The survival of universities in contested territories: Findings from two roundtable discussions on institutions in the North West of Syria.

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Abstract

This paper draws on discussions around the future of higher education (HE) in Syria after nearly a decade of violent conflict. Focusing on universities in non-regime-controlled areas, it illustrates the difficulties of sector-wide planning and the provision of institutional support during protracted conflict in areas with no single state entity or ministerial support.

Key Words

Syria

Conflict

Universities

Academics

Universities in Syria

Prior to the conflict Syria in 2011 there was a thriving and rapidly expanding university sector with five public institutions, a virtual public university, a growing number of new private academies, and around 371,343 students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Since 2001, there had been a number of sector-wide attempts at modernisation to broaden access and align studies more closely with market requirements (Dillabough *et al*., 2018: 7). However, the events of 2011 and subsequent years undermined any reforms that had occurred and inevitably led to the fragmentation and depletion of the whole sector. Public sector finance was channelled into the military and the war effort and any resource spent on education focused on what was seen as more urgent primary and secondary provision (Dillabough *et al*., 2019: 27).

Universities continued to function throughout the conflict and two studies in particular have documented their progress. Milton (2019) looked largely at regime-controlled areas and found that 'under conditions of highly destructive warfare involving multiple parties, foreign intervention, and the territorial fragmentation of the Syrian state', enrolment rates continued to be high while attendance rates dramatically fell. Any existing research activity all but disappeared as many skilled academics were forced into exile, international collaborations were disrupted, and data collection and field work became unsafe (Milton, 2019: 38). Milton (2019) further identified difficulties in maintaining quality teaching and learning and supporting student transition to employment, ongoing evidence of corruption and an inevitable black market in exam questions and fake diplomas as students tried to gain evidence of studies in order

to secure employment. The Cambridge report, also published in 2019, pointed out 'heightened and intense politicisation', as institutions became aligned with different political groupings, whilst other problems included the lack of accountability, curriculum stagnation and huge gaps in student learning as classes were disrupted and in some cases, the whole campus infrastructure was destroyed (Dillabough et al., 2019: 5). In areas which are not controlled by the Assad regime, there are additional challenges relating to the lack of governmental support, large internally displaced populations (IDPs) and continued shelling (Shaban, 2020; Al Ogla, 2019). All of this has had a huge impact on quality of provision, the existence and value of any qualifications and the future of a generation of young people.

As areas controlled by the regime have shifted, so too have the institutions within them. In non-regime-controlled areas of the North West, universities have emerged to replace former government institutions. Idlib University was established as a branch of the University of Aleppo (now affiliated to the so called 'Salvation Government') and Free Aleppo University, affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government, was established in 2014. The Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), supported the establishment of Sham International University in 2015 and Harran, a Turkish University, made a decision to open a branch in Al Bab, co-located with Free Aleppo University (FAU), between Azaz and Mare (close to IDP camps in the Euphrates Shield region). A conflict of interest developed between Harran and Gazientep Universities as to who should supervise Turkish universities in the North of Syria, and this has since been awarded to Gazientep who have opened three faculties in the region: Education in Afrin, Economy and Management in al-Bab, and Islamic studies in Azaz.

These different alignments inevitably impact on universities' security and vulnerability to bombardment, but also affect their access to trained academics, regulated curricula, recognised accreditation and certification and international funding. The 'Salvation Government' and the Syrian Interim Government are not formally recognised by the international community which leaves them outside of international protection and support. The Education 2030 Framework for Action (EFA) promoted by UNESCO includes

measures designed to support HE, based on the premise that a well-established and well-regulated tertiary education system can improve access, equity, quality and relevance, support sustainable development and operate through distance learning (Eck, Naidoo and Sachs-Israel, 2016). All of this could make a significant difference in a conflict affected or fragile context. Although UNESCO is mandated to support all levels of education, including tertiary, it works through governments of member states and has limited powers to intervene in contested areas. The EFA framework is also designed to operate through democratic government processes, and therefore ineffective in divided or disputed territories. While civil society and INGO support is available to them (and The Turkish Humanitarian Relief foundation has played a role in this), such funding is often directed towards schooling, generally seen as a greater priority by the international community. For example, The World Bank brief (2018) on Education in Fragile, Conflict and Violence Contexts focuses entirely on school education.

Methodology

The data for this paper was collected from two roundtable discussions hosted by Cara (Council for At Risk Academics) in July 2019 and February 2020 respectively, involving exiled academics and organisations who support education in conflict affected areas. The first brought together academics, INGOs, NGOs, UN agencies, government and practitioners from within Syria and from other conflict and post-conflict contexts to reflect on how universities might be supported and sustained and their potential role in the reconstruction effort. The second Roundtable involved a smaller group of invited local academics and representatives from International Sham University and Free Aleppo University to allow for more focused discussions on how institutions in the North of Syria might be supported to continue. It also looked at the role that Syrian academics in exile and the broader international community, particularly those involved in direct response, might play in providing coordinated support. Many of those who attended the Roundtables spoke of the reality of a 'lost generation' of academics, students and professionals who, due to destruction of the sector or their displacement, were unable to study or work.

Universities are mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and can make an important contribution to goals related to poverty reduction (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality governance (SDG5); decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16) and have the potential to play a significant role in conflict management and in recovery (Milton, S., 2013). Contextual knowledge, access to affected communities and the ability to gather and analyse data in areas not accessible to international researchers, can all make important contributions both to maintaining resilience within conflict situations and to recovery and reconstruction. Universities also often have some form of broader social mission (Millican and Bourner, 2014), which, if properly implemented can respond directly to the professional, social and economic needs of their local communities, particularly important when state provision is disrupted or destroyed. Birzeit University, one of the international participants at the first Roundtable, recounted their own history of establishing themselves as an educational institution, without formal state support, able to respond to crucial educational and societal needs during conflict (Kuttab in Millican, 2018). Operating during some of the most violent periods of Palestinian Israeli history, Birzeit remains a thriving university with a clear social mission and focusing on teaching, research and community work. The Roundtable discussions looked at how a coordinated response, led by Syrians in exile but supported by the international university sector, might be used to address some of the realities experienced by universities, their faculty members and their students in the North West Region of Syria.

Institutions in the North West region

It is important to emphasise that these institutions are continuing to operate and their resilience and ability to move and re-establish themselves multiple times, is impressive. International Sham University now has five faculties: Education, Sharia and Law, Economics and Business Management, Engineering, and Political Science. There are 65 staff teaching in Sham, many of whom come from FAU to teach part time, 860 students and, in March 2020 Sham held its first graduation ceremony.

Free Aleppo University (FAU), established in 2015 after fighting in Aleppo, necessitated staff and student groups disbanding and relocating to non-regime-controlled areas. Initially (2015–18), they set up branches in Daraa, Homs, Ghoutta, Idlib and West Aleppo but these were captured by the regime in 2018, and again by the Salvation Government early in 2019, leading to the loss of all 14 faculties. Many of these faculties have since been re-established in Azaz and Mare, and there are now 14 faculties and 4 two-year technical institutions. Subjects include IT, Medicine, Electronics, Dentistry, Law, Economics, and Islamic Studies, there are 96 staff members and over 5,000 students. Newly established facilities include a central library (with 4,500 books) and 40 auditoria/lecture halls, with new laboratories under construction in 2020.

The university offers student certificates and held its first formal certificate awarding ceremony in 2020. However, as of May 2020 these certificates are only recognised in North Syria and some parts of Turkey, meaning graduates working in other areas only have the option to be employed by Syrian run or Syrian leaning institutions, or in INGOs based on their skills, experiences or references. As degree certificates are not recognised by public institutions in Turkey or by Turkish professional bodies many of them are unable to work in the areas in which they have studied (based on recent private conversations with academics in the region).

FAU has recently started to publish two journals and is planning to establish a research centre with a focus on reconstruction and societal recovery, including child labour (as children under 10 often become sole breadwinners for families); underage marriage (and subsequent links to young widowhood); plummeting levels of literacy and massive school drop-out rates amongst IDPs; rising infant mortality rates; and the gender imbalance left by deaths of males leading to resurgence in multiple marriages, etc. The university is also developing population studies for the region with questionnaires already prepared and students trained to undertake surveys as soon as funds become available.

The rector of Sham International University outlined his plans for various societal-facing activities during the Roundtable meetings. This included the development of an 'Early warning system' focused on the social protection of students, many of whom

live in areas where there is a breakdown of social and cultural norms. The university was looking for financial support for an initiative which would provide practical training for students taking political science degrees to collect data on life in IDP camps and to monitor the safety of all young people. Sham already offers lectures on conflict management and plans for students to interweave social duties with academic study, supported by staff trained in community mediation techniques. A whole institution approach, with students taking computing science degrees preparing templates for online monitoring and reporting of activities, would enable the university to map areas of community unrest and request third-party intervention if local tensions developed. In January 2020 it was reported that female students were already acting as teachers in the camps and the university was looking for ways to extend community involvement in other areas by locating graduates in secondary schools trained to provide similar support.

FAU's plans for a research centre and Sham International's Early Warning project are both examples of ways in which HE can contribute to societal well-being in the absence of coherent state support.

Recommendations emerging from the Roundtable discussions: July 2019 and February 2020

The first Roundtable discussion focused on the challenges and recommendations for Syrian HE that had emerged from an earlier Cara study (Dillabough *et al*., 2019). These were: Politicisation of HE in Conflict; Curriculum Stagnation, Constrained Internationalisation and the Disappearance of Research; and Challenges of Access, Transition and Progression to Employment. Such challenges are common to many universities attempting to operate in a conflict context and the following were identified as priority areas for response:

1. The introduction of civilian personnel training 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;

4. Recognition of the role of academics in supporting and informing those responding to the current crisis and in any future reconstruction process; and

5. Stabilisation of the current context and protection of institutions, their students and faculty members.

These areas overlap and are inter-connected and it was felt that in order to retain independence and a Syrian identity, the Syrian academic community had to itself take a lead in moving the agenda forward. This first Roundtable expressed a pressing need for Syrian academics to collaborate and organise, to provide mutual support to colleagues and students whether in exile or in the country.

During the second Roundtable, discussions were more focused on identifying a way forward. There was general agreement around the importance of maintaining freedom of expression, within individual institutions of rigour in research and the production of knowledge and in academic standards. Politicisation was frequently discussed with an awareness of the impossibility of surviving on the ground without some sort of affiliation with a political party to provide them with legitimacy and protection as well as some kind of financial support. However, there was an awareness of the negative impact this can have on issues such as academic freedom, curriculum development and bias and student voice.

It was agreed that, if universities are able to continue, they can play an important role in the economy, in systems of governance and in societal reconstruction as well as in the lives and futures of individual students. There was also an acknowledgement of how gender relationships in societies undergoing conflict are disproportionately focused on the needs and leadership of men and the importance of improving the position and representation of women in society when building peace. It was felt that the societal-facing role of a university included shaping culture and values and that facilitating access to higher education (HE) for women and including women in key decision-making university bodies could make a significant contribution to wider progress in addressing this imbalance.

However, a key issue that arose in both Roundtable events was the added difficulty of operating in

a region that had no internationally recognised government. UNESCO, confined to working through states, is largely unable to provide support. Registering as a legal entity is difficult in an insecure or stateless environment, often precluding international recognition or accreditation. Governmental donors are reluctant to support unrecognised authorities and financial donors are often unable to transfer money to individuals working outside of registered organisations. Licensing and quality assurance remained priorities for individual institutions as did accreditation and certification for students.

A number of suggestions emerged for ways forward:

For academics in exile

Forming a professional research consortium

Research provides an opportunity for academics in exile to participate in an academic arena, reclaim their academic identity and practice, and contribute to addressing the challenges facing their countries, enabling responders to the crisis to benefit from local knowledge and networks. Forming a research consortium using a consultancy model could enable Syrian academics to work effectively on applied research that has significant local value. It could also act as an academic support network facilitating 'bottom-up' (alongside 'top-down') collaborations outside of the mainstream academia. A consultancy model is more likely to be self-financing in the longer term but would require a significant amount of start-up capital in the early stages. Registering as an independent academic institution in Turkey is not straightforward, but locating this entity close to the Turkish-Syrian border with easy entry into Syria would help facilitate cross border research[1].

Building on individual research collaborations

Professional research connections and collaborations with international counterparts, facilitated at the individual or small group level, could also provide the foundation for the development of institutional relationships over time. Individual academic affiliation and institutional connection provide legitimacy and provide access to expensive resources such as academic 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. Such affiliations should be possible in situations of conflict or post-conflict transitions, if undertaken transparently and with clear awareness of motives on all sides.

Creating a cluster of discipline-based research centres

Rather than a single base, a series of real or virtual research centres could focus particularly on Syrian issues and location-based education and research. These could be stand-alone, under the umbrella of existing universities using models of research centres in other universities and would offer a clear mission and focus for research and pedagogy. They would also provide an opportunity to build partnerships with the broader international academic community.

Supporting internal dialogue with mediation by international organisations

There was a reiterated need for dialogue with ministries for HE in a range of international contexts in order to move towards a stronger and more unified vision, mission and role for the sector. Taking a unified approach to putting the future of Syrian HE, and the importance of HE in conflict regions, on to international agendas would facilitate funding and help leverage political support. An international body, such as UNESCO, may be in a position to influence national government ministries to recognise and support institutions outside their areas of political control.

For institutions in the North

Developing internal HE frameworks and accessing online training in teaching and teacher development

In conflict-affected areas, where experienced academics may have been killed or forced into exile, institutions are often staffed by younger, more recent graduates who lack experience in teaching. In the absence of teacher development programmes there are few opportunities for them to improve beyond internal mentoring or learning on the job. Suggestions were made around sharing and adapting a Higher Education Fellowship scheme and supporting institutions to adapt competency frameworks to meet their own needs and contexts. These could be supplemented by existing online teacher development materials and internal support from experienced academics still residing in country.

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[1]This has since been done and the institution is now an emerging research hub in Gaziantep, applying for research funds via UK Research Council's Global Challenges Research Fund.

Keeping records of curricula, course programmes and monitoring and evaluation procedures

In the absence of formal internal licensing, institutions need to set up cloud-based data sets of students, academics, curriculum outlines and assessment frameworks in order to demonstrate academic rigour and quality assurance. International partnerships with recognised and well-established universities elsewhere could offer examples of workable systems for this, alongside distance-based support in introducing and implementing them.

Working to ensure consistency between course and curriculum content and keeping student transcripts

Accredited certificates are important for students in fragile or fluid contexts where displacement and migration are the norm. Students are often forced to move to other areas before completing their studies or trying to progress to work without internationally recognised diplomas. A consortium of networked institutions in the region could commit to sharing and, where possible, aligning course content and developing transcripts of student achievement. Cloud-based repositories, accessible from remote locations, would enable students to transition between, or on from, university study with clear records of completion.

Conclusion

The introduction of Westernised peace-promoting curricula in conflict-affected countries has the potential to aggravate conflict drivers by positioning liberal and more radical schools against each other in national-level competitions for ideological dominance. This does not mean that the promotion of liberal values should be abandoned in education programming in conflict-affected states, but rather that operating on small, short-term scales, or on a project by project basis, without analysing how the introduction of new curricula would impact on communities educated to opposing ideals, could cause more violence in the short term. Inherently, the needs of peacebuilding education require long-term funding commitment, and perhaps

a push for consolidated education reform, that addresses the divisions between different education systems. However, reform for the sake of reform is insufficient, unless it is combined with meaningful and long-term support to teachers and teacher training. While more research is needed to compare across conflict-affected states, a greater emphasis should be placed on the role of the teacher in interpreting the official curriculum for their students, as well as on the importance of contextualisation in peace education. The two go hand in hand: the role of the teacher in a classroom is to help guide students through new concepts and complex ideas, and they do this by translating those ideas into terms that they deem relevant to their students, to ease understanding. The more alien a curriculum seems to a teacher, the more aggressive the translation process is likely to be. These decisions are rarely made with the intention to harm students or to obstruct their learning but unless this process is understood, the gap between an intended liberal curriculum and what is actually taught may have far-reaching unintended impacts that harm (rather than support) the peace process, particularly when students graduate from these systems and are confronted with a divided political society that does not share their views.

Author Bio

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