We lived like a family. And then, suddenly, we became enemies. (Interviewee 14)

'I had a house.'

There were also references to relative financial stability before 2011, which was contrasted with economic hardship after 2011: 'We had financial security,' (Interviewee 14). 'We had a very stable situation back home … then we lost everything,' (Interviewee 5). 'In Syria …I had a house, I had a car and used to teach at the university. I then came to Turkey and had to spend my money and … Approach schools to see if they would employ me,' (Interviewee 10).

'Injustice and oppression were present in the whole of Syria.'

Respondents expressed a growing dissatisfaction with injustices and corruption in the period leading up to the uprising and felt they could no longer watch such atrocities in silence or live with such oppression. Watching death and destruction was a major part of the experiences described:

> Injustice and oppression were experienced by everyone until things exploded. People had had enough, even if it meant death, especially when it came to matters of dignity and attacking our children, which we couldn't bear, so we left. […] The oppression was imposed on everyone. […] There was a lack of opportunity, other than for certain groups of people; everyone else got nothing. (Interviewee 15)

Respondents talked of the difference between rural and urban contexts and how these could lead to inequality and injustice: 'I am from a poor family…I am from a village but I was able to get to university despite our difficult life,' (Interviewee 8). Another provided more details about the lack of access to education in the villages:[151]

> In general, the education was very poor in the villages. There were no teachers, or maybe only one teacher in the whole village. […] We had only one classroom for all [of the different age group] classes, so the teacher used to bring us into the class to teach us in turn […]. This was in primary school. For secondary level, we didn't have a school at all in our village, so we used to walk 5 km to the nearest school. […] I would say that the government didn't take good care of education in the villages. After being educated and graduating from university,

> we started to ask for our rights from the government. We asked for schools and other necessary services to be brought to the village. (Interviewee 17)

There was a reminder of other crises in Syria and one participant compared the tragic events of 2011 to the crisis in the 1980s, emphasising the reality of displacement:

> In 1980, there was another crisis in Syria, and a lot of academics were forced to leave, just as they are now. I think it's the same thing happening all over again. It happened 30 years ago when they forced a lot of academics to leave. (Interviewee 13)

Circumstances leading to displacement

'The spark came from Daraa.'

Some respondents reflected on the uprising itself. One, for example, reflected on the first wave of the uprising that took place in Daraa (often referred to as the Day of Rage). Extensive news reports supported the claims that: 'Injustice and oppression were present in the whole of Syria, but the spark came from Daraa,' (Interviewee 15).

'After that weapons started to appear.'

Some described the circumstances leading to internal displacement. 'There were many alarming events taking place. Some individuals from the opposition party had bought weapons…. So, I had to leave,' (Interviewee 11). The decision to leave Syria voluntarily, after taking unpaid leave from his academic position, was influenced by declining standards of living: 'In all honesty, I was not forced to leave Syria. I left by choice after the decline in living standards, which made life quite difficult…. Salaries were reduced due to the devaluation of the local currency…. This is one of the main reasons I decided to leave Syria,' (Interviewee 11).

Another respondent talked about how the militarisation of the conflict drove him into exile:

> We started to feel that the situation wasn't good. Our country was being destroyed. In the beginning, it was without guns, without bombs. These were normal demonstrations. After that weapons started to appear. (Interviewee 10)

And yet another shared his feelings of loss and disbelief that: 'the killers were Syrians and the victims were also Syrians,' (Interviewee 14).

Survival and conflict: 'I was shot at, but God saved us.'

There were accounts of being surrounded, shelled and interrogated. The stories were of confusion, violence and the miracle of survival.

> My house was in an area of the countryside that was taken by the Free Syrian Army. I lived under the shelling for a while. Once a shell fell very close to me.

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151 This is an abridged version of a longer quote in the Report on Syrian Education pre-2011.

My survival was a miracle. So, I left my house and lived for a while in areas that were under the control of the regime. (Interviewee 5)

Another participant recalled that everyone became subject to interrogation and detention: 'Once, I was with my family in my car in my home town, and we were shot at, but God saved us. Another time, I was stopped at a checkpoint, interrogated and almost detained,' (Interviewee 15). Another respondent shared a terrifying and life-threatening experience: 'A group of masked members came to my house. They took me and my car. I was terrified. They beat me and took a rifle and shot above my head to scare me,' (Interviewee 19).

Having been unable to leave Syria early due to 'personal circumstances', one respondent described a series of traumatic events, including the loss of many colleagues, the shelling of his university, difficulties commuting to work or renting in safer areas, and threats of interrogation and detention.

Lots of my colleagues have died. This has had a very damaging effect on me. Many used to live in the countryside where the crisis began and couldn't commute to their work because travel and the security situation was so difficult. They witnessed numerous security investigations; the Intelligence Services would often detain people in those areas, so lots of them had to move to more secure areas. This was not easy as housing rents started to rise to the point that a university lecturer might have to pay their entire salary or even more on rent. The situation was very bad for those people […]. We were all badly affected. [...]. On many occasions the university was also shelled and lots of students were killed. Of course, the source of the shelling was unknown. Lots of students were also detained. (Interviewee 9)

'If we catch him, we will kill him.'

Accounts of detention by Islamist factions were reported as pervasive and recurrent. One participant was detained by ISIS in 2015 'for about 10 to 12 days'. He had spent time in Turkey, which automatically made him a suspect:

The evidence was not there … But ISIS told me that I was guilty. Why? Because I came from Turkey, and Turkey is against ISIS. After I explained that I didn't have any connection with Turkey they released me, but then told me that if they caught me again, they would kill me. (Interviewee 4)

Following his release, the same respondent learnt that ISIS was after him again:

After that some friends who were with me in the cell told me the leaders [of that group] were very nervous…because they knew that I was a scientist. They were told: 'if we catch him, in any area, we will kill him, because he didn't help us to produce a bomb.' (Interviewee 4)

Another recounted how in 2013, after leaving the university and returning to his village, he was detained by DAESH: '[I was] accused of "being at the service of the infidels",' (an offence punishable by death). Forty-five days later, because of lack of evidence, he was transferred to attend a 'course of repentance'. He asked to visit his family for

three days before the start of the course. Permission was granted and he fled to Turkey. Many traumatic events preceded his escape including the arrest of members of his family: 'My older brother managed to escape, but his son is still held by them. My younger brother, who had a family of five children, was killed. ISIS put him in one of their videos,' (Interviewee 19).

Living in fear: 'Two academics were assassinated.'

An immediate risk of detention triggered one participant's decision to flee Syria after just one year of the conflict:

In 2012, I was told to report to an intelligence branch because I had been reported as speaking out against injustices committed against students and academics. I took one night to think it over and decided to leave the city immediately. The security situation was very dangerous, and the circle of protests was spreading like an oil stain. We received news about the detention of a number of academics from our university.... Two academics were assassinated. (Interviewee 2)

Following internal displacement, another academic and his family had to leave Syria:

I was under observation. Under observation meant that somebody had written an unofficial, report saying that I was speaking out against the military… or against the president… Maybe one of my students, so I was called for interrogation by the military security services. We have several of them – maybe 15 or 16 different services .... If you are taken inside, and you make it back out again then 'your light came from the top' – which means you are returning to life again. That was the feeling. When I was released … I told my wife: 'we have to get ready to move.' (Interviewee 7)

Likewise, Interviewee 9 recalled that:

Unfortunately, even a personal argument could lead to detention, so if I disagreed with somebody they might report me to the authorities and accuse me of supporting the terrorists. Also, if you are from a city under the control of the Opposition, then you might be detained for that reason alone. (Interviewee 9)

The threat of detention sometimes came from more than one faction. One participant left Syria in 2014 'because [his] life came under threat from the regime, the regime army and the jihadists'. He surmised that this was a consequence of his home being in one of the 'liberated areas', but his work in a regime-controlled area:

When I returned to my family home, the jihadists would say: 'you belong to the regime and you are a spy'…. And when I returned to my university…the regime army would say the same thing: 'you are a spy for the jihadists'. (Interviewee 12)

As the conflict became more violent, he had to reduce his travel between the two areas and in 2013 decided to stay near his work. Unable to visit his family he decided to leave. The decision to flee was also influenced by the arrest of his brother, cousin and nephew, who shared with him the atrocities they had experienced in a government prison:

> My relatives told us what they had faced inside the prison. It's incredible. … they hung them like sheep by their hands from the roof for up to eight hours. When they released them, they fell to the floor without moving. They used electric shocks and cigarettes on their skin, you can still find the scars on his arm … they prevented them from sleeping … some prisoners would die in front of them … they had very little food. In the summer, you need a lot of water – they gave them about 200 ml per day. (Interviewee 12)

The same respondent reported a similar sense of insecurity in the liberated areas and that he and his family faced 'threatening conditions' and had to 'pay some militia to leave them alone, to avoid being kidnapped or hijacked', (Interviewee 12).

Some ultimately decided to leave because they were unable to continue deferring their compulsory military service having completed their postgraduate studies.

'They wouldn't pay my salary anymore.'

For those residing outside Syria, the financial difficulties they experienced when their scholarships or fellowships were stopped, sometimes as a consequence of their political stance on the Syrian revolution, influenced their decision not to return to Syria.

> After the Syrian revolution, I took a position, like many others. In the final year, they wouldn't pay my salary anymore. In 2014, I came to […]. During this period, my university informed me […] it had taken the decision to fire me and fine me a large amount of money because I hadn't returned to my post. (Interviewee 18)

'It was mostly for my children, as the country's future looked uncertain.'

Interviewee 11 describes how his decision to migrate was also influenced by a positive image of life in his destination country:

> Some of my friends had given me a very positive view of life in […] … The situation in Syria was far from stable and I have two children … immigration to Europe was an option. My ambition was to obtain better work opportunities so not necessarily to move to Europe. [The move] was mostly for my children as the country's future looked uncertain. (Interviewee 11)

Another participant was studying for his PhD outside Syria when the conflict broke out. He was involved in the revolution from the outset. He decided to relocate in order to be closer to Syria and the Syrian activists.

Civic and political participation

'I cannot belong to any of them.'

Having left two years after the beginning of the crisis, one participant recounted how his decision was triggered by an inability to belong in the changing social and political environment: 'I cannot belong to any one of them [warring factions] … I don't know who my friends are, who my enemies are … I can't participate, and I can't support the regime. Absolutely not…,' (Interviewee 1).

Respondents in that position suffered the mistrust of all sides of the political spectrum.

> They ask you 'where is your gun?' [laughs] 'which gun?' you tell them, 'the guns the regime gave you.' I am a teacher, I'm not selling guns! … And you go to the other side, to the regime forces…and they say you are from the opposition, you are against us. […] I couldn't find any place for me in this situation, this environment. I decided to leave. (Interviewee 1)

Assumptions cannot be made about the political allegiance of displaced academics.

> I had to leave Syria because I don't agree with the military action and I am not convinced by this war, and I mean either side. I don't want to fight with either party. I am not fighting or supporting either party and I have never intervened […] I have never got involved in any of it. I was with neither side. I was neutral. (Interviewee 8)

'Nobody should support a government that kills its own people.'

There were a number of respondents who were openly opposed to the regime and this put them in a lot of danger. One respondent recalled how his open anti-government stance resulted in the loss of friends, who ceased all contact.

> When my office at the college was seized by the security intelligence, they confiscated all my belongings including my personal archives, and the pro-regime college administration denounced me to be a defector […] My friends who live within regime-controlled areas, and with whom I had contact through Facebook and so on, have blocked me out of fear of the regime. (Interviewee 2)

The ethical and inhuman aspects of the conflict caused these men to leave, unable to watch in silence.

> If you keep silent, you are secure, you aren't harming anyone or any party. But for a person like me, well educated, from a select educated class [sic], I should not remain silent. That's why I left. (Interviewee 7)

> Because I have a higher degree, I can't deal with these kind of men. My mentality is different from theirs, so that I had to leave Syria. (Interviewee 12)

> I can't stand to see the killing of civilians and remain silent. Sometimes I would speak about it with my students during lectures. One of the students said to me, 'You're sacrificing your life with this kind of talk.' (Interviewee 15)

The sense of professional collegiality with those who were detained and those who died in custody did not allow one participant to keep silent:

> In my opinion, nobody should support a government who kills its own people. Some lecturers were detained only because they criticised the security situation or because they were against firing at people with real bullets during the peaceful demonstration at the start of the crisis. Some of the lecturers who were detained died in custody. They are famous lecturers with good reputations. Others who were not detained were killed outside the university because of their opinions. (Interviewee 9)

'This is not the revolution that I want to be part of.'

Initially supportive of the popular movement which challenged the power of Assad, some respondents expressed disappointment with the direction that the revolution had started to take.

> I started to feel two years ago that something was wrong …This is not the revolution that I wanted to be part of, that I had worked hard for. I had to protect our revolution. This is …why I'm here: to try to have an impact through my opinion on the opinions of others. Fortunately, a lot of groups, a lot of colleagues trust me. Because until now I've remained politically independent. I don't belong to any political group. (Interviewee 13)

'All states of the world contributed to the Syrian conflict.'

Respondents shared concerns about the involvement of the global actors in the Syrian conflict. 'All the states of the world contributed to the Syrian conflict, really: Russia, USA, Europe, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran. Every country has had some role in Syria,' (Interviewee 12). 'I see the Syrian war as a Third World War but on Syrian soil where everyone is playing a part and the only victim is the Syrian people. This is the reality,' (Interviewee 15).

> There's no international decision on how to end this business in Syria. Syrians today can't do anything… If we take the revolutionary side, they are under the external governance of others. If we take the regime's side, the power in Damascus is also held by others like Russia and Iran and the Shi'ites across the world who support it, and maybe some Western countries. (Interviewee 14)

'Only education can give them a chance for a better future and keep them away from terrorism.'

A strong resistance to Islamic fundamentalism is present in all the respondents' accounts, together with an overriding awareness of the generational damage done by the disruption of education.

> The war has badly affected the education of a whole generation and has led to deterioration of people's lives and minds, and to poverty. A whole generation has been destroyed. (Interviewee 8)

Several respondents discussed the role of education in countering ISIS fundamentalist ideologies. At the same time, there was a sense of personal threat from Islamic extremism to those who resist it, even if they are living in […], following several related assassinations in the country. 'ISIS is attracting those young people. They can do it because the youth have had no education. If we fulfil our role [as teachers] we can stop ISIS,' (Interviewee 16).

> All we need is to educate people to be able to live … I don't want the young people of my country to be terrorists and only education can give them a chance for a better future and keep them away from terrorism. Education is the only way to fight those ideologies […] What has happened in our country is that ISIS

has been able to exist there because of illiteracy. If you don't understand Islam correctly it is easy to be drawn in the wrong direction. (Interviewee 17)

> I am a Muslim and ISIS gives a very bad impression of Islam …We hope that our European friends understand that real Islam is against terrorists and fights ISIS ideology. (Interviewee 17)

There was criticism of the quality of education in schools for Syrian refugees in […] and a lack of government attention to this matter:

> We found about 260 [teachers] with fake certificates. We told the [Turkish] government but it didn't do anything. Now those teachers are teaching my son […]. Those students will join ISIS because they have no proper education. […] This is a bomb that is about to explode. I understand this situation because I teach in schools and in universities. My colleagues feel the same about this situation. (Interviewee 16)

Some respondents felt that personal safety continued to be threatened in exile. For example, Interviewee 7 stated that '…also here [in …] some people who are against DAESH are not safe. Some have already been killed, I suppose you heard about several assassination cases,' (Interviewee 7).

Professional identity in exile

Routes to exile

There were big challenges to finding one's way into exile. Academics have had to navigate controlled or closed borders. The cost of smuggling and settling a family in a host country exacerbated already existing financial difficulties.

> I entered illegally as I paid money to the corrupt officials who control the borders, both armed Syrian factions and border officials ... I paid 3,000 American dollars for me, my wife and one child. I had around 10,000 American dollars at the time, that was all I had. With that money, I was able to settle down and rent a house and so on. (Interviewee 8)

Many shared their initial hope that the displacement would last less than a year. Before seeking exile, some sought out employment in other countries:

> I left Syria for a neighbouring country at the beginning of 2013 in the hope that after a year things would calm down and I could return back home … this was a bad decision because I couldn't find a job here […] They needed people to work but once that work had been completed there was no further need and so there was no job security, guarantees or assurances for me. (Interviewee 3)

After a year in his first country of exile, Interviewee 7 was advised:

> Life in Turkey was much better and the salary is the same. Additionally, you can get citizenship after five years of work […] By then, all Syrians started to feel the need to secure alternative citizenship. (Interviewee 7)

Another academic considered a dangerous sea crossing to Europe, but on the advice of his friends who had made this dangerous journey, he decided to re-locate to Turkey instead:

> I visited several cities and universities…hoping to find work. But during the first year it was very difficult to find anything. Then I asked my family to join me because circumstances were getting worse in Syria and I was afraid ISIS would take revenge on my family, or that the borders might be closed [...] Afterwards, I decided to take a dinghy and travel to Europe … then I hesitated because … colleagues in Europe told me that there were no jobs and they were living in camps and tents. So, I … decided to try again here. (Interviewee 19)

But the experience left him feeling disappointed and misled.

> I had heard from some friends that there were universities teaching Syrians, so I came here. But, actually it wasn't true. There was only one university that ran courses in Arabic but it didn't provide any contracts, rights or even formal documents for lecturers … I have children, my wife, my mum and my sisters here … The transition was very difficult. It is very expensive and I worked as a sessional worker for several months. (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 4 shared a similar story about his failed prospects to find work in a newly established Syrian university in exile, which turned out to be a scam:

> Before I emigrated and travelled here, some friends told me about the Free University, which had opened and was hiring lecturers. But, unfortunately, I only saw criminals and thieves there. (Interviewee 4)

In another case, respondents spoke of feeling contained or trapped in one place. For example, one spoke about how he could no longer travel because he had 'neither a passport, nor residency in Turkey' (Interviewee 18).

'I cannot live as a refugee.'

Many respondents rejected any affiliation with refugee status and felt a sense of personal loss associated with their identity before the crisis. Feelings of being rootless, stateless and rejected were evident. Such feelings seemed to emerge from the desire to maintain self-respect and avoid further experience of dependency and the lack of agency that refugee status involved. But this rejection was also linked to issues of belonging, alongside very difficult living conditions (especially in camps), and life circumstances (in the following, financial, family-visa and child-education related):

> I cannot live as a refugee … for me, you know, the worst thing for any person is not death, not to be poor, no, it is to be a refugee … Like a tree without roots, I feel, I am without roots. I cannot respect myself … I feel … there is something I have lost, all the time, all the time, when I go on a journey, to a picnic … Only while I [am] delivering my lectures do I forget. Only when I am lecturing and look at the faces of students do I forgot this … When I leave [slaps knee] I am refugee again. (Interviewee 1)

> I will be honest, refugees are like livestock – they eat, drink and sleep, only. They don't get worthwhile and valued work. But what do you want, that I only stay in the camps, only […] stay at home? No. I prefer to work because I have goals. (Interviewee 4)

Profound feelings of sadness and loss were expressed by Interviewee 5 and Interviewee 14. 'Currently, I am one of many Syrian academics who suffer here. We are all destroyed and very sad,' (Interviewee 5).

> In general, I'm not satisfied. I'm unhappy about my personal situation and unhappy with what is going on in Syria. But I can't do anything about it … I have children … They were outstanding students at school, but given the situation, they could not continue their education. (Interviewee 14)

'Life in a camp is horrible.'

Internally displaced in 2011, Interviewee 17 experienced living in a camp near the Turkish border, where living conditions were described as unbearable for both adults and children:

> I lived in a camp myself and I know. The children there suffer from mud and harsh conditions. They deserve at least to learn, to have teachers to help them … I can tell you, life in a camp is horrible. If it is snowing, the snow will be everywhere and there is no heating. There is no drinkable water and no toilets. (Interviewee 17)

'My profession is my dream.'

A clear sense of pride in one's academic identity was evident in the responses of many: 'I enjoy working at a university [in …], because it is my specialisation,' (Interviewee 16). Some took the decision to leave their current jobs, which are not academic in order to return to research:

> I decided to leave this organisation six months ago and return to my science, to my profession, to my dream. It's a long story. From the first year or second year at university, I decided to be a researcher and I have worked for a long time for this. I have put in a lot of effort, I tried to gain a lot of information during my study abroad, even things unrelated to my PhD studies because for me it was an opportunity to increase my skills. (Interviewee 13)

Being connected to the world of science also pointed to a sense of personal and professional fulfilment:

> I'm a scientific author. I like to write books. I like to write articles. And sometimes my wife gets quite upset… 'you have to sit with us'…But I say: 'I have a plan, I need to fulfil my plan and afterwards I will join you.' (Interviewee 14)

There were also accounts of how the inability to pursue academic studies mitigated against any hopes for integration and enhanced life satisfaction in exile:

> My wife … would have liked to continue higher education here … she was eligible to do a master's degree in Syria. Since our arrival, she has been unable to pursue any of that and she is now just at home with the children. (Interviewee 11)

At the same time, there was some sense of professional potential: 'But here … I have managed to write some good articles. I published them in English…I am trying to benefit from my time here,' (Interviewee 1).

Thwarted eagerness to return

There seemed to be a thwarted eagerness to return and to get involved in HE reform and political activism inside Syria:

> [2015], I think was the peak of change in the higher education system … I was no longer able to go to the university because it would be risking my life. Some colleagues from inside the departments said to me 'Where do you think you're going? You're needed!' because I had been active two or three years before that. I was even on television once. I had a [telephone] call with some of my students, the documents against me already exist. They were very insistent that I should not return to the university. (Interviewee 13)

Another respondent had also stayed in close contact with his students in Syria:

> Some of them ask for my help in proofreading their research papers, in addition to editing some papers. Another student sought my trusted experience as a university lecturer to review [his] master's and PhD research plans. (Interviewee 15)

In 2014, a risky return to Aleppo enabled one respondent to work with students, independently, without affiliation to a university: 'I started teaching students independently. But, I got the sense that the regime was spying on me again and was forced to flee,' (Interviewee 14). He was also invited to lecture at a university in a liberated area but found the experience unsatisfactory:

> Sometimes they invited me to give a lecture. But the conditions just weren't right, it's not like a lecturer can just get up and freely give information. It's difficult. I think that if a lecturer isn't given freedom and comfort, he can't offer anything to his students. (Interviewee 14)

'Language was a big problem for me.'

Language barriers were experienced as a major obstacle professionally, especially in the early stages of exile: 'It was a big problem for me to start teaching in English … But now, I manage to do it. Now I sometimes deliver my lecture in Turkish,' (Interviewee 1). This was the case for students as well as academics. 'The most common problems [for the majority of Syrian students] are integration and language. Despite the fact that they are taking or had taken the TOMER test,[152] they still struggle with language … the language problem and integration difficulties are major obstacles for many,' (Interviewee 6). Kurdish students were having to learn four languages, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic and English.

Many academics had taken to instructing in English as a strategy for securing a post.

'It was not that good [a] job, but it was a way to survive.'

For some, the integration into a new labour market felt 'like beginning all over again'.

> Now I am teaching Arabic in [name of the Faculty]. It is not my specialisation, but I can get enough money for me and my children. I am refreshing my English and trying to publish in my specialisation, as you know, my job is merely a way to get money. It is like I am beginning again, to be honest. (Interviewee 19)

Survival was a recurring theme, especially in relation to employment. Some had to take positions which were not related to their field of research. 'My current job is not related [to] what I specialised in, but I've got to do something,' (Interviewee 14). Another reported the following: 'It was not that good [a] job, but it was the way to survive … it looks like a stable life. […] but life is not that stable nor is it comfortable,' (Interviewee 7). The struggles for well paid, high-quality and appropriate work is a theme running throughout the responses.

Another reported that he 'looked for any type of work but as an academic I was over-qualified'. Relocating to the city did not make it any easier: 'I expected things to be easy here but [finding] work has been difficult. At the beginning, I had to tutor by the hour, which was not enough, so I dipped into my savings,' (Interviewee 15). Another reported on financial challenges in relation to the forms of work that are available to those in exile:

> Living conditions here include paying full rent and utility bills. I have no other source of income, except for the occasional teaching assignment in Arabic schools, which pays very little… There are some Arabic schools here, which we join for 6 months of the year when there are teaching posts. This includes teaching younger learners, which is paid even less … with contracts ending once students are no longer attending. (Interviewee 11)

Despite expressing disappointment at being forced to begin again and having to compromise on the quality or nature of the work they were able to engage in, some respondents strove to settle into their new lives once there was some semblance of minimal employment stability, although this was not true for all. Importantly too, many were commuting great distances to get to work and despite some degree of satisfaction in their lives, they showed a continued desire for further professional development and for better employment prospects.

'I found a new job … and started to adapt to my new life.'

Securing a job and earning money was a key step in being able to adapt and settle.

> The first month here was hard. The second month was also hard … I started to look for a job immediately I arrived here. After two months, I found a job with a humanitarian organisation. I worked there for four months. You know, after you have a source of income, your life starts to become stable … After four months, I found a new job where I have been working for a year and six months. I have started to adapt to my life, my new life, and to accept the local community and society. (Interviewee 10)

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152 An equivalent of the English TOEFL test for Turkish.

This did not always alleviate financial insecurity, however. Respondents described their financial situation, which was very difficult for some: 'I work part time. They pay 10 US dollars an hour, I have 16 hours every week. Therefore 160 dollars per week,' (Interviewee 6). Another gave this account: 'I am giving private lessons. I am teaching one high school student. I am giving him lessons for 500 Turkish Lira per month. This is my [only] income at the moment,' (Interviewee 8).

Others who had been forced to change cities and jobs several times still had low salaries.

> It took me four months to find a job. But … the salary is low … about 150 dollars a month, and you need at least 500 dollars to survive. So, it is difficult. I was in that situation until the start of 2016, when they opened Arabic programmes in [university name] and I had the potential to be a lecturer there. (Interviewee 16)

'There is a problem with racism.'

Some respondents also reported that they were experiencing prejudice which applied to students as well, but it seemed to vary from place to place. In commenting on students' experiences in exile one participant identified it as a problem:

> There is a problem with discrimination. Some of the students are facing it especially in the eastern governorates; the border cities, because of the vast numbers of Syrian students there. […] There is less [discrimination] in [the cities]. But most of our students are in the border areas with Syria. (Interviewee 6)

Such discrimination was reported as being experienced in other Arab countries. One respondent went to a neighbouring country where he searched unsuccessfully for work for a year. He felt discriminated against on account of his nationality:

> They told me that I am Syrian and that the position was not open to Syrians. The manager was Saudi Arabian, which was very shocking for me. I had all the qualifications. This happened in a neighbouring country for a year before I decided to travel elsewhere to seek employment. (Interviewee 15)

The above accounts of circumstances leading to displacement and experiences of exile are supported by a growing literature and online reports on external displacement of Syrians to neighbouring countries.[153] They are a powerful testament to the experience of refugee status; to the loss of professional identity; to life in exile and the challenges of resettlement. They highlight the needs and concerns of academics in search of safety, stability and labour-market mobility.

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153 See Watenpaugh et al. (2013, 2014).

Final Remarks and Future Recommendations

Whilst much of the post-2011 literature addresses the external displacement and migration of Syrians in need of education and support, there are few reports that focus on the state and internal conditions of HE post-2011.[154] This enquiry has sought to address that and the absence of a first-person Syrian perspective that can be supported by reliable evidence. Although the report captures the views of those interviewed and cannot therefore be seen as a definitive account on the state of Syria HE as a whole, nevertheless, this enquiry gives voice to a cross-section of those who remain actively engaged in HE in both regime- and non-regime-controlled areas and across both private and public universities, drawing on their direct experiences and providing unique insights into HE institutional governance, functioning, security, fragmentation and survival.

Even allowing for conflicting respondents' views, the state of HE at the onset of the crisis, as reported in our sister enquiry,[155] was that of a sector where attempts at reform had been thwarted and where market-driven expansion had focused on privatisation at the expense of quality. In this highly centralised system, the Ba'ath Party and national security apparatus had been embedded within a firm authoritarian and centralised university governance structure, with outmoded curricula and textbooks promoting regime ideologies. Corruption, favouritism and discrimination were extensive and heightened inequality was evident and rising rapidly in respect of both investment and access to HE across different regions of Syria and the neglected North East and rural areas in particular. Universities played little or no role in providing practical skills or training to support student transition into an already tight labour-market, an evident push factor in the existing exodus of educated Syrians prior to 2011.

Whilst corruption and security had long been central features of the HE landscape, including the suppression of dissent and opposition through detention and disappearances, before 2011 the sector was seen as broadly stable and functional. However, increasing inequity, decades of underinvestment in HE and a questioning of HE quality, governance and missions, coupled with growing political and economic grievances, had led to increasing disquiet amongst both the student and the wider Syrian youth population.[156]

This enquiry analyses the Syrian HE sector post 2011, through three emerging trends:

- **Trend 1** The heightened politicisation of HE in conflict.
- **Trend 2** Curriculum stagnation, constrained internationalisation and an absence of research.
- **Trend 3** The experience of students, access to HE, learning and progression.

All Syria's HE institutions have suffered degrees of politicisation whether in regime- or non-regime-controlled areas, including the militarisation of campuses, students and university practices, growing insecurity and human-rights violations against staff and students alike. There have been allegations of endemic corruption and a loss of clear university governance structures in which the security apparatus has played an increasingly dominant role since 2011 and seen the appointment of security personal to senior university management posts in regime-controlled sites. Insecurity, including targeted attacks on universities and university personnel, has driven faculty into exile to seek safety for themselves and their families, with a resulting loss of intellectual capital

and expertise. Student attrition rates have soared and the quality and integrity of HE in Syria have plummeted over the course of the crisis, undermining academic qualifications, certification, trust and professional and social mobility.

The HE sector has fragmented across political and factional divides and is now dysfunctional at best and collapsed at worse. Those in non-regime and highly conflicted areas of Syria struggle to survive, lacking both national and international recognition. Political realignment has also forced universities to abandon pre-2011 collaborations with Western universities in favour of universities in countries supportive of the regime, which are seen by respondents to be less advantageous in respect of the modernisation of teaching and research practices and any liberalisation agenda. These, as well as the diversion of already limited resources to the war effort and a partisan rather than a community or civic facing mission, have implications for individual HE institutions and for the development of any national coordination or regional quality assurance structures.

A lack of staff training or capacity-building in new teaching approaches; internal curriculum stagnation; security difficulties in accessing lectures and buildings; the ongoing presence of security personnel on campus; the disappearance of any time or support for research; and difficulties in accessing research published elsewhere or progressing disciplinary knowledge all have implications for academics in Syrian HE.

Broader issues of student access and experience relating to relevance and standards of learning; outdated teaching methodologies, often due to teaching being delivered by untrained graduates and a lack of resources and references; cancellation of lectures; absence of recognised certification; and deficient preparedness and opportunities for graduates to move on to meaningful work, all have implications for current and future generations of students.

Whilst none of the above is surprising, and such trends tend to predominate in HE sectors during conflict,[157] HE can play a vital role in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery. Building capacity, developing or maintaining international links and improving standards in a fragile conflict torn university sector appears crucial if it is to exist and undertake such a role in the future.

Respondents in this enquiry speak about the loss of 'an entire generation at every level of the education process', 'widespread brain drain', the importance of role models as 'bearers of intergenerational knowledge' and the generational damage done by a disrupted education and the loss of professional standards and accreditation. While the brain drain was not caused by the conflict, and academics unable to progress their careers had been leaving prior to 2011, the situation has undoubtedly been worsened by it. Some of this generation have been killed or conscripted, others are in refugee camps in neighbouring countries or temporary posts in Europe or the US. How many of these will be safe to return, and where they might return to has strong implications for the future of the sector and how far they may be able to preserve and rebuild it,

154   See Watenpaugh et al. (2014).
155   See Dillabough et al. (2018).
156   Buckner (2013); Dillabough et al. (2018); OECD (2016).
157   Millican 2017.

whether in regime-controlled regained areas or areas under Turkish or Kurdish control. It also highlights the career trajectories of those who are forced to remain in exile for the time being and their importance as bearers of knowledge and cultural identity and valid contributors to the wider international academic community.

Milton[158] describes HE systems in Libya and Iraq as 'neglected pillars of recovery' and Milton and Barakat[159] identify four important areas of contribution: stabilisation and securitisation, reconstruction, state-building and peace-building. Millican's study of Universities and Conflict[160] documents the contribution that HE institutions have made elsewhere to local communities and state infrastructure in peace-building and resistance. A Syrian HE sector badly needs support if it is to take on this role.

For the international community of NGOs, international aid agencies, neighbouring or other government interventions or university associations or institutions, this support could come in a variety of forms. These can broadly categorised in line with the three trends underlying this enquiry: internal ministerial and sectoral support around governance; management and quality and support to individual institutions; support to Syrian academics, both those working there currently and those in exile, and support for current and future students.

Ministerial or Sectoral Support

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

The enquiry frequently details the importance of the tension between those who view HE as a tool of the regime and those who prioritise the importance of autonomy and transparency, quality standards, equality of access and employment and an applied or contextual approach to teaching and research. The failure of any coordinated attempt at modernisation prior to the conflict, and the further politicisation or mere survival strategies employed in most HE institutions since 2011 mean that such change is long overdue.

Such de-politicisation would undoubtedly mean the end of patronage arrangements currently held with business elites of political persuasions as described by virtually all respondents in the enquiry and already in place prior to the conflict. It would also open the way for the introduction of mechanisms for ensuring autonomy and transparency of decision-making.

Academics in non-regime-controlled areas have in some instances tried to modernise and introduce fairer systems of access and employment, with attempts at quality standards. Links developed with international universities by those currently in exile, and the involvement of the international community in the country as a whole since the conflict, suggest that even with reduced capacity, institutions may be more receptive to international pressure to modernise in the future. However, these initiatives and relationships will need to be harnessed and built on if there is to be any national, recognised Syrian HE.

2) To seek the withdrawal of national security personnel from campuses and implement international standards of academic freedom.

National security personnel were already a presence on campus prior to the conflict and in some cases have been given additional positions of responsibility in HE institutions since the start of the conflict. Maintaining the security of students and staff in the next phase will remain a priority. However, students will not feel able to study freely, nor academics to pursue and support disciplinary studies with the constant presence of what they see as 'government informers'. Retrained security personnel who are not seen to be linked so closely to the regime and a degree of national commitment to academic freedom are essential if Syrian HE is to conform to international standards. There are examples of university involvement in training security personnel in other post conflict contexts.

3) 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; which may also play a role in educating future security and ministry personnel.

The pre-2011 report identifies how HE was underfunded prior to the conflict with government spending in HE declining after 2000 to one of the smallest shares of GDP in the world. Thereafter most finance allocated for education has been directed to emergency funding for primary and secondary schools and investment in HE has become peripheral to state sector rehabilitation.[161] Consequently while public HE institutions are seen as having higher standards and offering a better education to students they are severely under-resourced. Since 2011 much of the remaining education budget has been redirected to the war effort.

4) To introduce and formalise codes of conduct that respect international human rights for HE staff and students who remain inside Syria, as well as those currently seeking employment and education mobility elsewhere as a result of the conflict, but who might wish to return in the future.

Serious human rights violations were reported throughout the study relating to the political persecution of academic staff and students with humanitarian concerns or political views critical of the regime. It is imperative that such violations are monitored and prevented, and while this may be outside the scope of ministerial authority, it may be possible to undertake negotiations demanding to protect HE environments from the pervasive fear, self-censorship, repression, political persecution and human rights violation, which gravely limit their capacity for development.

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158 Milton 2013.
159 Milton and Barakat 2016.
160 Millican 2017.
161 See Milton (2017); Times Higher Education (2013).

Support to Individual Institutions

5) 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 universities.

The growth of private universities is not unique to Syria and is a trend observable almost everywhere, with subsequent tensions between gaining fee income and delivering quality education. However, without national and international support for public HE, many institutions, particularly those in rural areas, (often seen as safe areas) will be unable to survive. This will further disadvantage poorer students and those living outside of the cities and entail additional security risks for those who decide to relocate.

6) To build international partnerships with other Middle Eastern countries and associations of Arab universities, to revive pre-2011 partnerships with Western and European universities, and to develop global ties with international HE charities and universities able to coordinate future responses to the HE crisis in Syria and to increase public awareness.

There were attempts to develop internationalisation strategies prior to 2011 documented in the Pre-2011 report,[162] including the formation of European HE partnerships. Many of these were undermined by an internal reluctance to modernise the sector[163] and have been halted since the conflict and ensuing political realignment. Future partnerships are likely to be closely tied into any reconstruction support, but closer links could also be built with associations of Arab universities, particularly in relation to strengthening a civic or community facing mission and supporting the development of research. Both of these were cited as priorities for academic respondents to this report.

7) To develop greater links with employment and labour-market opportunities and create structures for careers support to help the transition from study into work, as well as continuing education opportunities that aid career development and social mobility.

Syrian universities have no strong history of careers support and outdated curricula and pedagogies have not helped to build links with employers or to prepare students for future work. Fake certification, depleted teaching timetables and disrupted study periods have left students even more unprepared for future employment.

A coordinated approach to assessing professional skill gaps and work opportunities and revising curricula to fill some of these gaps are a priority for individual students and a future Syrian state. These links will need to be developed nationally but are likely to be further hampered by risks of 'cronyism' and favouritism, which is currently evidenced between business entrepreneurs and individual institutions. Respondents throughout this report complain of inequality of opportunity for academics and students, and a large contingent of unemployed students, which would be a problem in many circumstances, holds particular risks for fragile and post conflict states.

Support for Academics, residing inside or outside Syria

8) 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.

The development of international partnerships, cited in point 5 above, has particular relevance for individual academics struggling to maintain an academic identity and to keep up to date with research and developments. Without access to research journals, funding or discipline-related study, their ability to pursue and develop their work and their careers is severely hampered. Academic respondents spoke of their ambition to pursue their own research, and those in non-regime-controlled areas spoke of their frustration at not being recognised by publishers. New relationships have been built with disciplinary colleagues by those living in exile, which testify to the benefits of this. Establishing research partnerships with those that return, or those that remain in exile, can be of significant benefit to the broader Syrian HE community.

9) To access capacity-building and research training, particularly in socially engaged research that could make a significant difference to the reconstruction effort, whilst enabling Syrian academics to fulfil their vital roles in the rebuilding of Syria's HE, research and social sectors, and in helping to develop a stable pluralist society.

Comments on the lack of connectivity between teaching, research and local context, both prior to and since the conflict, appear in both reports, as does the recognition that HE has a significant role to play in many aspects of any reconstruction effort. However, applied and socially engaged research is for most academics a new area. The provision of research support and training to those academics most connected to their communities is likely to benefit these communities far more than direct external expertise delivered by outsiders with little contextual knowledge.

10) To develop alternative pedagogies and teaching approaches, particularly practically-oriented and work-related approaches and pedagogies for peace-building that take account of diversity and difference and focus on rebuilding trust and accepting cultural pluralism, and to highlight the importance of academic, rather than government, control over curricula.

The pre-2011 enquiry does identify some attempts to improve and modernise approaches to teaching, and there are sporadic developments in non-regime-controlled areas. But there is general agreement that teaching throughout is of poor quality, dull and theoretical, using handouts and dictations and with text books that are only updated every 10 years. Training is needed in alternative pedagogies, using workplace skills and approaches and including knowledge, skills and attitudes in all areas in the future. This is particularly important if curricula are to prepare students for employment and play a role in peace-building and citizenship.

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162   See Dillabough et al. (2018).
163   See Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c); Tempus (2010).

11) To support programmes that will nurture and sustain Syrian academics in exile, including fellowships and scholarship schemes supporting temporary or longer-term academic placements and knowledge transfer for those who are unable to return home yet. This applies to academics in exile across the disciplines seeking education and employment mobility. It would be of particular value to those from lab-based disciplines, who lack the infrastructure to continue their applied work and to early career academics, who would benefit from PhDs.

12) To support programmes facilitating research collaboration and professional connections between Syrian academics, both inside and outside Syria, and with colleagues from the wider regional and international academic and scientific communities. This would mitigate professional isolation and support continued academic development and contribution to addressing the challenges that face Syria.

For academics to be able to continue their research and return home in the future, collaborative projects and fellowship schemes are a lifeline. While the pre-2011 enquiry shows a continuing, albeit relatively weak, research profile in many Syrian universities, this has since become almost non-existent. A future cohesive society needs an indigenous knowledge system, and academics may be able to benefit from collaborations developed while in exile. Such expertise could then be brought back to benefit a future Syrian economy and society.

Support for Current or Future Students

13) To support English language learning as the language of global knowledge transfer, in order to extend access to academic journals and the broader international academic community.

14) 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 a Syrian Open Education Programme.

There are notable gaps in learning as a result of a disrupted sector and, if students are to compete internationally, they will need to fill these, and to gain a level of proficiency in English as the language of science. International and national programmes are struggling to address this in various ways, but will need continued financing and support.

15) To lobby HE institutions and governments to provide financial support and academic pathways for continuing educational opportunities for students within Syria, in exile or undergoing resettlement and,

16) To identify scholarships at international universities to complete interrupted studies, particularly at post graduate level to enable them to return to populate universities in the future.

Again, the international community could, through the provision of scholarships, enable the brightest Syrian students to complete advanced degrees, enabling them to progress

individual careers, but also to be in a position to lecture future generations of students once fully functioning HE is restored.

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

18) To create HE employment opportunities that would attract the most qualified Syrian young academics back from exile, with the reassurance of academic freedom, opportunities for growth, and safety from political persecution.

While many Syrians are anxious to return home as soon as is possible, young people will be reluctant to do this without secure jobs or income. A future Syria needs its graduates, both in teaching and research positions and as career professionals, and young people need career-related opportunities.

19) To take the necessary measures in reducing unequal access based on political affiliation, sect, region or personal connection and introduce a model of affirmative (or positive) action promoting improved access to education and employment opportunities for members of marginalized groups, particularly women with limited financial resources and no links to the centres of political power.

All of the above will require equal-opportunity and merit-based admission policies, the abilities of lecturers (cited in 9) and resources available for university infrastructure and technology (cited in 3). They also require universities to improve English language teaching and to expose students to international journals and the latest thinking and research.

If they are to compete among their peers and if Syrian HE is to be recognised in the future, current students will need to fill gaps in their learning caused through the disruption of conflict and future students will need a broader and more comprehensive education. While post-conflict contexts often bring with them employment opportunities for students in humanitarian and reconstruction, Syria needs an educated, broadly minded and able personnel in the future. Scholarships and open-learning programmes have been developed in response to the conflict, and need to be made broadly available, to equip those who remain or are able to return. But there is also a need to make academic careers in Syria attractive to the best students, graduates and academics currently in exile central to which will be reassurances of academic freedom and equal opportunities for career growth. Such support could have a significant impact, not only on the lives of this generation of students, graduates and academics, but also on their communities and the lives of future generations of students.

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Appendix A Capacity building as a research methodology

Workshop planning for Syrian researchers: the first workshop

In this Appendix we report on the thinking behind our approach to capacity building and the methods used to develop the research capacity of the Syrian research team living in exile.

The programme involved two capacity-building workshops (one three-day workshop in June 2017 and one four-day workshop in July 2017), which included four teaching and learning components:

1) a teaching session on what constitutes high-standard and robust qualitative research, interview training;
2) timescape methods (timelines and mapping exercises to serve as both data and elicitation devices);[164]
3) interview protocol building; and
4) sampling, coding and thematic analysis of data, the writing of executive summaries and report writing.

Alongside this, a doctoral student offered an example of HE research in conflict zones.[165]

In each activity the research team sought to member-check participant responses and to share all findings that we ourselves had documented to build corroboration across data sets. Some of the major issues that we confronted, and which are discussed later in detail, were ethical issues around confidentiality, the need to ensure rigorously the protection of all respondents' anonymity and to be very mindful of the political sensitivity of issues when interviewing respondents who may not feel able to fully trust 'outsider' researchers.[166] This issue has been reported in the literature as one of the most significant drawbacks in conducting research in 'conflict environments'.[167] Most of the workshop participants were in exile but had strong connections to family and others, as well as being hopeful of returning. Substantial social fear was expressed by workshop participants about the nature of our roles as researchers, which we had anticipated, and sought to address throughout both workshops. This latter challenge cannot be underestimated when working with people in exile or seeking resettlement after experiencing conflict environments (even whilst in exile) or when forced displacement (including wishing to return to Syria) generates levels of social fear and social and personal losses, which fundamentally alter the interview context. Living in exile meant that responses were sometimes grounded in heightened degrees of anxiety, deep sadness, and feelings of insecurity about our roles and purposes and their safety and protection. The researchers all had experience in working with groups in society that had experienced protracted displacement.

Another important feature of the methods was to embrace time, place and region as important concepts that would inform our approach. We had developed a series of preliminary themes to explore, based on existing literature on Syrian HE, for example: monitoring quality and quality assurance; student satisfaction; equity; quality and breadth of the curriculum; mechanisms of promotion for faculty; workload; student access; and progression and employment pathways for students. We needed to explore these issues across different temporal periods. Hence, a multi-layered approach to identifying trends over time demanded that we raise questions that were historical in nature and character (and which afforded the possibility of corroborating or disputing any literature-based evidence and participant-based evidence) about how HE was understood in Syria in the time periods under consideration. Visual methods (timelines and mapping, charting) were used to capture critical events and turning points in the recent past. They were also used to encourage dialogue and reflection on workshop participants' experiences with HE over time.

Thinking about the concept of 'quality' in HE

Following Mazawi (2005) we viewed quality as something which is fundamentally grounded in the cultural constraints and possibilities of HE, and contextually situated in regions and nations, and institutional structures operating within the Arab world (as described in the section on context). Like Mazawi (2005), we therefore argue that trends in HE cannot be understood outside of the Syrian political and cultural context and history of education (Barakat 1993), or beyond the realm of systems of inequality which HE sites in Syria had inherited (as all other regional and geo-political sites do). In other words, it must also be seen within a wider understanding of quality HE globally. In what follows we provide an account of the methods we drew upon to collect data and conduct workshops.

Timescapes, timelines and entering the field of HE

The first workshop focused on what constitutes good qualitative research and collecting the first stage of data. The Cambridge team began by providing overviews of what constitutes good qualitative research, and of methods and approaches, and identified definitions of high-quality qualitative research approaches. The group explored, through mapping exercises and timelines, the HE context, and sought to capture quality HE or any compromise to it by documenting participant perspectives.

Timescapes is a methodological approach[168] adopted by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Centre which incorporates a temporal approach to gathering data about people's life experiences, critical events, turning points, or key moments of change associated with a question that demands a robust response across a particular time-period and that can be conducted in groups or by individuals. It is also an approach that draws upon various visual techniques for capturing a historical and contemporary account of critical events, shocks or key moments associated with a phenomenon.

This first method, the charting of timelines, was designed to capture critical events impacting upon HE in Syria. The timelines were designed to draw from 'insider knowledge' to capture political and educational changes impacting upon the ways in which quality was either enhanced or undermined by wider social, cultural, economic and political events. Events such as university decrees, state decisions on university expansion and privatisation, international collaborations, the introduction of quality assurance, the introduction of research centres, and key political decisions about HE, were the kinds of events that emerged on timelines. These exercises were therefore used for the purposes of data collection but were simultaneously used as elicitation devices to further discuss changes and challenges directed towards HE in interview settings, focus-group settings and in larger group discussions. A sample of completed timelines appears in the appendices in the report on Higher Education in Syria pre-2011.[169]

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164 See Hanna & Lau-Claydon (2012); Neale (2012); Neale and Hanna (2012).
165 See Jebril (2017).
166 Whilst there is much debate about the insider/outsider relationship in research, in this context it must be seen in a different vein. For example, in a standard qualitative research paradigm, insider/outsider is typically viewed as a difference in life experience or degrees of difference around ethnicity or class within a similar and familiar space (e.g., elite status versus working-class). However, the degrees of variation in this context did not simply stem from this notion of insider/outsider within the same geo-political region. Instead, the insider/outsider relationship is constructed as 'the West' and the Arab World, and an outsider can be anyone who is capable of reporting to the public on matters that could undermine participants' security in their home country or elsewhere. This creates layers of insecurity around collecting personal data, which are not equivalent to the kinds of insider/outsider dilemmas that emerge in more democratic contexts. This is an important thing to consider at the outset of any such research/capacity-building process with those in forced exile, regardless of their status or background (see Cohen & Arieli, 2011).
167 See Cohen & Arieli (2011).
168 Hanna & Lau-Claydon (2012); Neale (2012); Neale and Hanna (2012).
169 See Dillabough et al. (2018).

After timelines were completed, through large group discussions, we developed several forms of corroboration: taking substantive field notes whilst listening to focus groups present timelines (and posing questions whilst listening), checking focus group timelines against existing reports and literature, and following up where clarification was needed or where conflicts in interpretations across group members existed. The task undertaken by working focus groups and teams each developing their own timelines was as follows: list the critical events (political, social, economic and cultural) that impacted on quality HE in Syria and discuss in your groups how to further elaborate on their impact.

Mapping trends in HE in Syria

We followed the timeline exercise up with a mapping exercise, which provided a picture of the geographical landscape of HE in Syria, and the differentiation in HE across the nation, geo-politically and regionally, and then identified distinctions between private and public institutions to further explore views on trends in HE.

The team recognised substantial variation across institutions as well as public/private divisions, and that there was significant disagreement amongst and between respondents about the so-called 'best HE institutions' in the country. This topic needed to be discussed from various vantage points and the conflicting perspectives of the participants in order to adequately capture how to negotiate the various interpretations relative to documents, reports and existing literature. This mapping exercise was also designed to supplement our efforts to better understand the regions and places in the country that were most impacted by changes (some identified in the timeline exercises) which could then be mapped onto institutions in different parts of Syria.

For this mapping exercise, every group of workshop participants worked on paper versions of an on-line map of Syria. This map did not show any sectarian divisions or religious factions or conflict zones,[170] but rather identified cities and regions in Syria in a non-political sense. Using this map as an example, workshop participants drew their own HE maps within a wider mapping of Syria, showing distinctions between public and private universities and identifying areas where inequality in provision and any variation in quality might have existed. Again, as in the timeline exercise, the workshop participants worked in groups: to draw their own maps; to identify important HE institutions within and across maps; to rank institutions by region and place in terms of quality (in some cases); and to give information (when presenting the maps) about the variation in quality and type of institution in larger discussion groups. Groups also defined other HE institutions, such as research institutes or HE institutes. In so doing, we sought to identify the areas/regions where these institutions could be found to gain a sense of regional context (note that this latter exercise was more difficult) and influence (elite public HE institutions, for example, Damascus University). During workshop discussions, team members took notes on the mapping exercise and posed questions as a way of consolidating further what had been shared on paper.

Teaching interviewing methods: an introduction

Another activity was the training of the workshop participants in interviewing methods and the fundamentals of qualitative research (e.g., interviewing) so that they could contribute to the overall research we were conducting as 'insiders' and we could embrace the potential of workshop participants, as co-researchers on the project, and expand the sample of interviewees (i.e., other Syrian academics either in exile or in Syria, who could respond to questions about Quality HE). Open-ended interviewing techniques were taught and generative interactive dialogue took place, which served as focus group data that supported the main questions that the project sought to answer. This began with participants generating key themes associated with HE that they themselves identified and charted on poster paper. These themes were then discussed and debated in the larger group and extensive field notes taken, and a further refined list of themes for interviewing was generated by the team away from the workshop (which was sent on to all

participants). This served as the basis for the final interview protocol to be used by workshop participants in their own interviewing context (expanding the data set). Workshop participants developed research plans to take away with them in order to execute their study, conduct interviews and a team member from Cambridge was identified as a research contact and support to aid in any challenges as data was collected. Workshop participants were asked to bring all new data sets to the second workshop.

The second step of this process was to provide opportunities for workshop participants to practise interviewing so that, if appropriate, given the context and security matters, they too could conduct interviews as collaborators in ways that would ensure that their own respondents were protected. For example, participants practised interviewing techniques and learned note-taking techniques as it was felt they would not be able to audio-tape interviews due to security concerns.

A third step covered sampling and identifying target groups for interviews. The basic approach involved: defining research questions; choosing research respondents; understanding the role of purposeful sampling and access;[171] the identification of sample size; the identification of target groups that can address the themes of the research and answer questions (e.g., range of students, range of staff); accessibility and safety; research action plans (team members if operating in a team); and the development of a research timeline. We eventually had to eliminate the idea of a team approach to collecting further data because of the diverse locations of respondents and the challenges associated with coordinating such an approach. In designing a timeline, we encouraged the task structure below:

Vignette A.1: Task structure promoted in the workshop

Task 1: identifying research respondents;

Task 2: ethics (plan oral or written consent);

Task 3: conducting interviews, audio-taping, note-taking;

Task 4: identifying themes emerging from findings – constant discovery and constant comparison;[172]

Task 5: garnering preliminary insights; and

Task 6: research mentorship contact while collecting data.

Workshop participants were assigned to teams so that they could conduct research whilst away from the workshop and were divided into: document teams (teams providing documents and some précis or summary of the documents and analysis if possible); and research teams that would be involved in interviewing, although researchers conducted interviews independently as a result of the diverse locations in Turkey they returned to after the workshop.

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170 We are aware that maps are, by their very nature, capable of engendering discussions related to political and historical divisions. We felt strongly that we could use a more generic and contemporary map (dating back to before the year 2000) as a discussion and learning tool, to assess, with workshop participants, the regional differences and characteristics of the HE sector in Syria.

171 This was a particularly poignant aspect of the training as there was a need for purposive sampling in order to ensure that access to the relevant target group (i.e., other Syrian academics and students) was targeted safely and securely.

172 See Glaser (1992).

Open-ended interviews with Syrian academics: Displacement, journeys to exile, and reflections on quality HE

Another major aspect of the work was to conduct interviews with displaced academics in exile. We conducted open-ended interviews (with the support of interpreters) with 19 displaced academics in Turkey using an open-ended thematic protocol developed by the team. Team members, all experienced in different ways with issues of displacement, read the literature on displacement as well as substantive background material on HE in Syria and drew upon previous experience with HE displacement, change and quality in order to build the protocol. Protocol themes are presented in Table A.1.

Table A.1: Themes for discussion with displaced academics

1. Biographical/personal and professional: personal and professional history (HE history in particular).
2. Displacement, forced movements and consequences: personal and professional.
3. Description/Mapping of HE (pre-2011, post-2011).
4. Description of current situation: Syrian HE.
5. Personal and professional conditions.
6. Student experience, student representation, forced movement, university conditions.
7. Research and teaching.
8. Equity (pre-2011, post-2011): personal and institutional.

It is important to mention that these were challenging and difficult interviews to undertake for both interviewees and researchers. This was because of the sensitivity of the issues being addressed, the degree of trauma experienced by the academics in exile, and the social, economic, professional and personal losses they were experiencing. The Cambridge team took considerable care to ensure that co-researchers understood the purposes of the enquiry, that all confidentiality agreements were in place, that they had clear choices about participation and that they did not feel any pressure to undertake interviews.

Teaching data analytic techniques: the second workshop

In the second workshop, the approach was highly active and experiential. The Cambridge team engaged with workshop participants using an apprentice approach to analysing data from their research. We worked as a team, using collaborative practices in the workshop. Workshop participants worked on data collected for the project. For example: maps; timelines; and interview transcripts. We went through the following processes: preparing transcripts for analysis and coding; coding and forming themes; and writing summaries and cameos. After each attempt at the practice of data analysis in situ (as part of workshop training and analysis), there was a period of reflection on what had been learned, as well as reflection on the issues that emerged through engaging with, reading and interpreting the data. Research teams were built with the participants in a way that meant they could take the lead on any co-research or assistance that might be given regarding translation or summarising documents.

Whilst full involvement with these tasks was difficult for many workshop participants and dis-aggregating very challenging for the team, many strove to help with interpreting documents and providing research designs and summaries of findings. As a group we discussed in detail issues of validation and the credibility of data, encouraging all researchers to draw upon data sources in order to create a thematic writing structure and use multiple sources of evidence for writing executive summaries of what they had been learned from empirical research.

The workshop ended with the research teams finalising their data analysis, presenting their findings and a discussion about what recommendations we felt we could make at this stage. There was also a reflection on the workshop processes as a whole, as well as a plan for completing the final publication of the report.

Data collected remotely inside Syria

In preparing for the second workshop and collecting data that workshop participants had gathered remotely, it became apparent that researchers had faced significant challenges in conducting remote interviews. The process had clearly not been easy or straightforward, although the overall number of interviews undertaken was very high, given the security circumstances of all potential respondents and associated issues of trust and research experience. The open-ended remote interview largely ended up being delivered in the form of an online or a digital oral survey, although there were some exceptions. Consequently, there were vast variations in the quality of the data gathered. This notwithstanding, the report represents a fairly wide-ranging consultation on matters of HE quality in Syria today, something which is not only a high-risk task for those who undertook it but also challenging in terms of access, openness and thoroughness.

Coding schemes and analyses

The data set of 136 interviews was collated and analysed using the 11 categories presented in Table A.2. Categories 1 to 10 emerged from the literature review and capacity-building activities during the first workshop, which was aimed at eliciting views on factors contributing to enhancing quality in HE. The 11th category captured interviewees' experiences of internal and external displacement and questions of professional and civic identity before and after the crisis.

Table A.2: Categories used in coding

1. University mission, values, governance	5. Teaching, curriculum and assessment	9. Access
• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 staff perspectives
• pre-2011 student perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives
• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives
• post-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives
2. The role of university in the community[173]	6. Role of research	10. Student employability
• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 staff perspectives
• pre-2011 student perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives
• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives
• post-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives
3. Quality assurance	7. Resources and infrastructure	11. Testimonies of displaced academics[174]
• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• before the crisis
• pre-2011 student perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives	• circumstances leading to displacement
• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives	• civic and political participation
• post-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives	• professional identity in exile
		• hopes for the future.
	8. Student admission	
4. Staffing issues	• pre-2011 staff perspectives	
• pre-2011 staff perspectives	• pre-2011 student perspectives	
• pre-2011 student perspectives	• post-2011 staff perspectives	
• post-2011 staff perspectives	• post-2011 student perspectives	
• post-2011 student perspectives		

173 This theme was later integrated with the theme on university mission, values and governance.
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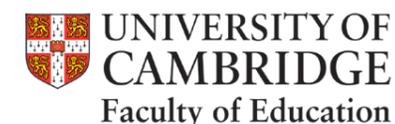
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