

# IMPROVING YOUTH ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSIDE SYRIA

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Workshop Report  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Attendees at a small workshop in Beirut, with many of them visiting from Syrian universities, sought politically neutral ways to help youth in Syria improve their access to education, and improve the quality of that education. As part of that discussion, workshop participants also suggested ways to support Syrian professors who have been cut off from participating in international meetings and from most professional development for the duration of a conflict that's now entering its eighth year.

The May 2 workshop, organized by Al-Fanar Media, the British Council, and the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, brought together key international organizations, Syrian professors, administrators, students, and nongovernmental organizations. In a day of roundtable discussions, held at the Issam Fares Institute, participants heard from Syrian students and educators about the barriers the nation's youth face in accessing higher education, and the challenges to professional development that faculty members have faced.



**Key Recommendations...**

## Key Recommendations:

- International organizations and universities could support Syrian students who are working toward master's degrees and doctorates and who have theses or projects that are oriented toward reconstruction. The students could be mentored and given resources key to completing their projects.
- Syrian academics and international partners could jointly conduct a needs assessment that would include structured interviews and an online survey to find high-impact interventions that might quickly help Syrian youth get better educational access. (We would be careful to extend on, not duplicate, previous published reports.)
- Universities in the countries surrounding Syria and elsewhere could create online/remote internships for Syrian students, expanding the pool of educational opportunities for them.
- International organizations working in higher education could draft and distribute a joint statement supporting more concrete interventions to improve educational opportunities for youth in Syria. Such a statement might improve the international focus on this area of work but would need to be crafted to maintain political neutrality.
- International organizations and donors could establish scholarships or free opportunities for Syrian students inside the country to learn foreign languages, such as English, that would help them access online education or study outside the country. As with Syrian refugees, language remains a barrier to educational access.
- International organizations and Syrian partners could create collaborative, online forums to connect the Syrian diaspora studying outside the country and students inside Syria to exchange learning materials and international resources. Syrian and international universities could also forge partnerships focused on the exchange of online materials to improve student and faculty access to information.
- The partners involved in creating the workshop expect it to be the first in a continuing series of conversations between those working in Syrian education, Syrian youth, and outside organizations.

Many Western governments, including the European Union, have banned using public funds on any activities that involve working with the Syrian government. Likewise, nongovernmental organizations trying to set up new activities inside Syria could face government restrictions there in their operations, so participants considered ways around these obstacles.

The conference sparked calls for ongoing collaboration between those involved in Syrian higher education and relevant international organizations.

## BACKGROUND

“ HIGHER EDUCATION  
PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT  
ROLE IN BUILDING  
TRUST, & ACTIVE  
CITIZENS ”

An entire generation of youth has been harmed by the violence, displacement, and lack of educational opportunities caused by seven years of war. International donors striving to improve higher education in the region have created scholarship programs for refugee youth and some educational programs serving the displaced. But access to such opportunities are sharply limited for those youth who remain inside Syria.

As such, the stakes are high for an entire generation, said Hana El Ghali, the senior program coordinator for research, advocacy and public policy at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy at the American University of Beirut: "Higher education plays a significant role in building trust, but also in building active citizens," she said. "Higher education shouldn't be viewed as a luxury, particularly in times of conflict."



# SUMMARY OF THE CURRENT STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SYRIA

The conflict in Syria has transformed more than 5.6 million Syrians into refugees, according to data from the United Nations refugee agency, and an additional 6.6 million people have been displaced inside the country. Although education is increasingly seen as fundamental to humanitarian relief efforts in conflict-affected countries such as Syria, the focus is usually on supporting primary education. Higher education remains a low priority.

Access to higher education in Syria has been a serious casualty of the conflict. The nation's Ministry of Higher Education estimates damage to the sector at \$17.5 million. The Syrian government has drastically decreased funding for higher education, from \$778 million in 2010 to \$84 million by 2016, according to British Council research.

The number of students allowed by the Syrian government to work on master's and doctoral degrees at public universities has dropped sharply during the war. Private universities are generally not allowed to offer master's degrees or doctorates at all. As a result, Syrian students who want such degrees seek them outside the country, accelerating the departure of young talent.

Infrastructure and the quality of teaching have all been severely affected. Syria's east, still occupied by opposition forces, did not have a functional public institution of higher learning for four years. Many students and staff members have fled to government-held cities in the west. Al-Furat University, in Deir ez-Zur, only recently reopened.

This has placed a high burden on the seven public and 22 private universities still active within the country. Classrooms are severely crowded, with as many as 120 students attending some seminars.





The consequences of overcrowding are even more dramatic, given the shortage of qualified academics. In 2010, the average salary of a professor was \$1,500 a month; today, due largely to inflation, the average salary is the equivalent of \$150, according to the British Council.

Despite these challenges, many Syrians remain proud of the fact that many universities have rarely, if ever, closed during the conflict, even if they had to relocate. They say damage to infrastructure, such as buildings, has been overstated. Representatives of the Syrian Private University, in Damascus, said that their institution had been closed only half a day in the past seven years.

Of the public universities, only Al-Furat University (University of the Euphrates), in eastern Syria, has been shut down, said Waddah Al-Khatib, director of international affairs for the Syrian Private University.

No one seems to doubt that many Syrian professors have fled the country. About half of the country's faculty members have left it since the onset of the conflict due to low salaries and security concerns, the British Council and other organizations estimate. Before the war the Syrian government often sponsored teaching assistants to study abroad. That no longer happens. In fact, 522 teaching assistants at Damascus University who had left to study abroad have not returned, according to British Council research.

This brain drain has hurt the quality of instruction that students receive and diminished the capacity for institutions of higher education to study innovative approaches to reconstructing the nation after the conflict ends, said Sulaiman Mouselli, dean of the faculty of business administration at the Arab International University, which had to relocate to Damascus from Daraa during the conflict, and who provided a detailed overview of higher education as it exists now in Syria.

Study materials and laboratory equipment are scarce, he said, and academic resources are outdated. Most written materials are from the 1970s, and the most up-to-date texts were first published almost a decade ago.

"The labs are outdated, even in the schools of engineering," said Mouselli. If students aren't getting good practical training, he said, "they could harm Syria and any other country they end up moving to."

## BARRIERS TO ACCESS

The damage to Syria's higher-education sector has severely affected students' access, said Hana El Ghali, of the American University of Beirut.

The Syrian gross domestic product has shrunk by 63 percent since the conflict began in 2011.

Today, 60 percent of Syrians live in extreme poverty, making tuition payments a crippling or impossible expense for most families and students, said El Ghali, citing World Bank data.

The security situation can make travel to campuses dangerous for many students. Even the simplest commute can be treacherous, said El Ghali. This is especially the case for male students, who fear being taken at military checkpoints and forced to enlist.

Such issues discourage enrollment, and many would-be students have fled the country due to the difficulties they face in attending university classes. The proportion of Syrians who passed the high-school exit exam and went on to register in first-year classes at universities has dropped sharply, according to information provided by the British Council. In the five-year period from 2006 to 2010, the figure was 32.4 percent. In 2011-2015, it fell to 18.7 percent.

"Many have lost the motivation to study," said El Ghali.

Many educational facilities have been converted into military bases or informal shelters for the displaced: Around 53 percent of school buildings were at least partially damaged, and 9.8 percent were destroyed, according to a World Bank report. With only one online university, the Syrian Virtual University, recognized by the government, and the English-language skills needed for foreign online degree programs lacking, remote learning has not been an option for most displaced students. Many educators believe it has great promise for the future, however.

Higher education has also suffered some intangible damage, said El Ghali.

"There are many things that we can't see that have been lost," she said, including trust and collaboration.

## STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

Syrian students at the Beirut gathering told workshop participants that systemic issues in Syrian higher education present before the conflict—such as a lack of critical analysis in the classroom and weak links to the international employment—discourage young people from pursuing higher education. Such issues have only worsened while the nation has been at war.





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"They do not motivate students to write academic articles and papers," said Hala Mkhallalati, who recently graduated from Ebla Private University, in Idlib, with a pharmacy degree. "Education isn't linked to the job market and students gain no experience to make them beneficial to their own society, so the whole structure of higher education must change."

Syrian higher education emphasizes the STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Social sciences and vocational skills, on the other hand, are considered "the dumpster of the baccalaureate system," said Al-Khatib, of the Syrian Private University.

Vocational training is not seen as a serious educational field, but rather as a "stop-over" on the way toward higher education, said Najib Abdul Wahed, an independent consultant based in France who formerly served as deputy minister for scientific research and academic affairs in the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education.

In addition to strong STEM programs, however, vocational training and social science degrees are what Syria needs post-conflict, said Al-Khatib and others.

While the STEM fields are also important to reconstruction, most "post-war fantasies that I hear all completely forget the human element" that is also needed to rehabilitate the country, Al-Khatib said. This human element—such as the study of democratic forms of government, conflict resolution, and societal cohesion—can be bolstered through social studies and vocational programs, he said.

The current negative perception of such fields of study lowers students' motivation and stands in the way of wider access to Syrian higher education, said Mkhallalati. Postgraduate education in disciplines—like public health or sociology—crucial to addressing the issues Syria faces after the conflict are currently not offered, she said. Students must go abroad for postgraduate study in those fields, incurring staggering costs along the way, if they can afford it at all.

Academics present at the workshop stressed that many disciplines are needed for Syria's reconstruction. "I cannot think of any field of study that's not important in Syria now," said Talal Al-Shihabi, an associate professor in the engineering department at the University of Damascus.



# THE NEED FOR RESEARCH

Educators also highlighted the need for scientific research in Syria. Most academics remaining in the country have to focus on teaching instead of research. Many important topics are not being studied, educators said, including population shifts in Syria, the effects of post-traumatic stress on students' academic performance, and the enrollment of men who haven't been conscripted and their academic choices.

Research on such topics is important for helping academia reflect on the new issues Syrian students and educators face going forward, said Al-Khatib.

"When we mention figures, we need to ensure that we don't lose the scope of what's happened over the last seven years," said Al-Khatib. "We're talking about a major war filled with post-war trauma and major demographic shifts—feelgood projects are important, but they can barely address what we're facing."

But Syrian academics in general emphasized their resilience. "Higher education in Syria has survived the crisis," said Al-Shihabi of the University of Damascus. "The credit for that goes only to the faculty and students who continued to work under extremely difficult conditions."



# INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

At the Beirut workshop, representatives from some international organizations talked about the programs they already have in place to improve access for Syrian students, scholarships, digital innovation, and vocational education.

Anasse Bouhlal, a program specialist in higher education with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, underscored his organization's efforts to provide better online education for Syrian students. Three Syrian universities are now taking part in a three-month Unesco program for Arab universities, e-Modules on Internal Quality Assurance, to address quality enhancement for higher education in the region, he said.

Unesco has also worked to create a dialogue between Syrian government offices and universities on improving digital-innovation strategies for students and faculty, such as supporting information-technology management skills. Representatives of all Syrian universities also attended a seminar in Beirut in May on digital transformation in higher education and open-education resources for universities, a joint collaboration between Unesco's Beirut office and Agence Universitaire de La Francophonie.

Representatives of Spark, a Dutch nongovernmental organization that supports higher education and entrepreneurship programs in conflict-affected countries, discussed that group's work in Syria and the region.

By mobilizing money from the Dutch Foreign Ministry, the Qatari nonprofit campaign Al Fakhoora, and a European Union regional trust fund known as the "Madad Fund," Spark currently supports over 4,000 Syrian, Palestinian and other displaced youth in the region in university, technical, and vocational studies. The organization seeks to eventually support 7,500 students.

Despite the security situation in Syria, Spark is currently supporting four technical schools in Homs, Quneitra, and Daraa with training in agricultural and nursing studies. (The school in Homs is being relocated.) In total, the organization supports the education of 200 students in Syria, said Gemma Bennink, Spark's regional program manager for the higher education for Syrians program.

Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (Hopes), another project that receives support from the European Union's Madad fund, provides a wide range of academic scholarships, counseling opportunities, and language courses to Syrians living in countries that host refugees in the region, as well as to young people in host communities affected by the high number of

refugees they have absorbed. The project has provided 470 scholarships and supported 19 higher-education training and capacity-building projects in the region, including computer-maintenance and web-design courses for Syrian refugees in Jordan, and entrepreneurship training courses for Syrian refugees in Egypt.

Hopes has also organized various university-based English and study-skills courses through the Higher Education English Access Program, and it is in the process of selecting 14 additional projects to support, some of which may operate inside Syria. The projects will focus on credit-based academic courses for vulnerable communities. Hopes scholarships and programs are administered by four agencies: the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the British Council, Campus France, and Nuffic, the Netherlands' organization for international cooperation in higher education.

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## LIMITS TO INTERNATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

While expressing a desire to expand the breadth of their services in Syria, international organizations also pointed out limitations to the aid they can provide.

The Syrian government still fails to recognize international diplomas that do not accord with traditional Syrian offerings, said Unesco’s Bouhlal, and virtual degrees earned in Syria often go unrecognized outside of the country.

“Talking about access alone isn’t the priority—we have more priorities behind these priorities, such as financing and quality of education,” Bouhlal said. “The Syrian Ministry of Higher Education is invited to work more on the recognition of diplomas offered outside traditional ones.”

Representatives of Western governments have said in the past that they have great difficulty working inside Syria because their nations do not have bilateral diplomatic relations with the Syrian government. For some, even working with public universities is presently a “no-go” zone, since those institutions are affiliated with the government.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaboration and quick mobilization of foreign funds to nongovernmental actors will be key to rehabilitating Syrian higher education and improving student access, participants heard in the workshop's closing roundtable. Some international donors remain hesitant to work directly in Syria, given the political and security risks they'd have to navigate, but some organizations have managed to maneuver through those difficulties.

As one example of one such an organization, workshop participants heard from a representative of the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East. Over the past two years, the organization has become the largest nongovernmental agency operating in Syria. It is able to transfer foreign funds directly into Syria, circumventing government intervention, due to its status as a religious organization, said representative Sara Sawva.

With 11 main offices and 35 service centers, the agency works in almost all regions of Syria. When a crisis hits a particular region, the agency is able to quickly mobilize foreign funds and life-saving supplies, such as surgery kits and clean water, through its expansive distribution network of 1,461 Syrian staff members. Staff members are often local point persons in neighborhoods that are overlooked by international organizations, she said. The agency also provides full accountability to international donors about the projects on the ground in Syria that the donors are supporting.

Given the success of her agency's aid model, international donors should seek out local, independent partnerships on the ground in Syria through established networks in academia and other institutions to more effectively reach those in need, Sawva said.

Building trust between Syrian educators, students, nongovernmental organizations and key international donors is badly needed, workshop participants said.

"Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration," said Nazir Ibrahim, president of the Syrian Private University. "We need to begin thinking of and launching new modes of collaboration with international academic partners to assist in the advancement of post-war Syria."

Online forums can help accomplish that task, said Yaman Al Sabek, cofounder and project manager with Sanad Youth for Development, a Syrian organization. An online forum connecting displaced Syrians now living elsewhere in the region and within Europe with international donors and academic faculty could facilitate collaboration, he said. It could also enlist Syrian postgraduate students and educators to conduct valuable, reconstruction-oriented research on the ground under the guidance of diverse international mentorship.

"Syrian youth today are in better contact with international institutions, which help to lead us to new opportunities," Al Sabek said. "It would be interesting to create a platform for Syrian youth abroad in order to put them in contact with youth in Syria."

Donors should also provide increased online access to English-language learning materials, said recent grad Hala Mkhallalati and others. While the British Council already offers such language learning programs, Mkhallalati suggested that special discounts be given to Syrian students in need. That way, they can learn English and other languages so they could access virtual degree programs offered by foreign institutions.

More students would consider online studies, she said, “but they have a problem with English. That’s why it’s a challenge.”

Aside from language learning, donors should help facilitate online vocational training and internships by partnering with universities abroad that can offer online modules in soft skills like communications and conflict resolution, as well as other 21st-century vocational skills like information-technology management. This would bolster the development of skills among Syrian youth and help to end the crippling isolation that has plagued Syrian higher education since the onset of the crisis, said the British Council’s deputy country director for Syria, Racha Nasreddine.

Such a move could also help to launch a consortium project in which online learning materials can be shared among faculties, aiding in capacity building and research opportunities for Syrian faculty members. “Better the entire higher-education sector for those staying in Syria by giving them more access to databases and e-libraries—give these students the opportunity to experience the world at their fingertips,” said Al-Khatib, of the Syrian Private University.

At the roundtable’s conclusion, participants agreed that there is much to do, but began planning initiatives in the short-term to bring Syrian educators again to Beirut to discuss more concrete interventions and goals.

International organizations and Syrian partners have already begun a needs assessment to find high-impact interventions that might quickly help Syrian youth attain access to higher education. In the interim, Syrian educators and international partners can begin compiling a roster of current rules and regulations on aid distribution, as well as a detailed list of access and capacity building needs in Syria, to be made public. That way, all parties involved—students, faculty, and international donors—can reach a heightened level of understanding about needs and expectations.

The meeting highlighted the urgent need for more proactive and sustained involvement by international organizations who could combine their resources with the energy and intellectual capacity of Syrian youth and professors to improve quantity and quality of educational opportunities available inside Syria. Planning has already begun for future conversations and meetings to move concrete projects forward.

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