

Rebuilding higher education in Northern Syria

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Abstract

This paper draws on a qualitative study, using both primary and secondary data generated from document analysis, interviews and focus group discussions with 24 academics and 14 students in three universities in Northern Syria to report on the situation of higher education sector in areas beyond the control of the Assad regime. The study reveals that these new universities have urgent needs such as reconstruction work on buildings and support for their academic and administrative staff and students to be able to operate meaningfully under the conditions of ongoing civil war.

Key Words

Higher education
 Syria
 Conflict
 Academic

Introduction

The Syrian revolution began in 2011 and escalated into a protracted war, a high intensity internationalised conflict that ranks amongst the most destructive wars since the Second World War (Milton, 2019: 38). The continuing war has led to a devastating humanitarian crisis affecting all domains of the Syrian society, including education. It has had a particularly profound impact on higher education (HE) (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014). The destruction, caused by the regime and its allies, has had an impact on the psychological, physical and societal needs of the whole of Syria, but particularly the Northern part of the country (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016).

HE has been particularly affected due to the destruction of infrastructure and buildings, internal and external displacement of HE staff and students, and the lack of government funding and accreditation. Additionally, the security situation in Northern Syria (NS) has deterred many young Syrians from enrolling or continuing their education in universities in areas controlled by the Assad regime. As a result, a large number of young Syrians who would have been at university prior to the conflict, has been deprived of access to HE. Apart from the detrimental effect on individuals, this has meant that all of Syria faces an enormous challenge to rebuild the HE infrastructure and educational services for the future.

HE was particularly affected in NS from 2011 until 2015 when the city of Idlib and its university were taken over by revolutionaries (Zedani, 2018). At the same time, an initiative emerged in the region, led by a group of academics who had fled from Assad regime-run universities. Those academics decided to establish the Free Aleppo University (FAU), as an

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alternative to University of Aleppo after fighting in Aleppo forced the university to disband and relocate in non-regime-controlled areas in 2015. This was followed by the opening of several private universities as a response to the need for HE in NS. These new universities have contributed to the provision of HE for young people in areas beyond the control of the regime. Aid agencies supported by the international community, have tended to focus on primary and secondary education in the region, leading to HE being neglected in terms of external funding, and international partnerships have not been sustained or developed to the desirable level. The priority has been to support investment in primary education as this investment would be perceived to bear higher rates of returns. It seems that HE is considered a luxury, rather than an essential component of the educational continuum or as a means to transform conditions in which refugees and conflict-affected populations live (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019: 2). Moreover, international support for young people to enrol in HE is lacking, because it is deemed a low priority for humanitarian aid interventions, which focus more on what they perceive as the 'basics' (Selby and Tadros, 2016: 11).

Previous research has only considered HE in Syria generally, without a focus on the specific case of NS. This article seeks to develop a clearer understanding of the HE situation in NS and draws on the perspectives of academics and students who are still working and studying at universities in the region. This study also draws on grey literature, due to the absence of reliable data and peer-reviewed literature on HE in the North of the country.

Literature review

A European Commission 'Overview of the Higher Education System: Syria' report (2017) highlights some of the key issues relating to the funding of the HE sector, as well as analysing the structure, staff, quality assurance, mobility, internationalisation, and reforms ongoing in Syria at the time the report was written. Similarly, Al Hessian (2016) provides an overview of the Syrian educational system, include HE. This work reported information about the admission requirements for the vocational colleges and universities, which are principally based on the students' final national examination score taken in their final year of secondary school (level 12). Bacci

(2009) and Buckner (2013) both focus on the main problems faced by the HE sector before 2011, namely: too many students for too few universities, the lack of quality assurance mechanisms, and the failure of the Syrian state to successfully link an expanded HE to the employment market.

In two parallel reports commissioned by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), Dillabough *et al.* (2019a; 2019b) examine the state of Syrian HE pre- and post-2011. The former reveals problems associated with the security apparatus and ruling party intervention in university decision-making, a lack of transparency coupled with corruption and cronyism, a trend towards expansion at the expense of improved quality and a lack of employment opportunities for students. The latter reveals a post-2011 HE sector, suffering from fragmentation, heightened politicisation, human rights violations and political realignment.

While these reports provide comprehensive studies of universities in the whole of Syria both pre- and post-2011, Milton's (2019) study focuses on the impact of conflict on HE in regime-held territories, offering a comprehensive analysis of how the Syrian conflict has affected universities across the country. He found that HE institutions are also struggling to operate in a very challenging conflict-affected environment characterised by high levels of violence, mass displacement and intense politicisation but that the system had not collapsed. Many campuses continue to function albeit at a lower capacity than in pre-war Syria.

Al Oglia (2019) suggested that the universities in this part of the country face an uncertain future, estimating that 16,000 university students deal with increasing financial, academic and security challenges and their chances of completing university education appears to be slim. While this article focuses firmly on the current situation in NS, it reflects the experiences of other conflict-affected HE sectors in other countries. However, universities, if sustained and supported can play a significant role in the process of conflict response and the eventual creation of increased stability. Milton (2013) describes HE systems in Libya and Iraq as 'neglected pillars of recovery' and Milton and Barakat (2016) identify four important areas in which HE could make contributions: stabilisation and securitisation (improved security), reconstruction,

state-building and peacebuilding. Millican (2018) also documents the contribution that HE institutions have made to local communities and state infrastructure in peacebuilding and resistance in other conflict affected contexts.

Methodology

This qualitative study aims to develop a critical understanding of the situation of HE in NS. The study uses a range of approaches, combining interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and document analysis, for the purposes of data triangulation and authentication. This approach enabled the researcher to verify and validate data through multiple sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 academics and 14 students who were still working or studying in three universities in NS. The sample was split across the three universities as follows: ten academics and six students from University 1; ten academics and six students from University 2; and four academics and two students from University 3. Specific codes were allocated to the interviewees, institutions and locations in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Research participants' comments are identified by the reference codes summarised in Table 1.

The researcher faced some constraints at the data collection stage. The most challenging were finding academics and students who were willing to be

interviewed, and the volatile security situation on the ground. Some academics and students were unwilling to be interviewed due to lack of trust, as a result of previous negative experiences with similar research projects that had been undertaken by Syrian and international NGOs. They believed that such research projects were conducted in order to obtain funding, rather than for the benefit of the community. Others refused to collaborate, without providing any reason.

At the time of the fieldwork, due to clashes between opposing armed groups in parts of NS, 22 interviews and three FGDs were conducted in the Euphrates Shield area, which is generally considered safe, and a further 16 interviews in Idlib and the West of Aleppo Governorate when considered safe to do so, ten interviews were conducted remotely. The three FGDs were conducted between 15th and 24th April 2019, which included FGD 1 with six academics; FGD 2 with 23 male and female students; and FGD 3 with nine female students.

These FGDs were conducted in person in NS in the area under study, and constituted the main tool used to validate data initially collected from the grey literature. The data was thematically analysed, combined with deductive and inductive methods and the unforeseen themes that emerged in the data were also incorporated in presentation of findings. Once the interviews had been conducted and the data were labelled, the researcher collated the information using the codes assigned to the participants.

Type	Total	Reference code
Interviews University 1	16	Uni1 – Number of interviewee (1–16) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Interviews University 2	16	Uni2 – Number of interviewee (1–16) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Interviews University 3	6	Uni3 – Number of interviewee (1–6) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Focus Group Discussion 1	6	FGD1
Focus Group Discussion 2	23	FGD2
Focus Group Discussion 3	9	FGD3

Table 1: Reference codes of the research participants

Findings

The findings of this research are categorised under the three main themes that emerged from the data analysis process: challenges facing HE; the needs of HE; and its role in the reconstruction process in NS.

Challenges facing higher education in Northern Syria

In conflict-affected contexts, HE faces numerous direct and/or indirect challenges. These can be grouped under the following key themes: physical destruction; population displacement (Milton and Barakat, 2016: 404); mental health; lack of international recognition; lack of financial support from the international community; the role of the armed groups; and the methodological challenges of conducting research in contexts of ongoing war. Table 2 provides further details.

The needs of higher education

Many interviewees, both academics and students, focused on the need for funding to improve a wide range of aspects of infrastructure, while academics also placed a great deal of emphasis on issues related to the reputation of their institutions. These will be discussed below.

The universities in NS need financial support to repair and improve infrastructure, equip libraries and laboratories and pay salaries. The lack of funding reflects a lack of international support leaving them unable to cover their operating costs, which forces them to charge high student fees (Rajih, 2017). However, although there is financial support available to Syrian students in exile, there are no scholarships for those who have chosen to remain in Syria. Most of the universities in the North of the country also lack modern equipment, such as advanced laboratories, digital screens and projectors. Despite the availability of the internet, its coverage is limited, and it suffers from constant interruption. Lecture theatres are too small to accommodate the large numbers of students attending lectures with many forced to stand. There are no spaces or common rooms for recreation, rest or sport. Laboratories lack the materials and tools to conduct experiments (FGD 2, FGD 3, uni2-11-f-a, uni2-10-f-a, uni1-9-f-s, uni1-16-m-a, uni1-1-m-a, uni3-6-m-a).

Students see the availability of transport and adequate accommodation as the most important needs for them. They agree with academics that classrooms should be better equipped, new laboratories should be established and old ones should be repaired and upgraded. Furthermore, libraries, reading rooms, computer laboratories, and student and teacher accommodation should be provided. Female students indicated the need for private vehicles for female-only transport (FGDs 1, 2, 3).

The ongoing conflict in NS has led to the lack of accreditation of the universities there, which led to a distrust within the community in the ability of these universities to provide quality education. Therefore, these universities are seeking to obtain official accreditation of their institutions, and of the degrees that they provide. This remains conditional on the international recognition of the main opposition body in the area. Some academics who were interviewed reported that:

Accreditation enhances the potential of the university because it opens the way for the exchange of academic experiences as well as the exchange of research and students. (uni1-4-m-a)

Accreditation reinforces the confidence of the staff in their institution and the students [to] guarantee their future. (uni3-3-m-a)

The HE system in NS is fragmented. There is evidence that fragmentation constricts social trust in HE credentials (Altbach and De Wits, 2018; Milton and Barakat, 2016; Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015). All academics in NS indicate their desire for the unification of the HE sector. One academic stated:

If the HE sector is not unified, we will not be able to cooperate with colleagues at other universities. (FGD 1)

The academics who were interviewed stressed that their universities needed to build relationships at the international level, which they believe would facilitate the question of accreditation, lessen their sense of isolation and enable them to keep up with the latest developments in their field. University administrations were largely ineffective in building these links, which were attributed by some to a lack of experience in developing such links, poor English language skills and the difficulty of obtaining passports and visas to allow travel to Western countries (FGD 1) where most academics and students interviewed hoped to travel.

Challenges	Details
Physical destruction	<p>The regime and its allies bombed university buildings (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 2015; Khoudr and Bakour, 2018; Nour Al-Deen, 2019) and destroyed the infrastructure.</p> <p>A severe lack of infrastructure due to the lack of financial support and suitable buildings and expertise.</p>
Population displacement	<p>Tens of thousands of university students have fled from regime areas due to the fear of being arrested by the regime and conscripted into the army.</p> <p>Many university-age Syrians who are unable to access HE due to the conflict, 'roam the streets' (Milton and Barakat, 2015: 4), falling, for example, into petty crime and drug abuse.</p> <p>Displaced students make up approximately 50 percent of the student population in the universities in NS.</p> <p>Most of the IDPs have not adapted to the new communities.</p> <p>Frequent displacement has left many financially destitute and has had a detrimental impact on the enrollment of young people in universities.</p>
Mental health issues	<p>Many students suffer from psychological trauma, depression, and self-isolation.</p> <p>There has been a significant and alarming rise in drug abuse among young people of university age.</p>
International recognition	<p>Academics are unable to communicate with the outside world.</p> <p>Staff, students and graduates are unable to publish or pursue careers abroad (Dillabough <i>et al.</i>, 2019a: 53).</p> <p>The efforts of INGOs involved in supporting academics remain limited.</p>
Financial support	<p>There is not enough financial support.</p> <p>HE has been neglected or under-prioritised.</p> <p>Academics believe they are a group that has been largely forgotten by international humanitarian organisations.</p> <p>Donors still see HE as a luxury.</p> <p>There are neither international nor local programmes to support HE.</p>
Interference of armed groups	<p>Armed groups support some universities at the expense of others. This has led to rivalry between universities.</p> <p>All universities in Idlib governorate were faced with a stark choice: to accept an armed group's authority or to close (Hayek, 2019).</p>
Difficulties in conducting research	<p>There is no budget for research in the universities.</p> <p>There is a lack of necessary laboratories, libraries and equipment to conduct research.</p> <p>Publishers do not recognise universities and fail to support research.</p> <p>Lack of access to international journals.</p>

Table 2: The challenges faced by HE in NS

Higher education and reconstruction

In his foreword to Dillabough *et al.* (2019a: 1), Lord Malloch-Brown, the former UN Deputy Secretary General and Chair of the International Crisis Group, states that rebuilding an autonomous effective system of HE in Syria will be a key part of the country's wider recovery and reconstruction process. The academics interviewed agreed on the important role of HE and their universities in the process of reconstruction in various fields. Below are some of their statements:

Universities have an important role in reconstruction through the study of projects related to realities of the situation and needs. (uni1-11-m-a)

Academics can make appropriate plans for the progress of the country and the restoration of what has been destroyed, in terms both of human beings and of the land itself. (uni2-10-f-a)

There are adequate human resources available, but we need funding, training, qualification and international expertise in order to play our part in the reconstruction process. (uni2-16-m-a)

HE also plays a major role in providing hope, promoting the values of peace and mutual understanding, which in turn contributes to the development of tolerance and peaceful coexistence and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017: 9). Syrians need to embrace these concepts after the conflict ends as the first step in building peace and reconstruction. Universities will be the starting point in this process. However, in order to move forward, rivalry between institutions must be avoided and a unified system will need to be agreed.

Based on the findings related to the challenges facing HE in NS and the needs emerging from this research, it is necessary to build an effective networking, communication and development strategy with international bodies to oversee and help transform the current provision of HE. This should help the sector work towards higher standards in teaching and research; to facilitate recognition and accreditation; and to provide essential financial support. The universities need to raise their media profiles and enhance their English language provision to develop links with international partners as well as enable access to academic resources. They should also aim to better understand the needs of the labour

market and provide their students with the skills and knowledge needed by employers. Scholarship programmes should be developed in response to the increased financial needs of the people who have been affected by conflict. NS universities need to build bridges of communication to come together under one umbrella and establish a formal overarching body that can supervise and manage HE in NS and provide a common conduit to the international community.

Conclusion: Towards sustainable higher education in Northern Syria

The war in Syria is ongoing without a foreseeable end. In Northern Syria, as many other parts of the country, the safety and security of the population continue to be threatened by various forms of military attacks and grave human rights violations. However, this does not mean that the HE sector – or other sectors – should be abandoned or put on hold for reconstruction. Without these initiatives to relaunch universities, there would already have been a nine-year period without an HE provision at the time of writing this paper. Despite problems of accreditation and quality assurance, some HE is available for students in non-regime-controlled areas.

This research not only contributes to the scarce literature on HE in Syria post-2011, but also complements similar research elsewhere. HE in NS, in particular, suffers from considerable challenges, such as: the interference of armed groups; lack of national and international accreditation and recognition; lack of financial support and sustainability; and other challenges, associated with the violent conflict, such as safety and security of staff and students. An additional finding, not reported in previous studies, is the effect of the rivalry between universities in NS.

Attention should be paid to local expertise in the reconstruction process. As Altbach (2009: 25) points out, 'local universities are the only institutions that are able to focus attention on local needs.' Academics can participate in the reconstruction process and could empower the HE sector by harnessing local expertise to support future development. The universities in the North of the country should negotiate opportunities and scholarships to allow a number of their students to complete their degrees or pursue postgraduate studies in international universities.

This study underpins the role of HE in the post-conflict reconstruction process and emphasises that this sector needs to provide support in various areas if the sector is to survive. The unification of universities in non-regime-controlled areas and engaging with the international community are very important to preserve the HE sector. INGOs and donors should consider HE as an undeniable fundamental right of Syrians in the North, as an essential part of the humanitarian response and of future development efforts. Strategically, a working group combining Syrian academics in NS and in exile could help develop future HE programmes.

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