Sustaining Syria’s Intellectual Capital: Collective Initiatives

The role of higher education in the future of Syria

FULL REPORT
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Introduction

This report deals with the immediate and future challenges facing higher education (HE) in Syria. It is informed by research commissioned by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics) and conducted over 2017 and 2018 to document 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 report is further informed by discussions at a two-day Cara Round Table in Istanbul in 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’.¹

The Round Table included colleagues with experience of working in challenging and fragile contexts in other parts of the world, from whom lessons might be drawn, and 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 neglected resource. Milton’s (2013) The Neglected Pillars 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.

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 among 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 neglected in the international response.

While UNESCO is mandated to support education, including tertiary education, among member states, and grounds its work in a human-rights approach, governments still hold primary responsibility for ensuring access to quality education. With a substantial part of Syria outside of the control of any internationally recognised government, those areas are without the support that bodies such as UNESCO could provide. Syrians speak of ‘a lost generation’ of academics, students and professionals who, through destruction or displacement, are unable to study or work.

The Cambridge-led Study Reports (2019), the two-day Round Table discussions that brought together Syrian academics with international counterparts and responders to the crisis, and this resulting report, are all intended to capture and outline the significance of the challenges facing Syrian HE and to provide pointers to what might be done in response.

¹ This Cara-commissioned research was led by Cambridge University faculty members working in partnership with 19 Syrian academics living in recent exile in Turkey and resulted in two reports, one focusing on Syrian HE pre 2011 and the second on Syrian HE post 2011.
Future Possible Scenarios for Syria

The Clingendael report (2017) outlined four scenarios framed by two key uncertainties: 1) Will the levels of violence in the Syrian conflict decrease, or increase even further? and 2) Either by design or by use of force, will governance in Syria fragment further or will it once again be more centralised? They conclude that the continuation of violence is highly probable even in the most optimistic of their four scenarios:

- **Fragile peace** (*Low intensity violence, central governance*). Assumes that Assad is toppled in a palace coup, after which the former Assad regime reasserts control over its militia and defeated remnants of IS. The Syrian parties, except for designated terrorist groups, return to the negotiation table and reach a peace agreement that includes a federal system, headed by a Syrian Government of National Unity (GNU),... supported by a UN peace operation. The Kurds have their autonomous region in the north. HTS [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham] is still in control of the Idlib region. … with some stability …, reconstruction is slowly gaining more traction and, in general, the situation in Syria is improving slightly.

- **Reconquista** (*High intensity violence, central governance*). … Assad’s forces gain momentum and regain control over most of Syria. … The Assad regime fights a high-intensity war to reconquer the remaining rebel-held areas.

- **Warlordism** (*High intensity violence, fragmented governance*). … As the situation deteriorates, the government and opposition forces fragment and the country turns to a patchwork of fiefdoms. All politics are local, and there are regular violent clashes between the warlords. International actors are reluctant to intervene in the conflict.

- **Frozen conflict** (*Low intensity violence, fragmented governance*). After large-scale ethnic cleansing, international and regional actors pressure their proxies into accepting a ceasefire. … Violence in Syria decreases and the conflict is effectively frozen. The country is carved up into separate statelets, each backed by different regional and international players. In some regions, the economic and good-governance situation improves, while in others the conflict continues.

Two years on, several additional scenarios were proposed by Syrian Round Table participants, some of which have come to fruition or are unfolding at the time of completing this report, including Turkey’s intervention in October 2019, and the formation of a Constitutional Committee.

- **Peaceful transition of power.** Assad leaves power after Russia renounces its support following a Russian-USA-Turkish agreement and the collapse of the state economy. A new election process takes place in which both regime and opposition areas participate. Kurdish area continues to demand autonomy, uniting regime and opposition forces in a conflict against Kurdish forces.

- **Constitutional Committee.** Turkey and Russia form a Constitutional Committee which begins its work, albeit with progress expected to be slow. At the same time,
the regime, supported by Russia, seeks to regain control of Idlib Province, starting with the Damascus–Aleppo road and the east of Idlib Province.

- **Internal conflict in Regime areas.** A conflict of interest and influence emerges between the Iranian-backed militia, the Russian army and the regime militia. Opposition forces in the north unite under one command and begin to regain control of recently lost areas.

- **Turkish intervention.** Potentially relevant to each of the scenarios is the possibility of a ‘Turkish Intervention’ imposing a ‘safe’ zone inside Syria along the border. Opposition forces, supported by the Turkish army, control the area. The HTS in Idlib is defeated. Idlib, Olive Branch (Afrin area), Euphrates Shield areas and the safe zone are governed by the Syrian Interim Government.

### Why Universities are Important in Conflict-afflicted Regions

Over the past decade there has been an increasing interest in the role that HE can play in conflict and the conflict recovery process. Bush and Salterelli’s (2000) work on ‘The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict’ acknowledges the ways in which education can both contribute to and mitigate conflict, and this applies equally to universities. Milton and Bakarat (2016), Milton (in Millican 2017) and Millican (2017) address the neglected potential for universities to play a significant role in bringing together partners, across country or ethnic divides, to hold difficult conversations; for university academics to use research and analysis to predict the build-up to conflict and to address the practical, technical, human and social challenges left by its aftermath; and for students, as citizens and actors in future peace-building initiatives, to develop the knowledge and skills to participate effectively. All of the sources cited above acknowledge the ‘two faces of education in conflict’ (Bush and Salterelli 2000), i.e. the recognition that universities can add to existing inequalities and divisions, aggregate power divisions, and add to social unrest or build capacity for tolerance and cohesion. They also emphasise the need to take seriously the potential for HE to play a role in conflict reparations, in building a robust evidence base and in working directly with communities.

UK research institutes and funds deployed by the Global Challenges Research Fund have also begun to issue calls for coordinated action-research projects that address HE’s role in recovery and reconstruction. University College London (UCL) has a programme in Higher Education, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Somalia, the Aga Khan Foundation has funded the development of Peace Universities in Pakistan, and there are similar initiatives in Colombia and Costa Rica.

Despite this emerging interest, universities are often overlooked in situations of protracted conflict or disputed territory. Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN in 2015, SDG4 is dedicated to education, while target 4.3 of SDG4 aims to: ‘By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.’ Higher education also
forms an important part of other goals related to poverty (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality (SDG5) governance; decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16). The contribution of HE to communities deserves to be taken seriously.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action (FFA), which guides UNESCO’s work, sets out international agreements to support HE, recognising that a well-established and well-regulated tertiary education system can help to ensure that the curriculum is designed to support sustainable development and take advantage of technology, open educational resources and distance education. It has been acknowledged that equality of access to education, alignment of education with societal needs and a quality and context-relevant curriculum, can contribute to the building of stability and is consequently even more important in fragile or conflict-ridden regions (Price, 2019). However, with UNESCO and other UN agencies mandated to work through internationally recognised governments, they are ineffective in divided or disputed territories and unable to implement such frameworks where there is often the greatest need.

HE in Syria: Situation Report

The findings and recommendations from the Cambridge University-led Study Reports on Syrian HE post 2011 (2019), as captured in an allied Policy Brief, were presented to Round Table participants by Dr Shaher Abdullateef and Dr Musallam Abedtalas. The research identified the following three dominant and emerging trends affecting the future of Syrian universities:

1. Politicisation of HE in conflict, leading to system fragmentation; heightened politicisation; corruption; violence and militarisation of campuses; human rights violations; and political realignment, with the interests and influence of extra-state actors restricting academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

2. Curriculum stagnation, constrained internationalisation and the disappearance of research, with resistance to attempts at modernisation prior to 2011 worsened by the loss of intellectual capital and under-resourcing; stagnating curricula diminished teaching capacity; the lack of accreditation of universities in non-regime areas; curtailment of ‘western’ international collaborations; and the disappearance of already limited research funding.

3. HE access, student experience and employability, and educational quality, which continued to vary according to region, further hampered by security risks and drop-out caused by poverty: fear of conscription and insecurity; lack of quality (most evident in non-regime controlled areas); outdated theoretical teaching approaches and materials; frequent gaps in continuity; and lack of alignment with employment needs in a shrinking market.
It also made the following recommendations:

I. Ministerial or sectoral support and support to individual HE institutions

- To de-politicise the HE agenda and review internal missions and governance structures, and the civic or community-facing mission of universities.
- To encourage the withdrawal of security personnel from campuses and encourage standards of academic freedom.
- To recognise the importance of HE and its role in educating future security and ministry personnel and to redistribute internal and international financing.
- To build capacity around the development of competencies and the restoration of standards and to provide financial, human and material resources.
- To develop international partnerships with other Middle Eastern countries, Western and European universities, and the Soviet Union.

II. Support for academics residing inside or outside Syria

- To pursue links with employment and labour-market opportunities and to develop structures for careers support.
- To provide access to academic databases and journals, research funding, mentoring support or collaboration in research.
- To highlight the importance of academic rather than government control over curricula.
- Research-training, particularly in socially engaged research.
- To develop alternative pedagogies and teaching approaches.

III. Support for current or future students

- To encourage learning of English, as the language of science, in order to extend access to academic journals and 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 the Syrian Open Education programme.
- 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 and into long-term careers.

This research provides important insights into the worsening situation of universities inside Syria and the urgent need for a unified external response. The advantage of involving Syrians as researchers not only allowed the study to benefit from local knowledge and expertise, but also served to grow Syrian skills within an international research context, in addition to building professional collaborations and partnerships between Syrians and the broader academic community.
Strong networks continue to exist between those in exile and those who remain in-country, with some of those in exile still teaching in universities in the north of Syria. Their combined reach, both back into local communities, some using local students as researchers, or sharing questionnaires through WhatsApp, offers a direct data-collection pathway. Partnerships between Syrians and responders to the crisis would enable rigorous quality empirical research and could facilitate the implementation of action-research interventions with the support of external funding mechanisms.

**Syrian Universities in northern Syria**

A 2019 follow-on study conducted by Dr Shaban focused on the huge challenges faced by universities operating in the volatile conflict-ridden north-west of Syria. These included bombardment, lack of financial support to rehabilitate or provide alternative campus accommodation and the absence of central ministerial support.

The study involved interviews with 6 academics and 32 students working or studying at Free Aleppo and International Sham universities, under the jurisdiction of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) Higher Council of Education, and Idlib University, under the jurisdiction of the Salvation Government Higher Education Council.

Universities that operate in the north-west take in around half of Syria’s displaced students, who often face discrimination from local students. Shaban spoke about factionalisation and discrimination among student communities, with many suffering from mental health problems, depression and low self-confidence, which was said by some to be coupled with a rise in drug abuse among those of university age.

Armed groups interfere in campus activities and are often present in university buildings, destabilising university life, albeit with an important protection role, given the lack of support from the international community. Working with universities located outside the jurisdiction of an internationally recognised state is not seen as a priority by NGOs, while UN agencies, including UNESCO with its education mandate, can only operate in these areas with state approval.

Shaban’s findings identify a huge need for financial support to improve infrastructure, equip libraries and laboratories and provide basic salaries for academics and administrative staff, in addition to the critical issue of recognition and accreditation. All the academics who were interviewed agreed on the importance of both, as well as the importance of unifying higher education, starting in the north-west region, of building connections with the international community, and of fellowships and scholarships to help develop research, which even prior to the conflict had little status in university expenditure.
BOX 1. International Sham University

Dr Elkadour, Rector of International Sham University (ISU), described to the June 2019 Round Table an independent, non-profit, private university, struggling to uphold the provision of education in the Euphrates Shield area. Established in Azaz in June 2016 with the support of IHH (Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation) ISU recruited 460 male students in year 1 (2016/17) to four Faculty of Engineering departments: Civil Engineering, IT Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Electronic Engineering. No fees were charged in its first year, but ISU’s limited funds led to the introduction of a $100 fee in its second year (2017/18).

Female students were excluded at the beginning, due to insecurity, with ISIS within two kilometres of Azaz in 2016. As security improved, the local community lobbied for the introduction of all-female departments. ISU now has 650 students, of which 100 are female and studying in the departments of IT, Law and Sharia.

Staff numbers have risen from 5 in 2016 to 51 in 2019, as have the number of buildings, rising from 4 to 11. ISU now has five faculties: Sharia and Law, Administration and Economics, Political Science, Education (teacher training) and Engineering, which include laboratories for soil, building material and chemical analysis, as well as mechatronic and IT laboratories. However, in common with all Syrian universities in non-regime areas, ISU is not recognised or accredited and lacks both funding and staff.

Ambitions to establish funded research centres and Turkish and English language departments are frustrated by limited finances.

Connecting with scientific research globally through memoranda of understanding (MoU) with universities in other countries would be of particular importance as ISU aims to be both locally relevant and globally connected. Despite limited financial and capacity support, it has established itself as a reputable institution aiming to provide quality higher education in very difficult circumstances.
BOX 2. Free Aleppo University

Dr Al Dakhil provided an overview of Free Aleppo University (FAU). It was established by a Syrian Interim Government (SIG) decision and opened in December 2015, with a mission to welcome displaced academics and students regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity. It has both a civic and academic mandate, and focuses on scientific research, and economic and social development.

Its two remaining ‘branches’ are located in Marea and Azaz, having had to abandon those in Damascus, Homs and Daraa when the regime regained control of the areas, and then those in Western Aleppo and Idlib Governorate following their takeover by the Salvation Government in 2019. This last led to the forceful transfer of 2,322 students to North Aleppo – a costly move for their families and the FAU. More funds are needed to help poorer students.

Student numbers have now fallen from 7,000 in 2018 to around 3,500 in 2019. It has 118 staff, 23 classrooms, 19 administrative rooms and several laboratories. Faculties included Mechanical Engineering, Agricultural Engineering, Economy, Law, Sharia Law, Pedagogy, Maths, Chemistry, Humanities, Literature, History and Geography. An additional four institutes offer two-year diplomas in IT/Computer studies and Medicine. There are plans to introduce a Technical Veterinary Institute if financial support can be secured as well as to re-open FAU’s Faculty of Dentistry, closed due to the loss of its Idlib Governorate buildings. However, current realities are that existing laboratories lack equipment, there are insufficient classrooms to cater for all specialities, and limited student housing.

FAU remains committed to high standards. It uses the original Aleppo University curricula and procedures. Educational levels are high, with qualifications recognised by the SIG and believed to be comparable to other international diplomas. The lack of formal accreditation is seen as a political issue, reflecting the absence of international recognition.
Each passionately voiced the right to be involved in future research undertaken in their area and in the potential reconstruction process. Shaban’s study is just one example of the contribution Syrian academics can make to collecting data, offering technical support and mediating local knowledge. Milton’s 2019 study, ‘Syrian Higher Education during Conflict - Survival, Protection and Regime Security’, which focused only on regime areas, found that there too ‘even under conditions of highly destructive warfare involving multiple parties, foreign intervention, and the territorial fragmentation of the Syrian state’ (2019, p 38) universities continued to function. But he also identifies a sector depleted of research and international collaboration, without adequate systems to support student transitions and no guarantee of quality, further impacted by the brain drain of academics since 2011.

While students in regime and non-regime areas continue to enrol in higher education, there is a huge fall in attendance due to security threats. This has led to a growing black market in exam questions and fake diplomas. Between them, both Milton’s paper and Shaban’s study show that Syrian higher education in regime- and non-regime areas alike is struggling to survive - showing huge resilience but badly in need of external support.

**Local Research into Universities and Stability**

HE has an important role to play in stability. Tejendra Pherali writes about education and conflict: ‘The prevalence of educational inequalities in society increases the likelihood of violent conflicts. Education systems that fail to provide equitable access to quality education risk producing societal inequalities which may serve as one of the root causes of instability. Additionally, education that undermines civic identities and recognition of diversities can only exacerbate social divisions and fuel conditions for conflict. On the contrary, inclusive education systems have the potential to promote peace, justice and strong institutions.’ (SDG 16)

Another group of Syrian academics, currently in exile in Turkey and involved in the Cara Syria Programme, carried out research into links between HE and social and cultural capital in order to understand how HE institutions might promote justice and, ultimately, peace. Their findings were also presented at the Round Table in Istanbul.

Dr Musallam Abedtalas gave an analysis of literature and empirical research that looked at the role that higher education might play in reconstruction processes. He cited evidence to illustrate how 50% of countries that suffer from civil war relapse within 10 years and argued for the importance of a sustainable peace, built from the bottom up. Research conducted by his team in the north-east of Syria suggests that the ethnic and religious diversity of the region could be seen to be representative of demographics across the country. The current relative stability in this region also made it a viable site for interviews, held with 18 academics in public and private universities in both regime and non-regime areas. He found that Syrian HE currently plays a very weak role in developing social capital, due mainly to the politicisation of institutions and their curricula. All interviewees agreed that many places had become diploma-providing bodies with a lack of any clear social mission. However, examples from studies conducted in other countries illustrated how community-engaged pedagogies could
significantly contribute to increased understanding and empathy between diverse groups and the promotion of inclusive values (Millican, 2008, 2014, 2017).

Abedtalas’ team drew on Putnam’s concept of bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam 2000), arguing how in times of conflict and fragmentation of society, bridging social capital, or the development of bonds between unlike groups, is crucial. He looked at studies by Millican (2008) and others showing how university education provides a valuable opportunity for young people to meet with unlike groups and develop new relationships. Citing examples of service-learning or student community-engagement programmes, he recommended an active community-based approach to learning where students took on roles within local community groups as part of their university study. His recommendations included training staff in current universities operating in Syria to develop curricula that included knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiential learning, with an eventual commitment to working across the whole county to support the recovery process. He also discussed the potential of forming a new university or research institute specifically with a social mission and a place-based approach and cited Birzeit and the Peace Universities of Costa Rica and Colombia as possible examples of how this might work.

Dr Samir Al Abdullah presented on research that had been undertaken by a team of Syrian academics between November 2018 and May 2019, looking at the role of cultural heritage in peacebuilding. He provided an initial overview of Syria’s rich history of around 38 ethnic, religious and sectarian groups and cited key figures known for their tolerance and inclusivity, such as Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the Druze people, the head of the nineteenth-century Syrian revolution and Fares al-Khoury, a Christian Minister of Endowment, responsible for building mosques for Muslims. He contrasted this with events since 2011 that had divided Syrians along ethnic, religious, sectarian and social lines.

The research involved 65 student questionnaires and 5 interviews with academics at Free Aleppo University, and 35 student questionnaires and 4 interviews with academics at International Sham University. Using quantitative and qualitative approaches, it looked at how universities might use cultural heritage as a tool for building cohesion. As with Abedtalas’ report, it found limited understanding of key concepts of social capital and cultural heritage. The majority of students said they had not received any formal education concerning the breadth and depth of Syria’s heritage, but had been taught a form of ‘Arab Nationalism’ which they had found to be divisive rather than inclusive. While not all students understood the concept of cultural heritage, after some explanation there was extensive interest in learning more about such subjects as part of their university curricula and agreement that a broad cross-curricula cultural perspective would add to a sense of tolerance and inclusivity. Students were asked to identify figures they felt represented Syrian identity and cited national figures such as Mohammad Kurd-Eli, Salah ad-Din, Fares al-Khoury, Mohammad al-Maghout and Hanna Mina, from different religions, ethnic groups and areas.
This research, like the previous one, defended the view that young people are shaped at an ideological level during their university years. Both advocated encouraging students to identify with a rich and diverse society, regardless of their discipline area or future profession. The research quoted one academic as saying:

‘We need to preserve Syrian cultural heritage as part of Syrian identity, and to develop the knowledge of academics in these areas, to include it in the curriculum in order to rebuild the community and stability. There are immediate relief and humanitarian aid needs but (we need) long-term solutions, such as harmony in our community and our society again.’

All the academics involved in these two research projects spoke of the value of these small projects in developing their own research experience and skills, particularly while in exile and unable to contribute first-hand to the development of their country. It provided them with a sense of agency at a time when they were unable to return and actively participate in teaching or civic activities at home. They expressed their interest in extending the research to other areas, including the Euphrates Shield and regime-controlled areas of Syria, where, if they could not enter themselves, they could work from a distance through academic contacts. The projects are further evidence of how much those in exile have to offer as insiders in researching their own society and how such research, even when carried out at a distance or under difficult conditions, can remain rigorous and representative of the views of people on the ground.

The Critical Role of Academic Research

The projects cited above are yet further examples of how the Cara Syria Programme currently supports exiled individuals to develop partnerships with recognised international academics and institutions, building professional connections externally to facilitate rigorous ‘insider’ research. Dedicated to the support of at-risk academics, both within their countries and outside, Cara is one of only a handful of organisations that work in this way and provides a model that could be supported more extensively by donors to the benefit of some of the larger relief and response organisations. It is a model that draws on Cara’s unique partnership with the UK’s HE sector and aims to be mutually beneficial, facilitating the continued contribution of individual academics, whilst supporting delivery of research that is of considerable value to responders to the crisis.

The projects outlined below, which were also presented at the Round Table, offer further examples of the valuable role Syrian academics and HE institutions might play in clarifying the current situation inside Syria. The data they have been able to collect is in many ways unique and clearly identifies current community needs as well as offering a valuable resource to be used to inform and support humanitarian organisations in planning effective response strategies.

University expertise and energy security

Dr Ibrahim Mahmoud presented on research to assess and understand electricity needs and sources in northern Syria. Over a series of research-focused workshops,
the research team, again Syrian academics exiled in Turkey, supported by experienced international academic mentors, jointly designed a series of data-collection tools and enlisted 20 academics and students inside Syria to carry out a household survey. The students conducted in-depth interviews with 136 households, residents and IDPs, 6 community surveys, and interviewed 8 private or individual electricity providers. The survey compared use and supply before and during the crisis, and the economic effect on households. It captured valuable data and provided an opportunity for students to apply the theoretical knowledge gained from their courses to a practical and pressing situation. It is the first proper survey of energy needs to be conducted in Syria and the results reveal how, with no effective mains electricity network, people are using a range of sources.

Findings show that 67% of households purchase amperes privately, accessing an average of 2½ amperes of electricity for six hours a day and paying on average 35 dollars a month. 22% of people are dependent on diesel or gasoline generators, using about 10 litres a day for six hours at an average of 6.8 to 7 dollars a day. Solar energy is used by only 8% of households and 3% of the families don’t have any access to electricity. 48% of families in Idlib are using solar systems in contrast to 14% in Aleppo, where the population is less educated, indicating a clear link between education and awareness of solar alternatives.

This research illustrates the connections and networks that exist between academics in exile and those in country and their importance to the broader humanitarian community, the value of involving academics and university students in preparing or conducting research within their local communities supported by international mentors, and the potential for academics in exile to enhance their ability to design research processes and access households in conflict or post-conflict areas, and obtain indicators related to household income and use.

It emphasises the importance of involving local experts as actors in recommending and designing alternative, more sustainable solutions and the significance of education in making basic lifestyle choices, in this instance around energy use and the potential of education in raising awareness of solar alternatives and of solar energy in meeting the current energy crisis.

As importantly, it points to yet further ways in which universities and university staff might be involved in responding to current and future infrastructure issues.

**Agricultural knowledge-exchange and food security**

Dr Shaher Abdullateef presented a report on behalf of a group of agricultural academics, also in exile in Turkey, focusing on the impact of the conflict on agricultural research and extension, and, subsequently, on food security. It illustrated how the destruction and fragmentation of HE has impacted the knowledge-transfer processes through the loss of qualified engineers and academics. Latest statistics indicate that 6.5 million Syrians are currently food insecure (Zurayk 2013: FAO, 2017), with a further 4 million at risk of becoming so. The lack of collaboration between NGOs dealing with food security and academics able to identify solutions has added to this problem.
Findings showed how displacement of farmers from their land, changes in the agricultural knowledge sector and an outdated HE curriculum are all closely related to food security.

This research was conducted in the Al Atarib, Azaz and Jarabulus areas in Aleppo Governate in northern Syria. It covered around 50 villages and involved more than 300 individual interviews with internally displaced and host farmers, and 6 focus groups with 33 farmers and 40 extension staff. Findings show how 50% of host and internally displaced people depend on agriculture, and 33% on livestock production as their main income. Food is in short supply and poorer families (44% of the total) are often unable to buy sufficient food to feed their families. The already low number of irrigated fields pre crisis (less than 20%) has fallen to 10% and livestock per farmer had decreased by 50% for sheep and more than 65% for cows.

Crop rotation is vital in agriculture but has almost disappeared as farmers plant wherever and whatever they can to survive, impacting on the sustainability of the land. Agricultural imports reduced significantly with an overall negative affect on food security, exacerbated by the lack of new research and extension support from HE. In the view of respondents, the quality of the teaching curriculum had dropped from good to weak or very weak. Furthermore, it was seen as highly theoretical and of little practical value. However, increasing interaction between host communities and internally displaced farmers brought a different source of knowledge, as the movement of populations added to the movement of knowledge and cultural approaches between geographic areas. An additional benefit of knowledge-sharing between host and displaced communities was that it facilitated integration, with displaced farmers renting land from host farmers and developing other mutually beneficial relationships.

**Key recommendations of the report include:**

- **Developing alternative agriculture- and knowledge-transfer systems** using HE-based tools such as distance learning or social media to build farmer capacity.
- **Benefitting from new knowledge-transfer avenues** built through migration and displacement.
- **Increasing the engagement of students in farmer networks** to strengthen the link between HE and society.
- **Reframing teaching approaches around problem-solving activities**, involving students directly in solution-based learning.
- **Introducing new place based, practically oriented, problem-solving activities** to all university curricula, responding to the needs of society and increasing graduate work-related skills.

Agricultural extension services have almost totally collapsed and need a coordinated humanitarian and development-oriented response. Syrian agricultural engineers and animal husbandry specialists need to update their knowledge of new technologies and crop varieties after eight years of civil war. HE teaching, curricula and research could all be supported to play an effective role in this process.
While the above projects indicate how HE could play a role in a future reconstruction, they also draw attention to the contribution it could make now, even in current circumstances, to alleviate the difficulties for people on the ground. By working more effectively, both with those in universities in country and those who are in exile, humanitarian and development organisations could benefit from a deeper insight into the communities they aim to support.

Gaps in Current Provision and Pressing Needs for Support

Discussions at the Round Table identified crucial gaps in current provision that have been overlooked by the international community. In dialogue with colleagues who have had experience of universities in other conflict contexts, the group outlined the most pressing needs for support.

Support for academics in exile

A number of universities in countries neighbouring Syria and beyond have responded positively to the needs of student refugees from Syria with scholarships, language support and distance-learning education. However, there has been far less attention given to academics in exile. Many are now living in, and likely to remain in, border countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. It is important to recognise the difficulties associated with being in exile and the responsibilities that come with it. Those who remain sometimes view those in exile as privileged, benefitting from training and resources provided by their hosts and avoiding the struggles they have left behind. Academics may face anger from their colleagues for leaving or maintaining silence, and there are significant personal adjustments involved when and if people return. These issues are not unique to Syria and there may be much that can be learned by looking at other contexts where such difficulties have been faced in the past.

If a faculty member leaves Syria without permission from the Ministry of Education, they lose all entitlements and privileges, including pensions. Those with PhDs from international universities are sometimes able to find an academic home in a Western institution but increasingly such positions are few and far between. Some have moved to neighbouring countries and found positions at universities across the border on short-term contracts, but many need assistance in rebuilding their careers and establishing a competitive international profile, given the predominantly teaching focus of the Syrian HE sector. O’Keeffe et al (2016) recounts the personal stories of Syrian academics trying to continue publishing, teaching and research in host universities where language, conventions and standards all differ from those they have been trained in. He identifies a handful of NGOs providing such support (the Scholar Rescue Fund – Institute of International Education (SRF-IIE), Scholars at Risk Network (SAR), and the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara)) and acknowledges the waste to the economy and society when academics are lost to their field. The model adopted by the Cara Syria Programme, providing English for academic purposes classes; training in research skills, international standards and good practice; partnering and mentorship from experienced international...
academics; facilitating short-term research incubation visits to UK universities and research collaborations; funding small- to medium-scale research; and helping with publication, could be expanded and replicated more widely. Cara’s alumni, dating back to 1933, 16 of whom became Nobel laureates and many more leaders in their fields, are a testament to how properly supported academics can make significant contributions to host and home communities, and the broader scientific world.

The need to work with donors in the reconstruction of HE

In Syria, HE infrastructure has been severely damaged. Libraries and their contents need replacing and the capacities of academics need to be enhanced across the board, in language, research, ethics, pedagogy, governance, quality assurance and curriculum development. University leaders will need to engage with international donors in any reconstruction process. Strategies for redevelopment will vary depending on the trajectory of the conflict and different possible scenarios. Round Table participants also discussed the importance of subjecting potential donors to careful scrutiny to ensure their motives were well understood. Donor influence could make a significant difference, such as insistence on the adoption of international academic standards by the HE institutions being funded, as well as making helpful recommendations on how the money is spent, to ensure transparency in governance and academic freedom in teaching and research. However, no money comes without strings and identifying and talking to donors requires an understanding of how funding works, of how to articulate and write proposals as opposed to academic documents, as well as an understanding of where and how to start. The Round Table suggested the need for a broker to navigate these, once priority regions and institutions and possible actions have been identified.

Transferring knowledge and professionalism to the next generation of leaders

There was much discussion of a ‘lost generation’ of students, which included consideration of an internal brain drain. Evidence from other countries shows how those who come back often remain employed in the civil society sector or working with international organisations in their home countries, rather than, for example, in one of the ministries. There was also a call for more scholarship schemes from the UK, the EU, the US and other international donors, albeit with recognition that while these would offer training for much needed professionals, they might also serve to alienate people from their communities. This led to further requests for support for internal institutions and a ‘place-based’ approach to learning.

All of the research projects undertaken through Cara and cited above recommended using students to solve real problems in their local communities, provided their safety can be assured and they can be properly trained. Consequently, by developing the capacity of academics and supporting a place-based approach, benefits can be transferred to students (from greater connection with communities and a more practical orientation) to future employers (who will benefit from students skilled in problem solving and with a knowledge of their environment) and to Syrian families (who benefit directly from properly supported and locally based problem-solving actions).
Quality assurance of provision in country

There were strong concerns raised about the lack of quality assurance in country, the selling of fake diplomas and the absence of any overarching body to provide accreditation in non-regime areas. There were allegations of corruption, with academics buying or upgrading diplomas to PhDs overnight. Some universities such as International Sham and Free Aleppo continue to aim for quality provision and high standards, and they receive strong encouragement to push forward, in the belief that if they manage to get it right, recognition and accreditation will eventually follow.

The Round Table discussed ways of assuring quality without a recognised ministry or quality assurance mechanism, which included possibilities for communicating under the auspices of a scientific or educational cooperation body. Starting with universities with a minimum level of transparency cooperating around curricula and using staff from different institutions to fill gaps in provision, a collaboration that might be built from the bottom up. The fundamental importance of making a start, building relationships and developing new ideas was emphasised, as opposed to arguing about titles, structures and allegiances or forcing a certain model of cooperation.

Forming a civic educational body away from any political affiliation, such as the Syrian Interim and Salvation governments, may be more likely to succeed on the ground, although doubt was cast on the acceptance of such a body by some of the participants. The challenge would remain one of acceptance and representation. If accepted, it could act as an independent education body with a consultative committee supported by academics from inside and outside Syria, acting independently from the political process. However, the Round Table felt that the support of political stakeholders was often needed to work towards depoliticisation within academic institutions.

The Question of Accreditation and Responsibility

While the question of accreditation was raised and discussed at the Round Table, the advice was that this could distract from the more pressing issue of the continued provision of high-quality HE and successful transition between different HE institutions. The regime National Council for Assessment and Evaluation has a responsibility to work across the whole of Syria but is currently only involved with universities in regime-controlled areas. Damascus does not recognise areas outside the regime’s control, educationally, socially, politically, or in the provision of humanitarian aid.

The role the regime Ministry of Higher Education in overseeing universities in both regime and non-regime areas was raised, with the suggestion from the UNESCO representative that UNESCO might be able to facilitate a meeting with the National Council for Assessment and Evaluation to discuss its responsibilities for evaluating provision and diplomas in non-regime areas, which would involve time in building trust on all sides. It was unlikely, however, that this would be welcomed amongst those in non-regime areas.
Developing contacts with international universities

There was strong interest among Syrian universities such as Free Aleppo and International Sham in forming teaching and research collaborations with international universities. The Round Table discussed the allied question and importance of introducing global academic standards and an international curriculum. While there have been some initial expressions of interest from HE-providing bodies outside Syria, these are not necessarily neutral or aligned. For example, there have been offers from Russian universities to accredit curricula based on a particular perspective. It is important that any international agreements are developed carefully in order not to trade one form of politicisation for another. All curricula, while upholding international standards, need also to be relevant to context and designed to meet the needs of the locality. Academics are grappling with this issue in different parts of the world, and it is important to build solidarity with them, to create a just HE system that acknowledges historical legacies and responds to current contexts and priorities, while working towards international standards.

The Spark representative at the Round Table offered to help facilitate connections with Spark's broad network of international universities.

A social mission for universities and place-based and engaged research

All the research presented and discussed at the Round Table provided evidence of the value to Syrians and to international responders to the crisis of rigorous place-based research, involving students in their direct localities. Training undergraduate and postgraduate students in data collection and local problem-solving approaches can help to make curricula more relevant to context and root it in present realities, rather than reproducing outdated theories or concepts. Feedback from participants at the Round Table testified to the importance of engaged research, carried out in connection with local communities or civil society organisations. Delegates praised the quality of the research presented, which was all undertaken on tiny budgets with support from Cara and international discipline mentors.

Historically, universities as a body have had some form of social mission, often referred to as the third of a tripartite mission, alongside teaching and research (Millican and Bourner 2011). In reality, such a mission can only be delivered through teaching and research and, if properly implemented, can help to ensure that universities respond directly to the professional, social and economic needs of their local communities. Birzeit University is a good example of an institution set up to respond to a situation of marginalisation and oppression with a clear social mission and an emphasis on teaching, research and community work, this last being one of the most important elements of its work. Universities are an important source of indigenous knowledge and need to identify and uphold this.

In the case of Birzeit, formal recognition was built gradually, through Arab and international networks. The Round Table participant from Birzeit urged the Syrian academics to move forward with whatever resources were available to them and not to wait for formal accreditation or a depoliticised environment. She explained the importance in Birzeit of a political perspective, where politics form part of the debate.
with no assumed neutrality. Students learn how to doubt before they reach certainty, how to question before answering, and diversity and difference are embedded in the curriculum. A formal process had been developed and agreed by faculty to allow dissent to be addressed and consensus to be reached.

HE can polarise society but can also contribute to diverse and inclusive thinking and curricula that foregrounds these issues and can be used to challenge marginalisation and discrimination. However, the fragmentation of HE in Syria has undermined any hope of progress towards locally focused quality institutions. The establishment of a research centre, with research and teaching directly oriented towards the needs of the locality, could address this if the right funding and support were secured.

A body of local and international representatives competent in communication and affiliation

A key purpose of the Round Table and this ensuing report is to facilitate a formal debate on the importance of Syrian HE and the ways in which it might be supported into the future. While INGOs such as Cara have played an initial role in facilitating capacity building, connection and continued academic engagement amongst Syrian academics in exile, two priorities emerged from discussions: the involvement of the international community in future support for Syrian HE; and moves towards this being Syrian led. Different suggestions were put forward as to how to create a body of local and international representatives, competent in communication and open to affiliation, which could take these issues forward.

There was some tension between top-down and bottom-up agenda setting, suggestions around the possibility of a union to represent those on the ground in addition to a brokering body to facilitate high-level discussions and the potential role of the Syrian National Coalition as a broker. There was recognition of the challenges involved in uniting academics working in regime-controlled areas, in non-regime-controlled areas and those in exile in a single process, and a sense of the importance of reaching out to all Syria’s academics regardless of status.

The three essential HE-related components to allow first steps to be taken were all there in some form: students, academics and facilities. As one participant said:

‘The key to progressing is dialogue and discussion. If we cannot yet meet as friends, then let us meet together as enemies first.’

Any future strategic directions for Syrian HE will need to take different possible future scenarios into account. Institutions will need to develop a sense of autonomy and resilience. While the development of peace may be a long-term aim, the strengthening of social and cultural capital, community cohesion and an academic-led response to unmet community needs in the immediate term could help to reduce violence and mitigate inequalities in each of the contexts. Consequently, the involvement of the international community, support for academics and institutions at home and in exile and the development of a locally relevant and place-based curriculum could all make a significant difference in the short and longer term.
Potential Future Directions for Syrian HE

A number of possible future directions and initiatives emerged from the Round Table, which were by no means mutually exclusive and would benefit from further consideration in the light of the various possible scenarios, including the scenarios of ‘ongoing war’ or ‘fragile peace’ in which each can be located. Their likelihood of success will be dependent on the relative stability of the broader context and the funding that might be secured.

Connecting universities in the north

Dr Elkadour offered International Sham University as a Syria base for discussions to help unify internal and exiled academics, as well as to facilitate institutional affiliation, collaboration and practical support, e.g. sharing materials and teaching staff, whilst remaining independent of political and other agendas. Although International Sham and Free Aleppo universities had good working relations, hostilities between Free Aleppo and the University of Idlib would constrain attempts to unify all the 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, given the current climate. This could be easier in a context of fragile peace but could become impossible in a situation of ongoing war.

Building connections between Syrian institutions, academics and international counterparts

Professional research connections and collaborations with international counterparts being facilitated at the individual level through the Cara Syria Programme could provide the foundation for the development of institutional relationships over time. Several of the Syria Programme research collaborations included Turkish academics, offering both local and three-way research collaboration opportunities and professional connections to build on.

Individual academic affiliation and institutional connection would also provide access to expensive resources such as journals or scientific equipment, although the potential constraints that might accompany such partnerships had to be considered and understood. This could be possible in either scenario but should be undertaken with a clear awareness of motives on both sides.

Making research the vehicle for moving forward: inter-connected Syrian research centres

The possibility of Syrian academics establishing either a physical or virtual research centre was also discussed at the Round Table and Mardin proposed as a location that would allow such an entity to benefit from and build on the existing Syrian academic cluster employed at Mardin Artuklu University. Although that would locate such a centre outside the main international hub of Istanbul, the idea of a single research centre could be developed as one of a series of inter-connected Syrian-led research centres to be established in Turkey and Syria, conceived around specific areas of expertise.
The Turkish German University, based on the outskirts of Istanbul, was also proposed as a host entity that would provide international reach. Several of the Round Table’s Syrian participants had existing connections with Dr Murat Erdoğan, having been involved in his ‘Elite Dialogue’ series, an initiative looking at the situation of Syrian academics and students in Turkey. Dr Erdoğan’s pre-report launch was hosted by the Turkish German University with the Rector as one of the speakers, indicating a degree of empathy with Syrian academics.

Research can provide the vehicle for Syrian academics to take things forward, both in country and as consultants in bordering countries, ready to use their knowledge and abilities to support the work of responders. An idea voiced at the Round Table was for a group of Syrian academics to register an independent research centre and non-aligned independent body open to all Syrians, as a legal Turkish NGO under a scheme that could make available start-up funds. It could form a vehicle for bottom-up collaboration around a unified purpose, outside of mainstream academia. However, the work associated with setting up an NGO and the burden and cost of complying with the legal requirements, including the submission of annual accounts, may not be helpful in the immediate term, whatever the broader context. This might be more realistically viewed as a longer-term aim, once critical links had been established with potential funders, partners and ‘clients’, to ensure viability and sustainability.

**Syrian Leadership and a Syrian Focus**

It remains important to Syrian academics that any initiative is seen as Syrian led. Cara’s role is one of facilitation, and care is taken to ensure that agenda-setting is Syrian led and that activities respond to Syrian participants’ priorities.

This interim facilitation role is part of a transition towards Syrian-led research, whereby using Cara to facilitate an interim process was seen by many to hold clear advantages, including making use of its 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 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 research centre, with limited understanding and experience of drafting funding bids that respond to funder criteria, would find it a challenge to develop a successful funding bid.

It will take time for Syrian academics to establish a reputation amongst responders to the crisis, including funders. The Cara ‘partnering’ model could therefore prove an invaluable stepping-stone in what is often a mutually beneficial collaboration with experienced ‘international’ colleagues as principal investigator or co-principal investigator, as well as providing essential reassurance to potential ‘clients’ that they will benefit from rigorous, quality research outputs, in addition to local expertise, knowledge and connections.
A series of real or virtual research centres could be used to focus particularly on Syrian issues and place-based education and research. These could be stand alone or under the umbrella of existing universities or continue to be facilitated by Cara as an existing legal entity.

There are models of Peace-Research centres in other universities that could provide some guidance on ways forward. A Peace-Research Centre would offer clarity of mission and a clear focus for research and pedagogy, as well as the opportunity to build partnerships with the broader international academic community and lay the groundwork for future social cohesion should there be a context of fragile peace in which such a centre might operate.

**Recognition and Accreditation**

Getting the future of Syrian HE formally on to international agendas and opening funding doors would be a first step towards international recognition.

Pursuing the suggestion that UNESCO might be able to broker a meeting with the regime Ministry of Higher Education’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. Trust would need to be built ahead of such a meeting. A pre-meeting with UNESCO was proposed as a first step to allow options and expectations to be clearly outlined and agreed beforehand. In a situation of fragile peace with some stability this could be a useful next step.
Final Words

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. Some of the final comments are quoted in full below:

“Our aim is to have a body for academics to unify our aims, to make our voice heard and be the communication bridge between external responders and donors, and education inside Syria.”

“We agreed on our shared values, which were freedom of expression, participation by women. One important thing is that women are represented and have some autonomy.”

“At the end of the day, we are all human beings, and we know there are politics and we know there are human beings, and we know that, as human beings, we have many similarities and, in the political context, we have politics that divide and, therefore, make access sometimes difficult. As human beings, our needs are common. We need stability – that’s financial stability, personal stability, emotional stability – and we need identity and belonging.”

Whatever next steps are decided on, they are necessary, and overall there was agreement at the Round Table that:

“The time is yesterday; anything is better than doing nothing.”
References


