Background and Purpose

This strategy paper deals with the immediate and future challenges facing higher education (HE) in Syria. It is informed by research conducted over 2017 and 2018 by Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey, supported by a team from Cambridge University. The research, facilitated by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), documented the situation of HE across the country, both prior to 2011 and in the intervening years of conflict. It provides evidence of a sector in crisis. This strategy paper is further informed by discussions at the two-day Cara Round Table in Istanbul ‘Syrian Higher Education: Immediate and Future Challenges’ (24–25 June 2019) whose purpose was to “bring together experts from across the academic, INGO, NGO, UN, government and practitioner divide, providing a platform for Syrian academics to share their local knowledge and expertise with relevant decision-makers and responders to the Syria crisis and to prompt and facilitate discussion around this critical issue”.

HE as a sector is both locally connected and globally networked, rooted in its communities whilst linked with academics and institutions across the world.1 The Round Table included academic colleagues with experience of working in HE in challenging and fragile contexts in other parts of the world from whom lessons might be drawn, as well as presentations by Syrian academics on research exploring the role that HE in Syria might play in the reconstruction process from different disciplinary perspectives.

These last exemplified the importance of academic research and locally generated knowledge, and the value of academics in exile as a resource. Milton’s (2013)2 The Neglected Pillar of Recovery emphasises how universities are an often neglected but important resource in a state’s recovery process. The contextual knowledge of Syrian academics, their access to their own communities and their ability to gather and analyse data in areas not accessible to internationals, would all make important contributions to addressing some of the broader challenges currently faced within Syrian society, as well as within the recovery and reconstruction process.

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1 South Africa, Serbia, Croatia, Belarus, Kenya, Palestine.
Both the Cambridge-led Study Reports (2019) and the Round Table emphasised the impact of the crisis on HE, the importance of maintaining and supporting it, and the lack of any significant coordinated response from the broader international community. Despite the work of Cara, and other regional NGOs, and the support provided to students in exile, Syrian academics in Syria and in exile feel that both they and HE have largely been overlooked in the international response.

This paper acknowledges the tripartite role of a university in teaching, research and social engagement and identifies challenges and opportunities in all three areas. Although the outlined strategies were discussed in the context of the two broad scenarios of ‘ongoing conflict’ and ‘fragile peace’, strategies to enable Syrian academics in exile to continue to contribute to addressing the challenges facing Syria and to help sustain Syria HE and its universities, particularly those in the non-Regime areas in the North, were specifically considered.

It is however important to note that the Round-Table discussions preceded October 2019 events, provoked by the US withdrawal from the North East of Syria and Turkey’s attempt to establish a border ‘safe zone’ inside Syria.

The different perspectives and experiences of the Round-Table participants helped to inform discussions and provided an opportunity to forge stronger links with those who might offer support.

**Principles**

Round-Table discussions drew on the Cambridge-supported study findings, and the priorities, challenges and recommendations for Syrian HE, as captured in the allied Policy Brief under three thematic headings:

- Policy inclusion of HE in conflict
- Curriculum stagnation, constrained internationalisation and the disappearance of research
- Access, student experience and employability.

While not unique to Syria, they will all need to be addressed to allow the rebuilding of a quality education system. The research also identified the following priority areas for response from the international community:

1. the introduction of civilian personnel trained in conflict reduction approaches;
2. a civic mission adopted by universities with standards of transparency; academic freedom and cultural pluralism;
3. modernisation and capacity building for academics, in research, teaching and curriculum development;

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iv. recognition of the role of academics in supporting and informing those responding to the current crisis and in any future reconstruction process; and
v. stabilisation of the current context and protection of institutions operating, their students and faculty members.

These priority areas are overlapping and inter-connected and, although the Policy Brief makes recommendations on the role of the international community in providing support, in order to retain independence and a Syrian identity, the Syrian academic community must itself take a lead in moving things forward. The Round Table provided an important opportunity to debate this role. Cara has continued to support Syrian-led research projects over 2018–19, looking at the challenges facing Syria and Syrian populations in exile, including a number that looked specifically at how Syrian universities might contribute to the future reconstruction of Syria. These included the role of HE in peacebuilding, the restoration of social capital or cultural identity, and the value of HE research in supporting energy and food security. All exemplify the value of local knowledge, expertise and access to communities in Syria that is often inaccessible to international researchers. The work of Syrian academics could make a huge contribution to responses to the crisis, as well as to broader scientific research. The Round Table expressed a pressing need for Syrian academics to collaborate and organise, to support each other in exile as well as colleagues and students within the country, in order to secure a viable future for Syrian HE.

**Strategic directions emerging from the Round Table**

The Round Table explored a range of possible strategies and initiatives but emphasised the importance of acting swiftly and taking small achievable steps, rather than being overwhelmed by the difficulties of predicting longer-term scenarios and needs. While the importance of university accreditation and recognition was also raised and discussed, it was unlikely to be something attainable in the short or medium term and would divert energies from more achievable goals.

The initiatives proposed and outlined below are by no means mutually exclusive and would benefit from further consideration in the light of both the current likelihood of ongoing conflict or possible agreements around some form of fragile peace. The viability of each would depend on the relative stability of both the Syrian and the international context, the ability of initiating groups to collaborate and bring others with them, and the funding that might be secured to support them. Most suggestions included the formation of an organisation, network or alliance to represent the interests of academics inside and outside Syria, as well as those of students. There was a strong desire for such a body to be independent, non-aligned with either Regime or opposition factions, as well as able to connect effectively with international responders to the crisis. However, how far support to students, academics and universities, particularly in contested areas, is possible during ongoing conflict remains in question.
Universities operating in non-Regime areas in the North were the primary focus of Round-Table discussions as the most impacted by the crisis, including by more recent events. While establishing such a body is an apparent priority, it is not without controversy, and may only realistically be able to support those in exile at this time.

Connecting universities in the North
Dr El Kadour, Rector of International Sham University (ISU), offered ISU as a Syria base for discussions to help unify internal and exiled academics, as well as to facilitate institutional affiliation, collaboration and practical support across universities in the North West. Such support would include sharing staff and material resources to fill gaps in provision and identifying joint interests, whilst remaining independent of political and other agendas. Although ISU and Free Aleppo University already had good working relations, hostilities between Free Aleppo and the University of Idlib would constrain attempts to unify institutions in the North West, at least in the short term. A further consideration was the ability of exiled academics to participate safely in person, which would be easier in a context of fragile peace but could become impossible in a situation of ongoing conflict.

Round-Table participants discussed the possibility of collaboration and cooperation under a scientific or educational umbrella. The absence of a single, overarching ministry was an issue that could be mitigated through the formation of small collaborative councils, overseeing quality assurance and later connecting into a larger overarching networked body. Existing HE ‘councils’, established by the Syrian Interim Government and the Salvation Government in the North, lacked a necessary level of independence and legitimacy. An independent civic educational entity was more likely to be successful on the ground, encompassing a consultative committee of academics from inside and outside Syria, acting in a voluntary capacity and independent of any political process.

There was general agreement that universities should be independent of politicisation and the control of ideas. While governments were required to provide recognition for universities, that recognition needed to be free from political agendas or ideological hegemony.

Forming a professional research consortium with Cara support
Research provided ‘win-win’ opportunities for all, enabling Syrian academics in exile to participate in an academic arena, reclaim their academic identity and practice, and contribute to addressing the challenges facing Syria. It also allowed responders to the crisis to benefit from their vital local knowledge, expertise, networks and reach back into Syria.

Forming a mission-driven consortium, using a consultancy model and providing services and expertise to responders to the crisis could enable Syrian academics to work effectively on applied research of significant local value. It could also serve as a hub or academic support network facilitating bottom-up alongside top-down collaborations around a unified purpose, outside of mainstream academia. Prior to forming such a group, it would be important to establish a clear objective and a model that would be sustainable and replicable. Prioritising issues of independence, autonomy and neutrality would necessitate reaching agreement on the definitions and boundaries of these in order to avoid future misunderstandings. The group would need to make a commitment to deal with disagreements as they arose in view of a broader aspiration to achieve mutual support.

A consultancy model is more likely to be self-financing in the longer term but would need to fundraise a significant amount of start-up capital in the early stages. Other attempts to set up such bodies have mainly failed because of arguments around funding and individual payments. Such a consortium would probably need to operate in Turkey and in accordance with Turkish law. Registering as an independent legal entity could make start-up funds available through a Turkish-led scheme, but the work associated with setting up an NGO and the burden and cost of complying with legal requirements, including the submission of annual accounts, might not be helpful in the immediate term, whatever the broader context. This consultancy model might be more realistic once critical links have been established with potential funders, partners and clients, to ensure viability and sustainability.

Cara could offer an interim facilitation role to such a group or groups. The Cara model involves ensuring that agenda-setting is Syrian led and that activities respond to Syrian participants’ priorities, so that if this was felt to be the preferred approach, they could ensure that processes were developed by those who would be involved. Cara has its own network of international actors and could offer support in identifying and lobbying responders.

This was seen by many to hold clear advantages, including making use of Cara’s well-established reputation and long history of contacts and collaborations within the academic world and beyond to open critical doors. In addition to facilitating and brokering relationships, Cara offers an existing legal umbrella and a proxy affiliation and legitimacy to those without academic affiliation, which can also facilitate access to funding opportunities that are closed to individuals. Even as a legal entity, an unknown and untested Syrian-led consortium with limited understanding and experience of drafting funding bids that respond to funder criteria, would find it a challenge to develop these successfully.

It will take time for Syrian academics to establish a reputation amongst responders to the crisis, including funders. Cara’s ‘partnering’ model could prove an invaluable stepping-stone in what is often a mutually beneficial collaboration with experienced international colleagues, as principal investigator or co-principal investigators. This would provide important reassurance to potential clients that they will receive rigorous quality research outputs that benefit from local expertise drawn from universities within Syria, with the added credibility of international research support.

Building on individual research collaborations
Professional research connections and collaborations with international counterparts, facilitated at the individual or small-group level through the Cara Syria Programme, could also provide the foundation for the development of institutional relationships over time. Several of the Syria Programme research collaborations include Turkey-based and UK-
based academics, offering both local and three-way research collaboration opportunities and professional connections to build on.

Individual academic affiliation and institutional connection provides legitimacy and offers access to expensive resources such as journals or laboratory equipment. Eventually extending this to include affiliation to a larger group could also provide an institutional home for a Syrian-led research centre, although the political or internal constraints on any group activities would need to be considered carefully. Such affiliations should be possible in situations of conflict or post-conflict transitions, and, if undertaken, need transparency with clear awareness of motives on both sides.

Creating a cluster of discipline-based research centres

Rather than a single base, a series of real or virtual research centres could be used to focus particularly on Syrian issues, as well as place-based education and research. These could be stand alone, under the umbrella of existing universities or continue to be facilitated by Cara as an existing legal entity, learning from models of research centres in other universities. These would provide clarity of mission and a clear focus for research and pedagogy. There would again be the opportunity to build partnerships with the broader international academic community.

A group of academics working in Artuklu University in Mardin expressed interest in the setting up a research centre there, as part of a series of networked discipline- or theme-based centres, located in different institutions. Areas of shared scientific interest would provide a clear research-focused agenda, clarity of mission and discipline-related reputation, as well as the opportunity to work with local colleagues. It could also lead to future collaboration with similar discipline-focused research institutes in other countries, including Turkey.

The Turkish-German University (TGU), on the outskirts of Istanbul, was also discussed as a possible host. Several Round-Table participants had connections with Dr Murat Erdoğan (Chair of the TGU Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of TAU Migration and Integration Research Center) having been involved in his Elite Dialogue series, which looked at the situation of Syrian academics and students in Turkey. The TGU Rector spoke at the Elite Dialogue III pre-report launch hosted by TGU, indicating a degree of empathy with Syrian academics.

Supporting internal dialogue with mediation by international organisations

There was a reiterated need for dialogue to move towards a stronger and more unified vision, mission and role for HE. While there was some scepticism about the effectiveness of dialogue and a concern that dialogue should not be used to defer change or action, Round-Table participants were aware of the importance of bringing people together with a strong sense of agreed processes, principles or objectives. Such dialogue should be focused on identifying problems and finding ways to address them and practical steps with tangible outcomes. Getting the future of Syrian HE formally on to international agendas and opening funding doors would be an important step towards international recognition.

This raises the question of who is best placed to broker such dialogue. While UNESCO has a key role in supporting education globally, its government mandate prevents it from responding in areas outside of Regime-control. It may, however, still be able to influence government ministries to recognise and support institutions in non-Regime areas as part of their responsibility to all parts of the country, regardless of location and status. A suggestion by the UNESCO representative to explore brokering a meeting with the Regime MoHE’s accreditation body, the National Council for Assessment and Evaluation, was seen as a possibility by those who were willing to consider a dialogue across the Syrian HE sector as a whole, as long as it did not involve the security apparatus. However, trust would need to be built ahead of such a meeting. A pre-meeting with UNESCO would likely be a necessary first step to allow options and expectations to be outlined and agreed beforehand, as well as to deal with the inherent mistrust and resistance amongst some of the Syrian participants. While this may still be difficult at this time, in a situation of fragile peace with some stability, it could be a useful next step.

Concluding Remarks

There is a pressing need to move forward and the Round Table ended with passionate exhortations for action, stressing the importance of identifying and taking first small steps to ensure some progress, without losing sight of the bigger picture. Whatever next steps are decided on, there was agreement at the Round Table that:

“The time is yesterday; anything is better than doing nothing”
Round Table Participants

Dr Juliet Millican*, Associate Fellow, Participation cluster, Institute of Development Studies.

Dr SHAher Abdullateef, Independent Researcher.

Dr Musallam Abedtalas, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Tourism and Faculty of Economics, Mardin Artuklu University.

Dr Samir Alabdullah, Researcher, Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Ankara.

Dr Manaf Aldakhil, Faculty member, University of Aleppo in the Liberated Areas.

Dr Abdulnaser Aljasem, Associate Professor, Faculty of Economics, Mardin Artuklu University.

Dr Wissam Aldien Aloklah, Doctor of Public International Law, Assistant Professor, Mardin Artuklu University.

Dr Rida Anis, Assistant-Professor, English Language Teaching, Hasan Kalyoncu University.

Dr Reem Al-Botmeh, Lecturer, Faculty of law and on the Human Rights and Democracy Programme, Birzeit University.

Dr Dina Zoe Belluigi, Academic, Higher Education Studies, Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland; Research Associate, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

Ms Emma Bonar, Syrian Refugee Youth Education Lead, Norwegian Refugee Council, Jordan.

Mr Anasse Bouhlal, UNESCO Regional Programme Specialist in HE for the Arab States.

Dr Cath Camps, Deputy Director, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, University of South Wales.

Dr Selma DjuJiman, Senior Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo.

Dr Izdin Elkadour, Rector, International Sham University.

Dr Ceren Genc, Senior Expert on HE Innovation, SPARK.

Dr Ibrahim Mahmoud, MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) Manager, Shafak Organisation.

Prof Collins Miruka, Adjunct Professor, School of Business and Economics, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya.

Dr Tom Parkinson, Senior Lecturer in Higher Education and Academic Practice Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent.

Dr Adnan Rashid Mamo, Assistant Professor and Lecturer in the Department of History, University of Aleppo in the Liberated Areas.

Ms Tijana Recevic, Junior Researcher and PhD Candidate, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade.

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