The State of Higher Education in Syria Pre-2011

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Foreword

The British Council and the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) are very pleased to have collaborated on commissioning this report on the state of higher education in Syria up to the outbreak of war. Both of our organisations are committed to working with scholars affected or displaced by conflict. Nowhere has the impact of war on universities, their staff and their students been more profound than in Syria, an impact that has spilled over into surrounding countries and has affected multiple cohorts of potential students in Syria, its neighbourhood and beyond.

The British Council and Cara are also committed to assisting academics and students affected by conflict not only during times of war but also in its aftermath. This includes protecting and advancing scholarship for the duration of hostilities as well as making efforts to reconstruct higher education systems as soon as conditions allow. The current study is designed to provide an essential baseline understanding for those engaged in work on the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Syrian higher education system in future. Moreover, the wide availability of such a report is vital in helping Syrian academics involved in this process to inform their international partners in such efforts.

We are very grateful to the authors of the report for this meticulous and sensitive study. Cara had drawn on the same team of experts to produce a separate report on the post-2011 situation in Syrian higher education. The work was carried out by Syrian scholars in exile, in collaboration with colleagues in the UK led by Professor Colleen McLaughlin at the School of Education, Cambridge. This collaboration is typical of the work undertaken by the Cara Syria Programme, which involves the building of international teams and networks and extending state-of-the-art research techniques to Syrian researchers.

The British Council has been undertaking and commissioning research both on its own and together with partners such as UNHCR and Cara, to understand both the impact of conflict and of displacement on young people of tertiary education age, and their challenges and aspirations for the future, as well as the opportunities they have been able to access and harness under trying conditions. Together we hope these studies and their associated activities will contribute to the future efforts of many of these young people in reconstructing their country when the war is over. It will also be Syrian academics themselves, wherever they are currently in exile, who will lead the way in training new teachers, doctors, engineers and other professionals necessary to rebuild the country. They will lead in setting the standards necessary to help Syria back towards its place in the international community.

We are humbled by the commitment of Syrian scholars and the aspirations of the generations of potential students and scholars who have been impacted by this protracted conflict. We hope that our contribution through this research will be to play some small part towards forging a more promising future for Syria, its higher education system, its scholars and all its citizens.

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Executive Summary

This summary is based on the findings reported in Section 3 and the themes discussed therein. The report is an outcome of a collaborative enquiry undertaken by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education team, and Syrian co-researchers who previously worked in Syrian universities and are currently displaced to Turkey. Interviews about the state and conditions of Syrian HE before 2011 were carried out with 19 Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey and 48 university staff and students still working or studying inside Syria, the latter carried out remotely by the Syrian co-researchers.

Part 1. Reform, mission and governance

- Reform and governance trends in the literature
- The role of the security apparatus in undermining HE reform, governance and change
- Quality assurance

Part 2. Teaching and research

- Staffing issues
- Teaching, curriculum and assessment
- Major obstacles to research
- Resources and infrastructure

Part 3. Student admission and progression

- Student admission
- Student access
- Student employability

PART 1
REFORM AND GOVERNANCE

From 2001, the push to reform higher education (HE) in Syria was a response to the lack of investment between 1980 and 2000 and to pressure from external organisations, such as the World Bank, to expand higher education provision, and, at the same time, to reform the curriculum. The modernisation of the sector was also intended to broaden access, to align provision with labour market needs, and to establish a quality assurance programme.

Data from the co-researchers and their interviewees corroborate the significance of a number of challenges to the likely success of the reforms:

- constrained decision-making powers within academic institutions

- the power of government control structures over student life

- over-regulated and highly controlled institutional governance

- a lack of transparency, coupled with favouritism, which aggravated the concerns and grievances of students and academics

- a clear trend towards expansion at the expense of improved quality

THE ROLE OF THE SECURITY APPARATUS

One enduring theme, perhaps the most prominent, was the role of the Syrian National Security Services in constraining HE reform and undermining transparency and fairness across the sector. There was also widespread agreement about the problems caused by ruling-party interventions in university decision-making, especially in the process of student admissions, staff appointments, and fellowship and scholarship awards.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

This was a common theme in the data, but there was considerable disagreement amongst both staff and students about what quality assurance meant, whether it impacted on working conditions and whether it actually existed. For example, some interviewees equated quality assurance with the availability of resources; other respondents talked about the stipulated number of contact hours with students, which in their view was aligned with international standards of quality assurance, such as those outlined in the Bologna Accord (Educational Reform Agreement, 1999). Most participants agreed that although attempts at quality assurance were spelled out in policy documents, they were rarely enacted in practice.

PART 2
STAFFING ISSUES

Low salaries and a resulting brain drain, reportedly reversed after the introduction of the 2006 University Regulation Law, were key features of the Syrian HE landscape at the turn of the new millennium. However, central government had a substantial impact on university staffing, especially at leadership level. One of the clearest indications of this was the appointment of all university presidents to both public and private universities by the Ministry of Higher Education. This practice represented a major challenge to the reforms outlined in university-related decrees regarding greater autonomy over appointment procedures.

The practice of favouritism in employment, fellowships, opportunities to study abroad and promotion practices was also highlighted. Respondents from non-regime-controlled areas emphasised this point far more strongly than those from other parts of the country.

Views diverged on whether the older generation of professors posed obstacles to educational quality due to their inflexibility and rigid approaches to work, or, on the contrary, whether their deep subject knowledge constituted a prerequisite for education quality. Some public university students also reported an unequal gender balance among university staff, with some universities entirely staffed by male professors.

TEACHING, CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

Respondents reported that teaching, curriculum and assessment in Syrian universities before 2011 were 'rigid', 'theoretical' and 'out-dated'. Textbooks were approved by the Syrian Government and University Administration to ensure that the curriculum was aligned with the ruling party's policies, which did not allow for knowledge innovation or developments within the discipline.

Overcrowded classrooms in public universities were a source of dissatisfaction for both staff and students, proving an obstacle to the growth of positive relationships. Communication was reported by most as poor and often distant, characterised by strict hierarchies, although not without exceptions.

There was also disagreement on the value of fellowship opportunities abroad. For some, the availability of these opportunities was a sign of educational development; for others, such outsourcing of professional development opportunities created an ideological divide between those educated in Warsaw Pact countries, locally, and in the rest of the world.

It is also noteworthy that all reported that a lack of field trips and research opportunities were major obstacles to developing the quality of teaching and learning.

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO RESEARCH

The chief obstacles impeding research were identified as limited research funding, the lack of a thriving research community, employment stagnation, too much teaching, using research for promotion purposes, a lack of collaboration with foreign universities and the absence of adequate forms of research training. Research was not normally viewed as the role of academics. Separate institutions undertook research in specific areas identified by the government. There were some exceptions, but the majority of respondents agreed about the lack of applicability of research and of an institutional tradition of using research to address social problems. The system actively discouraged such research through ideological control and self-censorship. It was also reported that many lecturers did not undertake research beyond their doctoral studies.

RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

There is a clear link between resources and the quality of teaching and learning. Despite the emphasis on reform, including the need for investment, a sharp decline on HE spending took place after 2000. It was estimated as one of the smallest proportions of total government spending and share of GDP in the world. Studies report that public spending per capita in HE in Syria in 2011 was still well below the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average, though there is no reliable data on investment or spending in private universities. Studies also report that there was a high level of inequity of financing across Syrian HE. Whilst the government was increasing the breadth of HE options, it was reducing funding to tertiary education.

Many respondents felt that resources and infrastructure were better in private universities. However, some academic staff reported that where such resources were available, they were rarely used as staff were unable to access up-to-date equipment held by others, since collaboration across teams and labs was not well developed. Overall, the data revealed a highly uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure across the HE sector as a whole.

PART 3
STUDENT ADMISSION

Student admission literature and official policy reports show that admission decisions were based on *mufadala*, whereby university applicants within a high school cohort compete for available seats in three faculties of their choice based on their cumulative high-school exit exam scores (Baccalaureate) and the capacity of each programme. However, study respondents reported some inequalities in admissions relating to students' political affiliations and geographical location. Reportedly, some students gained access to HE based on their affiliations with the ruling party. Participants argued that the National Security Services exerted control over students' lives from the point when they entered HE until graduation. The entry criteria to public and private universities

differed in that private universities, which relied entirely on student fees, accepted students with lower scores. Due to their lower student enrolment numbers, private universities were seen as providing more support to students than the public universities.

According to staff working in the public sector, quality was a determining factor in university selection. However, some students claimed that family income, career options and the location of the institution outweighed quality in making university choices.

Another finding is that eastern parts of Syria seem to have been neglected – economically and educationally – with substantially less financing than other areas. The criteria for university entry were also lower there than in the capital city. There was disagreement about gender balance in admissions, with some claiming there were more male students, while others insisting it was fairly equal.

STUDENT ACCESS

Equal access to higher education was complicated by the introduction of fee-paying private universities with lower entry requirements, alongside new fee structures for public universities, allowing students with low secondary-school graduation scores to access certain public university options for a fee. Standard public university tuition fees were reported by respondents as just US$20 per annum. This combination of public and private provision created a situation of social inequality because students from more affluent families were better positioned to pay higher fees. Respondents felt that the term 'equality of access' was not meaningful in the Syrian HE context.

Notwithstanding privatisation and the growth in the number of universities, reforms were also unsuccessful in addressing rising student numbers. Classes in some universities became seriously overcrowded, intensifying economic and political grievances within particular student constituencies.

STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

The interview data suggests that employment opportunities in Syria before 2011 were limited. A brain drain of qualified faculty and students was on the rise. The HE programmes did not seem to prepare students for employment. Only one respondent reported that there was no discrimination in the transition to the labour market. That view stood in stark contrast with the views of the majority of respondents, who pointed to persistent forms of discrimination and the poor relationship between HE programmes and labour market opportunities, which in turn meant that the role of the university in preparing students for the labour market and facilitating their entry into it was negligible.

Section 1: Introduction

AIMS AND PURPOSES

Higher education will play a key role in rebuilding Syria – a country torn apart by more than seven years of war and destruction – and will be crucial to rebuilding both the lives of those who have remained in Syria and of those who will return. It is our hope, as members of the joint Cambridge and Syrian team who undertook this project, that the report will contribute to that reconstruction by informing the debate on future reform.

The purpose of this project is threefold:

- To assist displaced Syrian academics living in Turkey (henceforward known as the Syrian research team, or co-researchers) by conducting a collaborative enquiry with colleagues from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, in order to build the co-researchers' capacity by introducing them to, and engaging them in, a qualitative study of higher education in Syria.

- To facilitate the continued contribution of Syrian academics in exile to addressing the challenges facing Syria

- To inform strategic planning on the future of Syria's higher education sector, by providing a background study on higher education in Syria in the lead-up to the 2011 crisis

This work was undertaken in 2017 over a relatively short period (June to October 2017) and was commissioned by the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), with financial support from the British Council and the Open Society Foundations. The manner in which we worked together for this project is described in detail in Section 2. A brief summary of our overall approach is as follows: we held two workshops with the Syrian research team in Turkey, where we taught qualitative research design methods and modes of analysis that sought to develop and enhance their understandings of qualitative approaches and higher education more generally. We used these workshops to assist the Syrian researchers in preparing for remote interviews into higher education in Syria pre- and post-2011 with other senior Syrian academics and stakeholders still working and studying inside Syria across both regime and non-regime HE institutions.

There are two separate reports: one on the period up to 2011 and one post-2011. This pre-2011 report contains interviews conducted by the Syrian and Cambridge teams and the results of an extensive desk-based review of the literature on HE in the Syrian context led by the Cambridge team. It is more reliant on the review of the literature, since the empirical data related more to the post-2011 period. The second report focuses on the period of conflict, between 2011 and 2017 and, while there is very little existing research, it benefited from the testimony of interviewees.

THE COMPLEXITY OF RESEARCH IN CONFLICT ARENAS

The premise of our work might, on first glance, seem clear and simple. This was, however, not the real story of our work on this project. As Brunskell-Evans and Moore wrote about a similar Cara project in Iraq, this was not 'just another academic assignment'.[2] The participants in our workshop had experienced difficulties preceding the start of the crisis in 2011 and traumas thereafter. The situations in which they found themselves at the time of this study were complex and demanding, both personally and professionally. Our first task was to build a team and relationships in ways that would allow for the discussion of difficult issues; we had very little contact time to achieve our intended aims and this, too, posed challenges. The atmosphere of the enquiry was characterised by anxiety: people were fearful of the consequences of the research and of the potential damage it might do to them and to others. They were also worried that this project might be ignored. The methods we had chosen highlighted many issues of safety, danger and ethics. Nonetheless, we designed a set of research and capacity-building tasks, 117 interviews were held with research participants from higher education in Syria today (48 staff and 76 students), as well as focus groups and individual interviews with 19 displaced Syrian academics in Turkey. The detail of the methodology is given in Section 2 and in Appendix A.

1. In this report the term 'displaced' is used to refer to both internally displaced persons and people displaced outside the national borders.
2. Brunskell-Evans & Moore 2012, p.ix.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SYRIA

The landscape of higher education in Syria has been transformed since the turn of this century. Up to 2001 there were only four public universities, until new legislation paved the way for private universities and a five-fold expansion of the sector over the next decade. By 2011, 16 out of 20 licensed private universities were operational, with the establishment of the public Syrian Virtual University in 2002 and a new public university in Deir ez-Zor in 2007 (for a list of university - and non-university-affiliated research, see Appendix B). The map and timeline below chart the key events in that development and show the map of higher education in Syria before 2011 (Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1).

Figure 1.1: A map of higher education institutions in Syria 1910–2011[3]

The numbers and symbols on this map are explained in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: A key to the map of higher education institutions in Syria 1910–2011

Code	Type of institution	Name of institution
🎓	Public University	1. Damascus University 1923 (Damascus)[4]
		2. Aleppo University 1958 (Aleppo)
		3. Tishreen University 1971 (Latakia)
		4. Al-Baath University 1979 (Homs)
		5. Syrian Virtual University 2002 (Virtual)
		6. Al-Furat University 2006 (Deir ez-Zor)
⭕	Public Higher Institute	1. Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts 1977 (Damascus)
		2. Higher Institute for Applied Sciences and Technology (HIAST) 1983 (Damascus)
		3. Higher Institute of Music 1990 (Damascus)
		4. Higher Institute of Business Administration (HIBA) 2001 (Damascus)
		5. National Institute of Public Administration (INA) 2002 (Al-Tal, outskirts of Damascus)
		6. Higher Institute for Water Management 2009 (Homs)
🎓	Private University	1. Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport 2001 (Latakia – satellite campus of Egyptian University in Alexandria)
		2. Al-Kalamoon University 2003 Rif Dimashq Governorate (Deir Atiyah)
		3. Cordoba Private University (previously Al-Maamoun) 2003 (Aleppo)
		4. Ittihad University 2003 (Raqqa)
		5. Syrian Private University 2005 (Damascus)
		6. International University for Science and Technology 2005 (Daraa)
		7. Arab International University 2005 (Daraa)
		8. Wadi International University 2005 (Homs)
		9. Al-Wataniya Private University 2006 (Hama)
		10. Al Andalus University For Medical Sciences 2006 (Tartous)
		11. Al-Jazeera Private University 2007 (Deir ez-Zor)
		12. Al-Rasheed International Private University for Science and Technology 2007 (Daraa)[5]
		13. Qasyoun Private University, established in 2007, started operating in 2013 (Daraa)
		14. EBLA Private University 2007 (Idlib)
		15. Al-Hawash Private University 2008 (Homs)
		16. Yarmouk Private University 2008 (Daraa)
		17. Al-Shahbaa University (previously Al-Khaleej) 2008 (Aleppo)
		18. Arabian Academy of E-Business 2009 (Aleppo)[6]
		19. Arab University of Science and Technology 2009 (Hama)
		20. Al-Sham Private University 2011 (Damascus) Rif Dimashq Governorate (Al-Tall)
		21. Bilad al-Sham for Sharia Science 2011 (Damascus)
		22. Al-Manara University 2016 (Tartous)
H	Teaching Hospital	1. Al-Mouwasat Hospital 1958 (Damascus)
		2. Heart Surgery University Centre 1974 (Damascus)
		3. Aleppo University Hospital 1974 (Aleppo)
		4. Children's University Hospital 1978 (Damascus)
		5. Al-Assad University Hospital 1983 (Latakia)
		6. Al-Assad University Hospital 1988 (Damascus)
		7. Skin and Venereal Diseases Hospital 1991 (Damascus)
		8. Oral Surgery University Hospital 1995 (Damascus)
		9. Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital 2000 (Damascus)
		10. Tishreen University Hospital 2000 (Latakia)
		11. Al-Kindi University Hospital 2001 (Aleppo)
		12. Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital 2001 (Aleppo)
		13. Cardiology and Heart Surgery University Hospital 2005 (Aleppo)
		14. Al-Bayrouni University Hospital 2006 (Damascus)

4. Damascus University was founded in 1923 through the merger of the School of Medicine (established in 1903) and the Institute of Law (established in 1913). Until 1958 Damascus University was named the Syrian University

5. Temporary address at the time of data collection – Damascus.

6. Temporary address at the time of data collection – Damascus.

Figure 1.2: Key events in the development of higher education in Syria 1903–2011

1903	1913	1919	1923	1928	1946	1958	1959	1966	1971	1979	1986	1995	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23

1903: Establishment of the School of Medicine

1913: Establishment of the Institute of Law in Beirut, transferred to Damascus in 1914

1919: University education to be on a charge-free basis

1923: School of Law named the Institute of Law and linked with the Institute of Medicine, the Arab Society, and the Centre of Arabic Heritage to form the Syrian University

1928: Establishment under the administration of the Syrian University of a School of Arts (originally named the School of Higher Literary Studies and renamed the School of Letters in 1929 before closing in 1935/6)

1946: Faculties and HE institutions were created in a number of new subjects

1958: Initiation of a new law to establish universities in the northern and southern regions in the United Arabic Republic and renaming the Syrian University as the University of Damascus. A new university was established in the Northern Territory and named the University of Aleppo

1959: College of Fine Arts founded in Damascus and becomes part of the University of Damascus in 1972

1966: Creation of Ministry of Higher Education

1971: University of Latakia founded, renamed Tishreen University in 1975

1979: Al-Baath University established in Homs

1986: A number of teaching assistants sent to Eastern Europe for training

1995: Introduction of information technology for universities

2001: Decree No.36 stipulates that private educational institutions could develop post-secondary education

2002: Decree to establish the Virtual University and the Higher Institute of Business Administration

2003: University of Al-Kalamoon becomes the first private university in Syria

2004: Further expansion of private universities, some public universities and the issuing of a new Scientific Missions Act

2005: Biotechnology introduced in laboratories

2006: Development of a University Regulation Law and Scientific Full-Time Law

2007: Decree No.52 stipulates the appointment of top students as assistant professors

2009: Decree No.49 stipulates the establishment of funds for scientific research and scientific degrees for academic researchers

2010: Modification of the quarterly term decree (switching from two to three examination terms)

2011: New law aimed at linking higher education with the labour market. Start of revolution and fleeing of many academics and students

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Before 2011 and the start of the conflict in Syria, higher education, not unlike its counterparts in other Arab states, could be seen as a sector experiencing substantial change and reform.[7] Relatively little qualitative research is available on this topic: most work comprises either descriptive accounts of the circumstances of Syrian HE in an historical framework or reflections on the state of Syrian HE based on more anecdotal reporting drawn from news outlets, NGO reports and accounts written by academics in exile. Although HE has experienced significant reform worldwide in recent years, the Syrian case was marked by a number of distinctive features. The institutional structures and practices of Syrian HE operated under the powerful and often contradictory pressures of government regulation and control, alongside state-related assertions of broadly secular objectives, together with longstanding nationalist ambitions to use HE as an instrument for leveraging political power. In its pursuit of political stability, Syria has long been characterised as an autocratic power within the Arab region and HE reform under such political circumstances has been correspondingly challenging to achieve.[8]

In 2005, David Hardy, the then president of the European Association of Distance Teaching, and Roger Munns, a senior education advisor at the British Council, wrote an article on reforms within the government-controlled areas of the Syrian Arab Republic.[9] At the time, there was a broad appraisal of the reform situation in Syrian HE with some recognition of President Assad's efforts. They cite a number of challenges (such as student/staff ratios, the lack of student attendance, USSR- and Soviet Bloc-trained academics, and an education process driven by political interests rather than wider market needs) all limiting any real reform progress. While the article had a clear focus on Syria and Assad, claims before 2010 present a contrast with the work to assess quality carried out by TEMPUS (2010) and the United Nations Development Programme and Regional Bureau for Arab States (2009). These issues have been identified in the literature concerned with HE and the Arab region more generally. As Mazawi (2005, 2011) has argued, HE has been a substantial instrument for nation-building and is sometimes drawn upon as a mechanism for encouraging regime support in many Arab states.[10] Moreover, Syria had been substantially affected by wider political conflicts in the region over time, the historical impact of the Muslim Brotherhood[11] and stagnation in the education sector.

7. Beck 2010; Beck & Wagner 2010; Bok 2003; Van Buer 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Buckner 2013; Chaaban 2008, 2009; Ministry of Higher Education 2010; Munkkel, Ellawy, Shwiekh & Wagner 2010; TEMPUS 2010; Sanyal 1998; Street, Kabbani & Al-Oraibi 2006; UNESCO 2009; UNDP 2003; World Bank 2010, 2011; Wahed 2010; Wagner 2010.

8. Azzi 2017.

9. Hardy & Munns 2015.

10. See also Hinnebusch 2012; Hinnebusch & Zintl 2015.

11. It should be noted that the Muslim Brotherhood should not be conflated with ISIS. ISIS was created in 2014. Prior to 2014, its incubator was a small organisation in Iraq (not well known in Syria) called *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*. It emerged in Syria as a consequence of the Iraq war and thrived throughout the war in Syria. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, it is not intrinsic to the social fabric of the country.

Syria is certainly not alone in these respects, but Syrian HE has been particularly affected by longstanding geopolitical, regional and sectarian conflicts, whether military or political.[12] An important challenge reported in the political sociology HE literature points to the part played by the influx of high numbers of young men escaping conflicts in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, which put a strain on already limited public resources coupled with growing youth unemployment. For example, according to estimates by the Syrian government and the UNHCR, by 2010 Syria had taken in approximately one million Iraqi refugees.[13] Regional conflicts also increased pressures on sector-wide services, particularly for young men seeking tertiary education, transition programmes, vocational training, higher education and employment. Before the onset of the Syrian crisis, there was already some indication that necessary transition programmes, and tertiary and vocational education-sector expansion were underway.

These issues notwithstanding, global economic pressures on HE were mounting in Syria before 2011, largely, though not exclusively, by way of external agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate independently of government, and through rising competition in the region. Indeed, prior to 2000, a number of external institutions such as the World Bank[14] and the United Nations Development Programme[15] had encouraged the Syrian government toward an HE expansionist model to accommodate the growing numbers of young people seeking access to HE.[16] There was also external pressure to move towards HE privatisation and for curricular changes reflecting skill sets necessary for students to find employment in a changing labour market in the wider context of globalisation.[17]

It should be said that HE reform made up part of a much wider set of economic reforms in Syria; for example, Syrian banking law had been reformed, with corporate taxes reduced in 2003 from 65 per cent to 35 per cent[18] with the objective of facilitating private investment in the country. Private investment into HE was seen as an avenue towards transforming Syria's political economy – as successive NGO and think tank reports have suggested, the reform of HE governance structures was designed to direct the socialist market economy of the Syrian state towards a more diversified, quasi-privatised economic structure. Between 1980 and 2000, Syria had not invested in the large-scale expansion of HE and, according to the World Bank, the country suffered from one of the lowest HE expansion rates in the world.[19] Furthermore, following decades of stagnation, the beginning of expansion of HE from 2001 raised expectations and pressures for academics, students and their institutions. These developments coincided with the erosion of employment protection laws, resulting in far more precarious employment security and constrained employment options.[20]

As Mazawi (2000, 2005) relates, Syrian HE had undertaken an extensive policy of Arabisation across the entire sector prior to these reforms.

For some, Arabisation, as Mazawi (2005) argues, was seen as part of a decolonising strategy designed to distance Syrian HE from the West and reduce the use of English as a medium of instruction. However, pressures continued to mount across the Arab world as economic decline and rising competition dominated the economic landscape in the late 1980s and '90s. The World Bank observed that 'countries in the Middle East need to overhaul their education systems to meet the needs of an increasingly competitive world and realize the potential of their large and growing youth population'.[21] Romani (2009) noted that during this period, with intensifying global competition in HE and the proliferation of advanced neo-liberal models of HE across the Arab world (especially in Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Syrian HE was comparatively stagnant. The economy was volatile despite some GDP growth.[22] As a result, there was underperformance in terms of human capacity building and little progress in widening provision and participation relative to other global and Arab regions. Syrian HE was also less successful in the internationalisation of education relative to other developing nations in the region. For example, Syria has no US satellite campuses, compared with Qatar or the UAE, fewer international partnerships than most Gulf Cooperation Council members and no well-established American universities like those in Beirut or Cairo.[23] Furthermore, Syrian HE suffered the same problems as its regional counterpart as described by Romani (2009):

The inadequacy of Arab higher education relative to the fulfilment of social needs has been denounced for decades. Over-valuation of the general teaching university; poor research; redundancy of the most attractive disciplines, resulting in the demonetisation of these disciplines; the related increase in graduate unemployment; the brain drain of the most skilled; and the unavailability of vocational training are among the most principal structural problems associated with Arab higher education.[24]

12. See Anderson 2011, Avery & Said 2017 and Tinti 2017.
13. UNHCR 2010.
14. World Bank 2008a, 2008b.
15. UNDP 2003, 2006, 2009. See also Romani 2009.
16. Buckner 2011; Buckner & Saba 2010; Kabbani 2009; Kabbani & Kothari 2005; Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon 2008.
17. See Johnstone, Arora & Experton 1998; Rieke 2010.
18. Buckner 2013.
19. World Bank 2008a, 2008b: Buckner 2011, 2013; Kabbani & Salloum 2011.
20. See Buckner 2013.
21. World Bank 2008a, p.1; see also Beck & Wagner 2010.
22. Shafiq, Mason, Seybolt and DeLuca 2014.
23. Faith American University is listed as operating in Raqqa from 2015 but has no official website and there is no documentation on this institution.
24. Romani 2009, p.2. The government of Syria is responsible for the supervision of all HE institutions (public, private and HE institutes). This is accomplished by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and the Higher Education Council (HEC).

A United Nations document published
in 2003 reported as follows:

*The 2002 United Nations Development Program's Arab
Human Development Report highlighted the key role
of education as a force for accelerating the pace of
change, development, and progress and called for 'a
radical revision of education systems in Arab countries.'
The report declared poor quality 'the Achilles heel
of education in the Arab world' and called for action
in three broad areas: 'enhancing human capabilities,
creating strong synergy between education and the
socio-economic system, and formulating a programme
for education reform at the pan-Arab level'.*[25]

Within the pan-Arab context, in 2010 Syria was
ranked close to the bottom in terms of its success
in improving the quality of higher education,[26]
particularly in relation to the financing of HE,
with a record of failed reforms. Moreover, the
country's HE institutions were not listed by the
World HE ranking index because its internal
rankings and evaluations were deemed unreliable
sources of information for evaluative purposes
by the ranking agency for the Arab world.[27]

In summary, what has been documented as a
significant tension before 2011 was a battle over the
definition, regulation and control of HE between the
state and what Mazawi (2005) refers to as 'disruptions
of globalisation' in the wider, competitive global
political economy of HE. For Mazawi (2011): 'political
subordination and economic liberalisation feed on
each other ... the state's political subordination of
higher education institutions subverts the emergence
of an authentic academic leadership and emphasises
authoritarian modes of decision making' (p.3). He
goes on to argue that the reforms of HE designed
to promote economic advancement and encourage
accountability and efficiency have taken place without
corresponding improvements in academic freedom
or the questioning of highly controlled forms of
governance. Here is, perhaps, the central paradox
that is documented in the HE literature relating
to stagnation – that the promotion of horizontal
expansion did not lead to a more robust, autonomous,
effective and accountable system of HE in Syria.

25. UNDP 2003, p.8; See also UNDP 2006.

26. See Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

27. See, for example,
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/where-to-study/study-in-syrian-arab-republic; and
http://www.qs.com/higher-education-world-2016-qs-world-university-rankings-arab-region

Section 2: Capacity Building as a Research Methodology

AN APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING AND RESEARCH

In this section, we report on the main methodological issues. Further detail is given in Appendix A.

Qualitative research methods were a priority if we were to engage in a collaborative venture of the kind we had designed to fulfil Cara's mandate:

- To facilitate continued academic contribution and professional connection so that Syrians are actively engaged in addressing the challenges facing Syria into the future.

- To provide an action-learning capacity-building opportunity using research as the vehicle.

- To deliver a rigorous quality piece of research to influence policy makers and planners working on the question of HE into the future.

Another purpose was to include co-researchers as collaborators in the process of collecting further data, analysis and report writing.

The practices undertaken in any form of enquiry in a severe conflict environment are highly complex and can be dangerous for those involved, including those in exile. It makes demands on the design and conduct of enquiry, as well as on the people involved.

The overall design was as follows:

Two workshops were held in Turkey (3–6 June and 15–18 July 2017), during which the Cambridge team progressively explained the stages of undertaking qualitative research and planned the collaborative enquiry into the status, condition and quality of HE in Syria post-2011 with the Syrian co-researchers.

1. The first workshop dealt with the nature of qualitative research, timelines and mapping, and the proposed methods of interviewing. The instruments for interviewing were constructed together with the Syrian co-researchers, supporting both geographic and timeline-mapping. They also planned whom they would interview and what documentation they had access to, which could be used to enrich the project as part of the overall literature review.

2. The Cambridge team also undertook research in the form of a focus group and individual interviews.

3. Between the two workshops, the Syrian co-researchers interviewed university staff and students who were still in HE in Syria and a small number who had recently left; the key criterion for the selection of interviewees was that they had recent and relevant experience of HE in Syria. The interviews were either at a distance or in Turkey.

4. The second workshop also took place in Turkey and focused on data analysis and write up.

5. There was wide consultation with co-researchers[28] following the two capacity-building workshops.

RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF CONFLICT AND EXILE

Undertaking research in the context of exile presented the research team with fundamental considerations – particularly those of a philosophical, methodological, practical and ethical nature – that needed addressing.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The current context needed to be viewed from an historical and geographical viewpoint to ensure understanding from regional, national and global perspectives. We were mindful not to conceptualise HE from our own historical vantage points,[29] or superimpose our own ideals upon it. It was therefore important to gain access to first-hand Syrian experiences in HE, and their experiences of professional behaviour. We also needed to study documents or website descriptions taken from university webpages,[30] and seek out a much wider and expansive international literature.

28. See Table 2.1: Methods used.

29. Barakat 1993; Buckner 2011.

30. All sources were critically assessed and we are aware that national or official documents (including university website descriptions) all had to be evaluated for credibility. To balance this, the documentary analysis of literature was as wide as possible given the scope of the project.

Indeed, the study co-researchers and the interviewees all reported that state documents were not reliable sources of data, so other sources of evidence or testimony were sought, although these were not accepted unquestioningly.

Barakat (1993) argues for a second condition for conducting and conceptualising research in the Arab world: the need to view Syrian society as changing rather than static (regardless of politics), and to see these changes as a series of pressure points, critical events and endogenous and exogenous shocks[31] that played some part in the enhancement or diminishment of quality higher education. He writes that:

the forces of change are explained in terms of internal and external contradictions, renewed historical challenges, encounters with other societies, the discovery and development of new resources, and invented or borrowed innovations. In this process, the West has served more as a challenge than as a model to be emulated. (Barakat 1993, p.13)

It was important to avoid 'essentialising' Syrians, and Syrian and Arab societies as they relate to HE more generally. Secondly, we attempted to better understand forces of change and any potential shocks to the system and regions. This entailed building an approach that addressed such issues in the broadest sense. A third aim was to ensure that we garnered understanding of the crucial relationship of HE with existing social and power structures. A final issue that stimulated us to think carefully about methods was that the prevailing conditions of conflict and the suppression of civic debate and varied forms of patronage in the Arab world had resulted in substantial feelings of fear and alienation amongst Syrian academics in exile.

Another important aspect of the planning was the necessity to consider the different perspectives of the Syrian co-researchers, their various disciplines and areas of expertise; the majority of whom were from the sciences and applied fields of study. They had little, if any, previous training in the social sciences and humanities.

ETHICS, ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

There was a crucial need to uphold high ethical standards whilst conducting this social research, such that the core principles of justice, public responsibility and respect were upheld, and the people involved were protected from harm. Our focus centred on the need to protect the anonymity of all who contributed to the study in whatever capacity, to ensure that they were fully informed of the purpose of the research and the processes surrounding it, to guarantee that their confidentiality would be protected, and to respect their dignity, their cultural identities and autonomy at all times.[32] Living in sites of conflict, or being an asylum seeker, refugee or displaced person, led to particular ethical concerns beyond the normal dimensions of a standard research project taking place in a stable environment. Security, trust, confidentiality and establishing rapport were essential to the success of the study. Confidentiality agreements included any further research the co-researchers might conduct with others. Ethical considerations also arose in relation to institutions, funders, project partners, recruitment 'gatekeepers' and family and community members. Cambridge team members sought to navigate these issues by drawing on their academic standards for conducting research, as well as negotiating thoroughly with partners and co-researchers, following the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for research ethics. This meant that a substantial amount of time was spent in on-site problem-solving approaches amongst team members and debriefing on how to respond to ethical challenges.[33]

PRACTICAL RESTRAINTS – MATTERS OF TRUST

The matter of trust was omnipresent. For example, key factors impacting on the interviews were the fears, hesitation and lack of trust experienced by the project co-researchers and how they imagined they might be viewed both within and beyond the Syrian borders; the lack of faith on the part of the co-researchers and the interviewees in the potential usefulness of the research being conducted; and the lack of knowledge on the part of the interviewees about some of the issues raised. The interviewees in Syria often perceived questioning as interrogation and security service related, which is something that should be considered in relation to conflict-based research. As mentioned earlier, in highly controlled HE contexts where security and risk are central experiences, finding innovative ways to establish reliable evidence about HE matters is a crucially important consideration.

31. Sutoris 2016.
32. ESRC 2015.
33. Neale & Hanna 2012.

PRACTICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE CONTEXT

In light of the security issues surrounding interviewing and despite the fact that the interview schedules were designed to be carried out either face-to-face or remotely, the majority of remote interviews were in fact conducted through a written question-and-answer format in order to ensure anonymity and protection of both co-researchers and interviewees. Consequently, project co-researchers preferred written responses (and drew on their note-taking training) because the interviewees felt safer in these circumstances. Ideally, the interviews would have been more dialogically driven or used a conversational approach as opposed to direct questioning. Sending an interview schedule in the form of a questionnaire is a different approach from using an open-ended interview format, in which the interviewer might change the order of the questions or probe more deeply, in order to respond to unexpected topics arising, or to respond to something unique to the person or persons being interviewed. This latter point was important because those conducting interviews needed to be aware of the social fears and authentic experiences of their own interviewees, and their fears of sharing, honestly and frankly, their thoughts about HE in Syria.

THE NATURE, CHARACTER AND FORMULATIONS OF QUESTIONS

The interviews were conducted either directly through the web using digital apps or by sending questions with answers returned either in voice recording or in writing. Some interviewers used the schedule as a questionnaire rather than as a framework for the interview, so that in some instances the respondents' answers were brief and the data was not as revealing as it could have been. Some workshop co-researchers recognised that some interview questions were unclear, and that there were problems with translation and repetition. Some questions were very lengthy so many reported that they did not have the time to ask them all and suggested that it would have been better to seek one-word answers, which would have impacted on both the content and any interpretation of the data. Oral testimonies proved lengthier and more fruitful, but they also felt challenged about how to interpret such testimony. Workshop co-researchers also reported that they were not able to apply all the interview techniques learned in the workshops and felt uncertain about how to do so without more experience. This was not surprising as the training sessions were short in duration; while this constraint was a challenge, both for us and for co-researchers, it was beyond the scope of the project to engage in further training opportunities.

SUMMARY OF METHODS AND SAMPLE

This sub-section provides a summary of methods and sample used in this project.

Table 2.1 Methods used

1. Two capacity-building workshops on Qualitative Research and Interviewing (Workshop One) and Data Analysis (Workshop Two) included the following data collection and capacity-building activities:

- maps and timelines exercise following an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 'timescapes' methodological approach[34] (details of the methods are provided in Appendix A)
- summary of Arabic-language documents
- workshop participants' writing on themes developed during Workshop One and literature review

2. Interviews with displaced academics currently residing in Turkey (19 interviewees, all male).

3. One focus group with 12 displaced academics, all male.

4. Interviews[35] with 117 interviews inside Syria from 11 Syrian universities. The interview schedules are included in Appendices D and E.

The sample included two groups of interviewees:

1. 19 displaced academics currently residing in Turkey

2. 117 interviewees, who were working (41 staff) or studying (76 students) in 11 universities (7 public and 4 private) in Syria, which are located in regime (8 universities) and non-regime (3 universities) controlled areas.

Table 2.2: Number of staff and students in Syria by university type (public/private) and gender

University type	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Public	31	4	**35**	48	22	**70**
Private	5	1	**6**	3	3	**6**
TOTAL	36	5	**41**	51	25	**76**

Table 2.3: Number of staff and students in Syria by area (regime-controlled /non-regime-controlled) and gender

Area university is located	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Regime-controlled	24	3	**27**	36	20	**56**
Non-regime-controlled	12	2	**14**	15	5	**20**
TOTAL	**36**	**5**	**41**	**51**	**25**	**76**

The interviews with 19 displaced academics were conducted in Turkey by three University of Cambridge research team members. One focus group with 12 displaced academics, from within the same sample, was conducted by the same research team. The 117 interviews inside Syria were collected by digital means (apps or email) and conducted by 11 Syrian researchers. The number of interviews carried out by each researcher varied from 2 to 17. The total number of interviewees and their gender are detailed in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Total number of interviewees inside and outside Syria by gender and university

	Male	Female	No. of project participants	No. of different universities*
In Syria[36]	87	30	117	11
Displaced academics[37]	19	0	19	3
TOTAL	**106**	**30**	**136**	**11***

* Three are common across the respondents

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34. Hanna & Lau-Claydon 2012; Neale 2012; Neale & Hanna 2012.

35. Some workshop participants sent an interview schedule as a questionnaire and this added methodological and logistical complexity to the project.

36. Referred to in the text as staff or student with university number; gender is also indicated.

37. Referred to in the text as Interviewee 1 to 19.

RESPONDENTS IN SYRIA

Due to the challenges resulting from particular sensitivities associated with data collection from the respondents in Syria,[38] the sample is not balanced in terms of gender representation with 30 female (5 staff and 25 students) and 87 male (36 staff and 51 students).

For the project as a whole, the representation of universities varied greatly. For example, there were 35 respondents in one university (Uni 4: 10 staff and 25 students) and only one respondent from another (Uni 3: 1 student). There were 35 staff and 70 student respondents from public universities and 6 staff and 6 student participants from private universities.[39] There were 27 staff and 56 students from regime-controlled areas and 14 staff and 20 students from non-regime-controlled areas.[40]

Out of the total number of 117 interviewees (87 male and 30 female), only 40 male (29 staff and 12 students) and 8 female (4 staff and 4 students) responded to questions regarding the state of HE before 2011. The responses of these 48 participants from Syria are presented in this report.

Graph 2.1: Number of staff by discipline who replied to questions regarding the state of HE pre-2011

NUMBER OF STAFF BY DISCIPLINE

| Discipline	Number
Agricultural Engineering	2
Arabic Literature	3
Computer Engineering	3
Economics	4
Engineering	5
English	1
English Literature	2
Geography	3
History	3
Islamic Studies	1
Law	3
Pharmacy	3
Sociology	1
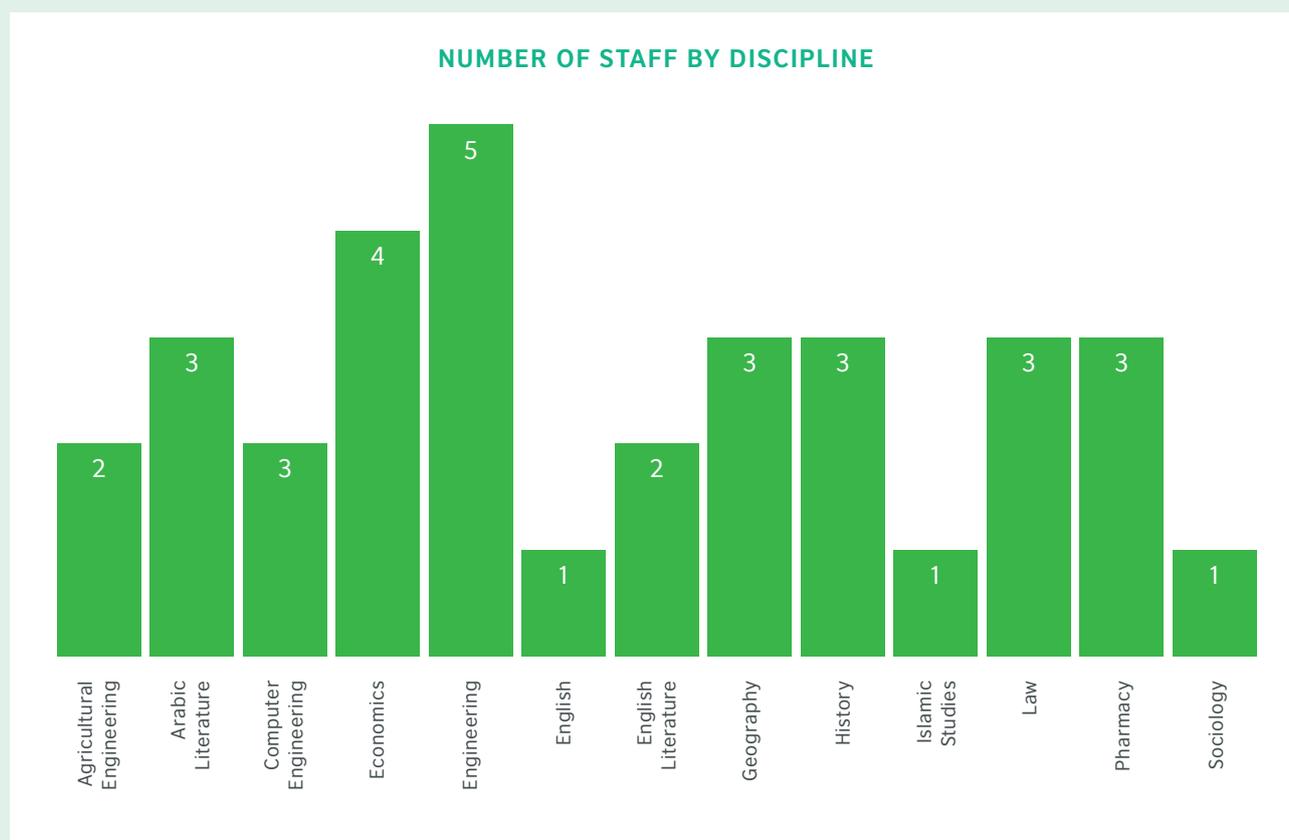
Staff interviewees from Syrian universities who replied to the questions regarding the state of HE pre-2011 were drawn from 13 disciplines detailed in Graph 2.1. The student participants from Syrian universities who replied to the questions regarding the state of HE pre-2011 specialised in 12 disciplines detailed in Graph 2.2.

38. The interviewees' gender is indicated; years in teaching or study as well as subjects are not indicated for confidentiality purposes.
39. See Table 2.2.
40. See Table 2.3.

Graph 2.2: Number of students by discipline who replied to questions regarding the state of HE pre-2011

NUMBER OF STUDENTS BY DISCIPLINE
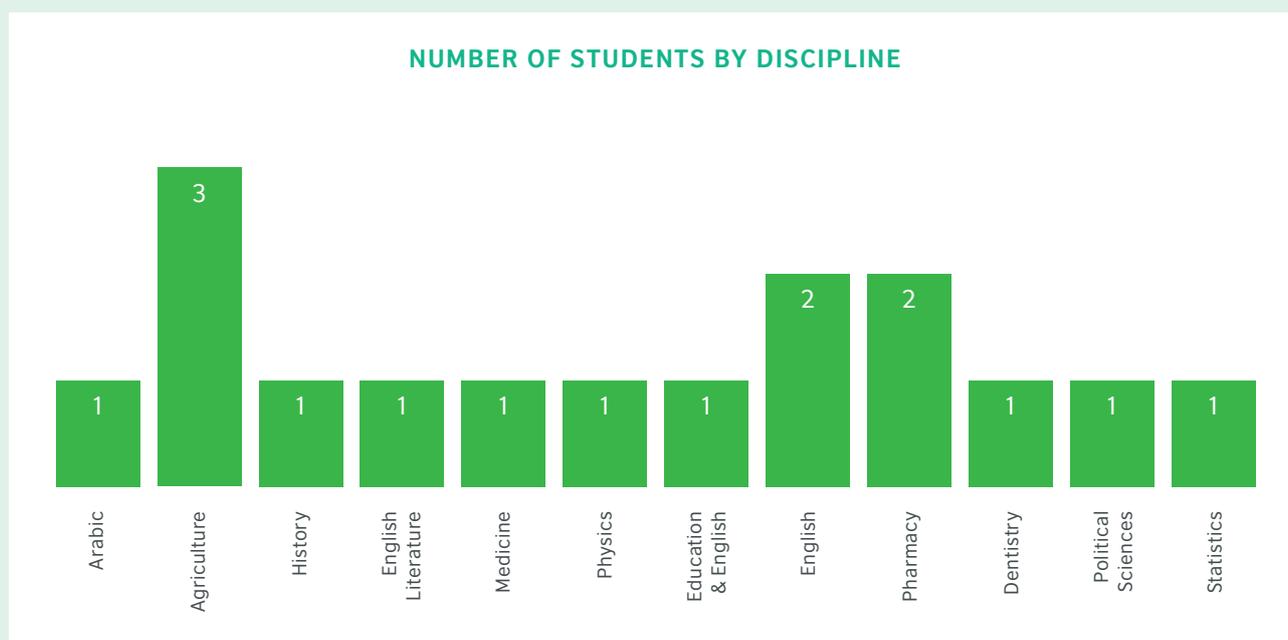
PARTICIPANTS OUTSIDE SYRIA

Interviewees are referred to in the text as Interviewee 1 to 19. All 19 interviewees were male. They had previously worked in 3 public universities in Syria. Alongside working in the public universities, several had also worked in private universities. Holding parallel jobs in both public and private universities was a widespread practice in Syria before 2011.

Interviewees specialised in 14 subjects; some had been recipients of scholarships and sought professional development or employment opportunities abroad, so that in 2011 several had been studying or working outside Syria either on a scholarship or a fellowship. In each case, the scholarship payments or fellowships had ceased with the onset of the crisis. At the time of interview, some were unemployed and the majority who were employed had been unable to acquire work in their fields of specialisation.

CO-RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS ON CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS FOR THE STUDY

SECURITY

The main challenges and difficulties were associated with the threat of security either to oneself or to others. Interviewees in Syria reported that they had experience of research undertaken by other organisations, such as universities, NGOs and government agencies. Some participants felt that such projects had been carelessly constructed and were potentially dangerous to participants or that participants were not adequately debriefed or consulted about them. There were clear feelings of mistrust around 'research'. Given their personal experience of conflict and what has been reported in research in conflict environments,[41] this sense of concern or anxiety is not unexpected in either conflict or post-conflict settings.

VIEWING RESEARCH AS A LEGITIMATE AND SERIOUS ENDEAVOUR

Another challenge was that many potential interviewees were highly sceptical of the value of research. For example, some felt that little or nothing would result from their efforts and involvement. Many had been made multiple promises by external parties in the past that had not been fulfilled. The co-researchers reported that a multitude of civil society organisations had taken advantage of the situation of university staff and students to achieve their own ends, resulting in a loss of trust in such organisations. This notable factor impacted on and even sometimes undermined the success of the interviews.

QUALITY OF THE DATA

Data quality was discussed in the workshop, with one co-researcher reporting as an 'essential problem … that most students were inhibited by fear, and consequently their answers were standardised and idealised, even when they were not convinced of them':

They often give answers that they do not believe themselves. For example, to the question on the conditions of university accommodation: eight students are housed in a single room, which they could only get access to through personal connections. There are no services. They even have to buy drinking water by the gallon. And yet, their responses were that the accommodation was wonderful and excellent as if they were living in a resort. The problem lies in their mindset and not in whether the answers are right or wrong. (Workshop Two discussion)

In this case, offering a socially desirable response clearly limits the value and quality of the data.

41. See Jebril 2017.

LEARNING AS A RESEARCHER

Many co-researchers felt that they had learned substantively about the processes and practices of qualitative research and in particular about the process of interviewing and data analysis. They felt that the experience of conducting interviews, 14 in one case, had enabled them to hone their skills and engage in time-management, as well as the process. Others agreed that the process of qualitative data collection and analysis was both valuable and rigorous. And still others valued the very real upfront experience of interviewing and the humanistic dimension of conducting semi-structured interviews, alongside a clear apprehension of the struggles and burdens of others in coercive conditions. For some, this appeared to be a new and liberating experience. One co-researcher related that:

In Syria, where I was a faculty member at a government university, academics learn to repress, because we are subject to coercion from our seniors. This was then projected onto the way we dealt with students. Through these interviews, we learnt how to listen to the burdens of others. This was not the case in our time. This is important to me personally and professionally. (Workshop Two discussion)

The complex nature and particular characteristics of undertaking research in conflict settings, particularly where people are dislocated and fearful, was a continued learning experience for the Syrian co-researchers as well as for the Cambridge team members.

Section 3:
Syrian Higher Education Pre-2011 – The Findings

Using literature and interview data, we collectively sought to establish trends, emerging patterns and to identify key issues relating to the status and condition of Syrian higher education before 2011. We report these under the following categories: higher education reform, mission and governance, teaching and research, and student admissions and progression over a period of approximately twenty years.

ORGANISATION OF THE SECTION

The section is organised into three parts, covering ten themes:

Part 1: Reform, mission and governance

- HE reform and governance trends in the literature

- The role of the security apparatus in undermining HE reform, governance and change

- Quality assurance

Part 2: Teaching and research

- Staffing issues

- Teaching, curriculum and assessment

- Major obstacles to research

- Resources and infrastructure

Part 3: Student admissions and progression

- Student admission

- Student access

- Student employability

These themes have emerged from a review of existing research, grey literature and the collaborative enquiry undertaken by the Cambridge team and the Syrian co-researchers. Each section opens with a brief overview of the existing literature related to an identified trend and associated sub-themes and is followed by insights from interviews, where possible. In cases where displaced academics were recalling their student years, their responses were included under the category of 'student perspectives'. Each

major section concludes with a summary of emerging issues from the literature review and interview data.

SOURCES AND DEFINITIONS

It is important we make explicit that we are only able to report on what has been published (in any form), rather than claim we have clear evidence of reform efforts and their outcomes, as these efforts have not, to the best of our knowledge, been robustly studied as formal research. Discernible patterns are more difficult to map with high levels of integrity. We have included in the literature review documents largely from within Syria and online accounts of reform events – UN and NGO sector reports – and an overview of reform efforts in published forms by external collaborators working with Syrian HE academics.[42] The reports are case studies of institutions and evaluations of reform platforms. Much of this work is highly anecdotal in nature (e.g. PowerPoints, online reports, summaries by key players at the time of reform efforts inside Syria or reflecting on them while in exile) and does not adequately account for any Syria-wide national efforts. To address this challenge, we have sought, where possible, to bridge existing literature with interview accounts from individuals and groups. It must therefore be recognised from the outset that there are particular challenges to laying final claim to trends as Syria-wide trends, as these are highly varied across the country (as suggested in the literature and by all those who provided testimonies). It is equally difficult to measure in any precise way the associated impact on the status of HE. A variety of factors contribute to these challenges.

42. See, for example, Van Buer, Wagner & Gausch 2010.

1   The heterogeneity of programmes, varied efforts and conflicting reports in formal data, as well as little or no account of reform efforts, despite their documentation in decrees from official government sources.

2   Difficulties in trying to chart differences in private and public universities, the unevenness of robust data and statistics about these differences, and conflicting perspectives amongst respondents.

3   The elusiveness of robust records from government sources and the challenge of unreliable sources.

4   The extent of information that an interviewee feels comfortable sharing and their sometimes limited knowledge of what might be taking place at a micro-level of reform, governance and mission in different and diverse regional Syrian HE contexts.

5   The desire from many external sources (e.g. the World Bank) to heighten the visibility and status of HE in Syria by pointing to reform efforts in reports but with little or no externally completed evaluations of reform, to the best of our knowledge, at the onset of the crisis.

6   A substantial focus in many reports on descriptive accounts rather than on detailed analysis of any horizontal HE expansion project that addressed wider political and civic needs in Syria. These include, for example, the desire for more transparent and ethical discussions about civic participation and engagement, the expansion of more democratically oriented social science programmes and links to equity and the social mobility of, and access for, the most disadvantaged in Syrian HE.

Part 1: Reform, mission and governance

More than ever before universities are being measured against not only their national competitors but also [against] rivals from the rest of the world.[43]

HE REFORM AND GOVERNANCE TRENDS IN THE LITERATURE

Largely from 2001 onwards, there was a focus on a major set of reforms in Syrian HE. Many of these reforms sought to link HE with labour-market needs, to expand the HE sector and to reconsider or rewrite the mission statements of universities. In reporting on the pre-2011 HE literature in Syria, it is impossible to speak of mission statements, values and governance without discussing plans for HE governance reform, whose ethos, broadly speaking, was a move towards horizontal expansion and less centralised governance structures. For example, one of the most powerful decrees in Syria's reform of HE governance was the Legislative Decree No.36 of 2001,[44] which sanctioned the opening of private universities, and a partial decentralisation of HE and the 'governing' of private universities. Another key document was the 2006 University Regulation Law,[45] which pertained to the functioning of all public universities. It represented a corrective to a previous law, aiming to offer greater autonomy[46] to public universities, such as increasing the decision-making scope of university presidents.

In turning to the interview data, it seems that the ideals of autonomy and openness in HE were experienced differently. Interviewee 8, for example, shared a significant observation about the openness of HE in Syria at the turn of the new millennium:

Actually, Bashar al-Assad's era was much more open compared with his father's. There were many initiatives to improve the higher education sector and bring local talent back to the country. It took them five years between 2000 and 2005 to put together the details of the relevant law. They held many conferences, symposia and meetings to get there. (Interviewee 8)

At the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's presidency, there was a strong anticipation of a new era of HE reform, facilitated by technological advancements.[47] However, according to many of those interviewed, such HE autonomy and reform was often difficult or impossible to realise. For example, respondents' accounts pointed to high levels of infiltration by the Security Services into Syrian HE. In terms of official decrees and descriptive reporting, it would seem such reforms were part of a post-2001 Syrian reform landscape; however, assessing their full realisation is a more challenging task.

Vignette 3.1: The introduction of digital technologies into HE

At the beginning, when Bashar al-Assad became president, he tried to make changes and improvements, especially in the education sector. Even before he came to power he brought computers to the country and established what is called the Syrian Association of Informatics and Computers and was its direct supervisor. We, the Syrian people, were very hopeful as he was educated abroad and his wife studied in the UK. We hoped that he would improve things in the country. Before 2000, in Syria, people did not own digital TVs. Even mobile phones were not allowed. Lots of electronic devices were not allowed, like computers. But after Bashar came to power, he tried to make some improvements. The Virtual University was one of them. (Interviewee 9)

Another dimension of reform rhetoric was the aspiration of more autonomy for HE institutions. For example, as Ayoubi (2010) points out, the University Regulation Law was designed to enhance university autonomy and increase decentralisation in the public sector, particularly in ensuring more freedom to make staff appointments and promotions – signs of a more open HE system influenced by funders such as the EU, DAAD, and the British Council. However, the paucity of robust empirical research makes it hard to ascertain whether any new forms of institutional autonomy or transparency emerged nationwide and many study respondents said that such assertions were in name only.

At the same time, the literature suggests that a broader process of modernisation encouraged reform across the entire HE sector, with a particular focus on broadening access, addressing labour market needs and quality assurance. A list of these pre-2011 Syrian HE reform priorities have been outlined by Ayoubi (2010), each seen as a crucial dimension of reform:

1. The opening of new institutions to meet the needs of local students and ensure employment for those returning from studying abroad;

2. The development of new admissions policies that support high academic standards, student needs and national development needs;

3. Advancing existing curricula and developing a more flexible set of rules for both assessment and teaching to meet market demands;

43. Times Higher Education 2013. See also UNESCO 2007, UNESCO 2009; UNDP 2003.

44. See Appendix F.

45. See Van Buer, Wagner & Gausch 2010; Hassan Sheik 2013; Mualla 2002.

46. Teuscher & Rieke 2010; Teuscher, El-Khayat, Moussa, Kaskous & Sumainah 2010; Peisl & Wagner 2010.

47. See Hardy & Munns 2015.

4. Further developing a quality assurance programme and accreditation system;

5. Introducing staff development programmes to upgrade the skill sets of staff;

6. Modernising the scientific environment and developing modern and equipped lab settings, new libraries, and good IT standards;

7. Revising academic research environments and enhancing and enriching graduate studies programmes;

8. Upgrading tertiary institutions such as vocational education and other forms of educational training; and

9. Restructuring the sector so that updated management information systems can exist.[48]

These reform attempts notwithstanding, Van Buer (2010a) reported that the philosophy of decentralisation as a reformed dimension of HE governance was difficult to adapt across the Syrian HE sector because:

[focusing] on autonomy requires a certain modification in philosophy – originated from centralized decision-making and leading to coordination and support of individual development on ministerial levels. [… and the] granting of autonomy to single universities can be considered as rather unusual [in Syria] so far, especially in comparison to the so-called European HE landscape. The current Syrian HE framework of 2006 shows an administration institution that is still oriented in a strongly centralised way, and that is particularly influenced by the HE minister in charge.[49]

Regardless of reported challenges to reform efforts, attempts have been documented by several scholars, including Wael Mualla (2010), former president of the University of Damascus, who published his own view on the shifting governance structures. He points to initiatives that were put forward as governance reforms through laws and decrees, some of which were also documented during our timeline exercises.[50] As early as 2002, Mualla (2002) wrote:

The University Regulation Law in Syria states that universities' purpose is to achieve advances in the field of Science, Technology, Human Sciences and Art which would contribute to the Social and Economic development of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Law envisages that this purpose can be accomplished through the following tasks:

* *Producing highly qualified specialists in the various fields of science, production and services*

* *Advancing and participating in scientific research which contributes to scientific and technological progress, especially which aims at finding solutions to the various problems that face the social and economic development of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Arab countries*

* *Developing research, teaching and learning methods and instruments which includes authoring and translating university textbooks and establishing appropriate research*

laboratories to support scientific research […]

* *Promoting continuous learning and training*

* *Developing students' scientific character and orienting students towards choosing their optimal future activities*

* *Encouraging cultural, artistic, social and sportive activities*

* *Strengthening cultural and scientific links with other Arab and foreign universities and scientific organizations*

* *Realising maximum interaction between universities through different HE institutions, and through social and economic institutions and organizations*[51]

Respondents in our research were sceptical about the extent to which these changes had been implemented between 2001 and 2010.

In Syria, we have the best constitution in the world. The real problem is applying and implementing [these initiatives] on the ground. (Interviewee 3)

Our desk-based research on Syrian HE reform efforts in the first decades of the millennium also supports an unevenness in application and implementation and this may explain, in part, why there were differences of opinion between our respondents. For example, reform efforts were not understood in the same way across the sector nor were the ideas about improving HE and elevating its status elsewhere in the region or internationally.

Hassan Sheik (2013) identifies the components of quality HE as: teaching, curricula, research, staffing, students, infrastructure, services to the community and academic environment. After 2013, Al-Hessan (2016) argued that these dimensions of HE should also address labour market needs and ultimately are indicators of a more internationally recognised HE. He goes on to report, however, that outdated curricula, an emphasis on less technical expansion within the sciences and the horizontal expansion of the humanities through increased student numbers (but not civics or equity-oriented courses), a focus on rote learning, and didactic teaching – all indicated a lack of preparation in Syrian HE for what can be understood as the globalised knowledge economy.

There was also an associated trend towards recognising the need for the reform of HE mission statements to reflect new developments in curriculum reform, and to draw on international collaborations and gain advice from the wider global HE sector. Indeed, various European councils reported on such efforts largely in regime-favoured areas of Syria.[52] For example, there did appear to be some university initiatives designed to implement a focus on the need for a 'new knowledge economy', strategic alliances, cooperation agreements, outward mobility and internationalisation.[53]

48. As cited in Ayoubi 2010, p.301.
49. Van Buer 2010a, p. 241.
50. See Appendix C.
51. As cited in Mualla 2002, pp.7–8.
52. See Mualla 2002, 2010.
53. Al-Shalabi 2011; Konrad & Fiorioli 2010.

Overviews of such efforts by Van Buer, Wagner and Gausch (2010) and Al-Shalabi (2011) report on the tenth 'five-year plan' commencing in 2006.

This plan was designed to support the building of a new knowledge economy both in the region and globally through HE reform.

In this push for a new governing structure and new knowledge exchange, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education reported that a number of milestones had been achieved in HE that included the opening up of new faculties in cities across Syria, as well as attempts at new models for governing academic and student experience.[54] Some reports suggest that these measures allowed for the development of more diverse mission statements in the private HE sector.

Importantly, in 2005, the Higher Education Council[55] invited universities to engage in a self-evaluation of their programmes. Al-Shalabi (2011) and Kayyal (2010a, 2010b) have reported that this was carried out to assess the current performance of academic and administrative processes, to highlight weaknesses and to create draft plans for future improvements. The University of Damascus is reported as a case study site where a number of surveys and focus groups took place in order to redraft the mission statement of the university. It was also reported that wide and varied stakeholder consultations (involving students, staff and lecturers) and surveys provided information regarding the limitations of administrative and academic functions. This work led to a revised University of Damascus mission statement honouring the following requirements: the mission should reflect the necessity to support the social and economic development of Syrian society; it should reflect an investment in the Syrian people; and it should enhance organisational development and international collaborations to improve the overall quality of provision and experience.

According to Kayyal (2010a, 2010b), this mission was adopted and drawn on to support the development of a Quality Assurance Centre at the University of Damascus and a number of pilot faculties conducted self-evaluations and developed action plans that were associated with the president's office (also reported under quality assurance). A number of key items were identified as central to the development of new university missions. Mualla (2002, pp.7–8) reported that plans were in process throughout 2006 to 2009 to improve the status and quality of HE, with some of this work supported by the British Council.[56]

One co-researcher shared a similar study conducted by Hassan Sheik (2013), who identified the importance of the role of knowledge capital as expressed by the deans of Syrian universities seeking to innovate in HE. Hassan Sheik (2013) surveyed 95 deans (exclusively male) and found that approximately 90 per cent of them reported a desire for innovation and viewed knowledge capital as significant for future HE innovation; again, there is no reported robust record of whether any such innovations were achieved nationwide.

Whilst there is little further documented evidence relating to reform successes, HE governance was reported as shifting before 2001, transitioning from a primarily autocratically governed socialist-oriented approach, towards a quasi-public/private HE system, sometimes referred to in the HE literature as modernised authoritarian governance. In 1970, an earlier political coup, named the Corrective Movement, supported a 'socialist sectarian orientation' to HE; hence only public HE institutions were legitimised under the previous president Hafez al-Assad (years in office 1970–2000). An agenda of future privatisation of HE remained peripheral to wider reforms until his death. After twenty years of planned global reforms of HE and as a consequence of economic downturns, Hassan Sheik (2013) argues that the 1990s and early 2000s were the seminal decades for preparing for vast privatisation of HE and the expansion of essentially private enterprise.[57] This reform, pressured by the World Bank and many other external agencies, was designed to create stability in the Arab region, but eventually led to not only substantial discontent amongst students but also to major unemployment.[58] This move coincided with a general shift towards an agreement with the EU, moves towards enhanced liberalisation of trade, the opening of the 2008 stock market, and new HE negotiations with European Higher Education institutions.[59]

54. See Educational Decrees included in Appendix F.

55. The Higher Education Council is based at the Ministry of Higher Education. Its members are appointed by the Prime Minister at the beginning of each academic year, headed by the Minister of HE. It has the ultimate power of deciding, implementing and evaluating HE policy and is the main body responsible for issuing detailed laws and regulations governing the higher education sector in Syria. (European Commission, February 2017).

56. See Mualla 2010.

57. Hassan Sheik 2013.

58. For a full-scale overview of Syrian HE governance structures see, for example, Hassan Sheik 2013; Beck & Wagner 2010.

59. Buckner 2009, 2011.

A key trend in the Syrian HE reform movement is its clear links with the restructuring and reform of other spheres of social and economic life such as a rise in trade, new HE negotiations with extra-national funding bodies (e.g. British Council, EU, DAAD), changes in labour market law and a rise in the entrepreneurial class in Syria.

Whilst such trends are documented in the literature, it is important to note that contradictory outcomes were reported by those interviewed for this project. Equally important is that there may have been, in some cases, a lack of information amongst respondents about reform efforts nationally. This lack of information may well relate to rising sectarian developments and associated conflicts before 2011, which began to undermine any effective evaluation of such efforts, particularly where little or no government resources were allocated to evaluating HE reform change. For example, some respondents described the university mission as 'educational and humanitarian' before 2011 (uni_2 staff 2_F and uni_2 staff 3_F) in relation to those regions that were not regime-controlled at the time of data collection. Other responses, in line with think tank or online reports written by Syrian academics now in exile and European collaborators,[60] were highly critical of any such changes, highlighting outdated curricula and failed attempts to link learning outcomes to labour market needs:

The university's mission before 2011 was to give students outdated textbook knowledge with some half-hearted attempts to connect the university with the labour market by training students in some skills they may need in both the local and international labour markets. (uni 6_staff 1_M)

Importantly, many reform efforts that involved international collaboration did not begin until the mid-2000s and may not have been easily assessed nationwide just before the onset of the crisis. After 2011 they would likely have been impossible to assess. According to one respondent, reform efforts and missions remain unchanged from the turn of the twentieth century, particularly as related to HE autonomy, because of the maintenance of a strict governance hierarchy.

Before 2011 the University Presidency was the centre of decision-making in consultation with the Al-Baath Party members known for its autocracy and appropriation of political, economic and administrative decisions. (uni_5 staff 8_M)

Such views seemed consistent with perspectives in other studies on the enduring challenges undermining reform efforts before 2011. For example, Van Buer (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) reported that Syria's highly controlled HE governance structure undermined large-scale reform efforts at the end of a decade-long effort at reform. As another study respondent commented on the structure of university management pre-2011:

The university was managed by the University Council comprising the university president, his deputies,

deans of all the colleges and senior employees. It was responsible for all decisions relating to the university apart from structural decisions, which were taken by the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Higher Education Council such as the establishment of new colleges. (uni_4 staff 5_M)

The study focus group discussions supported this claim by arguing that little or no decentralisation in HE had really taken place. As a response to the question of whether there was any financial support for universities available locally as a consequence of reforms, one participant replied: 'No. In Syria it is a central regime. All the wealth ends up in the capital, Damascus'. This seemed to be the case regardless of university status, as 'both public and private universities were working under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education'. These latter findings concur with Al-Hessan's working paper (2016) on understanding centralised control of HE before the onset of the 2011 Syrian crisis.

These findings suggest that whilst there was an emphasis on economic ideas of human capital, global pressures for reform, assurance systems and assessment at the start of the twenty-first century, there was insufficient evidence of any widescale reform. Beck and Wagner (2010) argue that Syria remained focused on a 'top-down management approach which fundamentally constrained institutional autonomy' (p.35) and that centralist structures were seen to impede the value of any potential liberal reforms, including the reform of university mission statements directed towards greater autonomy. Mazawi (2000, 2004, 2005, 2011) supports this view by arguing that in the Arab HE context more generally, the ruling elites regulated leadership appointments to HE leadership posts, and university councils included members who were often 'ministerial appointees' undermining any realisable autonomy signalled in earlier reform decrees.

60. See Van Buer 2010a.

Work conducted by Khalifa and Ayoubi (2015), also reported little distinctive variation in leadership styles across the HE sector. This is because both public and private institutions necessarily operate within the prevailing political, economic and social contexts of Syria and most (if not all) leaders in the private HE sector would have migrated from the public system to the private system in the first instance. This may also explain why greater shifts in academic cultures around citizenship, inclusion, diversity and equity were seen as more difficult to achieve.

THE ROLE OF THE SECURITY APPARATUS IN UNDERMINING HE REFORM

Another enduring theme – and perhaps the most prominent of all – was the role of the National Security Services (or Mukhabarat[61]) in constraining HE reform and undermining transparency and fairness across the sector. A joint report published by the University of California Davis Human Rights Initiative and the Institute of International Education[62] concluded that 'generally, though not always, membership in the party is a prerequisite to advancement and leadership on campus for faculty'. They went on to say in the same report: 'in general Syrian universities are used to produce 'quiescence' and political support […] and academic freedom in the university is non-existent'.

This top-down approach in HE has been documented as fundamentally linked to the political environment of Syria, which is seen as tied to both tangible and intangible security structures governing HE and led by the Al-Baath Party:[63]

The leadership of the party took over direction of the educational process … The Ministry of Higher Education manages and oversees university education and was linked to Al-Baath Party branches within universities. With the written foundation of the Syrian Constitution, Al-Baath Party offices are seen by many as managing all aspects of higher education, from educational policy to defining institutional structures and issuing appointments to leading educational positions, and also subject to approval from the security apparatus and the presidency… To further strengthen the link between education and Al-Baath Party, informal educational organizations developed to complement the goals of the formal educational system even before the National Charter and Constitution solidified this relationship. These groups enjoy independent organisational structures, as well as separate legal and financial frameworks. They work with a wide swath of students from six to twenty-four to support the development of formal educational policy objectives, summarised as the development of 'Unity, Liberty, and Socialism' in these youth. (Al-Maaloli 2016)

These programmes, such as the Al-Baath Vanguard Programme, are seen by many as a way of enshrining, through education, the importance of the central political party and government, and of maintaining, in different education sectors, the compliance of students and academics.[64] Activities in these programmes, which had vast membership, pertained to party loyalty and linked young people's education to Syrian political aims. According to Al-Maaloli (2016), the numbers of Vanguard members enrolled from

1974 to 1990 was 16,956,746.[65] Adherence to such programmes could be seen as a practice 'upholding a regime's self-projected image of benevolent rule'.[66]

In line with these educational programmes, one could argue that Syria's national political aims were not separate from the governance aims of the education sector, and HE appeared to be no exception. Therefore, whilst in theory autonomy was written into reform decrees, some reports pointed to the appointment of academics who were linked to security bodies,[67] and to academics aligned with the regime, carrying major educational governance roles. In regime-controlled areas this practice continues.[68] Online reports also claimed that security officials had governing HE roles, including control over aspects of student services, powers inside the central admissions structure of the university and a regular physical presence on campuses. Our respondents and interviewees reported extensively on the invasive role of the security apparatus in intervening in HE operations and student life.

It is worth noting that the central role the Security Services in the HE system is seen as a defining element in both the past and the recent history of Syrian HE. For example, many participants felt that even after 2001 'there was an atmosphere of tyranny and a strangulation of freedoms that stifled creativity in the hearts of young people' (uni 10_staff 5_M). Another interviewee emphasised that 'free thinking wasn't possible then and isn't possible now' (uni 4_staff 7_M). Similarly, Interviewee 7 summarised the political pressure to conform as follows:

There is no opposition in Syria. If you are not with the Al-Baath Party you are placed in jail for having opposing ideas. Sometimes, if you are lucky, you can escape the country. And this is just for expressing your oppositional ideas or opinions. (Interviewee 7)

Political control over universities was also reported as being exercised through the National Union of Syrian Students. Although it is linked to the Ministry of Higher Education, it serves the 'Intelligent Service or the General Security Service'. These student groups are also highlighted as significant in the literature[69] and point to their powerful role in shaping university security culture.

61. Arabic term used frequently in reference to Syrian (and some other Arab) National Security Services.

62. See Watenpaugh & Fricke 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014.

63. See Al-Maaloli 2016, p.1.

64. The Al-Baath Vanguard Programme was designed for primary school children, teenagers and young adults as after school training to encourage civic unity and state socialist goals amongst young people (see Beck & Wagner 2010).

65. See http://www.syrianpioneers.org.sy/node/24; see also Al-Maaloli (2016).

66. Mazawi 2011, p.2.

67. See Bergman 2013.

68. See Polk 2013.

69. See Al-Maaloli 2016.

There was a special department inside the Intelligence Service called the University Branch. In each faculty or college, there is one or more University Branch representatives. Their job is to monitor the security situation in the faculty. Sometimes they ask for information about a student or a member of staff. Anything related to any security situation would be done through the University Branch, in collaboration with the Al-Baath Party, which also has a branch in each university faculty. (Interviewee 9)

Interviewee 15 described the norms underlying regime practices, particularly staff and student recruitment by the Security Services to exercise control over their activities:

Some of them [Security Service recruits] write reports on colleagues, which may lead to their being detained or expelled from the university. This happened in our department before the crisis in 2008. (Interviewee 15)

Others suggested that this pervasive security culture was linked to the acquisition of key positions in Syrian HE. For example, Interviewee 7 suggested that key positions in Syrian HE were occupied by the elite Alawite community, and 'everything was dominated either by the Alawi people or by the security service. Security systems are mostly Alawi.' Similarly, Interviewee 6 made a powerful assertion that Syrian 'politics destroyed education' and 'the interference of politics in the university' was a monumental problem. From his perspective, appointments were made not based on 'your ability to conduct excellent work; they just looked at your sectarian views and beliefs' (Interviewee 6). Another respondent reported that 'before 2011, appointments were based on party allegiance and security scrutiny and a review with the Al-Baath Party' (uni_5 staff 8_M); and 'appointments were rarely based on scientific criteria' (uni 5_staff 9_M).

Employment and competency across the various specialties were very low because administrative appointments were based on favouritism and autocratic decisions. […] Professional training courses were restricted to certain people. Opportunities for academic exchange, if available, were equally based on party allegiance. (uni_5 staff 8_M)

Time and again, respondents returned to the theme of the security apparatus as a means of governance and control. They also highlighted the consequent fears that students experienced and pointed to associated examples of corruption. Interviewee 13 remarked that:

There is more control [in public universities]. The students don't feel free. They're afraid of the Security Services who enter lecture halls and classes and take students away. Each university should be able to prevent other forces from controlling the university. (Interviewee 13)

Interviewees 3 and 9 mentioned the challenges associated with corruption and blackmail:

There are issues relating to systemic corruption including financial corruption. For example, in 2006 and 2007 two professors[70] were asked to resign when they were discovered to be accepting cash from students in exchange for exam passes. The university asked them to resign rather than fire them in order to maintain the university's good reputation. (Interviewee 9)

And Interviewee 6 reported that of 45 teaching assistants who were sent abroad, only 20 to 30 were employed by the university: 'the others were sent abroad because of favouritism'. (Interviewee 6).

Similarly, Staff 8 from University 5 reported that:

Before 2011 there were [staffing] gaps as the appointment of academics was based on their relationship with the university president and dean of the college they graduated from. Lists of the specialists recommended for appointment only included those that had a strong relationship with the university president and the dean. (uni_5 staff 8_M)

Such reported practices extended to scholarships and professional development opportunities and interfered with transparent and ethical forms of HE mobility through merit:

Ninety per cent of both internal and external scholarships were offered to Alawites or those who were close to them. They would receive a scholarship to study abroad and return to Syria to a guaranteed position, despite the availability of more competent candidates. It was a well-planned system within this small closed circle, starting with a scholarship and ending with employment. (Interviewee 15)

These accounts were corroborated by other respondents and seemed pervasive before the outbreak of the conflict:

Prior to 2011, decisions were made by the university administration with security service approval (uni 7_staff 3_M) and the quality of education became worse even before 2011 when the security services and management intervened (uni 7_staff 3_M).

70. Here, and in following quotes, 'professor' can refer to either academics at professorial level or teaching staff more generally.

Weak governance – despite high levels of party control – was also identified by those interviewed. A link between narrow parameters for inclusive decision-making and the skill base and competencies of employees in key university positions was also emphasised:

The weakness of university governance was the lack of participation. Decisions were made without any discussion. On numerous occasions, after one, two, three weeks, a decision was overturned when it became apparent that it was wrong. This was a constant area of conflict. Those who made the decisions were not qualified to do so. The university president was chosen on the basis of political considerations, and not because of his academic qualifications. This was also true of deans and department heads. (Interviewee 13)

Again, as in other aspects of governance, views on university management seemed to confirm wider concerns over the ruling party's control over decision-making. Further mediating this political control was a much diminished HE finance structure and financial disparities across the country. Major factors impacting these forms of political control were the combined conflicts in the region, pressure to modernise and a shortfall in financing reform. These accounts are corroborated in the research HE literature on other Arab states.[71] Whilst there was a reported distinction across governance structures between the public and private sectors, a top-down structure seems to have remained intact in the private sector despite the commercial nature of its funding. An interviewee outlined this management structure:

Private universities are companies registered under the Commercial Companies Law, recording who owns the university with a Board of Directors made up of shareholders and reflecting share-ownership in the company. The Board of Directors oversees the university's financial and public policies with a smaller Board of Trustees, drawn from amongst their membership, which is responsible for other considerations such as the construction of new buildings and budgets. (uni 9_staff 1_M).

The interviewee goes on to say that the Board of Trustees is responsible

for the appointment of university deans and the university president. The University Council, made up of the college deans and the university president, made up of the College Deans and the University President, is responsible for the implementation of public and university policies as established by the Board of Trustees as well as for teaching and curricula related issues, and for monitoring staff engagement. It is also responsible for communicating with students and for supervising academic/teaching processes and examinations. (uni 9_staff 1_M)

Whilst distinctions between universities clearly existed, there was evidence that top-down state governance remained intact across the sector. For example, accounts offered by private university

staff amongst the study's interviewees commenting on the differences between public and private universities in Syria reaffirmed the fact that both institutional forms were subordinated to the powers of the Ministry of Higher Education.

[There is] not a big difference between public and private universities. They belong to the same system. Even private universities are controlled by the regime. (Interviewee 13)

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Much of the HE evaluation literature on Syria's changing HE sector uses the idea of quality assurance, which is taken to mean that HE offers a level of quality that can be assured through working practices reflecting the interests and needs of stakeholders. For the sake of this enquiry, the term 'quality assurance' relates either to HE accreditation, collaborative efforts at rebuilding evaluation structures in HE or to the reform of degree courses to render them internationally competitive and consonant with the accountability structures needed to allow Syrian students to compete internationally.[72] Quality assurance would therefore require up-to-date curriculum models, new methods of teaching and forms of external evaluation to enable programme accreditation.[73]

In drawing on the available documentary sources, it would seem that there were clear attempts at reform in relation to quality assurance.[74] For example, in 2007 the Ministry of Higher Education and the Syrian Economic Sciences Association came together to identify the HE challenges facing Syria in this respect. In 2007 a lecture was delivered by the Minister of HE, addressing the policy challenges of HE in Syria, along with Syria's vision, mission, strategic objectives and policies for HE. He outlined policies to address those challenges and meet objectives in terms of admissions, quality assurance and accreditation, intermediate institutes, labour market needs, and professional capacities for academics.[75] Much of what has been reported on in terms of reform efforts focuses on the University of Damascus. These attempts at reform were also verified, at least in part, by the study's timeline exercises,[76] focus group discussions and field notes collected by the research team.

71. Van Buer 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Mazawi 2005; Buckner 2013; Yahia & Turkmani 2011.

72. See also Abrahart, Kaur & Tzannatos 2002; Ayoubi 2010; Azmeh 2014, 2017; Bared 2010; Bashshur 1997.

73. This has also been corroborated with the interviewees, who report outdated learning materials, 'communist style' teaching and little or no evaluation of programmes.

74. See also Mualla 2002.

75. Al-Shalabi 2011; UNESCO 2012; Mualla 2002, 2010.

76. See Appendix C.

Whilst there are reports in the international literature suggesting movement towards addressing quality assurance in Syrian HE, only a small number of universities benefited from these in terms of curriculum, research and evaluation. Peisl and Wagner (2010) have reported, for example, on the introduction of Problem Based Learning in the Bachelor of Agriculture degree to ensure higher quality teaching and student outcomes, but we do not learn whether such a model was ever implemented and, if it was, how it was evaluated and the extent to which it was found to be effective over time. Moreover, as Van Buer (2010a) argues, many of the reforms were resisted and the implementation of quality was often constrained by traditionalist forms of bureaucratic centralisation within the Ministry of Higher Education and those resistant to reform. General trends in the literature pointed to an emphasis on rote learning and recall, lack of higher-level cognitive skills and very little modification of student assessments over time. The central nature of the bureaucracy is highlighted as a serious concern, although not overtly, with limits to the development of modern academic curricula reported, and little or no academic freedom. As in other multilateral reports, a lack of inter-university cooperation in the provision of training teaching-and-learning staff is also flagged as a concern.

Other particularly important trends concerned with quality assurance relate to student satisfaction. A rare piece of research on student satisfaction in Syria points to the importance of overall university image and its part in providing 'service quality'. This particular perception of quality – as a client-based service – emerges from a business school model. The authors report that Syria has witnessed radical changes within HE across a decade, with significantly higher numbers of institutions operating in the private sector and a concomitant increase in student numbers. Dib and Alnazer (2013), for example, report that the number of private universities rose from 3 in 2004 to 17 in 2013 and argue that:

the aim of the private higher education industry is to give an alternative road map for tertiary education for those who failed to get admission into public universities and intend to go for higher education locally. Therefore, it becomes fundamental to analyse students' satisfaction in higher education, as institutions of higher education could greatly benefit […] from an institution with a type of competitive advantage.[77]

These authors identify 'word of mouth' rather than HE evaluations, evidence of 'new customers' and hopes of lowering attrition rates as central to improved student satisfaction. They argue that branding was a significant way to increase financial benefits and was deemed important to students. The authors surveyed students and identified the physical environment of the university, levels of interaction and support between students and faculty, feedback and assessment, and administrative management practices as central to improving student satisfaction. Whilst not all such elements were measured, service quality was seen in privatised terms, in which students were characterised as fee-paying clients. Whilst enhanced HE quality assurance was given as a desirable aim, it tended to be viewed in business terms without much thought to substance. Students also reported that many academic and employment needs were not met in the Syrian HE sector.[78]

Further evidence of student dissatisfaction has been reported by Buckner (2013).[79] She conducted research with 22 Syrian students (aged 18–32) in Damascus in 2009. Her study demonstrated that the primary sources of student discontent emerged from quite discernible patterns of state control over education and of the HE experience more generally.

77. Dib & Alnazer 2013, p. 285.
78. See also Al-Fattal 2008; Butter 2016; Chen 2005; Ismail, Alli, Abdullah & Parasuraman 2009; Romani 2009; Wilkens 2011.
79. See Central Bureau of Statistics 2004–9.

In particular, this work addressed the extent to which the state dictated or directed students' life paths by controlling their university and subject choices and future career trajectories. This has been corroborated by others examining the outcomes for university graduates seeking to make positive transitions to the labour market. For example, according to Wilkens (2011) and Kabbani & Salloum (2011),[80] the introduction of the private for-profit HE model lowered quality because there was no effective assessment of the university curriculum, which was deemed to be less important than profit margins: 'With some exceptions, new private institutions are viewed as further undermining quality and social equity' and 'producing graduates at high personal cost without the knowledge and skills needed to succeed'.[81] It is noteworthy that this is supported by policy analysts who have reported that the HE sector quality represented a major institutional site of criticism, largely because the expansion of Syrian HE did not result in the integration of youth into the labour market sector.[82] Curriculum models did not parallel labour market needs, and nor did young people exercise autonomy over their employment or economic futures.[83]

Key policy developments aimed at establishing a quality assurance system at university level took place between 2005 and 2007. They are summarised in Vignette 3.2 below.

Vignette 3.2: University centres for quality assurance and accreditation

In 2005 the Higher Education Council adopted a series of resolutions that laid down the basic principles for establishing quality assurance and accreditation centres in higher education institutions. In 2007 the increasing number of private educational institutions and resulting competition between both public and private universities and institutions to attract students led to a quality assurance centre being set up in public universities. Decree No.300, 2007, established a committee for the accreditation of private universities under the name of 'Technical Committee for Private Universities' and Decree No.31, 2007, established the rules for scientific accreditation and the criteria for granting it to private universities. (uni 10_staff 2_M)

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The student perspective on quality assurance was provided by displaced Syrian academics recalling their own student lives in Syria. The majority of responses echoed those documented in the preceding sub-section, such as the lack of practical application in their programmes of study: 'the academic standard was so-so, because the applied components, which are the most important, were very weak' (Interviewee 18). There was also mention of the sheer quantity of information the students were required to learn, which at least one interviewee justified:

Each course consisted of twelve two-hour lectures. Most of the courses also had a practical element. The quantity was very good. When I went abroad I compared the lectures from Syria with those in my country of Fellowship. I said to myself 'okay, I have a lot of information, even if it's old and not updated, but still'. (Interviewee 13)

Participants from regime and non-regime-controlled areas held significantly different views on quality assurance. Those from non-regime-controlled areas emphasised the lack of strategic initiatives pre-2011:

Before 2011, there were no strategic initiatives, no openness to the outside world or attempts to benefit from the experiences of other universities and research centres, due to the Ministry of Higher Education's and Scientific Research Council's neglect, and scientific decisions being made for the benefit of some at the expense of academics. (uni 5_staff 8_M)

The same interviewee suggested that policy makers were more concerned about the expansion of education at the expense of quality: 'the educational policy was concerned with quantity rather than quality' (uni_5 staff 8_M). This trend is documented as a consistent pattern throughout the literature and is sometimes seen as horizontal expansion and contraction. The latter term refers to the contraction of subject choices, for example the elimination of disciplines and reduced strategic initiatives and support.[84] As stated in this report, this was reported as taking place whilst horizontal expansion grew without sufficient funding.[85]

Responses to questions about the effectiveness of the quality assurance system at university level pointed to the problem of policy implementation:

80. See also Chaaban 2009.
81. Wilkens 2011, p. 5.
82. Al-Fattal & Ayoubi 2013; Al-Fattal 2008; Alatas 2003; Butter 2016; European Training Foundation 2003; Kabbani & Kothari 2005.
83. See Mazawi 2005; Rugh 2002.
84. See Buckner 2013.
85. See Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

Theoretically, there was a system of quality assurance, but it was not effective in practice. There was an office and a person responsible for it. But we never saw him nor witnessed the impact of quality assurance on the university. (Interviewee 19)

Quality assurance criteria were not applied in the university either before or after 2011. (uni 5_staff 8_M)

Before 2011 there was a unit for quality assurance, but it wasn't functioning in the way that would be required for success. (uni 5_staff 9_M)

The direct link between quality assurance and poor research funding was also emphasised:

The quality assurance system was poor and I don't think it exists at present, because any academic wanting to serve society requires materials and funding and an interest in scientific research. (uni 4_staff 7_M).

Another feature of the responses was the frustration experienced when quality assurance was absent or poorly understood, and professional growth was seen as being discouraged, impacting on the ability to work effectively: 'when your efforts are not appreciated, whilst those of the unsuitable are, you become frustrated and your performance declines' (uni 2_staff 3_F).

There were differing perceptions of the definition of quality assurance. One interviewee suggested 'that education quality was the monitoring of lecturers' and students' attendance' (uni 6_staff 1_M), while another stated that quality assurance 'relates to the number of teachers to students and the beneficial value of published research' (uni 4_staff 4_M).

Another remarked that: 'it affected our commitment to the quality of the curriculum taught, to the number of hours we worked and the standard of examinations' (uni 5_staff 2_M). For Staff 5 from University 4, quality assurance allowed him 'to carry out scientific research in a better way to get promoted'. Staff 2 from University 10 also attested to quality assurance having 'a positive influence … We were committed to a set of standards and regulations, such as rules governing academic promotion.'

These last two perspectives seemed to be the exception, with most respondents more concerned with teaching hours, research and exam standards rather than an overall evaluation scheme for ascertaining quality nationwide and raising the status of Syrian universities internationally. There were also challenges linked to how respondents understood quality assurance with conflicting interpretations an inevitable outcome. What does seem clear, however, was that students and faculty were dissatisfied in many ways, and this dissatisfaction is substantially corroborated in the literature, pointing to its significance in shaping the student protests that began in 2011.[86]

STUDENT VOICE IN DECISION-MAKING AND GENERALISED CORRUPTION IN ACCESS AND UPWARD MOBILITY IN HE

Another trend emerging from the literature and supported by most respondents was the challenge of access to HE and HE mobility in the face of wide corruption. The pattern of overall responses before 2011 suggests that corruption, particularly through elite networks, was prominent. For example, Interviewee 17 stated that:

One of the bad things was the administrative corruption, which led to difficulties in getting, for example, a room in student accommodation without personal connections. So, if you are poor and have no connections, you get no services as a student. (Interviewee 17)

Interviewee 18 provided an example of the power of personal connections in determining options available to study-abroad scholarships:

I wanted a scholarship to go to the UK, but they said: 'you cannot because it is very expensive for us'. So, I accepted one for a different country. But, some of my friends who had personal connections at the university, got scholarships to the UK. We call it 'wasta' […]. It's unfair. (Interviewee 18)

Personal and party relationships seemed highly significant for students and the National Union of Syrian Students is highlighted as important in this regard. Vignette 3.3 provides a detailed account of the role of the National Union of Syrian Students and the Student Representative Body, highlighting its uniformity, rather than its diversity.

86. See Buckner 2011, 2013.

Vignette 3.3: Political cultures, Syrian HE and student representation

The National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS)	The Student Representative Body
The NUSS is a semi-governmental organisation that is connected to the leadership committee of the Al-Baath Party via an office called the Student Office. This office is based in the Al-Baath Party Leadership Committee building. In Syria, there are different organisations for the different ages, which are all related to the Al-Baath Party. In primary school, it is called the Al-Baath Blossoms, in secondary school it is called the Al-Thawra (Revolution) Union and, at the university level it is called the National Union of Syrian Students. All of these organisations influence future political planning. […] The NUSS is responsible for nominating students as members of the Student Representative Body and for the overall supervision of the student representative bodies. If there are 10 faculties, there are around 100 to 150 people who work full time for the National Union of Syrian Students, each with a direct connection to the leader of the Student Office, a position with substantial power. (Interviewee 9)	In each faculty, there is a Student Representative Body, which is elected annually by the faculty students to represent them. The head of each of the student representative bodies can participate in faculty committee meetings and speak on behalf of the students. Each Student Representative Body has around 10 to 15 members. (Interviewee 9)

For many, the Student Union's affiliation with the ruling party was their reason for not engaging with its activities:

There was a Student Union. It is affiliated with the ruling party. It is connected politically either to a party or to elections. Therefore, I did not engage with it. (Interviewee 6)

SUMMARY OF EMERGING ISSUES ON REFORM, MISSION AND GOVERNANCE

The major trends that surfaced in the interviewees' accounts and the literature review in relation to the governance, mission and reform themes were:

• Challenges to reform efforts due to top-down governance structures and practices pre-2011

• Problems associated with the Syrian state security apparatus and ruling party interventions in university decision-making

• Lack of participation of university staff and students in decision-making, coupled with corruption and favouritism

The impact and degree of these mediating factors on good university governance and its nationwide scale is difficult to gauge when one considers HE issues. It is, however, far more obvious in the case of appointments, fellowship and scholarship practices, and student satisfaction. This was also supported by research by Buckner (2013),[87] Al-Fattal and Ayoubi (2013), Law (2016) and many online reports[88] highlighting evidence of a highly securitised form of HE undermining quality, equity and encouraging stagnation.[89] A lack of transparency and access to upward HE mobility was also noted. These latter issues are significant given the challenges facing a youthful population in need of progression, both within HE and the labour market. They are also significant when considering academics seeking international recognition and the need to encourage innovation, in part, through academic freedom. The primary corroboration between the literature and respondents' reflections is as follows:

• Constrained decision-making powers within academic institutions

• Power of government control structures over student life

• Over-regulated and highly controlled institutional governance

• Lack of transparency coupled with favouritism, which played a key role in pre-2011 HE and led to student and academic grievances

• A trend towards expansion at the expense of improved quality

87. See also Dalati, Al-Hamwi & Arab International University 2016, Heiler 2010, Hendrixson 2003, Kabbani & Kamel 2007.

88. For example, Yahia & Turkmani 2011.

89. See also Clarke 2014.

Part 2: Teaching and research

This section discusses four related themes: staffing issues; teaching, curriculum and assessment; the role of research; and resources and infrastructure. The assessment draws on a combination of the review of the literature and the interview data. This last is also used to illustrate key points and show additional developments that are not discussed in the literature review.

STAFFING ISSUES
EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Interviewees provided information about the demographics and appointment procedures, staff capabilities and international exchange opportunities that were not covered in the literature reviewed. Interviewee 16 noted that during his time as a student: 'all [teachers] were men [and] only in the laboratory were there some female [staff]'. Participants reported that to become a lecturer, the minimum qualification required was a PhD or a master's degree (uni 5_staff 5_M). This requirement is also stipulated by the 2006 University Regulation Law. In the event that positions remained unfilled, 'then bachelor's degree holders were appointed instead' (uni 5_staff 5_M). This last would certainly diminish quality, particularly if the graduate had no teaching experience. Interviewee 18 partly supported this claim by maintaining that, during his time as a student, there were 'no professors' up until 2005, when teaching assistants began to return from professional development abroad (Interviewee 18).

Another recurring theme revealed by interviewees was the common practice of appointing the 'best graduate students' from the graduate student cohort (Interviewee 7), a practice supported by decrees.[90] Other evidence pointed to favouritism and political loyalty in employment decisions. In one instance, a staff member working in a non-regime-controlled region stated that: 'before 2011 treatment depended on favouritism and party committees' (uni 5_staff 3_M). The influence of political loyalty and favouritism on employment practices, promotion and study abroad decisions are also supported in the literature, particularly as it related to employment mobility for graduate students on return to Syria.[91]

Many also stated that even top graduates who applied for teaching assistant posts needed to wait for extended periods, in some cases more than a year, for their employment contracts to be finalised. This time lag put additional pressures on the applicants to comply with the 2006 University Regulation Law that required fellowship abroad placements to be undertaken within three years of appointment.

Respondents stated that overall staff competencies were rated 'medium to low' (uni 5_staff 9_M), which was again attributed to 'favouritism and autocratic decisions' (uni 5_staff 8_M) and that there are 'those with outdated experience and a rigid mindset who are unable to develop their work strategies' (uni 5_staff 9_M). However, this view of the value (or lack thereof) of an older generation of staff was qualified by one respondent, Interviewee 9, for whom the presence of an older generation was both indicative and predictive of quality education. He felt that some older staff had experience: 'most of the lecturers had both academic and practical experience, but the experienced lecturers were from an older generation and retired by 2000' (Interviewee 9).

Participants' views on staff capabilities in private universities also varied greatly. Reportedly, private universities were able to attract the best candidates because of financial propositions, better resources and infrastructure, including lab equipment and other facilities according to Interviewee 12, whilst, according to another, 'staff capability [in private universities] was low and depended on old inflexible expertise' (uni 11_staff 1_M).

IN-COUNTRY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The trend towards reporting poor or diminished staff capabilities was also attributed to the fact that there was no formal merit structure to reward teaching:

There was no differentiation between a lecturer who put in a lot of effort and lecturers who sat in their office and gave very old lectures. There were no incentive systems to promote or reward staff financially or otherwise. (Interviewee 13)

Accounts concerning professional development opportunities were equally mixed across the respondents. Some reported positively about their experiences with others disappointed. For example, one staff member stated that: '[professional development opportunities] were excellent and plentiful' (uni 5_staff 7_M). However, another staff member from the same university reported that 'professional and training courses were restricted to certain people to the detriment of other academics and administrative staff' (uni 5_staff 8_M).

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90. See Decree No.52, 2007 in Appendix F.
91. See, for example, Ayoubi 2010.

Commenting on the availability of internal opportunities for professional development, Interviewee 18 stated that for newly appointed staff, such opportunities were limited: 'there was no support at all [when I started teaching]. I had to rely on myself and develop a good relationship with the professors who taught me'.

Conflicting views make it difficult to establish any objective assessment of the availability and quality of professional development opportunities, despite an overall indication that they were generally scarce, insufficiently institutionalised and limited in accessibility.

ACADEMIC EXCHANGE AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

This section considers the issues of academic exchange and international collaboration in relation to both students and staff. Discussions brought to the surface questions about the availability of such opportunities, the selection process, the choice of countries for international exchange and how the presence of professionals educated abroad impacted on educational quality within the country.

STUDENT EXCHANGE

Both literature and interview accounts indicate that in the 1970s and 1980s (and up to 2000), some collaborations took place with the former Soviet Union and in other Arab States. In the so-called reform era (2001–10) participants engaged increasingly in exchanges with Germany, France and the UK, and these opportunities seemed to have been concentrated in the 'elite' urban public universities. Van Buer, Wagner & Gausch (2010) discussed this extensively in relation to a number of TEMPUS university collaborations that took place in Germany and France.[92]

A number of international academic exchange programmes were available for staff and students in private universities before 2011. 'The university would send students abroad to study (uni 8_staff 3_F) and 'a lot of staff and students went to many universities around the world to gain experience' (uni 8_staff 4_M). Destination countries for student exchange included Russia, Egypt, Iran, France, Germany and India (uni 1_staff 1_M; uni 7_staff 4_M; uni 4_staff 4_M) and also 'Yemen, some Asian countries, and, sometimes, China' (Interviewee 12). In terms of the approximate number of students engaged in exchange programmes:

There were about 300 Syrian students in a country of exchange from different disciplines, but most tried to get into medicine, pharmacy and dentistry. […] (Interviewee 12)

Exchange programmes were organised as part of intergovernmental cooperation, which specified a number of students from a particular subject each year. For example, one interviewee said he had studied as an exchange student with twenty other Syrian students (Interviewee 6). Another mentioned that his scholarship was partly provided by the Syrian government and partly by the receiving country's government. As part of the exchange terms, Syrian universities hosted international students.

As a rule, only high-performing students were eligible to take part in the international academic exchange programmes. However, personal connections and party affiliations played a role in determining such an outcome: 'in addition to the best students, other students were secretly selected and supported financially to go abroad' (Interviewee 7). One interviewee complained of unfairness as he did not get his first choice, whilst others were chosen through favouritism and 'were able to go [to their first choice]' (Interviewee 18).

Opportunities to study abroad existed with Syria's neighbouring counties, the former Soviet Union countries and Western countries. All study respondents identified initial attempts to address the question of quality in HE during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad.

President Hafez al-Assad sent a large group of students, who belonged to his party, to Russia where they obtained PhDs. They came back and changed [education], attracting new students and forcing change in Syria's universities. (Interviewee 1)

Many respondents agreed that this development changed the HE landscape in Syria by creating division between those who were educated in Russia and those educated locally and in Western countries, as well as increasing competition between universities.

According to Sally Ward (2014), between 2008–2011, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education sponsored a number of master's and doctoral students to study in the UK through its Higher Education Capacity-Building Project, in partnership with the British Council. Many of whom lost their funding and were trapped by the outbreak of the crisis in 2011.[93]

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92. Van Buer, Wagner & Gausch 2010; Van Buer 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; see also Ayoubi 2010, Kayyal 2010a, 2010b.
93. Ward 2014.

There are several studies that highlight a culture shock experienced by returning students and staff, which was particularly high amongst those who were studying in affluent Western European countries. Lamine's UNESCO-supported research (2010), following a 2009 conference in Cairo, tackles various diverse topics on Syria, including virtual learning and related challenges faced by academics.[94] Ayoubi (2010) conducted research with those returning to Damascus University, some of whom revealed substantial feelings of deprivation with regard to success, mobility and professional development in the HE sector.[95] These sentiments were attributed to an inability to contribute to a stagnating system and a gap in organisational culture compared with their institutions of training outside Syria.

While these sentiments were not directly addressed in the current study, interview data indicated a rift between academics returning from international postgraduate study and the realities of the Syrian academic environment.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD

As for the availability of professional development opportunities abroad, some stated that staff members were only able to benefit from one opportunity to go abroad over their career (uni 11_staff 1_M), whilst others reported being able to benefit from this opportunity more than once. However, several participants also reported that opportunities for academic exchange, 'if available, were based on Party allegiance' (uni 5_staff 8_M and uni 5_staff 9_M) or 'were restricted to certain 'groups' (uni 2_staff 2_F and uni 2_staff 3_F) or 'people' (uni 5_staff 9_M).

There was no agreement on the availability of exchange and professional development opportunities abroad amongst participants from public universities. Some participants viewed them as 'available' (uni 7_staff 4_M), but 'few' or 'very few' (uni 4_staff 1_M, uni 5_staff 9_M), while other participants saw 'many [opportunities]' (uni 5_staff 7_M) existing with 'many universities' (uni 5_staff 3_M).

Some private university staff shared a view that academic exchange opportunities were available with 'a lot of staff and students [being able to visit] many universities around the world to gain experience' (uni 8_staff 4_M). A staff member from the same university also mentioned that there had been a number of visiting lecturers from abroad who had taught in their university:

[I]n the past the whole process was better. For example, the University of [name of university] had many lecturers from Egypt, Iraq, Europe, and Russia before 2011. (uni 8_staff 4_M)

In terms of the countries of exchange, some participants said there was a focus on 'developed countries' (uni 5_staff 9_M), others said they included 'most countries' (uni 2_staff 3_F) or even 'all countries' (uni 2_staff 2_F). In more specific terms, the participants named Germany, France and the UK

(uni 4_staff 9_M), as well as Turkey, Egypt and Iran (uni 4_staff 8_M) as destination countries for exchange.

Opinions on the value of university staff educated abroad were equally divided. For example, Interviewee 9 maintained that the presence of a new generation of professionals with academic exchange experience negatively affected the quality of Syrian HE. Similar opinions emerged about those scholars trained in Soviet Bloc countries. For some, the older generation of professors offered higher quality education than staff returning from study (or fellowship) abroad. Interviewee 2 pointed to the sharp ideological divides between those who were educated in Warsaw Pact countries and those educated in Western countries:

The government used to send them [students and academics] on scholarships to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. This started in 1984 and lasted until 1996. A large number of researchers graduated from socialist countries; almost 50 per cent of academics. This is a very big number. It was disastrous, creating ideological and theoretical conflict between those who graduated from Britain, France, Germany, the USA, Australia, India, Pakistan, or other countries, which embraced scientific progress, and those who graduated from socialist countries, which adopted Marxist thought, including in the sciences. Most of those who returned from the latter didn't add any scientific value. (Interviewee 2)

Two respondents made a direct link between professional development opportunities in Eastern and Western bloc countries and student experiences:

From 1989 to 1995, as an undergraduate student, I observed huge disparities between a professor who was a UK graduate, for example, who gave us extensive supervision, and a Soviet Union graduate. There were big gaps. (Interviewee 2)

Professors or lecturers who graduated from Western Europe and America were good, but those who graduated from Russia or Eastern Europe were not particularly good. (Interviewee 17)

These views stood in contrast with an account from Interviewee 4, who stated that those who were sent to Warsaw Pact countries had 'good scientific knowledge, and that after 2000 almost all of them returned to Syria and were appointed to key management positions' (Interviewee 4).

One interviewee shared a largely negative view of the policy consequences of outsourcing professional development opportunities abroad:

They didn't want to improve higher education in Syria so they started sending people to any university abroad. They came back and are now professors. Higher education was really not particularly good even before 2011. (Interviewee 7)

94. Lamine 2010.
95. See also Ayoubi 2010; Zintl 2015.

BRAIN DRAIN
STUDENTS SEEKING JOBS ABROAD

Reportedly, before 2011, Gulf countries were the key destinations for Syrian university graduates (uni 6_staff 1_M; uni 4_staff 4_M), where it was relatively easy for the best to find employment:

Graduates of Syrian public universities, especially Damascus and Aleppo, were highly skilled and would easily progress into the labour market, especially in Arabian Gulf countries. (uni 10_staff 2_M)

The main reasons for seeking employment opportunities abroad were the availability of work, attractive financial propositions, a less constrained working environment, greater autonomy and better resources in terms of infrastructure and collaboration. Others also reported the draw of working within a competitive research culture (Interviewee 18). Another push factor, for men, was the threat of compulsory military service (uni 4_staff 4_M).

STAFF RETENTION

Perhaps one of the gravest HE staffing issues was staff retention. A number of reports address the impact of a brain drain in Syria, which resulted in part from the slowness of reform before 2011, lack of transparency, and constrained or no academic freedom. There was also substantial concern in the literature about low salaries in HE,[96] which meant that 'you needed more than one job' (Interviewee 1).

Researching this brain drain problem, Mehrunisa Qayyum (2011) studied first- and second-generation Syrians in the US and considered some of the reasons for the exodus (before 2011) of Syrian graduates to the US. Her findings suggested that before 2011, the 'intellectual elite seem to be targeted for harassment rather than promotion'. She argued that thousands of intellectuals had gone missing over recent decades, with some having been imprisoned and many others moving to self-exile and she quoted Mohamed Chafik from the Syrian American Council: 'the regime, by design, facilitates brain drain'. She also interviewed a number of former academics and professionals who had sought asylum or had immigrated to the US.[97]

The problem of brain drain was particularly acute before 2006. In relation to this problem, Interviewee 1 stated that:

In 2002, there was a big problem in higher education. It was the problem of salaries. The majority of our teachers were working in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. (Interviewee 1)

However, the brain drain was mitigated after the 2006 University Regulation Law was passed. It was reported that: 'This new law made a difference. Many things changed, including salaries (Interviewee 1). It was also reported that:

After that [2006] law, the situation was much better. This encouraged highly qualified academics to come back to the university and the level of the education improved. (Interviewee 8)

The interview data also provided examples of how the opening of private universities offered opportunities for public university staff to improve their financial situation:

After 2006, there was a growth in private universities with good salaries [...] but they didn't have teachers so the majority came from public universities and worked as part-time [employees] (Interviewee 1).

Whilst these accounts do not tell us much about the quality of teaching in private universities, they again highlight inconsistencies across participants' views. Although one finding in the literature was of the view that if staff were migrating from the public to the private HE sector, there should be little difference.[98] Perhaps respondents' accounts of substantial variation in teaching across the country provide a more realistic view. Clearly, limited experience in a regional HE institution could also impact on participants' perceptions of teaching quality.

TEACHING, CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

We did not identify any substantive literature to support a detailed account of the teaching, curriculum and assessment' theme in relation to pre-2011 developments in Syrian HE. At the same time, the interview data provided substantial, yet conflicting accounts, which are less indicative of major trends but helpful in understanding the cultural norms of HE practice.

TEACHING STYLES

Several participants commented on the quality of teachers and teaching pre-2011. In reflection on the past, one participant reported that teaching quality 'was very good' (Interviewee 11), while another interviewee mentioned that the 'mastery of science used to be stronger' (Interviewee 15). Considering his time as a student, one interviewee echoed the 'good' quality of teaching view: 'The quality of the teachers was good. They [professors] had extensive subject knowledge, although not all of them, to be honest' (Interviewee 10).

Private university staff described their teaching styles as 'good' (uni 8_staff 2_M) and 'interactive' (uni 9_staff 1_M). The latter reference to 'interactive' teaching is only present in the accounts of the private university staff, who defined interactive teaching as teaching that 'delivers information in an accessible way' (uni 9_staff 1_M). Another suggested that 'the style of teaching depended on the individual' (uni 8_staff 4_M), implying that there had been no attempt to establish a comprehensive teaching style in Syrian HE before 2011.

96. See Kabbani & Salloum 2011.
97. Qayyum 2011.
98. Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

By contrast, staff members from non-regime-controlled areas attempted to generalise the nature of teaching before 2011 by emphasising its political and ideological nature, which was also a pervasive theme in the literature. They advanced arguments about the ideological function of teaching: 'before 2011 teaching was authoritative and dogmatic' (uni 5_staff 7_M). It was also reported to be 'old-fashioned, not taking modern curricula and teaching methods into consideration' (uni 5_staff 8_M). Two staff members from University 2 also maintained that 'before 2011 teaching was carried out in the old traditional way' (uni 2_staff 2_F), or 'using old traditional methods' (uni 2_staff 3_F).

Other participants made a link between teaching styles and a lack of resources:

Our teaching style is old-fashioned taking the form of a theoretical lecture. We lacked modern tools to allow us to share information in a modern way such as projectors or Internet networks. (Interviewee 19)

Related to the issue of teaching resources is a reported shortage of field trips to related industries or geological, archaeological, tourist sites or other relevant field sites in the country. Apparently, there were significant failures in the fields of applied sciences in conducting and sanctioning field trips, due to the complex bureaucracy, which could 'take about six months' to approve (uni 4_staff 4_M). Similarly, one respondent reported: 'we only had one or two field trips outside the faculty' (Interviewee 18).

Another significant constraint to teaching was large class sizes, referenced by respondents from public universities and across the disciplines. Even though attending lectures was not compulsory (Interviewee 12), interviewees reported that 'lecturing in Syrian universities before 2011 involved classes of 300–600 students' (Interviewee 3) and 'our biggest problem was the number of students. In the first year I had around 600. All of them in one classroom' (Interviewee 19). Interviewee 14 clarified that students were divided into smaller groups when they started their specialisations in their third year of study: 'Class size would vary. Sometimes I had 12 students, sometimes 50 when it was for specialist areas, but for general subjects you got groups of 200 or 300 students' (Interviewee 14).

The issue of large classes also surfaced as a major obstacle to developing positive relations between staff and students. For example, it was reported that:

In public universities, the lecturers entered the classroom, gave the lecture and then returned to their office and there was no or very little discussion between lecturers and students. (Interviewee 12)

This reaffirms the centrality of class size in determining student and staff relations. However, it was made clear that smaller classes were just better in general, and particularly in relation to student–faculty contact and student experience:

The relationship between lecturer and students in an institute was very close, because of the limited number of students. There were 40 of us. This small group allowed us to develop good relations with the lecturer so that the lecturer knew every student by name and the city they came from. The long days [spent together] made us [feel] like a family, like neighbours. The relationship between the students and the lecturer was very good. (Interviewee 12)

However, the majority of participants described the dominant styles of communication as 'reserved' (Interviewee 12) or 'very formal' to the extent that 'students did not like to contact their professors, as if there was a wall between them' (Interviewee 19).

Recalling his time as a student, Interviewee 6 admitted that communication styles between Syrian professors and students were different from communication styles with those in academic exchange countries: 'The professor [in the country where I studied] communicated with us much better. They were more respectful than the Syrian professors' (Interviewee 6).

There were instances, however, when the similar background allowed a closer interaction. One Interviewee reported that:

The relationship [between teaching staff and students] depended on how close the teacher was in terms of his interests, ideas and social background. Most of the teachers I dealt with were from my social background, from rural areas, or we were of the same generation, or we were sent to the same country to study. (Interviewee 19)

While reflecting on their own style of communication, some participants shared examples of more equal and friendlier relationships. In particular, Interviewee 4 maintained that 'the relationship between myself and my students was very nice; it was friendship as well as teaching-ship' (Interviewee 4). In contrast to the 'reserved' style that was prevalent, Interviewee 12 admitted that his style was different.

I tried to be friendly with students and to develop good relationships with them and with colleagues. I found them to be very cooperative and kind. I never faced problems with any of them. (Interviewee 12)

TEXTBOOKS AND THE QUALITY OF THE CURRICULUM

In terms of the quality of the curriculum, some participants agreed that it was 'good before 2011' (uni 4_staff 5_M) or 'acceptable but could be improved' (Interviewee 3). Interviewee 3 further explained that 'after 2000 we had a different educational system. Fewer disciplines were merged [to increase labour market relevance]'. By contrast, one participant from a regime-controlled area criticised the learning goals of the pre-2011 curriculum by emphasising its ideological underpinnings: '[the curriculum aimed to] praise the leader of the state and teach a false history' (uni 10_staff 5_M). Shanta Devarajan, from the Brookings Institute, supported this claim by observing that textbooks were ideologically oriented and that there was a strong emphasis on rote learning, 'repeating what the professor says without questioning or debating'.[99]

Another interviewee stated that the only benefit of the old curriculum was that it was 'clear and in print'; however, the content of the curriculum was 'old and rigid' (uni 5_staff 7_M). Interviewee 18 provided a more nuanced view: 'sometimes, we would study very advanced things, and at other times the subjects would be outdated' (Interviewee 18).

By all accounts, before 2011, the curriculum was taught through approved university textbooks, which were the only teaching materials allowed in the lecture halls. Interviewee 19 maintained that 'we were obliged to use the book in the university and could not use anything else' (Interviewee 19). The textbooks were approved by the Syrian Government and University Administration, ensuring that the views presented in the curriculum were aligned with the ruling party's vision. There was a strong sense amongst interviewees that the policy of compulsory academic textbooks led to a decline in the quality of many courses.

Another participant reported that even though approved textbooks were in Arabic, the content of most was translated or adapted from English, Russian, French or German textbooks and was rarely updated. The curriculum taught in 2011 was purportedly approved in 1995 (uni 5_staff 8_M) and did not meet either labour market or community needs (uni 4_staff 7_M). A staff member from a non-regime-controlled area critiqued the quality of the textbooks: 'Although the books were new[ly published] they were a mere reprint of the old books and full of information of no scientific value '(uni 5_staff 9_M).

Other criticisms of the textbooks were that they were 'lengthy' (uni _4 staff 4__M) and were only updated once in ten years (focus group discussion). The above views contrasted with the accounts of those who stated that in private universities, 'books and teaching materials were good; [private universities had] new books, new journals, new computers' (Interviewee 1).

THE BALANCE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE CURRICULUM

In terms of the balance between theory and practice, one interviewee recalled that the curriculum in Syrian universities before 2011 'was theoretical and had a poor level of application' (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 made a similar link between resources and the applicability of the curriculum.

University education or lab education lacked a strong practical element. For example, in my field I could train students in applied programmes such as SPSS and other statistical software, but the students didn't actually work with any of these programmes, because information technology was lacking. Labs were not equipped with computers. (Interviewee 2)

It also seemed to be the case that undergraduate students in Syria before 2011 were offered a densely populated weekly timetable of lectures, although, as already noted, attendance was not compulsory. An example of such a timetable is provided in Vignette 3.4 below.

99. Devarajan 2016.

Vignette 3.4: Teaching and communication style

We had four years [to master a discipline] with about 13 subjects a year, six or seven subjects a term, and lots of lectures for each subject. We normally had four or five lectures a day. We would start at 8 o'clock and finish at 5 o'clock. Teachers used a whiteboard. Some teachers wrote on the board and we wrote after them [sic]. Others had slides, they put [up] the slide and read and explained it using the board. We had to take notes. Normally in the first year [we had] approximately 150 students in class and in the 3rd and 4th year we had 50 students. We met our professor in the lecture. If we had questions we went to his *[sic]* office. But not all [professors] were available. That was the only channel we had to communicate with them. […] We studied many subjects, but looking at the quality of the teaching material, project titles or their application, we saw that there were gaps. When I was a master's student and a PhD student there were no resources covering my field. I relied on Internet articles. Other colleagues also suffered [from a lack of relevant material]. Everything depended on personal efforts and activities. The application of science … was bad. (Interviewee 16)

In terms of the balance between theory and practice in the curriculum, the challenges were allegedly due to the lack of funding, poor Internet coverage, a lack of involvement of lecturers in research and a poor publication record in international peer-reviewed journals (uni_2 student 3_F).

Interviewee 8 shared an important observation:

The lecturers who graduated from Russia were more interested in theoretical subjects whilst those who graduated from the UK and France concentrated more on the practical, which was much more valuable and enjoyable for us as students. (Interviewee 8)

Reflecting on his time as a student, Interviewee 13 reported that 'our teachers didn't show us equipment or do any experiments to show us how it worked' (Interviewee 13).

There were also significantly differing accounts by staff from private universities where 'there was a [greater] balance between theory and practice in the curriculum' (uni 8_staff 2_M) and 'more weight [was placed] on the practical aspect [of learning]' (uni 8_staff 1_M).

ASSESSMENT

Focus group participants described working assessment practices. The academic year in Syria consisted of two semesters: a winter semester, (mid-September to late December) and a spring semester, (mid-February to end of May) with written exams at the end of each. In the event of failure, the student could re-sit the exam at the end of the following semester. In the case of repeated failures, the student was able to re-sit exams during the next academic year. It was stated that 'before 2011, [more than] half of the students used to pass [the exam], reflecting a high pass ratio of 60 or 70 per cent' (Interviewee 11). Interviewee 8 noted that 'under the 2006 [University Regulation] Law, lecturers were required to consider the 'success' to 'failure' ratio with a minimum 20 per cent allowed to pass' (Interviewee 8).

One respondent viewed student assessment as geared towards 'knowledge of theory' (uni 4_staff 6_F), although another mentioned that 'students were evaluated through exams in theory and practice' (uni 10_staff 4_M). Others viewed the quality of students' projects before 2011 as high: 'Even BA students' graduation projects used to be of a high standard' (Interviewee 11).

The staff members from non-regime-controlled areas were rather critical of the purposes of examination in Syria pre-2011. In their opinion, 'students were assessed on their memory of the curriculum rather than their understanding of it' (uni 2_staff 2_F).

By contrast, in private universities, assessment was 'based on assignments, lab work and exams' (uni 8_staff 1_M). A more detailed description of assessment was offered by another:

Students' theoretical performance was assessed via written exams run during the semester. Those marks were then combined to obtain the students' final semester mark, out of a total of 50. The final [semester] exams were also out of 50, with both marks combined to reach a score out of 100. The pass mark was 50. (uni 9_staff 1_M)

Apparently, the distribution of scores for practical assignments and final exams depended on the university and discipline. Some faculties, such as Agriculture, awarded 30 marks for the practical exam and 70 marks for the final written exam. In some universities, the final mark depended entirely on the final written exam. In cases where students had to re-sit the exam, the maximum mark awarded could not be higher than 70.

Students who did not attend lectures could buy lecture notes from the university bookstores and use them to prepare for exams. It was suggested that 'students could pass their courses without even knowing their lecturers' (uni_7 student 9_M). In addition, it appeared that students who had not attended research seminars, which 'counted for 20 per cent of the total of 100 per cent', would get alternative exam questions, which were also worth 20 per cent (Interviewee 6).

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO RESEARCH

There is little sound evidence relating to the quality of academic research and level of research activity in Syrian HE institutions prior to 2011. There are many reasons for this, including the proliferation of private universities in Syria and the decline of investment in the sector as a whole. While some interviewees reported that before 2011 research was used for promotion purposes, apparently it was the only time when publications were taken into account (Interviewee 3). Consequently, after promotion many academics 'neglect[ed] research' (uni 4_staff 4_M). As a result, 'most research was unguided and useless in solving real problems' (uni 5_staff 9_M).

There seemed to be two main constraints to research before 2011. One of them was a lack of access to international research publication databases, including ScienceDirect (Interviewee 1). There was also strict control from the National Security Services (Mukhabarat) and wider issues surrounding restricted academic freedom. Respondents commented on the Security Services' control over all research projects, any of which could be held back on the grounds of 'opposing Al-Baath Party policy or initiating sectarian tension' (uni 4_staff 4_M). To avoid unnecessary attention from the authorities, interviewees learned to 'be specific with titles' so they 'did not attract attention' (Interviewee 15). In support of this claim, Lamine (2011) reported that research was heavily state-regulated and was often used for ideological purposes.

Another concern raised in the literature was the substantial unevenness of research across the HE sector, with some institutions conducting significantly more research than others (such as business schools or civil engineering departments). In reflecting on the work of a Syrian-born UK-based astrophysicist Rim Turkmani, Yahia and Turkmani (2011) suggested that there was effectively only one institution that received viable funding, which was the Scientific Studies and Research Centre in Damascus: 'the civil research institute was one part of this Centre and [...] the rest of the activities are under the strict control of the regime.' It also appeared that a number of European collaborations that had been developed with this institute were ultimately dropped once news about the engagement of non-research sectors with the institute 'started leaking' to wider HE Syrian contexts and the international community.[100]

Looking at the disparity of research activity across disciplines, Mualla (2010a, 2010b), Romani (2009) and others concluded that the quality of research was generally poor [101] with the exception of specific areas, such as agriculture.[102] That made strategic sense, given that 'most success and breakthroughs in scientific research in Syria come from the agricultural research sector [...] because research in this sector responds to the direct needs in developing agriculture in Syria'.[103]

In addition to 14 research centres, which were located in each province, there were 4 research departments: 1 for citrus in coastal area in Latakia, 1 for olive research, in Idlib province, 1 for cotton in Aleppo and 1 for apples in As-Suwayda. These departments were located in the main [agricultural] produce areas with several smaller research centres in the same province. For example, in Idlib there were 4 or 5 smaller centres. Each centre had some staff, equipment and tools and this was the lowest level of the research in agriculture. (Interviewee 10)

It was also apparent that high teaching loads in some HE institutions discouraged faculty members from conducting research, and an absence of guidelines for managing and assessing research made matters worse.[104] This dearth of high-quality research training was widely backed up by the literature and the interview data: 'scientific research in Syria is generally poor due to a lack of funding, as a result of which society was not educated to solve problems using research' (uni 10_staff 1_M). Additionally, according to the literature prior to 2011, there was a widespread perception that the majority of Syrian universities were not engaging sufficiently in sound research practices at an international level. This finding is also supported by interviewees' accounts, which suggested that before 2011 research collaborations with foreign universities were severely constrained (Interviewee 1).

It was suggested that a positive growth in research cultures was hindered by the failure to provide an encouraging and well-funded research environment that enabled research capacity-building. Arguably, the development of research mainly depended 'on personal efforts, [and] personal activities' without sufficient support for research at the university level (Interviewee 16). Yahia and Turkmani (2011) refer to these efforts as 'scattered examples of bright research, mainly the dedication of keen individuals',[105] whereas in their overall assessment of the quality of research in Syrian before 2011, they concluded that:

[S]cientific research levels in Syria are low [...] Syria lacks some of the most important elements needed to encourage scientific research, such as intellectual freedom and proper research funding.[106]

In support of the above, Interviewee 3 pointed out that research was funded individually with personal money but with most research being theoretical, funding was not required. However, the same interviewee stated that some years later, to encourage research activities, the university allocated funds of approximately US$1,000 (Interviewee 3). This concurs with a university decree encouraging the financing of research.

100. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.
101. Mualla 2010; Romani 2009.
102. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.
103. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.
104. See Hanafi 2011a, 2011b.
105. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.
106. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.

Interview data provided a few examples of international research-funding schemes and research projects, which were funded by international agencies in coordination with the government, to address important topics such as refugee issues. This was supported by a respondent's account that the UNHCR funded some research on Iraqi refugees in Syria during the Iraqi refugee crisis in 2003. Several European organisations also funded research in some faculties, in areas like population, family, water and management. No participants mentioned reform initiatives, such as EU TEMPUS, the British Council, DAAD or collaborations reported in the literature or work conducted with universities on student satisfaction.

Reports also suggest there have been limited developments in research associations, weak forms of institutionalisation and a failure to develop scientific communities.[107] Links between research and the needs of Syrian society were reported as absent, and researchers were seen as hostages to a government that did not seek to invest in the pool of research talent within academic communities, and failed to expand graduate training.[108] It would seem also that private universities had fewer resources for research and that research tended to be encouraged by external agencies and other supra-national bodies.[109] It was reported that research was mostly conducted in public universities (uni 4_staff 4_M), where the state of research (in comparison with private universities) was 'a little better' (uni 10_staff 1_M).

Reflections on the state of research collaborations in the literature highlighted a need to stimulate research cultures and to ensure that there is a capacity to earn a living as a researcher.[110] It was also reported that researchers were often on non-permanent contracts and moved from centre to centre and were unable to secure stable employment.[111]

RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE
HE EXPANSION WITHOUT INVESTMENT

The financing of HE was a key issue. Kabbani and Salloum (2011) reported that whilst the Syrian government sanctioned extensive reforms and expansion after 2001, its HE spending declined sharply, falling to one of the lowest in the world relative to GDP.[112] They also reported that public spending per capita for higher education in Syria, in terms of US PPP (purchasing power parity), has remained well below the OECD average.[113] They also record that there were high degrees of inequity of financing within and across Syrian HE: whilst the government was increasing the breadth of HE options, it was, for example, reducing funding to tertiary education. Hence the argument that quality was compromised by expansion without investment.[114]

The 'no-cost'[115] feature of the state-funded HE system, coupled with a 50 per cent increase in demand between 2003 and 2007, was a clear trend in the pre-2011 situation and led to other infrastructural challenges.[116] For instance, a lack of quality equipment in many HE institutions, a resulting decrease in science and technology students and a relative over-representation of students in the social sciences and humanities was widely reported.[117] Participants shared cases of oversubscribed faculties of law and arts, where students attended lectures standing up. During the examination period, the problem with the large number of students was particularly acute. It was reported that exams took places in corridors and in tents (Interviewee 19). These and other examples reinforced the claim that Syrian university facilities were 'inadequate for a growing number of people demanding a university education.'[118]

107. Bashshur 2007; Nuffic Foundation 2016.

108. See Buckner 2011.

109. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.

110. See, for example, Borghi & Silva 2016; Barakat & Milton 2015; Hardy & Munns 2015; Heyneman 1997; Lamine 2010.

111. Yahia & Turkmani 2011.

112. Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

113. We have been unable to source reliable data on investment in private universities.

114. Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

115. Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

116. Buckner 2013; Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

117. Despite the fact that social science and humanities subjects were not highly valued by universities, the numbers of non-elite students enrolled in them expanded due to constraints on subject development expansion. By contrast, elite families or students with the best exit exam marks were often encouraged or even pressured to choose medicine, as an example. It has been further noted that most universities prioritised scientific faculties such as agriculture, medicine, dentistry and pharmacy when they were able to secure enough funds for technical equipment.

118. Bacci 2009.

STATE OF RESOURCES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

This section draws on interviewees' accounts of the state of resources and infrastructure in public universities, where 'despite corruption, there was funding and the infrastructure was stable and growing over time' (uni 4_staff 7_M).

a. Internet, whiteboard and projectors

Only four respondents from different public universities claimed that the Internet had been available to them before 2011 (uni 7_staff 4_M, uni 5_staff 9_M, uni 10_staff 1_M and uni 10_staff 2_M). Two of those respondents further clarified that it had been available mainly after 2005, although in some faculties limited to the deans' offices, academics, department heads and some administrative staff (uni 10_staff 2_M and uni 5_staff 9_M).

Many stated that Internet was 'poor' (uni 4_staff 16_M, uni 4_student 20_M and uni 6_student 2_M) and 'there were no Internet labs for students' (uni 2_staff 2_F and uni 2_staff 3_F). Two students echoed concerns by staff that there was no Internet access for students, even in public universities and that there was a charge for access as part of a fee-paying structure (uni 2_student 3_F).

The limitations of Internet access in the majority of reported cases was in a sharp contrast to the Internet facilities and infrastructure provided at the Syrian Virtual University.

Vignette 3.5: The Syrian Virtual University

The Syrian Virtual University (SVU) was founded in 2002, based on a Presidential Law in co-operation [I believe] with the British Government. It was located in the same building as the Ministry of Higher Education with a good infrastructure and the highest possible Internet speed from the network companies. [...] British engineers supervised the SVU website design, through which all SVU lectures would be delivered online. A good number of students registered with the SVU, which offered degrees in law, IT, including networking and programming, economics and languages, including English. The university also provided master's degrees and more recently, it started providing PhD degrees, including practical PhD certificates. Students within each discipline were divided into classes, due to their large number, with only 25 students in each class to protect the quality of the online lectures. The SVU gradually expanded, establishing branches in Istanbul in Turkey, in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, as well as in Jordan to provide the Syrians living in those countries access to HE. (Interviewee 9)

Other forms of technological innovation in the public university sector, such as whiteboards, appeared to be almost non-existent before 2011: 'before 2011 chalk and blackboards' were used since projectors were scarce (uni 2_staff 2_F, uni 2_staff 3_F); 'laboratories and lecture halls had no whiteboards or projectors' (uni 5_staff 8_M); and 'Internet and whiteboards were not available before 2011 and, if they were available at all, it would be with great difficulty' (uni 5_staff 5_M).

b. Computer and science labs

In terms of computers and science lab equipment, only one respondent reported that 'the laboratories were excellent and we had very developed apparatus and machines' (Interviewee 5). A staff member from University 2 reported that 'equipment and labs were in a much better condition before 2011' (uni 2_staff 4_M). However, students' views on the availability of computers and science labs stood in sharp contrast to those of staff.

According to students' accounts, laboratories were old and scarce and it was common practice for less well-endowed departments and faculties to use the facilities of better-resourced faculties (Interviewee 10).

c. Libraries

Comparing the situation of library resources in Syria with those in his country of academic exchange, Interviewee 18 concluded that 'material, references and resources, in general, were much easier to access at the university [in the country of academic exchange] than in Syria'. Student respondents attested that despite the fact there were libraries in each faculty, resources were limited and often outdated (uni 1_student 1_M and uni 2_student 9_M).

d. Dormitories and sports facilities

Although public universities were not well equipped, some services were provided to students, including halls of residence, libraries, laboratories and small areas for sports. While not all directly related, they impact on teaching and learning as part of a general resource for students. Reportedly, the halls of residence in each university housed thousands of male and female students. Residential rooms, measuring 2 × 3 metres, provided accommodation for at least 4 students. Interviewee 12 shared a memory of his time as a student: 'in dormitories there were a lot of facilities, like a library and clubs, for body building, or gyms, a garden and a hall for meeting friends or family, for example'. Some public universities provided small sports venues, student recreation areas, restaurants and gardens. It was also said that some universities did not have any sports facilities (uni 1_student 1_M).

DIFFERENCES IN FINANCING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

Financing differences between public and private universities were highlighted in the interview data and exemplified by student fees. Before 2011, public universities relied on their share of the state budget and modest fees,[119] whereas student fees in private universities could be as high as US$5,000 per year. These financial differences were most apparent in relation to lab equipment:

In public universities, lab capacity was between 40 and 55 as compared with a maximum of 20 in private universities. Also, in private universities, each student had access to a microscope, whereas in public universities 6 or 7 students, and sometimes 8 or 9 students, had to share a single microscope. (Interviewee 12)

This poor financing resulted in a general lack of infrastructural provision in public universities. Outdated laboratories, technologies and learning materials were seen to undermine quality across the HE sector. In some cases where equipment was available, university lecturers 'didn't want to share this equipment with others' (Interviewee 13).

The situation with equipment in private universities appeared to be strikingly different:

In terms of resources, private universities were well equipped, with classrooms, laboratories, sports clubs, a hospital, a library, a supermarket, gardens, transport facilities and halls of residence. These facilities were equipped with up-to-date equipment and devices. (uni 8_staff 3_F)

Some respondents referred to equipment in private universities before 2011 as 'perfect' (uni 8_student 4_M) and 'very modern' (uni 8_student 2_F). Other staff and student accounts concurred: 'the lecture halls were well equipped, large and well ventilated, with whiteboards and projection equipment' (uni 9_staff 1_M and uni 9_student 1_F) and that 'Internet was available for all students with good quality connection' (uni 8_student 2_F).'Whiteboards and projectors were available, as well as materials and equipment needed to conduct lab experiments'; and 'classroom sizes could accommodate the required number of students' (uni 8_student 2_F).

Only one private university staff member described resources in more measured terms: 'although they [resources] were modest they were available before 2011' (uni 11_staff 1_M). The experiences noted above indicate that resourcing in private universities pre-2011 was uneven with some enjoying better resources than others. However, overall, private universities were reported by all as being better financed and better equipped than their public counterparts.

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119. Interview data provided an estimate of $US 20, whereas Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014, p.12, suggested the fees were $US 70. Both figures are valid as the amount would likely increase through the years.

SUMMARY OF EMERGING ISSUES ON TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Low salaries and a resulting brain drain, which was reportedly in a reverse trend after the introduction of the 2006 University Regulation Law, were key features of the Syrian HE landscape at the turn of the new millennium. The presence of favouritism in employment, fellowships, scholarship opportunities to study abroad and promotion decisions were also highlighted. Respondents from non-regime-controlled areas emphasised this point far more strongly than participants from regime-controlled areas of the country. Respondents' views diverged strongly as to whether the older generation of professors, due to their 'inflexibility' and 'rigid approaches to work', posed obstacles to educational quality or, by contrast, due to their deep subject knowledge, represented a prerequisite for education quality. Similarly, the participants could not agree on the value of fellowship opportunities abroad. For some, the availability of these opportunities was a sign of educational development, for others such outsourcing of professional development opportunities abroad created ideological divides between those educated in Warsaw Pact countries, locally and in the rest of the world. The students in public universities reported high levels of gender inequality among university staff, and in some universities the entire cohort of professors was male.

Respondents' views on teaching, curriculum and assessment varied depending on whether the respondents came from regime- or non-regime-controlled areas or from public or private universities. Respondents from regime-controlled areas tended to view the quality of teaching before 2011 as high, whereas respondents from non-regime-controlled areas emphasised ideological and political characteristics of teaching, curriculum and assessment, which – from their perspectives – were 'rigid', 'dogmatic' and based on rote learning and 'memorising' rather than application. Respondents from across the study agreed that the level of practical application of curriculum was of poor quality. The imposition of approved textbooks promoting political ideologies did not allow for knowledge innovation or developments within the discipline. Overcrowded classrooms in public universities was a feature pre-2011 highlighted by both staff and students. Communication between most students and staff was reported as poor and often distant, in which strict hierarchies were observed, although not without exceptions. Lack of field trips and research opportunities were described as major obstacles to developing the quality of teaching and learning. It is noteworthy that this was reported by all of the respondents.

Key obstacles impeding research pre-2011 were attributed to limited research funding and incentives, a lack of a thriving research community, employment stagnation, too much emphasis on teaching, using research for promotion purposes, a lack of collaboration with foreign universities, and the absence of adequate forms of research training. There were some exceptions to the general rule, but the majority of respondents agreed on the lack of applicability of research and any institutional tradition of using research to address social problems. The system actively discouraged such research through ideological control and self-censorship. It was also reported that many lecturers did not undertake further research after completing their doctoral studies.

Interviewees reflected experiences of better resources and infrastructure in private universities. Some respondents from public universities reported no Internet and no whiteboards pre-2011, only 'blackboard, chalk and talk'. Some respondents also reported that where some equipment was available, it was rarely used or that access to more up-to-date equipment was withheld by others, since collaboration across teams and labs was not well developed. Overall, the data depicted a highly uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure across the HE sector as a whole.

Part 3: Student admission and progression

This section covers three themes: student admission, access to higher education, and student employability. As in Parts 1 and 2, the literature review provides a context to better understand the interview data, while that data is used to illustrate key points, reveal new patterns or point to observations not necessarily identified in the literature.

STUDENT ADMISSION
ADMISSION CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES

The process of student admission to Syrian HE and corresponding enrolment data are well documented prior to 2011. According to the available literature, the system of undergraduate admission was highly centralised with entry requirements set by the Ministry of Higher Education. University admission was through the *mufadala*, which was adopted for most disciplines.

The early division of secondary school students into a literary track (humanities and social sciences) and a scientific track provided an indicator of the numbers of student likely to apply for university each year.[120] Whilst there were some discipline-specific variations in admission requirements – for example, a number of majors required discipline-specific exams – students applying for a 'literary' track faced a more limited choice of university majors than their 'scientific' equivalents.

The interview data indicated little difference in admission requirements between public and private universities, with respondents stating that 'they do not really see any differences' (uni 10_staff 3_M) or that admission criteria in public and private universities are 'not that different' (uni 1_staff 1_M). However, another group stated that admission criteria for public universities were higher (uni 7_staff 1_M; uni 7_staff 4_M and uni 4_staff 6_F). And yet, despite being more challenging to enter, public universities still accommodated a larger number of students (uni 7_staff 4_M; uni 5_staff 5_M). Within both public and private HE sectors, admission criteria 'varied by college and department' (uni 7_staff 4_M) or 'branch' (uni 5_staff 5_M) with medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and engineering requiring higher scores than other subjects.

Despite the horizontal expansion of the Syrian HE sector through the introduction of private universities, many online reports have pointed to its failure to address the problems of rising student numbers, due to limited capacities.[121] Nevertheless, having lower entry requirements was sometimes seen as a positive thing, because it allowed many students who were not able to get into their chosen fields at public universities to study their chosen field in the private sector, where they could afford to do so.

This is significant because most Syrian students are not able to choose their field of study, which is dictated by their exit exam grades. Private universities provide a better opportunity. Those who have money can choose the degree they want. (Interviewee 13)

THE PROBLEM OF COMPETITIVE DEMAND

Perhaps one of the key grievances related to admission as reported in the literature and confirmed by many respondents was that admission to public universities had always been difficult because of competitive demand, very low costs and their positive reputation as compared with private alternatives. Public universities remain a preferred pathway for most student applicants. However, there has been a substantial and enduring imbalance in admission across the urban/rural divide in Syria, particularly in terms of applications to city universities. A University of California/Davis report[122] noted that, as a consequence of the *mufadala* system,

students will be forced to study in faculties they do not like. The trade-off is that the fees are really very cheap (70 US dollars a year all included)[123] for those with good marks […]. Students who do not get good results with their [high school] baccalaureate[124] exams can still enrol in a faculty, but they have to pay higher fees (1500–3000 a year) or enter private universities and colleges on even higher fees.

The rising number of university-bound students in a country with a young population and a low per capita income had resulted in admission into public universities becoming highly competitive over the years. Since 2005, solutions adopted to try to cope with rising numbers included: raising admission criteria, offering parallel programmes and vocational education as alternatives to students who did not meet admission criteria, and endeavouring to increase the number of faculty members. The opening of new programmes with the aid of international universities was also introduced but deemed to be an expensive solution. The resulting dynamic of fewer secondary school graduates being accepted for university was higher youth unemployment.[125]

120. Al-Momani 2011; Buckner 2013; Buckner, Beges & Khatlib 2012.

121. Approximately 26 per cent of students were enrolled in HE around 2011–12; Buckner 2011.

122. Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014, p.12.

123. See note 115.

124. Equivalent to high school leaving exams.

125. Al-Momani 2011; Buckner 2011, 2013; Kabbani & Kothari 2005; Kabbani & Salloum 2011; Watenpaugh & Fricke 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2013.

Whilst the number of students was only part of the problem, it was certainly a central challenge to admission, as well as in the classroom. Student interviews confirmed the pressure of high student numbers on the HE system:

The faculty had more than 40,000 students but was too small to accommodate that number. [...] The number of new entrants [per year in one department] was more than 1,000, maybe 1,500. By comparison, there were only 200 new entrants a year to the same department at my university abroad. (Interviewee 18)

ADMISSION DECISIONS, DEGREE INCOMPLETION AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY SERVICES

Academic performance, as reflected in summative assessment, was the main determinant of university admission, as confirmed both by the literature and interviewees. It was also critical to post-degree outcomes. Those who gained the highest scores in their faculties would be offered employment at their university, with the possibility of overseas graduate study. This practice, which was stipulated in a decree,[126] was confirmed by interviewees.

The focus on summative assessment also had repercussions for the non-completion of degrees, which was deemed to be a major problem. As Interviewee 17 explained, 'you need to do great just to be able to pass exams and graduate'. Participants reported that many students could take years to complete their degrees due to exam failure:

In the period between 1990 and 2000, there were huge numbers of students in the [name of the university] who never graduated, [...] some reached their 50s and still didn't graduate. When I was a student, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, university was very difficult. You needed to be very good and to study very hard to be able to graduate. (Interviewee 17)

Military service was another common obstacle to degree completion, either interrupting or extending the time taken to complete a degree. Students could postpone military service whilst at university, but there were time limits. The Syrian Ministry of Defence website[127] refers to a decree in 2007 concerning the postponement of military service for study purposes. Age limits differ based on degree type and other criteria. There is no evidence that this policy was altered between 2007 and 2011.

Data from respondents also highlighted the influence of the Security Services (Mukhabarat) on admission decisions and the consequent impact upon career opportunities.

The Mukhabarat were involved from the outset of a student's life through to graduation, when they selected certain students to be contracted every academic year. (Interviewee 15)

Arguably, it would seem that the Mukhabarat had a long-term role in students' lives beyond admissions, as they had the power to allocate or terminate employment contracts and exercise various types of pressure, sometimes violently coercive, or offer often unmeritorious opportunities to students and graduates.

One staff member (University 10) also suggested that political loyalties played a role in admission decisions: 'There was a proportion of students who were admitted to universities because of their party affiliation and not their grades' (uni 10_staff 5). A staff member from University 5 reinforced this claim by suggesting that 'admission was based on the faculty-specific entry exam as well as the rank the student held in the political party' (uni 5_staff 3_M). Another staff member from the same university saw a strong link between high-achieving students in schools and the political affiliation of their families to the party – what is often referred to as the party's elite 'inner circle' in online reports of academics in exile (see Polk 2013). It was reported that 'those obtaining the highest marks were usually the children of senior officials' (uni 5_staff 8_M).

126. See Decree No.52, 2007, in Appendix F.
127. http://www.mod.gov.sy/index.php?node=556&cat=327

STUDENT CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY AND DISCIPLINE

Student behaviour models may offer a better understanding of Syrian students' university admission priorities and choices. Some authors[128] argued that new forms of competition had emerged as a result of the expansion of HE and the rise of the notion of the 'student customer'. This had led to private universities, driven by a strong business motivation, to seek a better understanding of the priorities informing student motives. Their findings suggested that decisions governing choice of university were not restricted to academic discipline preferences but included factors such as desires for a more cosmopolitan existence, greater diversity of subjects and people, enhanced personal autonomy, expectations of greater intellectual challenges and ambitions for distinction in the fields of their choice. In contrast, our enquiry also bore out evidence of students selecting subjects as a result of familial pressure, the rigidities of university admission procedures, and the influence of established intergenerational patronage.

Highly restrictive choices for study often undermined students' desires concerning their academic discipline.[129] Additionally, an extensive level of family pressure to pursue 'elite choices' if grades were strong enough meant that students' interests were not always a determining factor in the choice of discipline:

Most students aren't able to choose what they want to study. Acceptance in the university system relates to your high-school certificate score and not to what you want to study. (Interviewee 13)

The account below also points to discipline selection for the purpose of maximising future opportunity:

I understood the system and decided that I needed to become the top student in my department and I did. [After two general years of study], students have to decide which discipline to continue in for their third year. At the end of the second year, three of us were ranked as the best students, so we met and decided to each go into different disciplines to increase our chances of continuing our studies. (Interviewee 13)

According to another interviewee, it was possible to repeat the last year of secondary school to get high enough grades to raise the chances of being admitted to a chosen field of study. Choice of university was greatly influenced by family, but other factors, such as family income and distance from the university, also appeared to impact on the student's choice:

In the beginning my father wanted me to study one discipline when I did my baccalaureate, but I was interested in another discipline. However, my grades were not high enough, so I re-sat my baccalaureate exams the next year. I got the necessary grades and insisted on studying another discipline. I also chose this university as it was only 50 km away and allowed me to return home daily. Our financial situation did not permit me to go to another city. (Interviewee 6)

Uni 7_staff 3_M said that 'before 2011, it was possible for students to choose the university they thought they were most likely to be accepted at relative to their scores'. Public university staff believed that quality was a determining factor in university selection, whereas students argued that distance, family income and career ambitions carried more weight than university reputation and quality.

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128. Al-Fattal & Ayoubi 2013.
129. See Wattenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN ADMISSION

The regional disparities and rural/urban differences in Syria before 2011 were evident in the accounts of two respondents. One claimed that:

Eastern parts of Syria were ignored economically and educationally by the government both before and after 2011. It was considered a 'developing' area, so that they even had separate [lower] admission criteria. The total score required to go to the Faculty of Medicine was 240, for example, in Damascus, but only 215–220 in those developing areas. (Focus group)

The other reported having a difficult life in the villages and how inhabitants of one village had sought to reclaim education as their right. Student respondents from rural areas shared that they had to balance their time between studies and work; '[being a student was] good, but tiring, because even during my studies I was working with my family in the fields and studying at the same time' (Interviewee 6).

Vignette 3.6: 'Education was very poor in the villages'

In general, education was very poor in the villages. There were no teachers, or maybe only one teacher for the whole village. […] I grew up in very poor conditions. We used to have only one classroom for all classes, so the teacher used to bring us into the classroom [by class] to teach us, then bring in another class and so on. This was in the primary school. For the secondary level, we didn't have a school at all in our village, so we used to walk 5 kilometres to get to the nearest school. My friend had a bike but he wouldn't allow me to ride it, so we had to carry it with us to be able to walk together. […] I would say that the government didn't take good care of education in the villages. It seems they concentrated more on the cities and left the villages for later. There could be other considerations, political ones maybe, I don't know, but that is possible. Also, if people aren't educated, they won't make demands for education or any other rights. After we were educated and graduated from university, we started to demand our rights from the government. We asked for schools, and other necessary services, to be brought to the village. (Interviewee 17)

ACCESS
ENROLMENT FIGURES

The available data points to approximately 26 per cent of Syrian students enrolled in HE.[130] Another estimate places the total participation of Syrians aged 18–24 in tertiary education[131] at approximately 20 per cent before 2011[132] as per the figures in Table 3.1. Table 3.2 reports the number of postgraduate students in public universities in the academic year 2011–12.

Table 3.1: Higher education enrolments by institution type in 2009–10[133]

Public Universities	Government Sponsored	Fee Paying Students (Parallel Learning)	Open Learning	Total University
Damascus	101, 024	17, 695	64, 187	182, 906
Aleppo	80,651	13, 144	36, 994	130, 789
Tishreen	47, 930	8, 165	14, 433	70, 528
A-Baath	36, 402	7, 409	24, 589	68, 400
Al-Furat	22, 340	3, 907	7, 372	33, 619
Sub Total	288, 347	50, 320	147, 575	486, 242
Other post-secondary institutions				
High and intermediate institutes (2-year vocational and art institutes)				89, 024
Ministry Training Centres				60, 688
Private Universities				24, 573
The Syrian Virtual University				8, 103
Sub Total				182, 388
Total Post Secondary				**668, 630**

Table 3.2: Postgraduate student numbers in public universities in Syria in 2011–12[134]

University	No. of postgraduate students
Damascus University	11, 537
Aleppo University	3, 304
Tishreen University	2, 721
Al-Baath University	1, 630
Al-Furat University	284
Total	**19, 476**

130. Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014.
131. Consistent postgraduate enrolment data prior to 2011 is difficult to obtain.
132. This dropped to less than 5 per cent in 2016.
133. Buckner 2013.
134. Data collated by Syrian co-researchers.

ISSUES OF INEQUITY IN ACCESS TO HE

Equal access to higher education was complicated by the introduction of fee-paying private universities with lower entry requirements, along with new public university fee structures allowing students with low secondary school graduation scores to access certain public university options for a higher tuition fee. Private institutions did not receive government financial support[135] and were accessible only to fee-paying students. According to many online reports and academics writing from exile, this quasi-private structure created a situation of gross inequality because students from wealthy families could now buy their way into HE. Whilst not well-documented in the literature, some reports indicate that this arrangement was negotiated between the elites governing private enterprise in the country, and the national government seeking to form alliances to encourage national HE sector growth.

Transnational political economics and growing interest in driving the reform of HE led many governments in the Arab world to seek new ways of financing universities.[136] It was clear that issues pertaining to equal access had not been addressed, and that there were serious concerns about securing employment growth into the future to support the expansion of HE during this period.[137] Notwithstanding privatisation and horizontal expansion, reforms were unsuccessful in addressing rising student numbers. Classes in some universities became seriously overcrowded, contributing to the intensification of economic and political grievances within particular student constituencies, most notably in Daraa – the city that witnessed the onset of the popular uprising in 2011.[138]

Yet, participants in our enquiry confirmed that 'equity' or 'equality of access' did not have a meaningful political or institutional place in the Syrian HE context.[139] Some were convinced that there were no access issues because 'in Syria everybody can go to university and study there. We have no problem' (Interviewee 5). Others reported that offices relating to 'equity' or 'equality of opportunity' were not part of the Syrian HE landscape. When asked about support for students with special needs or offices supporting diversity and student integration, the same participants said they had 'never heard of such a thing' (Interviewee 5). When it came to financial support, the existence of student loan offices was recognised, but so was widespread favouritism in access to their resources: '… it is not easy to get money from them. You had to have connections … their resources were not really available for normal people' (Interviewee 8).

ACCESS AND EXCLUSION GRIEVANCES

Gross enrolment rates (GER) in Syria just before 2011 were approximated at 26 per cent.[140] However, immense variations between enrolment rates across different regions also indicate widespread variation in access.[141] Research also suggests that changes to HE policy, for example, highly competitive and centralised access to public universities, outdated curricula and the low quality of innovative teaching in many private universities were all reducing the quality of the student experience and employment prospects.[142] The argument was that students were growing increasingly dissatisfied with their government and their universities and linking their own economic hardships with macro-economic policies related to HE, particularly where it was argued that the quality of HE was poorer as a result of private institutions.[143] The link between low per capita income, educational and employment opportunities and a heightened propensity for internal conflict constituted one of the most powerful explanations for students' political and economic grievances leading up to the crisis in 2011. These grievances were greatly heightened when financial situations were precarious, when they came from outside the urban elites and when HE-sector salaries were not rising in line with those across the rest of the Arab world. Resulting student perceptions were that low faculty salaries could relate to poor-quality teaching.

The literature also pointed to political grievances as they related to university access more generally. For example, the reality that students, or prospective students, had limited access to desired subjects, to good-quality free education and to personal political autonomy is addressed recurrently. Access constraints could be contrasted with identified forms of patronage and unfair admissions that were extended to students from the wealthy elites or regime-related 'seats'. These concerns were also reported in focus group discussions, in which participants confirmed that elevated levels of inequality in access existed, especially for those in rural contexts. Many focus group participants felt that their own HE experience had been diminished by restrictions in access and reported grievous discontent with the role of the Mukhabarat in regulating HE admissions.[144]

135. Immerstein & Al-Shaikhly 2016.

136. See Buckner 2011, 2013; Buckner & Saba 2010; Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

137. De Wit & Altbach 2016, p.9; Boccanfuso, Larouche & Trandafir 2015.

138. See Heyneman 1997; Nuffic Foundation 2016; Shafiq, Mason, Seybolt & DeLuca 2014.

139. The enrolment percentages in this report vary because the reported range varies from 20 to 27 per cent across reports.

140. See Table 3.2 indicating that the University of Damascus alone took more students than all other public universities combined.

141. Shafiq, Mason, Seybolt & DeLuca 2014.

142. Kabbani & Kamel 2009.

143. See also Buckner 2013; Romani 2009; Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon 2008; Sottimano & Selvik 2008; Street, Kabbani & Al-Oraibi 2006.

144. It is estimated that the vast majority of students attending university are from urban centres and over-represented by high-income families. Rural applicants have less chance at obtaining places in public universities because, it is argued, their secondary education is of a poorer quality and they also have fewer financial resources to access private institutions, Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

In addition to concerns about the role of political elites in Syrian universities and the urban-rural divide in access to HE,[145] there were growing signs of ethnic and religious minority exclusion in HE prior to 2011. For example, particular forms of Islam were deemed subservient to state interests and were consequently sidelined in HE governance,[146] with little influence over HE policy.[147] Additionally, certain minorities were denied admission to university on ethnic grounds. While many Syrian academics in exile have reported that some higher education institutions supported sectarian minority students, such as Christians, Shiites, Ismailis and Murshidis, before 2011, the literature highlighted[148] the exclusion of some ethnic minorities from the top Syrian institutions:

The persecution of ethnic minorities, mainly the Kurds [estimated to form 10–15 per cent of the population], as well as Turks, Assyrians, Armenians and Circassians, have rarely raised the concerns of the international community nor ignited any criticism of the Syrian regime despite numerous reports supported by facts and figures about the systematic persecution suffered by the Kurds and other ethnic minorities.[149]

The key argument maintained is that approximately 50 per cent of all Kurdish communities have been denied citizenship rights; these groups consequently could not be admitted into public universities and nor were they eligible for teaching posts.[150]

Challenges in access to HE were emerging in tandem with drastic changes to financing models for HE, including reduced funding to public universities. As a result, mounting pressure to increase access led to horizontal expansion without investment in quality. In 2010, Decree No.283 supported expansion, which resulted in the creation of a media faculty at the University of Damascus, a law faculty in Daraa, a veterinary faculty in Idlib, a tourism faculty in Tartus and a science faculty in Tadmur.[151] This followed similar expansions that had taken place three years earlier in 2007.[152] Thus, it can be said that the public HE sector witnessed what has often been referred to as a problem of 'quantity over quality' or 'expansion and contraction'.

Table 3.3 captures some of the decrees that were designed to change access arrangements to HE in Syria from 2004. These are largely government laws and have not been assessed empirically in any robust research study. They are shared here without analysis to provide the official perspective from the Ministry of Higher Education and are not part of the grey or substantiated literature.

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145. It is estimated that the vast majority of students attending university are from urban centres and over-represented by high-income families. Rural applicants have less chance of obtaining places in public universities because, it is argued, their secondary education is of a poorer quality and they also have fewer financial resources to access private institutions, Kabbani & Salloum 2011.

146. Mazawi 2005.

147. See Buckner 2011.

148. Alodaat 2013.

149. Alodaat 2013, p.1.

150. As we learned from the enquiry, there were some exceptions.

151. See Decree No.283, 2010, in Appendix F; see also Table 3.3.

152. See Decree No.319, 2007, in Appendix F.

Table 3.3: Decisions and decrees linked to widening access arrangements

Year	Type of Document	Description
2004	President Bashar al-Assad issues a new scholarship law	The document includes definitions and listings of aims and types of scholarships. It also outlines the following: the executive committee for scientific scholarships and its specialisations the executive programme for scientific scholarships, and the eligibility criteria for academic scholarships, etc.
2006	University Regulation Law	A policy document that changed the structure and regulations of HE in Syria, replacing a 1982 decree. Chapter 1 lists the constituent colleges in each of the five state universities and the degree programmes offered. It clarifies the mandates and assignments of academic administrators, department affairs and academic seniority, and charters for university councils and departments. Chapter 2 addresses faculty affairs such as academic assessment, teaching load, secondment, reporting, and teaching assistant, technician and administrator affairs. Chapter 3 addresses study plans and student affairs, including curricula, student assessment, degree awards, admission and registration, social and sports-related affairs, and disciplines. Chapter 4 addresses qualification and specialisation. Chapter 5 covers postgraduate education. Chapter 6 regulates university building and financial affairs. Chapter 7 lists six miscellaneous clauses of a technical nature.
2006	Decision No.45	This document outlines similar faculties and programmes in government universities between which students are permitted to transfer. It also outlines transfer privileges for children of faculty members transferring between civil engineering faculties.
2007	Higher Education Policies in Syria	A lecture by the Minister of HE addressing the challenges of higher education in Syria as well as its vision, mission, strategic objectives, policies adopted to address challenges and meet objectives in terms of admissions, horizontal expansion, licensing for private universities, quality assurance and accreditation, intermediate institutes (technical and vocational Institutes),[153] aligning programmes with labour market needs, capacity building, research, open education (open forms of learning not constrained to a university classroom), and funding.
2008	Educational Degrees Law	This law allows universities to establish academic co-operation and partnership contracts with other universities to facilitate the update of degree programmes offered at Syrian universities. The document also refers to conditions of student admissions to these programmes, including tuition fees.
2010	Decree No.245, 2010: adjustments to the executive list in the University Regulation Law	This document includes adjustments to Decree No.250 which regulates Syrian universities' summer term and credit hour systems.

153. See Nuffic Foundation 2016.

GENDER BALANCE

In certain HE programmes 'the percentage of male students [enrolled] was always higher' (Interviewee 19). It was estimated that 'the percentage of male and female students in [one of the science disciplines] was approximately 60 per cent to 40 per cent' (Interviewee 16), while subjects such as pharmacy and literature were more popular with female students than with male (uni 8_staff 2_M). Such differences were seen as 'acceptable and understandable' because some faculties, such as architecture, had more female students whereas civil engineering had fewer female students (Interviewee 3).

CORRUPTION

The literature also provided evidence of corrupt practices in the issuing of fake degree certification before 2011.[154] As a result, the former Syrian Minister of Higher Education announced the complete closure of all student service offices in the public university sector on the grounds that individuals were seeking to buy certification. This was reported by the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (2009): 'Dozens of non-licenced offices are still active in the black market, stealing with total impunity the effort, money and future of Syrian students'. One such office was referred to as the Arab British Academy for Higher Education, which was operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education. At the time, it was concluded that 'the Ministry of Higher Education cannot directly interfere to close down such centres as such action is the prerogative of the Security Forces'.[155]

STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY
LOCAL AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Student employability was perhaps one of the most crucial factors in raising questions about the value of HE in Syria. Whilst there was some political stability before 2011, political turmoil in neighbouring countries had an impact on the already struggling labour market. There was growing political discontent amongst young people, both within and outside of HE, about the ways in which higher education was shaping their future career trajectories.[156] Growing unemployment amongst a bulging youth population was exacerbated by the influx of young people from neighbouring countries, who had fled to Syria following conflicts.

The Syrian economy has been unable to provide jobs for the rapidly growing population. The story of the Arab youth bulge is well known, and Syria has been particularly affected. The last decade has seen an enormous demographic shift with around half the population of the Arab world under 30. Syria is worse off than most, with more than half the population under the age of twenty-five. […] Syria's unemployment figures have been notoriously unreliable. Until the Arab Spring, official Syrian figures placed unemployment at a fanciful 9%. In December 2011, the new Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Radwan Habib, confessed that unemployment in the country stood at between 22 and 30 per cent.[157]

Our methods sought to address the fact that there were a series of pressure points or key political, social and economic events that shaped HE realities. These were not isolated solely within Syria; to ignore external pressures would be to misapprehend why such a devastating conflict emerged in Syria in 2011.

Syria is a country in transition. On the one hand, it is undergoing a profound change of internal restructuring aimed at the direction of the free market economy, on the other hand it is opening up to the outside world. According to the 10th 5-year programme spanning 2006–2010, the reform of the university sector plays a profound role. It is designed to help to assure a specific Syrian way towards a knowledge-based society through highly qualified university alumni. This way aims to achieve improvement of competitive powers of Syrian products and services worldwide, but mainly in the Arab world (e.g. European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007 […]). Considering that an extremely young population and also a high proportion of unemployed young adults is already strong and will probably increase in the future […] there is therefore a need to increase the admission quota [of students] by 2% until 2010.[158]

According to respondents, employment opportunities for university graduates before 2011 were 'few' (uni 4_staff 4), but 'to some extent acceptable' (uni 4_staff 5). The Ministry of Higher Education was aware that 'graduates could not find job opportunities'. It tackled the issue by closing down specialisations in areas where graduates were finding it difficult to obtain employment (Interviewee 3).

It was also suggested that in the public sector the 'state used to provide employment' (uni 5_staff 2_M). Interviewee 10 described this procedure: 'We have an office in the government; the Prime Minister's Office. Our names [as graduates] were sent to this office, which in turn allocated [candidates] to vacancies at governmental organisations or within the ministry'. Another explained that students' names were sent not only to the state institutions, but also to private companies (uni 7_staff 3_M). There is a very small body of literature on obligated versus unobligated institutions, where some students were offered work as a result of university completion, but we could not find further evidence of this as a fundamental pre-2011 practice.[159]

154. See Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism 2009.
155. Mualla 2002, pp.7–8.
156. See also Buckner 2013.
157. Landis 2012.
158. Van Buer 2010a.
159. Mualla 2002, p.34.

STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Unlike some of the other themes, where responses seemed more contradictory, the response to questions about the relevance of their academic programme to the labour market was overwhelmingly negative. A staff member replied simply 'No' to the question of relevance (uni 5_staff 5), while another staff member expanded in more detail that universities did not prepare students for employment because '[their] only mission was teaching and administration', explaining that this 'failed to create persons who were competent in their specialisation' (uni 4_staff 6_F). Again, we see consistency here with the literature on labour market challenges and university stagnation. University curricula and missions did not match labour market opportunities and student needs.[160]

According to one interview, efficiency in the public sector was poor:

Before 2011 not much attention was paid to work opportunities, particularly in the colleges of a theoretical nature. Even if there were opportunities, they would be in the public sector, which was sagging, undeveloped and already suffering from masked redundancy. (uni 5_staff 8)

Ironically, one of the more productive and common ways in which students were prepared for transitioning to the job market was driven by economic necessity, with public university students having to combine studies with part-time work. (Interviewee 11) This helped them build workplace confidence, gain practical experience and bridge theoretical knowledge acquisition with applied practice.

With regard to transparency and fairness in promoting post-degree employment, there were two conflicting accounts. The first reporting that 'the transition into the labour market [was] without discrimination' (uni 10_staff 4), and the second that 'it [post-degree employment] also depended on personal contacts' (uni 4_staff 6).

A member of staff from University 4 maintained that student success in gaining employment 'was determined by their ambition from the time they joined the university' (uni 4_staff 6). They also expressed the view that universities should not be assessed on the success of their graduates in transitioning into labour market and that the responsibility for the success lay with students' individual choices at the point at which they chose their specialisation. This view reflects how personal accountability sometimes took precedence over demands for structural solutions, and how little was expected, or indeed provided, by the government and its institutions, in terms of guiding, preparing and empowering students for employability, aligning HE with labour market needs, or indeed nurturing an economic environment that offered graduates better employment chances.

SUMMARY OF EMERGING ISSUES ON STUDENT ADMISSION AND PROGRESSION

Student admission literature, official policy reports and summaries on HE in Syria argue that before 2011, admission decisions were based on the average score of the high school certificate. Our respondents did, however, report some inequalities in admissions relating to students' political affiliations and geographic location. Participants in this group argued that the National Security Services exerted control over students' lives from the point when they entered HE until they graduated. There were also claims that some students gained access to HE based on affiliations with the ruling party. The entry criteria to public and private universities differed, with private universities allowing lower entry criteria but where a fee structure was in place. According to staff working in the public sector, quality was a determining factor in selecting a university. However, some students argued that distance and personal circumstances outweighed quality in making university choices.

Another conclusion is that the eastern parts of Syria seem to have been a peripheral concern for the government, with substantially less financing than other areas. The criteria for entry into universities was lower there than in the capital city. The gender balance in science programmes was reportedly 60 per cent (male) to 40 per cent (female). Due to a smaller student population, private universities were able to provide more support to students in comparison with public universities.

Issues pertaining to HE access brought to the surface geographic inequalities, the challenges associated with poverty and lack of accessibility concentrated outside of the cities, as well as the signs of rising social tensions and divisions. While academic merits were taken into consideration, personal connections and favouritism often overrode them and effectively determined not only admission to university but also study-abroad opportunities and career progression.

The interview data suggested that employment opportunities in Syria before 2011 were limited. The HE programmes did not prepare students for employment and a brain drain was on the rise. Only one respondent reported that there was no discrimination in the transition to the labour market. That view stood in a stark contrast with the views of other respondents who pointed to persistent forms of discrimination and a lack of attention to the role of the university in preparing students for the labour market and facilitating their entry into it.

160. See Buckner 2013; Kabbani & Salloum 2011; Sanyal 1998; Schuh 2010; TEMPUS 2010.

FINAL REMARKS

This report has demonstrated that there remain substantial uncertainties and disagreements about the scale and character of reform in Syrian HE, about the relative strengths or weaknesses of specific reforms, and about the factors contributing to its developments or stagnation. Much of this disagreement reflects the fact that the academics, students and staff interviewed had experienced different HE systems (private or public), different scales of mobility within the HE sector, within different disciplines, all with different skills and roles, and with periods of employment ranging from one year to long service in the sector. What is perhaps less well understood from our pre-2011 data is the degree to which other social, global and economic factors and associated regional conflicts shaping the HE landscape put additional pressure on the sector, further diminishing the possible effectiveness of the reform agenda.

However, several things do seem clear about the pre-2011 HE context in Syria. Security concerns and political control of governance appear to be a dominant feature of the landscape, and this is in line with the HE sector in other parts of the Arab region. Expansion through privatisation is well documented and evidenced, but this expansion does not seem to represent an improvement in the quality or status of HE. A review of the literature seems to support this picture, with the scale of privatisation in Syria having more or less trebled between 2001 and 2010. This change in HE reflected other changes in state governance in Syria, which moved from being a primarily socialist-oriented approach towards a quasi-public/private HE system. This change coincided with a more general shift towards association agreements with the EU, towards increasing liberalisation of trade, the opening of the 2008 stock market, and new HE negotiations with European higher-education institutions.[161]

A key feature of the Syrian HE reform movement is the clear link between the restructuring of HE and the restructuring and reform of other spheres of social and economic life, such as a rise in trade, new HE negotiations with extra-national funding bodies, changes in labour market law and a rise in the entrepreneurial class in Syria. Another finding seems to be a clear distinction between the views of those who are members of power elites, with rich networking opportunities, and those who live and work outside these privileged connections, particularly in relation to career mobility, promotions and enhanced educational opportunities. It would seem that very different mobility dynamics in appointments, in access to resources and opportunities for personal and professional development across the HE sector, played a significant part in shaping interpretations of Syrian higher education.

161. Buckner 2009, 2011.

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Appendix A: Capacity building as a research methodology

WORKSHOP PLANNING FOR SYRIAN RESEARCHERS: WORKSHOP ONE

In this Appendix we report on the conceptualisation behind our approach to both capacity building and research methods used to develop the research capacity of the Syrian research team living in exile.

As discussed at the outset, taking a dual-track approach to developing methods and capacity building was necessary. This was because we were seeking to collect evidence-based responses to research questions on the characteristics and profiles of quality in HE and aiming to build research capacity. Our aim was also to facilitate continued academic engagement and contribution by Syrian academics in exile.

We held two capacity-building workshops (one 3-day workshop in June 2017 and one 4-day workshop in July 2017), which included the 4 teaching and learning components:

1 a teaching session on what constitutes high standard and robust quality qualitative research, interview training

2 timescape methods (timelines and mapping exercises to serve as both data and elicitation devices)[162]

3 interview protocol building

4 sampling and coding and thematic analysis of data, the writing of executive summaries and report writing

Alongside this, a doctoral student offered an example of HE research in conflict zones.[163]

A pivotal element of methodological rigour was that in each activity we sought to member-check participant responses and to share all findings that we ourselves had documented to build corroboration across data sets to establish another more substantive layer of corroboration. Some of the major issues that we confronted, and which are discussed later in detail, were ethical issues around confidentiality, the need to ensure the protection of all participants' anonymity rigorously and to be mindful of the political sensitivity of issues when interviewing participants who may not feel able to fully trust 'outsider' researchers.[164] This issue has been reported in the literature as one of the

most significant drawbacks in conducting research in 'conflict environments'.[165] Most of the workshop participants were in exile but had strong connections to family and others inside Syria, as well as being hopeful of returning. Substantial social fear was expressed by workshop participants about the nature of our roles as researchers, which we had anticipated and sought to address throughout both workshops. This latter challenge cannot be underestimated when working with people in exile or seeking resettlement after experiencing conflict environments (even whilst in exile) or when forced displacement (including wishing to return to Syria) generates levels of fear and social and personal losses, which fundamentally alter the interview context. Living in exile meant that responses were sometimes grounded in heightened degrees of anxiety, deep sadness, and feelings of insecurity about our roles and purposes and their safety and protection. The researchers all had experience of working with groups in society who had experienced protracted displacement.

Another important feature of the methods was to embrace time, place and region as important concepts that would inform our approach. We had developed a series of preliminary themes to explore, based on existing literature on Syrian HE: for example, monitoring quality and quality assurance, student satisfaction, equity, quality and breadth of the curriculum, mechanisms of promotion for faculty, workload, student access, progression and employment pathways for students. We needed to assess these issues across different temporal periods.

162. See Hanna & Lau-Claydon 2012; Neale 2012; Neale & Hanna 2012.

163. See Jebril 2017.

164. Whilst there is much debate about the insider/outsider relationship, in this context it must be seen in a different vein. For example, in a standard qualitative research paradigm, insider/outsider is typically viewed as a difference in life experience or degrees of difference around ethnicity or class within a similar and familiar space (e.g. elite status versus working class). However, the degrees of variation in this context did not simply stem from this notion of insider/outsider within the same geopolitical region. Instead, the insider/outsider relationship is constructed as 'the West' and the Arab world, and an outsider can be anyone who is capable of reporting to the public on matters that could undermine one's security in their home country or elsewhere. This creates layers of insecurity around collecting personal data, which are not equivalent to the kinds of insider/outsider dilemmas that emerge in more democratic contexts. This is an important issue to consider in framing the ethics of the research at the outset of any such research/capacity building process with those in forced exile, regardless of their status or background (see Cohen & Arieli 2011).

165. See Cohen & Arieli 2011.

Hence, a multi-layered approach to identifying trends over time demanded that we raise questions that were historical in nature and character (and which afforded the possibility of corroborating or disputing any literature-based evidence and participant-based evidence) about how HE was understood in Syria in the time periods under consideration. Visual methods (timelines and mapping, charting) were used to capture critical events and turning points in past time related to Syrian HE. They were also drawn upon to provide considerable scope for encouraging dialogue and reflection on workshop participants' experiences with HE over time, documenting historical events in HE and to provide a platform for how these experiences might have impacted upon them.

THINKING ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF 'QUALITY' IN HIGHER EDUCATION

We were aware that extensive qualitative research had not been conducted using a broad and more expansive brush with Syrian academics in exile, and which sought to capture a picture of a robust or compromised HE and its characteristics. Rather, following Mazawi (2005), we viewed quality as something that is fundamentally grounded in the cultural constraints and possibilities of HE, and contextually situated in regions and nations, and as institutional structures operating within the Arab world. Like Mazawi (2005), we therefore argue that trends in HE cannot be understood outside of the Syrian political and cultural context and history of education (Barakat 1993), or beyond the realm of systems of inequality which HE sites in Syria had inherited (as all other regional and geopolitical sites do). In other words, it must also be seen within a wider understanding of quality HE globally. In what follows we provide an account of the research methods we drew on to collect data and conduct workshops.

TIMESCAPES, TIMELINES AND ENTERING THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Workshop One focused upon what constitutes good qualitative research and collecting the first stage of data. Throughout the process, we intended to tap into workshop participants' knowledge of events in HE in Syria, and to mobilise their 'insider' knowledge of the circumstances and conditions of HE across time and place. We began by providing an overview of what good qualitative research is, an overview of methods and approaches, and identified definitions of high-quality qualitative research approaches and then we explored – through mapping exercises and timelines – the HE context and sought to capture quality HE or any compromise to it by capturing participant perspectives.

Timescapes is a methodological approach[166] adopted by the ESRC Research Centre that incorporates a temporal approach to gathering data about people's life experiences, critical events, turning points or key moments of change associated with a question that demands a robust response across a particular time period, and which can be conducted in groups or by individuals. It is also an approach that draws on various visual techniques for capturing an historical and contemporary account of critical events, shocks or key moments associated with a phenomenon. This first method – the charting of timelines – was designed to capture critical events impacting upon HE in Syria. The timelines were designed to draw from 'insider knowledge' to capture political and educational changes impacting upon the ways in which quality was either enhanced or undermined by wider social, cultural, economic and political events. Events such as university decrees, state decisions on university expansion and privatisation, international collaborations, the introduction of quality assurance, the introduction of research centres and key political decisions about HE, were the kinds of events that emerged on timelines. These exercises were therefore used for the purposes of data collection but were simultaneously used as elicitation devices to further discuss changes and challenges directed towards HE in interview settings, focus-group settings and in larger group discussions. A sample of completed timelines appears in the appendices.[167] After timelines were completed, we developed several forms of corroboration in large group discussions: taking substantive field notes whilst listening to focus groups present timelines (and posing questions), checking focus-group timelines against existing reports and literature, and following up where clarification was needed or where there were conflicts in interpretations between group members. The questions we posed to focus groups and teams each developing their own timelines were as follows: list the critical events (political, social, economic and cultural) that impacted on quality HE in Syria and discuss within the groups how to further elaborate on their impact.

MAPPING TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SYRIA

We followed up the timeline exercise with a mapping exercise, which allowed us to better understand the geographical landscape of HE in Syria, how best to see the differentiation in HE across the nation – geopolitically and regionally – and then to ascertain distinctions between private and public institutions to further explore views on trends in HE. We did so because we knew there was substantial variation across institutions as well as public/private divisions, and that there was significant disagreement amongst and between participants about the so-called 'best HE institutions' in the country. This topic needed to be discussed from various vantage points and the conflicting perspectives of the participants, in order to adequately capture how to negotiate the various interpretations relative to documents, reports and existing literature. This mapping exercise was also designed to supplement our efforts to better understand the regions and places in the country that were most impacted by changes (some identified in the timeline exercises), which could then be mapped onto institutions in different parts of Syria.

166. Hanna & Lau-Claydon 2012; Neale 2012; Neale & Hanna 2012.
167. See Appendix C.

For this mapping exercise, we gave every group of workshop participants paper versions of an online map of Syria: this was a visual map that did not elucidate any sectarian divisions or religious factions or conflict zones[168] but, rather, identified cities and regions in Syria in a non-political sense. Using this map as an example, workshop participants were then asked to draw their own HE maps within a wider mapping of Syria, showing distinctions between public and private universities and identifying areas where inequality in provision and any variation in quality might have existed and why. Again, as in the timeline exercise, the workshop participants drew their own maps, identified important HE institutions within and across maps, ranked institutions by region and place in terms of quality (in some cases) and gave us information (when presenting the maps) about the variation in quality and type of institution. They also defined other HE institutions such as research or HE institutes. In so doing, they sought to identify the areas/regions where these institutions could be found, so as to gain a sense of regional context (note that this latter exercise was more difficult) and influence (elite public HE institutions, for example, University of Damascus). During workshop discussions, the team members took notes on the mapping exercise and posed questions as a way of consolidating further what had been shared on paper.

TEACHING INTERVIEWING METHODS: AN INTRODUCTION

Another key method was the training of the workshop participants in enquiry methods so they would learn something of the fundamentals of qualitative research (e.g. interviewing), that they might embrace their potential of workshop participants as co-researchers on the project, and they might contribute to the overall research we were conducting as 'insiders' and expand the sample of interviewees (i.e., other Syrian academics either in exile or in Syria who could respond to questions about quality HE). This approach was designed to support a less structured form of snowballing that would extend our evidence base and support further qualitative research training. Open-ended interviewing techniques were taught and generative interactive dialogue took place, which served as focus-group data that supported the main questions we sought to answer through the project. Our approach was to draw upon the expertise of the group: this began with the task where the participants generated key themes associated with HE that they themselves identified and charted on poster paper. These themes were then discussed and debated in the larger group and extensive field notes were taken, and a further refined list of themes for interviewing was generated by the team (away from the workshop, and then sent on to all participants) which served as the basis for the final interview protocol to be used by workshop participants in their own interviewing context (expanding the data set). Workshop participants developed research plans to take away with them in order to execute their study and conduct interviews. A team member

from Cambridge was identified as a research contact and support to aid in any challenges as data was collected. Workshop participants were asked to bring all new data sets to the second workshop.

The second step of this process was to provide opportunities for workshop participants to practise interviewing so that if appropriate, given the context and security matters, they too could conduct interviews as potential collaborators in ways that would ensure that their own participants were protected. For example, participants practised interviewing techniques and learned note-taking techniques whilst conducting interviews, as it was expected that they would not be able to audiotape interviews because of their own security and the security of their interviewees.

A third step was to teach sampling and to identify target groups for their interviews. The basic approach was as follows: define research questions; choose research participants; identify the role of purposeful sampling and access;[169] agree sample size; identify target groups of students and staff who can define the themes of the research and answer questions; address accessibility and safety; research action plans (team members if operating in a team); develop a research timeline. We eventually had to eliminate the idea of a team approach to collect further data because of the diverse locations of participants and the challenges associated with coordinating such an approach. When designing a timeline, we encouraged the task structure below:

Vignette 3.7: Task structure promoted in the workshop

Task 1: Identify participants

Task 2: Ethics (plan oral or written consent)

Task 3: Conduct interviews, audiotaping, note-taking

Task 4: Identify themes emerging from findings – constant discovery and constant comparison[170]

Task 5: Garner preliminary insights

Task 6: Research mentorship contact while collecting data

Participants were assigned and divided into two teams so that they could conduct research whilst away from the workshop: document teams (teams providing documents and some précis or summary of the documents and analysis if possible) and research teams (involved in interviewing), although participants conducted interviews independently as a result of their diverse locations in Turkey. The interview schedules that workshop participants used for remote interviews with staff and students in Syria are presented in Appendices D and E.

168. We are aware that maps are, by their very nature, capable of invoking discussions related to political and historical divisions. We felt strongly that we could use a more generic and contemporary map (dating back to before 2000) to assess, with workshop participants, the regional differences and characteristics of the HE sector in Syria as a discussion and learning tool.

169. This was a particularly poignant aspect of the training, as there was a need for purposive sampling in order to ensure that access to the relevant target group was carried out safely and securely.

170. See Glaser 1992.

OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS WITH SYRIAN ACADEMICS: DISPLACEMENT, JOURNEYS TO EXILE, AND REFLECTIONS ON QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION

Another major aspect of the work was to conduct interviews with displaced academics in exile. We conducted open-ended interviews (with the support of interpreters) with the displaced academics living in Turkey, using an open-ended thematic protocol developed by the team. Team members – all experienced in different ways with issues of displacement – read the literature on displacement, read substantive background material on HE in Syria and drew upon previous experience with HE displacement, change and quality, in order to build the protocol. Protocol themes are presented in Table A.1.

Table A.1: Themes for discussion with displaced academics

1. Biographical/personal and professional history (higher education history in particular)
2. Displacement, forced movements and consequences: personal and professional
3. Description/mapping of HE (pre-2011, post-2011)
4. Description of current situation: Syrian higher education
5. Personal and professional conditions
6. Student experience, student representation, forced movement, university conditions
7. Research and teaching
8. Equity (pre-2011, post-2011): personal and institutional

It is important to mention that these were challenging and difficult interviews to undertake for both interviewees and researchers. This was in part because of the sensitivity of the issues being addressed and also as a result of trauma experienced by the academics in exile, and the social, economic, professional and personal losses they were experiencing. As researchers, we took considerable care to ensure that they understood the purposes of the research, that all confidentiality agreements were in place, that they had clear choices about participation and that they did not feel any pressure to undertake interviews.

TEACHING DATA ANALYTIC TECHNIQUES: WORKSHOP TWO

In Workshop Two, the approach was highly active and experiential. We engaged with workshop participants in an apprentice approach for analysing data from the participants' own research. We also aimed to work as a team and have collaborative practices in the workshop, including maps, timelines and interview transcripts. Participants went through the following processes: preparing transcripts for analysis and coding, coding and forming themes, and writing summaries and cameos. After each session and attempt at the practice of data analysis in situ (as part of workshop training and analysis), there was a period of reflection on what had been learned, as well on the issues that emerged as a consequence of reading, interpreting and engaging with data. Research teams were constructed with the participants, such that they could take the lead on any co-research or assistance that might be given regarding translation or summarising documents. Whilst full participation on these tasks was difficult for many workshop participants and disaggregating it all was very challenging for the team, many strove to assist us in interpreting documents and providing research designs and summaries of their findings. We also discussed in detail issues of validation and the credibility of data. We then moved forward to encourage participants to draw upon data sources in order to create a thematic writing structure, and to use multiple sources of evidence for writing executive summaries of what they had learned from conducting their own research.

The workshop ended with the research teams finalising their data analysis, presenting their findings, and a discussion about what recommendations we felt we could draw at this stage. There was also a reflection on the workshop processes as a whole, as well as a plan for completing the final publication of the report.

THE DATA COLLECTED REMOTELY FROM INSIDE SYRIA

When we were preparing for the second workshop and were collecting the data that workshop participants had gathered remotely, we recognised that they had faced significant challenges in conducting remote interviews. Conducting interviews had clearly not been straightforward, although the overall number of interviews conducted was very high given the risk and security circumstances of all potential participants, and associated issues of trust and research experience. The open-ended remote interview largely ended up being in the form of an online or a digital oral survey, although there were some exceptions. Consequently, there was vast variation in the quality of the data gathered. There is a fuller discussion of this issue later in this section of the report. This notwithstanding, the report represents a fairly wide-ranging consultation on matters of higher education quality in Syria today, something that is not only a high-risk task for those who undertook it but also challenging in terms of access, openness and thoroughness.

CODING SCHEMES AND ANALYSES

The data set of 136 interviews was collated and analysed using the 11 categories presented in Table A.2. Categories 1 to 10 emerged from the literature review and capacity-building activities during the first workshop aimed at eliciting participants' views on factors contributing to enhancing quality in higher education. The 11th category captured interviewees' experiences of internal and external displacement and questions of professional and civic identity before and after the crisis.

Table A.2: Categories used in coding

1. University mission, values, governance
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

2. The role of universities in the community[171]
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

3. Quality assurance
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

4. Staffing issues
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

5. Teaching, curriculum and assessment
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

6. Role of research
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

7. Resources and infrastructure
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

8. Student admission
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

9. Access
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

10. Student employability
- pre-2011 staff perspectives
- pre-2011 student perspectives
- post-2011 staff perspectives
- post-2011 student perspectives

11. Testimonies of displaced academics[172]
- before the crisis
- circumstances leading to displacement
- civic and political participation
- professional identity in exile
- hopes for the future

171. This theme was later integrated with the theme on university mission, values and governance.
172. Not recorded in this report.

Appendix B: University – & non-university-affiliated research centres and institutes

1. UNIVERSITY-AFFILIATED RESEARCH INSTITUTES

UNIVERSITY OF DAMASCUS

Research Centres

1. Strategic Research Studies Centre
2. Poisoning Struggle Centre
3. Centre for the Treatment of Epilepsy
4. Seismic Observation – Centre for Land Sciences
5. Centre of Oncotherapy
6. Demographic Research Studies Centre

Institutes Offering Research Degrees

1. Higher Institute of Seismological Studies and Research
2. Higher Institute of Laser Research and Applications
3. Business Administration Institute
4. Environment Researches

University Hospitals

1. Al-Assad University Hospital (Damascus)
2. Al-Mouwasat Hospital (Damascus)
3. Children's University Hospital (Damascus)
4. Al-Bayrouni University Hospital (Damascus)
5. Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital (Damascus)
6. Heart Surgery University Centre (Damascus)
7. Skin and Venereal Diseases Hospital (Damascus)
8. Oral Surgery University Hospital (Damascus)
9. Aleppo University Hospital (Aleppo)
10. Al-Kindi University Hospital Blood Transfusion Centre (Aleppo)
11. Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital (Aleppo)
12. Cardiology and Heart Surgery University Hospital (Aleppo)
13. Tishreen University Hospital (Latakia)
14. Al-Assad University Hospital (Latakia)

UNIVERSITY OF ALEPPO

Research Centres

1. Agricultural Research Centre
2. Demographic Research Studies Centre

Institutes

1. Institute for the History of Arabic Science

University Hospitals

1. Aleppo University Hospital
2. Al-Kindi Hospital
3. Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital
4. Al-Bassel Cardiology Hospital

UNIVERSITY OF TISHREEN (LATAKIA)

Research Centres

1. Demographic Research
2. Studies Centre
3. Research Centre for Oceanic Studies

Institutes

1. The Institute of Marine Research

University Hospitals

1. Al-Assad University Hospital

2. NON-UNIVERSITY-AFFILIATED RESEARCH INSTITUTES

Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre is a government agency tasked with the advancement and coordination of research activities in the country towards social and economic development, including the computerisation of government agencies. It is considered to have better technical capacity and equipment than the Syrian universities. Intelligence services agencies and other analysts believe it is responsible for research and development of nuclear, biological, chemical and missile technology and weapons.[173]

Higher Institute for Applied Sciences and Technology: degree-awarding engineering and technology institute with branches in Damascus and Aleppo.

The National Agricultural Policy Centre (NAPC) affiliated with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, funded by the Government of Italy, and part of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. It focuses on agricultural policies in Syria and aims to provide policy analysis for relevant stakeholders and policy-makers.

Syrian Centre for Policy Research: a non-governmental, non-profit think tank that aims to influence policy-making through public policy-oriented research.

173. See Nuclear Threat Initiative 2012.

APPENDIX C: Examples of timelines constructed in the first workshop

Figure 1
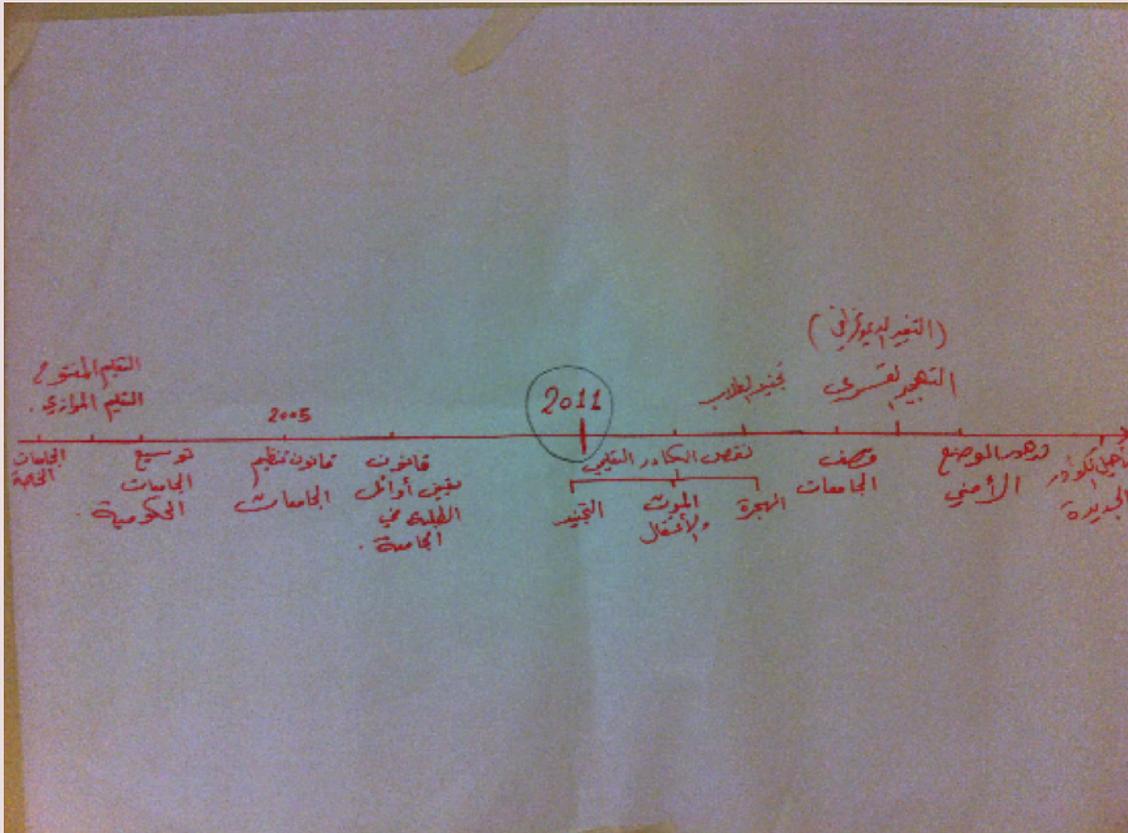
Figure 2

Figure 3
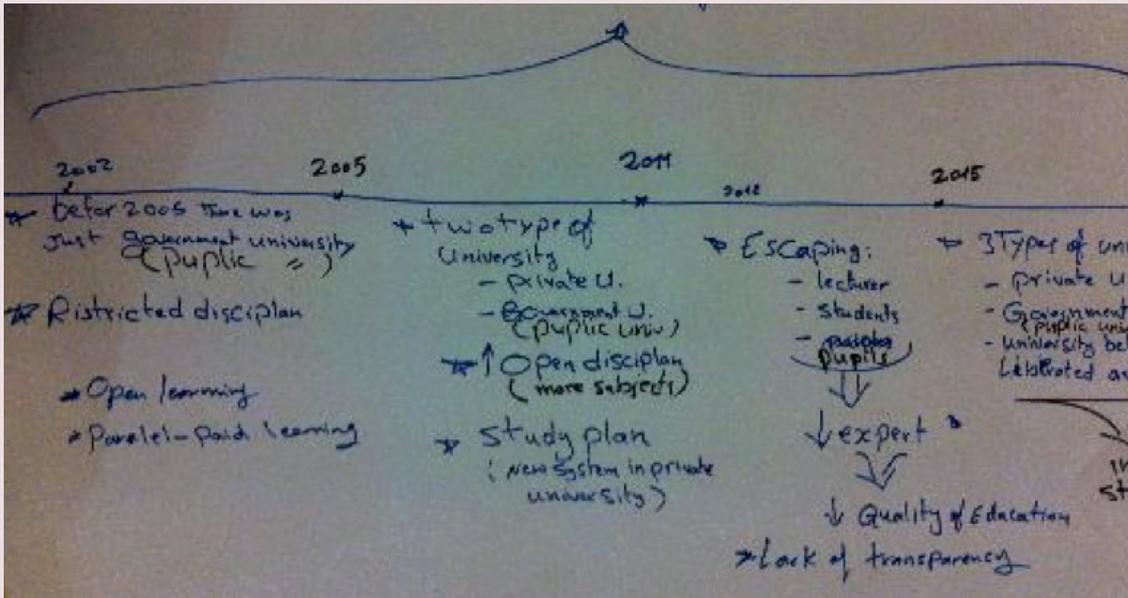
APPENDIX D: Interview schedule for university staff

1. UNIVERSITY MISSION AND VALUES; GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- How would you describe the university mission?

- How is the university managed?

- How are appointments made? (e.g. university president, senior academics, lecturers, admin staff)

- What decision-making bodies are there at the university? What kinds of decisions do they make and why?

- Have governance, management, mission and values changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Please give some examples.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- How would you describe the quality assurance system in your university?

- Can you paint a picture of what it looks like?

- To what extent has quality assurance impacted on your work?

- How has the quality assurance system changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Please give some examples.

3. RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- Please describe the state of resources and infrastructure at your university (e.g. availability of Internet, whiteboards and projectors, lecture halls, computer labs, libraries, class size, student/ teacher ratio, sport facilities, dormitories, etc.)

- Can you say how these have changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Please can you provide some examples of these changes?

4. STAFF CAPABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- Can you describe the minimum qualifications that are required to work as a lecturer, academic, manager at your university? Examples: degree status, how many degrees, do you need an undergraduate, master's and/or doctorate, for example?

- What opportunities for professional development are available inside the university and/or outside the university?

- What academic exchange opportunities, conferences and international collaborations are available and encouraged through your university? Which countries does (or did) your institution have formal exchanges with, and why?

- How have these arrangements and collaborations, for example, changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Can you provide some examples?

5. STUDENT ADMISSION (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- What are the criteria for admission?

- Are there regional/ private university/ public university/ faculty differences in terms of admission?

- How have admission criteria changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Can you provide some examples?

6. TEACHING, CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- How would you describe your teaching style?

- What is the balance between theory and practice in the curriculum?

- What are your views about the quality of the curriculum offered?

- Do you feel that there are programmes, which are more popular with male or female students? What is the gender balance on different programmes?

- Can you describe how students are assessed?

- Can you describe how teaching, curriculum and assessment have changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Can you provide some examples?

7. STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY (PRE-2011; POST-2011)

- How successful are students in transitioning to the labour market in Syria and internationally?

- In your view, do you feel that the university has programmes that are relevant to the labour market? If so, why? If not, why?

- How might you describe the career trajectories of the students in your institution? For example, do students stay in Syria after degree completion or travel abroad for work? If so, which countries are they most likely to move to and why?

- Can you describe how student employability has changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Can you give some examples?

8. ROLE OF RESEARCH

- Do all lecturers do research? If yes, are they expected to publish?

- Do lecturers get research training?

- Who are the main bodies funding research and are they independent of government?

- Do you believe that there are constraints on academics and students in terms of their choice of research topics? For example, do funding agencies define what can be researched and what cannot be researched? And are there any preferred methods of research?

- Can you describe what you perceive as the impact and applicability (e.g. social and scientific, economic) of research on society at large in Syria and surrounding regions or internationally?

- Are there differences between a public or private university in terms of research?

- How has the role of research at your university changed pre-2011 and post-2011? Please give some examples.

9. ACCESSIBILITY TO QUALITY HE

- To what extent do students go to universities that are geographically closer to their areas/villages/cities/places of residence or do they choose to go to particular universities based on, of because of, their quality or national reputation?

- What do you believe are the things that affect access to universities (probe examples: family situation, transport, checkpoints, economic and social support, financing, charitable foundations)?

- How would you describe the opportunities that students have for international exchange (provide examples) and where are the most likely sites of exchange (institution, countries, for example)?

- Why do you think these are seen as institutions where high-quality educational training can be achieved?

- Would you say that these opportunities and forms of access have changed since 2011? Can you, for example, describe how you accessed the university (e.g. getting to it, completing teaching or student tasks such as exams) before and after 2011?

10. STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR THE FUTURE OF QUALITY HE IN SYRIA

- What do you believe should be the priorities for higher education in Syria now and into the future? In other words, what do you think needs to happen now? Do you think these views are shared across Syria by academics and students, for example?

- Are there, for example, some key strategic initiatives that you believe are crucial for ensuring the quality of higher education in Syria? How could these initiatives be acted upon in the current situation and into the future?

11. ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Is there anything you would like to add on any of the topics we have discussed today?

- Is there anything I have not asked that you think important to mention?

APPENDIX E: Interview schedule for university students

1. UNIVERSITY MISSION AND VALUES; GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

- How would you describe the university mission at your institution?

- Can you give us a picture of how the university is managed and an account of some of the governance structures? For example, who appoints the president of the university, etc.?

- Do you feel that the students have a voice in university decision-making?

- Are there student representatives? What are their roles and responsibilities?

- Is there student union/student governance? What kinds of activities do the students engage in as part of decision-making, for example?

2. RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

- How would you describe the state of resources and infrastructure at your university (e.g. availability of Internet, whiteboards and projectors, lecture halls, computer labs, libraries, class size, student/teacher ratio, sport facilities, dormitories, etc.)

3. STUDENT ADMISSION

- Can you describe how students are admitted to university?

- What regions are students coming from?

- Why did you choose your field of study? Was there any pressure to study one subject over another and if so why? Where did this come from? For example, family, university guidance, limited subject options?

- What were your expectations before you entered your programme?

- Do you feel that these expectations have been met? If so, why? If not, why?

- Do you think there is a difference between private and public universities in terms of admission criteria?

- Is there a minimum score that students need to have in order to get accepted? Does the minimum score vary according to the programme/ faculty/ across the university? Please give some examples.

- Would you describe admission criteria as transparent? Are there any challenges relating to admissions that you can describe to us and that you feel are important to know about?

4. TEACHING, CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

- How would you describe the teaching style on your programme of study?

- Is it your view that teaching styles differ across the faculty/university or are they similar? Can you provide examples?

- Does or did the style of teaching reflect your expectations before entering the university? Is this style successful at ensuring student engagement in your view?

- Can you describe for me the relationships between students and staff?

- What is the balance between theory and practice in the curriculum?

- What is your view on the quality of curriculum offered? For example, is there something that you would like to see more or less of at the university in terms of curriculum offered?

- Are there programmes, which are more popular with male or female students? What is the gender balance on different programmes?

- How are students assessed formally in both individual subjects and for the completion of a degree?

5. STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

- In your view, how successful are students in transitioning to the labour market in Syria and internationally?

- To what extent does the university help students' access to employment?

- Do you think that the university has programmes that are relevant to the labour market?

- Do students stay in Syria after degree completion or travel abroad for work? If they travel abroad, which countries are they most likely to go to and why?

- Is this process – promoting post-degree employment – transparent and fair?

6. ROLE OF RESEARCH

- Do you have opportunities to do research while you study?

- Do you think it is important to have such opportunities?

7. ACCESSIBILITY TO QUALITY HE

- To what extent do students go to universities that are geographically closer to their areas/villages/ cities/places of residence or do they choose to go to other universities based on quality?

- Can you outline some of the things that impact on access to universities (probe examples: family situation, transport, checkpoints, economic and social support, financing, charitable foundations)?

- What are some examples of access opportunities that students have for international exchange and where are the most likely sites of exchange? Why are these seen as sites where high-quality educational training can be achieved?

- How has access changed in the Country since 2011? Can you, for example, describe how you accessed the university/school before and after 2011?

8. STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR THE FUTURE OF QUALITY HE IN SYRIA

- In your view, how would you identify and prioritize key initiatives need for immediate and long-term action for ensuring high-quality higher education in Syria now and into the future?

9. ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Is there anything you would like to add on any of the topics we have discussed today?

- Is there anything I have not asked that you think important to mention?

APPENDIX F: Arabic-language policy documents reviewed by the Syrian research team

Central Bureau of Statistics (2011). New and previous students, university graduates and academic staff by gender, university and faculty 2009-2010. Statistical Abstract for year 2011, TABLE 16/11 Central Bureau of Statistics, Office of Prime Minister, Syrian Arab Republic.

Central Bureau of Statistics (2011). Universities, faculties, students and graduates by gender, 2006–2010 Statistical Abstract for year 2011, TABLE 15/11 Central Bureau of Statistics, Office of Prime Minister, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Finance (2011). Modification of table No. 4, adjunct to the Law of the organisation of the universities, No.6, 2006, showing the salary for each job title. Law No.728, 2011, Ministry of Finance, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2001). The organisation of private educational institutions for post-secondary education. Legislative Decree No.36, 2001, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2006). Law of the organisation of the universities. Legislative Decree No. 6, 2006, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2006). Law of full-time scientific research. Law No.7, 2006, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2006). The regulations for implementing the law of the organisation of the universities. Legislative Decree No.250, 2006, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2007). Establishing a public scientific committee named the Higher Institute of Water Management. Legislative Decree No.27, 2007, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2007). Establishing new faculties at some universities. Legislative Decree No.319, 2007, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2007). Higher Education Policies in Syria. Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2007). The highest-achieving graduate in each faculty is employed as an assistant lecturer. Legislative Decree No.52, 2007, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2009). Establishing a fund to support scientific research and technological development in higher education. Legislative Decree No.49, 2009, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2010). Establishing the Faculty of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at the University of Euphrates. Legislative Decree No.308, 2010, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2010). Establishing new faculties at the Universities of Damascus, Aleppo, Al-Baath and Tishreen. Legislative Decree No.283, 2010, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2010). Modification of the regulations for implementing the law of the organisation of the universities which were issued by the decree No. 250, 2006. Legislative Decree No.245, 2010, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2010). The 11th Five-Year Plan for the Higher Education Sector. Directorate of Planning and Decision Support, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2010). Vision for Higher Education and the 2011–2013 action plan and its executive programme, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). Establishing the centre of measurement and improvement in higher education. Legislative Decree No.15, 2012, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). Establishing several faculties. Legislative Decree No.301, 2011, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). Establishing the Faculty of Law at the University of Damascus in the city of Quneitra. Legislative Decree No.390, 2011, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). Modification of the regulations for implementing the law of the organisation of the universities which were issued by the decree No.250, 2006. Legislative Decree No.203, 2011, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

Ministry of Higher Education (2011). The regulations for implementing the decree No.178, 2015, concerning how students are excluded due to repeated failure. Resolution No.48, 2011, Ministry of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

The Council for Higher Education (2011). Adopting a national policy to link higher education to the labour market. Resolution No.49, 2011, The Council for Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

The Council for Higher Education (2011). Rules related to awarding a student two marks in one or two courses, if this would allow the student to progress. Resolution No.269, 2011, The Council for Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.

The Council for Higher Education (2011). Rules related to how students are excluded due to repeated failure and progress from year to year. Resolution No.1, 2011, The Council for Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic.