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Sharing the burdens of responsibility for a better future in transnational academia: Reflections of displaced Syrian academics on an atypical academic development event

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Abstract

Academics in conflict and refugee contexts often work in settings that are at stark odds to those typically portrayed in academic development research and can encounter different challenges. Normative academic development resources can therefore be inadequate, inappropriate or inaccessible to academics marginalised by conflict or displacement. This paper reflects on a round table event held in June 2019, where Syrian academics gathered together with counterparts from post/conflict contexts including Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa to share experiences and formulate strategies. This short paper foregrounds the perspectives of Syrian academics who participated, and their insights into the value and challenges associated with international fora concerning academic development in conflict contexts.

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1. Introduction

The World Bank (2017) and UNESCO (2019) acknowledge the critical role HE plays in (re)building sustainable societies. Absent from the earlier Millennium Development Goals, HE is explicitly addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) under the aim of equitable access to tertiary education for all men and women by 2030 (UNESCO, 2019). The UN's Education Framework for Action 2030 calls for international collaboration to 'strengthen well-informed HE systems' (UNESCO, 2019). We argue that if the international academic development community is to contribute meaningfully to these aims, it needs to broaden its contextual scope and seek to understand the specific challenges faced by academic communities living and working under duress, and work with those communities to address them.

The scale of destruction and displacement caused by the Syrian crisis has been unprecedented in recent decades, as have the challenges faced by HE communities inside northern Syria and in exile. In 2019, Syrian academics participating in the Council for At-Risk Academics' Syria Programme (Cara SP⁷) expressed their desire to learn from academics whose countries' HE systems had survived years of conflict. At a two-day workshop in June 2019, Syrian academics gathered together with counterparts from Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa to share experiences and formulate strategies for the future.

2. Methodological notes

To accommodate consideration of the many problems where Syrian academics need help to find creative solutions, the round table began with a loose agenda that allowed themes to arise responsively from discussion. First, Syrian contributors recounted the needs and experiences of students and academics (both in exile and inside northern Syria) to the international contributors, who had experienced and/or conducted research on HE in contexts of conflict, oppression or exile. International contributors in turn asked questions and made comparative observations, towards a shared contextual understanding. This led gradually into a transnational sharing of knowledge, support, and solidarity, including both a pragmatic focus on accessible resources for academic development in resource-poor, non-institutional settings, and also wider-ranging discussions about academic culture, heritage, freedom and purpose in periods of post/conflict and crisis, and future hopes for reconstruction, development and commemoration.

We had intended to extend these conversations, and present a vision for an holistic academic development for conflict contexts, in our planned symposium session at ICED 2020. In lieu of this, we foreground the reflections of the Syrian authors who were present at the 2019 workshop (for a paper from the perspective of the UK-based authors see Belluigi and Parkinson (in press). Below is a condensed summary of our reflective accounts.

3. Reflective insights

We benefited from the lessons our international colleagues had learned through their experiences. We were also inspired by their resilience. Encountering people who have gone through difficult circumstances similar to those you have faced, who refused to surrender or give up, makes you think, "if they can overcome their challenges, I CAN too." We felt that we, Syrian academics, were not alone.

⁷ Established in 2016 to provide academic development support to Syrian academics in exile in the ME region: <https://www.cara.ngo/what-we-do/supporting-higher-education-in-crisis/>

Through our discussions it became clear that to address the complex challenges arising from unprecedented deterioration in social, cultural, economic, and academic status of the HE sector in Syria and its displaced communities, a broader understanding of academic development is needed that moves beyond a focus on teaching and learning and encompasses community building. International contributors from other post-conflict and exile contexts emphasised the need for us to present ourselves as a union or a group, since working individually will not achieve results. Indeed, reflecting on our experiences on the Cara SP, while the formal academic development activities support us in developing our competencies as educators and scholars, the Cara SP also facilitates our coming together as Syrian academics to work through psychological trauma, and discuss feelings of frustration and uncertainty about the future. This has been equally important, offering an invaluable opportunity to retain an academic identity, particularly for those of us without institutional affiliation.

Advice and encouragement from these international counterparts reminded us of our need to connect more and more with colleagues in our own Syrian academic community, including those in diasporic universities across the world, and those who graduated from international universities. Due to the collapse of the Syrian HE sector, displacement and various divisions, the Syrian academic community is fragmented and individuals are seeking individual solutions, but we can harness the shared hope of Syria's future to motivate us. Building our community is our first step towards academic development, and can be achieved simply and at low cost. Knowing that there is solidarity and support from international counterparts motivates us and inspires us further. Getting academics from the global North and the global South together who genuinely try to help each other will enhance everyone's understanding and, as a result, facilitate finding better solutions. Indeed, we hope one day to be able to participate in transnational, academic development, where all countries - normative or abnormative, colonial or post-colonial, hegemonic or non-hegemonic - contribute together to promoting just societies through accessible higher education.

Since the round table, and in collaboration with various Syrian and international stakeholders, much work towards building a collective academic identity has begun, including a Facebook page⁸, a website⁹ and the establishment of the Academic Centre for Peace Studies in Gaziantep¹⁰. We are also broadening our international engagement, participating in international fora for academic developers such as the Erasmus+ funded IntREF project¹¹; collaborating with international colleagues to establish a teaching standards framework for universities in northern Syria; and pursuing international funding and partnerships for the enablement of our research practice.

4. Conclusion

We propose a vision for academic development that attends to the needs of academic communities working under conditions of conflict and displacement, and draws on strong international networks to reckon with uncertain higher education futures.

⁸ Amal-Syria ('Hope-Syria'): <https://www.facebook.com/Amal4Syria>

⁹ Syrian Academic Expertise: <https://sae-afs.org>

¹⁰ Academic Centre for Development and Peace studies: <https://acdps.org/en/>

¹¹ <https://sites.durham.ac.uk/intref/>

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