Syrian higher education:
A beacon of hopes despite the daunting challenges

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List of abbreviations

BA. . . . . Bachelor's Degree
DAFI. . . . . . . Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative
HE. . . . . Higher Education
HEIs. . . . . . . Higher Education Institutions
HOPES. . . . Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians
ICT. . . . . . . Information and Communication Technology
IDPs. . . . . . Internally displaced people
ISIL. . . . . . . Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
MA. . . . . Master's Degree
MHE. . . . . . Ministry of Higher Education
NGOs. . . . . Non-governmental organizations
PhD. . . . . . Philosophiae Doctor
QA. . . . . Quality Assurance
QM. . . . . . . Quality Management
SCC. . . . . . Skills and Career Center
UN. . . . . United Nations
UNICEF. . . . United Nations International Children's Energency Fund
YPG. . . . . . Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (Kurdish language);
         People's Protection Units (English language)

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Abstract

Due to years of conflict, many Syrians are currently displaced within their country and beyond Syria's borders. In 2015, large numbers made their way to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey as well as across Europe and applied for asylum in Germany, Austria, Sweden, etc. The Syrian crisis raises important education-related questions for the international community as a whole, like the educational background of Syrians currently on the move. This paper examines some key themes of the Syrian Higher Education System so as to enable better understanding of Syrian education in a broader global context. It aims to provide detailed information where researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can draw from to inform their own work.

Foreword

Marcello Scalisi, Director, UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union

I was lucky enough to visit Syria several times before 2011. Through the many academic cooperation initiatives in which I was able to participate, and minimally contribute, I always brought back with me both humanely and professionally intense memories.

The dramatic evolution of the Syrian crisis, which has obviously also halted academic and university cooperation with European countries, nonetheless continually calls for our attention. We often reflect on what role UNIMED can play as a network and through its members, 150 universities from 24 countries in the Euro Mediterranean region.

Therefore, this study is meant to be a modest contribution, but one which we believe is essential, to attempt resuming a dialogue with our Syrian colleagues, still there, but also with those who have left the country.

Getting into their reasons is not relevant at the moment. That is not our role. We should rather ask ourselves whether we can rebuild the dialogue with the higher education institutions still active in Syria today in order to offer, where possible, spaces for discussion, confrontation and analysis, that can feed the hope of young university students once again.

Over the years after the conflict, and still today, we have worked much to support the inclusion of Syrian refugees in our member universities. And we will continue our efforts, thanks to the many willing member universities whom we work with, as well as with our international partners.

On the other hand, we must keep working on how to approach and support Syrian universities and their current and future students. This study aims to give an initial interpretation of the current situation, so as to invite European institutions and

European governments not to abandon academic cooperation with Syria, without thereby giving any key to political legitimacy. Indeed, the study clearly shows that what Europe and the European governments are not doing in Syria today, is being done by other countries, quite successfully.

The Erasmus+ international mobility program has timidly reopened the doors of mobility from Syrian universities towards Europe (while not vice versa yet), for students and staff (both academic and administrative). It is a first step to rebuild academic cooperation beyond borders, and we hope it will not be completely hindered by the difficulties on the ground.

The future depends on the actions we perform today, on our ability to give space to the energy of the Syrian youth, as highlighted in the analysis proposed by this paper.

UNIMED is - and will always be - close to the universities, in order to make them promoters and guarantors of the demand for autonomy and freedom: it is time to act, it is time to move beyond the status quo. It is now time for the future prospects to make sense, to give space to a young Mediterranean generation.

This publication is part of a series of UNIMED contributions on the role of universities in this perspective. We hope to offer an analysis of trends but also to contribute, from our own modest viewpoint, to give a positive look into the current debate, so often limited to geopolitical analyses without paying much attention to young students and academics as protagonists of social and civic life, who can act as agents of change. It is to them that our ongoing efforts to achieve the goal, too often imagined and never truly pursued with tenacity, of a cohesive and peaceful Mediterranean region will return.

About UNIMED

UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union - is a network of Higher Education and Research Institutions, founded in 1991, and active in promoting academic cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region and in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Middle East and in Western Balkans. It counts 150 Associated Universities coming from 24 countries (data updated to September 2022).

Introduction

After ten years of civil war, Syrian society and related higher education institutions are attempting a progressive return to normality. This is witnessed by the growing attention of many international stakeholders who are once again starting to observe their performance and analyze their needs in order to recover the last, disastrous, years of lack of cooperation. The objective of these initiatives is clear: to analyze one of the few sectors in the country that is gradually recovering (the proliferation of universities and higher education institutions in recent years has been remarkable) in order to achieve an adequate level of understanding of the local situation and try to understand the old and new balances. Considering the higher education institutions as a useful mean to achieve objectives such as the advancement of peace building strategies has also been recognized as a valid approach even by Syrians themselves.

The general objective of the current study, originally titled *MUSALIHA[1], Higher education in Syria as a means of reconciliation and peacebuilding*, is to define a clearer state of the art, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, of the current Syrian higher education system and to developing recommendations for international stakeholders and local institutions in order to ensure an effective re-establishment of university cooperation capable to carry out peace-building actions in the country. The outcome of the research process is presented in the current paper, titled *Syrian higher education: A Beacon of hopes despite the daunting challenges*, published by UNIMED, Mediterranean Universities Union, in collaboration with the Lebanese International University and supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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1 مصالحة MUSALIHA arabic word for *reconciliation*

Background of the study

The modern state of Syria was established as a French mandate in 1920, and then gained independence in 1945, when it became a founding member of the United Nations (UN). Thereafter, the country faced numerous political changes and military coups until 1963, when the Ba'ath party took over the country through a coup d'état. The Ba'ath party has been in power since then, and the country was under Emergency Law between 1963 and 2011. In March 2011, a largely peaceful protest movement started as part of the Arab Spring, though violent conflict soon broke out between government forces, protesters, and other parties. The conflict has essentially divided Syria into four regions, controlled by different interest groups: (1) the Syrian government forces and allies, (2) the Syrian opposition and Syrian Islamic factions, (3) Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and (4) the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Further it has led to the displacement of millions of Syrians within and outside Syria's borders. Table 1 below provides some key recent demographic information about Syria. Table 2 reports data on the population by educational level.

TABLE 1: Key demographic information about Syria

POPULATION	17, 185,170 *(JULY 2016 EST.)*
ETHNIC GROUPS	ARAB (90%) KURDS, ARMENIANS AND OTHER (10%)
RELIGIONS	MUSLIM (87%, MAJORITY SUNNI) CHRISTIAN (10%) DRUZE (3%) SOME JEWS
MEDIAN AGE	24.1 YEARS *(2016 EST.)*
REFUGEES IN SYRIA	526,744 PALESTINIAN REFUGEES (2014) UNDETERMINED NUMBER IRAQI (2015)
SYRIAN REFUGEES	4.8 MILLION DISPERSED IN EGYPT, IRAQ, JORDAN, LEBANON AND TURKEY (2016)

TABLE 2: School-age population by education level

EDUCATION LEVEL	AGE GROUP	NUMBER OF PEOPLE
PREPRIMARY	3-5	1,443,016
PRIMARY	6-9	1,885,406
SECONDARY	10-17	3,627,384
TERTIARY	18-22	1,805,523
TOTAL	3-22	8,731,329

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to gauge the needs of Syrian universities and to better understand the challenges facing Syrian Higher Education Institutions, with the aim of proposing actions for capacity building to inform policymakers, planners, and stakeholders. The analysis focuses on the current situation of Higher Education in Syria as revealed by university administrators and academic staff members in both private and public universities. It draws on their direct experiences and unique insights into the crisis facing the Syrian Higher Education sector.

Syria's under-resourced Higher Education sector was seen before the outbreak of war in 2011 as generally stable and functioning. Even so, the survey raises concern about the long-term damage that a collapsed Higher Education sector will do to Syria's socioeconomic recovery and highlights priorities for Syrian universities, in which the international community has a vital role to play.

Research methodology

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

i) Which is the state-of-the-art of the Syrian Higher Education sector?

ii) Which are the main internationalisation features of Syrian universities?

iii) What are the current strategies, and practices in place in the Syrian universities?

iv) Which is the role of Higher Education in the national and regional contexts?

v) What challenges and risks potentially hinder the Higher Education sector?

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, starting with a thorough desk research consulting sources in different languages (English, French, Arabic) to continue using a survey to collect data about the status of Syrian public and private universities.

For the purpose of the study, researchers reached out to 33 universities, and eventually 13 responded, namely: Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences, Al-Baath University, Al-Hawash Private University, Al-Sham Private University, Arab International University, Damascus University, Ebla Private University, University of Hama, University of Kalamoon, University of Manara, Tartus University, Tishreen University, Yarmouk Private University. The sample of 13 universities can be considered as a representative sample, since they together represent about 300.000 students, more than 4000 members of the academic staff (teachers, assistant professors, lecturers, etc) and about 10.000 staff and administrative employees. Therefore, answers collected have the potential of showing representative trends of the Higher Education sector in Syria. The questionnaire included both closed questions and open-ended questions with the aim of providing insights into the universities' approaches and operations, in addition to staff perspectives on the relevance and effectiveness of their respective institutions in the national and regional contexts.

13 universities involved in the study, representing about 300.000 students, more than 4.000 academic staff members, and about 10.000 administrative
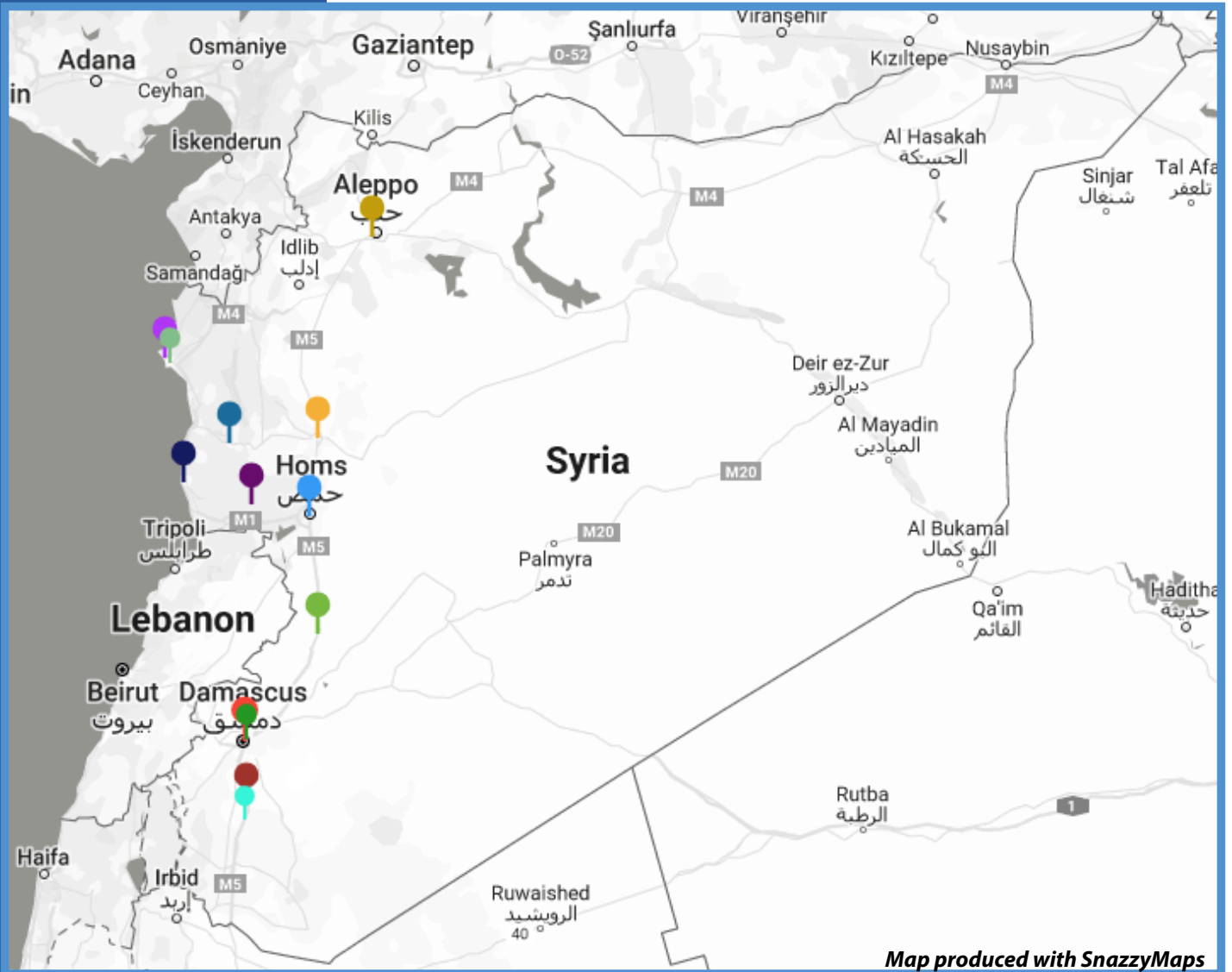
Map produced with SnazzyMaps

Universities contributing to the research

- ■ **Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences**
- ■ **Al-Baath University**
- ■ **Al-Hawash Private University**
- ■ **Al-Sham Private University**
- ■ **Arab International University**
- ■ **Damascus University**
- ■ **Ebla Private University**
- ■ **University of Hama**
- ■ **University of Kalamoon**
- ■ **University of Manara**
- ■ **Tartus University**
- ■ **Tishreen University**
- ■ **Yarmouk Private University**

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Structure of the Syrian Education System

In Syria, education is not divided into higher professional education and research-oriented higher education. Syrian higher education institutions can offer both types of education, and some degree programs offer a combination of both. These programs focus on research and professional practice. Students can study and obtain the following degrees:

Bachelor / الإجازة

Master / الماجستير

Doctor – PhD / الدكتوراة

Students can pursue higher education at: public universities; private universities; and higher institutes.

Public universities

Education at most public universities is free. Students only pay a small annual registration fee. They can obtain a Bachelor, Master or PhD title. Most of Syrian students study at public universities. The University of Damascus is the oldest and largest in the country. Besides Arabic, education is also being provided in English.

Private universities

There have been private universities in Syria since 2001. These universities can only teach if they are officially recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE). Until now, private universities have only been allowed to offer Bachelor's programs. Students are required to pay tuition fees. Besides Arabic, education is also being provided in English.

Education at most public universities is free, and is offered in Arabic and English.

Higher institutes

Higher institutes often fall under the supervision of a public university or the Ministry of Higher Education. These institutes offer various types of programs. Students can obtain a Bachelor's, Masters or PhD degree. However, very few students choose to study at such higher institutes. This is because the admission requirements are often stricter than those for programs offered by public universities.

Post-Secondary Education

Before the ongoing war, Syria had a reasonably well developed post-secondary education sector. The Ministry of Higher Education oversees the sector. Tertiary education is provided by intermediate institutes, universities, higher institutes, educational hospitals, and educational and council centers.

TABLE 3: Tertiary education

LEVEL	DEGREE	INSTITUTION TYPE	DURATION	REQUIREMENT
STAGE 1	Diploma	Vocational Institutions	2 years	Minimum of 50% to 60%
	Bachelor Degree	Universities	4-6 years	Min 50% or 60% Project/research/ training/ internship
STAGE 2	Higher Diploma	Universities	1-3 years	Minimum 60% Project/research
	Master's Degree	Universities	2 years	Minimum 60% Thesis
STAGE 3	Doctoral Degree	Universities		Minimum 60% Thesis

Education for Syrians inside Syria

The following sections briefly explore the state of education in four different regions: government-controlled regions, opposition-controlled regions, Kurdish-controlled regions and regions controlled by the so-called Islamic State.

Government-Controlled Regions

Syrian education in government-controlled regions is more stable than in the opposition's region because, broadly speaking, these regions are safer. However, due to the relative stability attracting students, so many schools in these regions have overcrowded classrooms, especially in Basic Education. The majority of these schools have started running double shifts to accommodate increasing numbers of students. Teachers at these schools are mostly recruited through public education institutions and their classes follow a fixed timetable, with some additional courses available to support students in achieving higher marks on their exams. For the most part, teachers and students who are enrolled go to school on a regular basis, except when there have been rising tensions, or an incident such as a random bombardment. However, in areas where there has been a large influx of internally displaced people (IDPs), many children are out of school (particularly displaced children) for a variety of reasons, including a lack of available learning spaces, a lack of official documentation allowing for children to enroll, etc. (UNICEF, 2015).

Opposition-Controlled Regions

Education in opposition-controlled regions is characterized by unstable enrolment and intermittent academic semesters due to the armed struggle and continuing insecurity. Schools are still supervised by the Syrian government in the majority of the opposition-controlled areas, and receive government funding, including payments for teachers and school resources, but often this funding is insufficient.

The opposition and its own Ministry of Education run some schools in these regions, but these often lack qualified staff, despite low student-teacher ratios (classes have a maximum of ten students). In the areas controlled by moderate groups, education services often continue, using the official Syrian curriculum, but with certain subjects removed, such as national education and history, because they are seen as reflecting the views of the present government. In some of these areas, a curriculum revised by the Syrian Opposition Coalition based in Turkey is in

use. The Syrian Opposition Coalition conducted Grades 9 and 12 examinations in these areas and provided certificates for students who successfully completed such examinations. However, there is no official recognition of any certification issued by an opposition group from the government, thus making educational progression difficult for concerned students. There are some local organizations and NGOs striving to improve the educational situation by opening institutes and organizing some courses and centers for children affected by the war. But the quality of education is often poor, such that even the people who are in charge of these organizations prefer to enroll their children in government supervised schools. The national exams in Syria are conducted exclusively in the government-controlled areas. Students from the opposition areas have to enter these areas to sit their exams.

Kurdish-Controlled Regions

The educational system in the Kurdish regions is similar to the government-controlled areas in terms of safety, but in Kobani or Ayn al-Arab (a Kurds area located near the Turkish borders), the majority of its educational institutions and buildings were destroyed due to intensive armed battles with Islamic State (ISIL) in 2015. The Syrian government, in collaboration with international organizations, continues to provide schools in these regions with maintenance support, textbooks and other resources, and guarantees the salaries in the educational sector. The curriculum in these regions is Kurdish and is taught in Kurdish language, Arabic and Syriac (Aramaic). Some parents oppose the Kurdish curriculum, since it is not officially recognized by the government. The previously existing education system has broken down in the areas controlled by ISIL.

International Standards in Syria's Higher Education

The need to encourage the adoption of international academic standards of transparency, academic freedom, and rigor, could significantly impact governance across the Syrian higher education

sector, as well as the governance and management of individual universities. There should be further scope for partnership and collaboration over the introduction of international standards for Higher Education.

University Third Mission

Currently both public and private universities show evidence of governance strategies that are divided. If these universities are to have any chance of operating effectively, there needs to be a unified move towards a view that sees universities as having a public mission, reflecting civic engagement, employment mobility, and as a place for knowledge development. To fulfil a civic role, universities will need to adopt international standards of academic freedom, transparency, equality of access, and rigor in setting standards, revising curricula, awarding degrees or conducting new research. Providing human and financial support in each of these areas offers a real opportunity for the international community to have a stabilizing influence in the immediate and the longer-term future of Syrian Higher Education. Of equal importance is the focus on a civic mission. At the international level, higher education is seen to uphold standards of transparency, autonomy, freedom, and cultural pluralism, and this will be crucial to any post-conflict Syrian HE sector. To such an end, national or local organizations and other entities can also impact on individual institutions by collaborating on community initiatives, drawing on the support of academics, involving students in community outreach and where possible supporting internships and work-related programs.

Capacity Building

Any modernization of Higher Education requires additional capacity building for university administration, academics in teaching, research, and curriculum development, adapted to fit the local context. For instance, Syrian academics currently outside Syria who may return will be able to share new skills and knowledge gained whilst abroad.

Recommended areas of support to Syrian Universities can be classified into four distinct areas:

      1) internal sectoral support;

Human and financial support offers a real opportunity for the international community to have a stabilizing influence for the Syrian Higher Education.

4 areas in need of support in Higher Education: internal sector, individual institutions, academics, current and future students.

> 2) support to individual institutions in Syria;
> 3) support for academics, both internally and in exile; and
> 4) support for current and future students.

In each of these areas, there are clear roles for either partnering countries or international organizations, NGOs or funding agencies, and university associations and institutions.
These can be detailed as follows:

- To review internal missions and governance structures, particularly in relation to the civic or community-facing mission of universities in both public and private universities.
- To lobby for a fairer redistribution of internal financial support and additional external support and a recognition of the importance of HE within the education sector; particularly its role in educating future security and Ministry personnel and a generation of professionals and of citizens.
- Support for individual institutions in the country.
- To build internal capacity around the development of competencies and the restoration of standards and to provide financial, material and human resources to individual departments.
- To help build international partnerships with other foreign universities.
- To develop alternative pedagogies and teaching approaches, particularly practically oriented and work-related approaches and pedagogies for peacebuilding, such as community-engaged learning that take account of diversity and difference and focus on rebuilding trust and accepting cultural pluralism.
- To encourage partner organisations and foreign universities to support capacity building and open learning or virtual programs providing distant training.
- To support academics, living either in Syria or outside, by providing access to academic databases and journals, access to research funding, discipline-related mentoring support or collaboration in international research partnerships.
- To include Syrian academics in research partnerships and provide them with access to academic databases to counteract some of the frustration felt by academics unable to progress their study and work.

- To fill gaps in learning in individual disciplines through the development of a range of e-learning or distance-learning programs and through support for the Syrian Open Education program.
- To develop greater links with employment and labor-market opportunities for careers support and in the transition from study into work.

Research results

Data on the Higher Education sector

As to start, the document reports the qualitative data collected from the 13 responding universities, to define the context. Most universities were established after the year 2000. Founding dates go between 1923 (University of Damascus) to 2016 (Tartus University). This is shown in figure 1:

INSTITUTION	YEAR OF FOUNDATION
Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences	2005
Al-Baath University	1979
Al Hawash Private University	2007
Al Sham Private University	2013
Arab International University	2005
Damascus University	1923
Ebla Private University	2007
University of Hama	2014
University of Kalamoon	2003
University of Manara	2016
Tartus University	2015
Tishreen University	1971
Yarmouk Private University	2008

In figure 2 we can see that 38.5 % of the universities are public, 53.8% are private for profit and 7.7% are private not for profit. So, the private sector is the most popular in Syrian Higher Education.

Type:
13 responses
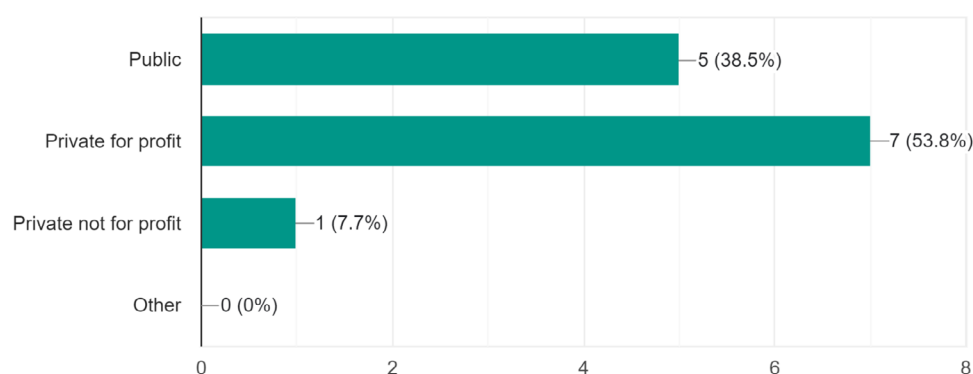
The number of faculties varies between 5 to 21. The number of departments varies between 9 to more than 120. The number of programs ranges between 2 and more than 100. This reflects the diversification in the number and types of faculties, but it also demonstrates variation in specialties. The universities in the study include all together 261 majors, 717 departments, 42 campuses.

Number of faculties

University	Value
Arab International University	8
Yarmouk Private University	6
Al Sham Private University	11
Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences	6
Tishreen University	17
Ebla Private University	6
Al Hawash Private University	8
Al-Baath University	21
Tartus University	11
University of Manara	5
Damascus University	20
University Of Hama	14
University of Kalamoon	9

Number of programs / majors

University	Value
Arab International University	17
Yarmouk Private University	5
Al Sham Private University	10
Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences	5
Tishreen University	49
Ebla Private University	5
Al Hawash Private University	10
Al-Baath University	44
Tartus University	1
University of Manara	4
Damascus University	46
University Of Hama	100
University of Kalamoon	13

The studied universities represent 299.315 students, 4.614 professors and 10.935 administrative staff. Those numbers reveal how the Higher Education sector in Syria is still fulfilling its set role.

The funding process, considered to be crucial for the proper functioning of the universities, is provided mostly from students'

fees and from owners of the institution. This confirms that the private sector is strongly represented in Syrian Higher Education.

What are the different sources of funding for the University? Please select all that applies.

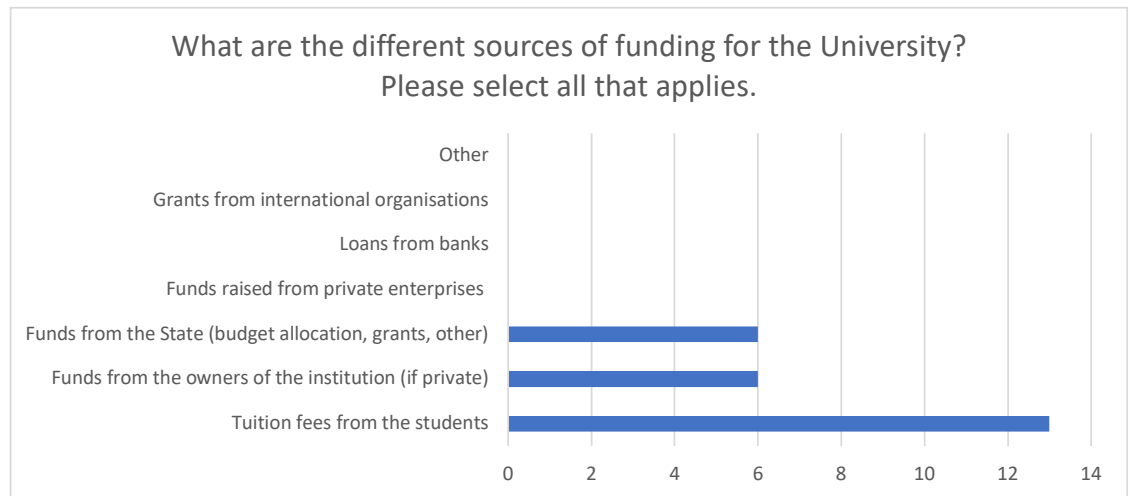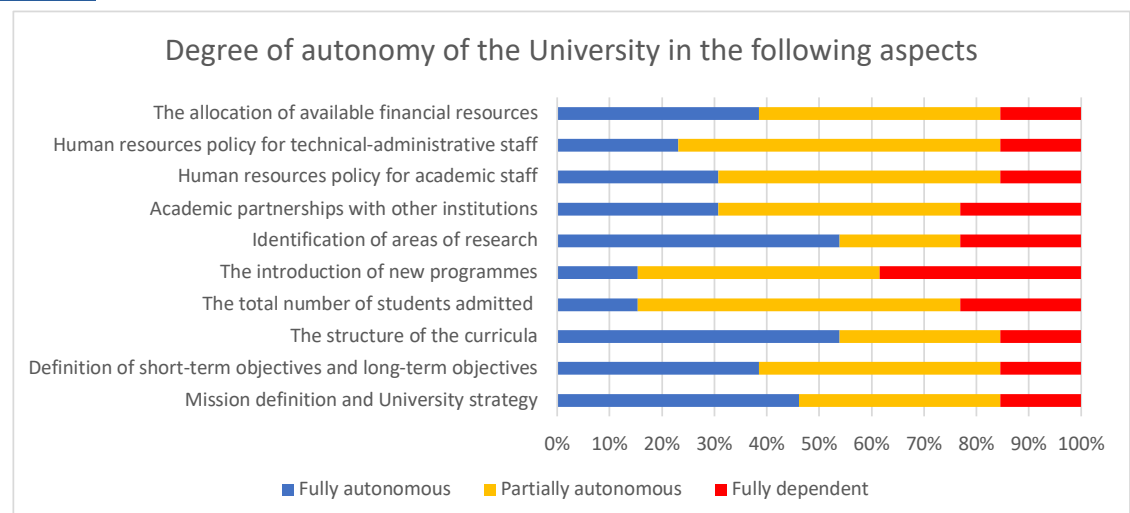| Source	Value
Other	0
Grants from international organisations	0
Loans from banks	0
Funds raised from private enterprises	0
Funds from the State (budget allocation, grants, other)	6
Funds from the owners of the institution (if private)	6
Tuition fees from the students	13

The capacity of universities of being autonomous is key to guage how universities function and how they perform in different areas. From the data collected, institutions feel to be more autonomous in research, reflecting the acknowledgement of the importance of research development in tertiary education. The least autonomous area of institutional performance is the allocation of the available financial resources. So, universities need to be funded from different resources, other than those mentioned previously.

Degree of autonomy of the University in the following aspects

- The allocation of available financial resources
- Human resources policy for technical-administrative staff
- Human resources policy for academic staff
- Academic partnerships with other institutions
- Identification of areas of research
- The introduction of new programmes
- The total number of students admitted
- The structure of the curricula
- Definition of short-term objectives and long-term objectives
- Mission definition and University strategy

■ Fully autonomous   ■ Partially autonomous   ■ Fully dependent

The area of research seems to be a major objective of the tertiary educational cycle since a considerable number of universities include it in their mission.

How would you describe the mission of your institution?
13 responses

Teaching	12 (92.3%)
Research	10 (76.9%)
Vocational Education and Training (VET)	4 (30.8%)
Other	0 (0%)
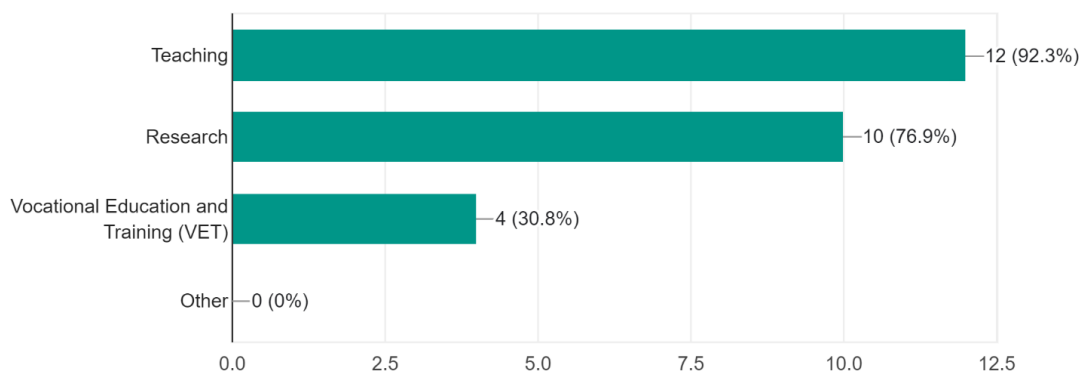
The types of degrees offered show how MA and PhD are among the degrees offered that can enhance university research work, even if only Bachelor degrees are given by all the 13 universities of the study.

Degrees offered: (select all that applies)
13 responses

Bachelor	13 (100%)
Master	5 (38.5%)
Doctorate	5 (38.5%)
Certificate	1 (7.7%)
Other	2 (15.4%)
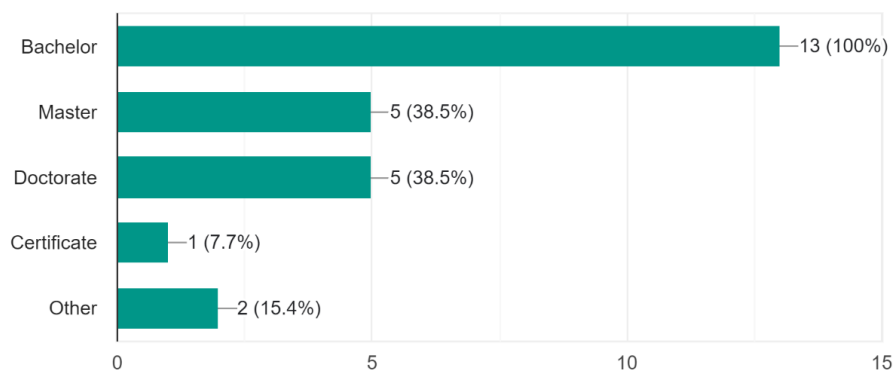
Nine out of 13 universities mentioned that they have a strategic plan. Thus, the Higher Education sector is on the right track of development on one condition: to follow up on every plan and make suitable monitoring steps and evaluation measures.

All universities showed the presence of a Quality Assurance department. It is clear that this administrative department is considered a priority for all universities. Then, most universities also have a Student's Affair Unit, an Admission and Registration Directorate, a Public Relations Office, a Foreign Language Center, an International Relation Office / Global Engagement Office.

Which administrative units does your university have?
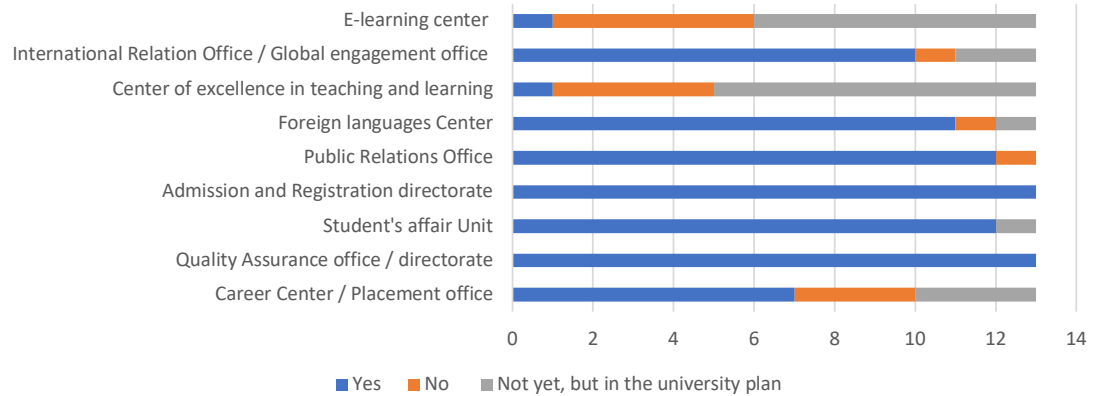
The main role of the Quality Assurance office is to assess the learning outcomes and evaluate the facilities of every institution. In addition, QA is applied to research, teaching methodologies and the accreditation process.

Which of the following is addressed by the QA system?
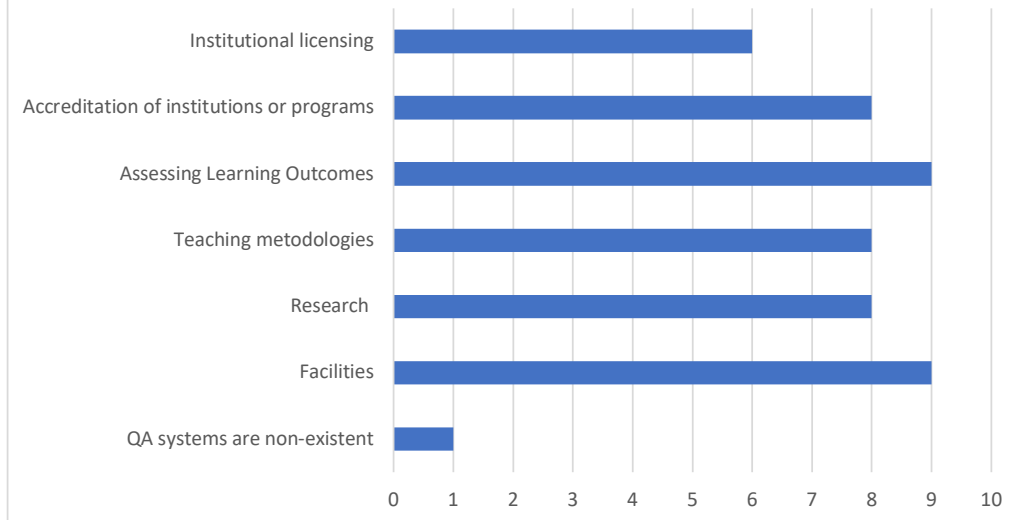
The Quality Assurance department focuses its work on establishing action plans and implementing corrective measures, as shown in the figure below.

What are the mechanisms used to follow up on evaluations' results?
13 responses

- Establishing of Action Plans
- Variable budget allocations are linked with results
- Implementing of corrective measures
- Other

53.8%
46.2%

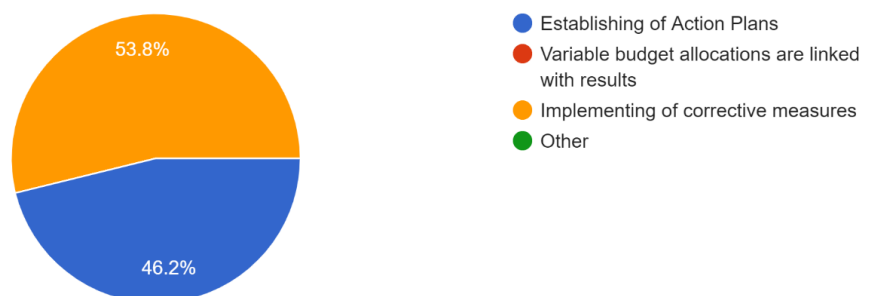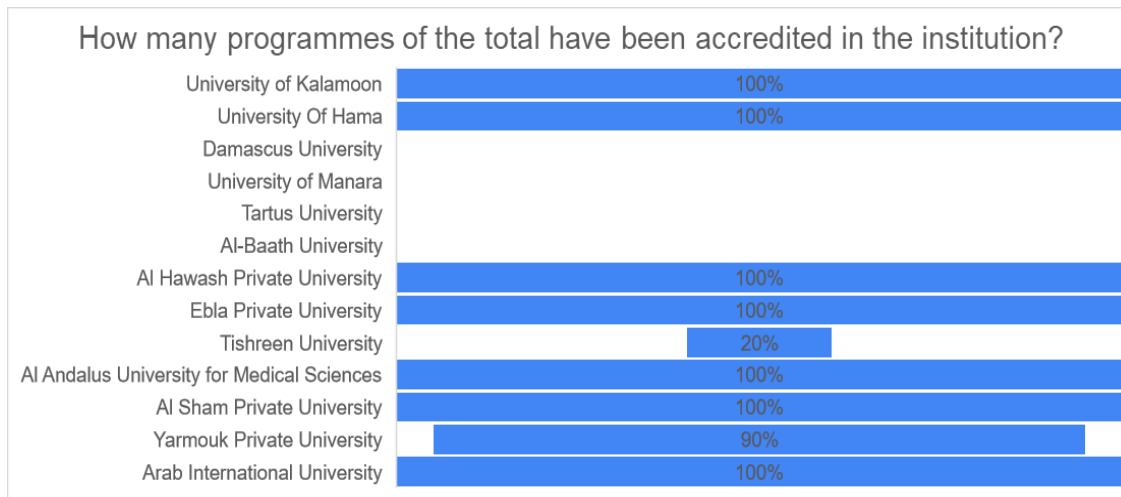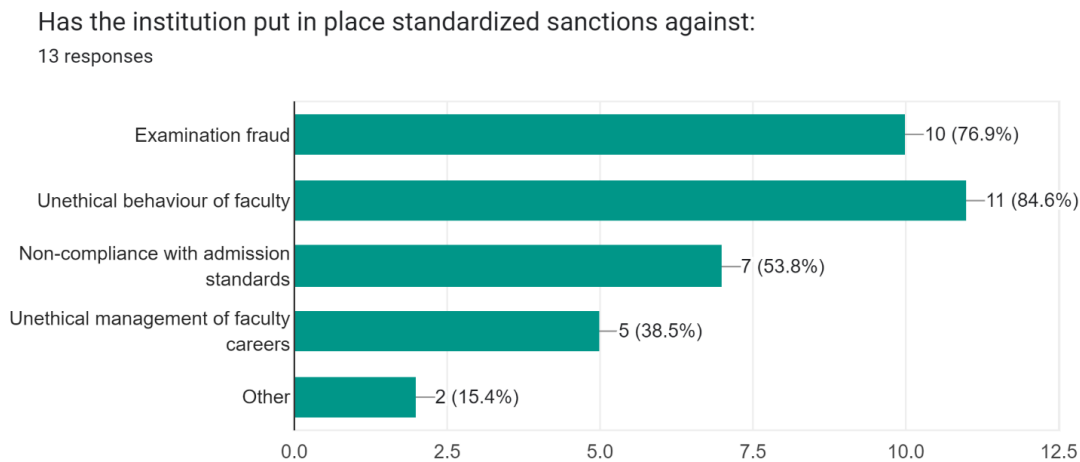A considerable number of programs were accredited in each university, thus increasing the trust among students and parents. However, such accreditation needs to be followed up, since many programs are still not accredited. Universities as well as MHE need to put more effort on this important responsibility.

How many programmes of the total have been accredited in the institution?

University	Percentage
University of Kalamoon	100%
University Of Hama	100%
Damascus University	
University of Manara	
Tartus University	
Al-Baath University	
Al Hawash Private University	100%
Ebla Private University	100%
Tishreen University	20%
Al Andalus University for Medical Sciences	100%
Al Sham Private University	100%
Yarmouk Private University	90%
Arab International University	100%

The sanctions enforced on different universities weakens the process of accreditation, especially if they are accused of unethical behavior or examination frauds.

Has the institution put in place standardized sanctions against:
13 responses

| Category	Value
Examination fraud	10 (76.9%)
Unethical behaviour of faculty	11 (84.6%)
Non-compliance with admission standards	7 (53.8%)
Unethical management of faculty careers	5 (38.5%)
Other	2 (15.4%)

Internationalisation of universities

Universities connect with other institutions inside and outside Syria through mobility programs and cooperation initiatives (even though strongly reduced in recent years).

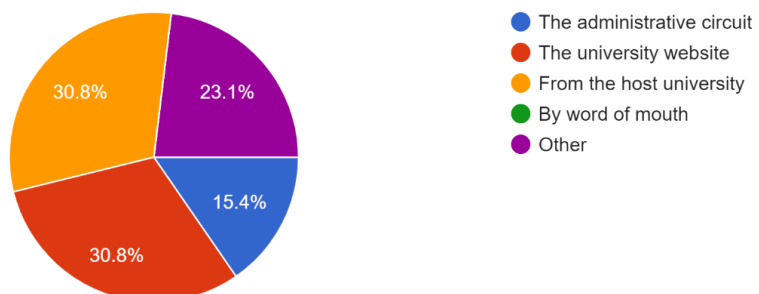Is there a department responsible for mobility programmes in your University?

13 responses

- Yes
- No

46.2%

53.8%
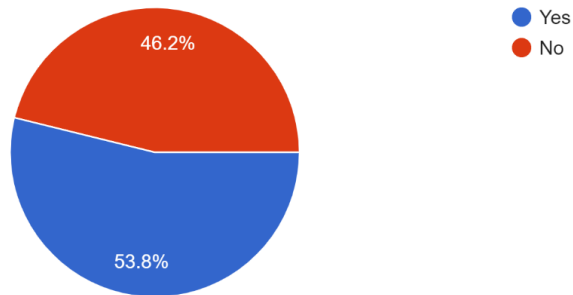
The mobility program plays an important role in helping these universities become global institutions and lead to impactful research and more effective improvements. Information on international mobility programmes reaches universities via different channels, while international cooperation is mostly due to personal relations of staff members with their foreign peers, or due to previous joint collaborations with foreign institutions.

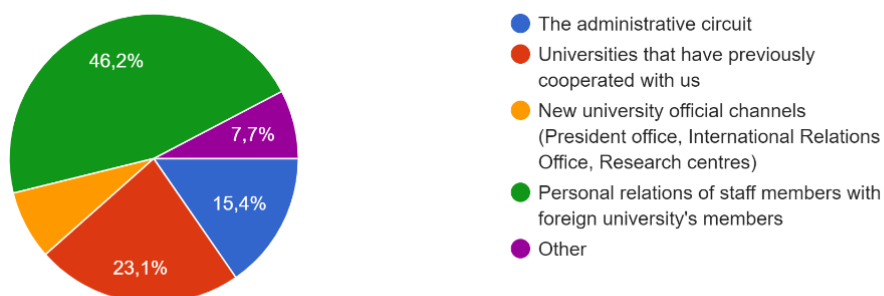Information on international mobility programmes reaches you through: (Please select the most appropriate answer)

13 responses

- The administrative circuit
- The university website
- From the host university
- By word of mouth
- Other

30.8%

23.1%

15.4%

30.8%

Information on international cooperation programmes reaches you through: (Please select the most appropriate answer)

13 risposte

- The administrative circuit
- Universities that have previously cooperated with us
- New university official channels (President office, International Relations Office, Research centres)
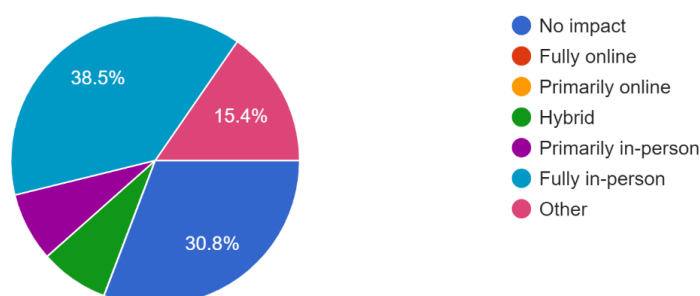- Personal relations of staff members with foreign university's members
- Other

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the whole process of teaching, learning and research. Online and hybrid teaching was used considerably in Syrian universities but still not as effective as it was used in other regions of the world.

Has the mode of teaching and learning changed due to COVID-19? If it has changed, what is the current overall situation?

13 responses

- No impact
- Fully online
- Primarily online
- Hybrid
- Primarily in-person
- Fully in-person
- Other
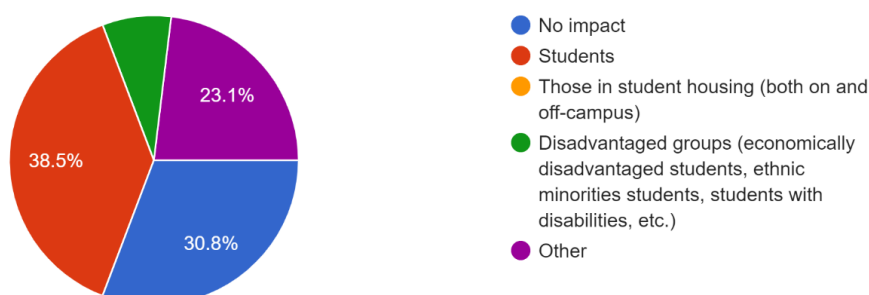
Students were the most affected by the pandemic restrictions.

Who is mostly affected by COVID-19?

13 responses

- No impact
- Students
- Those in student housing (both on and off-campus)
- Disadvantaged groups (economically disadvantaged students, ethnic minorities students, students with disabilities, etc.)
- Other

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Strategies, practices, challenges

The investigation identified some emerging trends affecting Syrian higher education institutions. The Higher Education system in Syria after the outbreak of war in 2011 is fragmented and broken in many cases, particularly in highly conflicted regions that lack both national and international recognition. Whilst the survey respondents identify varying higher education-associated political activity across the country, all institutions of Higher Education have suffered degrees of politicization through a variety of means that include problematic governance structures, archaic teaching practices, patronage and politicized appointments of senior management and academic posts. As a consequence, this has led to the social distrust of such institutions as capable of educating students into the future. Syria's pre-2011 attempts at modernization of higher education, including reform of curricula and teaching practices, the introduction of greater autonomy and quality assurance structures, met with considerable resistance.

Loss of intellectual capital and under-resourcing

The ongoing conflict has resulted in massive loss of academic and administrative expertise and infrastructural damages that were further worsened by the diversion of funding towards the conflict. The content and delivery of curricula, absence of practical application and increasing reliance on rote learning, outdated curricula and textbooks poses a significant challenge to all Syrian universities.

The loss of expertise coupled with the non-attendance of staff and students due to insecurity as well as appointment of Master's credentials to academic posts due to the absence of qualified PhD personnel, have all resulted in diminished teaching capacities and quality.

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The respondents reported about extensive bribery and cheating and suggest that the war led to increased corruption threatening the integrity of the Syrian Higher Education sector. Some made reference to the widespread presence of fake certification which has caused distrust and diminished social mobility. Respondents spoke of the lack of a significant research culture in Syrian universities even before the outbreak of war. In that limited funding or incentives, coupled with an overload of teaching responsibilities, little time is left for research. Even minimal funding had disappeared, while the context itself has made field research almost impossible. Most participants reported that research had all but disappeared after-2011.

The experiences of students varied across Syria's universities, relative to location, control, resources and whether private or public, but all reflected the realities of a highly shattered and declined sector, which despite attempted reform prior to war was still in need of extensive development and modernization.

Access after the outbreak of war in 2011 increased, as entry requirements were significantly lowered for both public and private universities to counter shrinking enrolments.

Due to the ongoing war, university choice was based on safety rather than quality considerations.

Despite improved access, attrition rates have soared, particularly in some urban areas, due to rising concerns for personal safety, lack of social and financial support and internal displacement, poverty and fear of detention or compulsory military service.

Educational quality

Improved access has come at the expense of quality.

In an attempt to maintain standards, some universities have introduced additional evaluation tools, such as oral exams. The continuing loss of experienced academic faculty, appointment of untrained new graduates in light of shortages, coupled with other faculty staff having to teach outside their area of specialization, as well as outdated curricula and texts, and absence of applied opportunities, have all resulted in a rapid deterioration in the

Students perceive HE as a highly shattered and declined sector, still in need of extensive development and modernization.

quality of teaching and learning standards. Respondents spoke about gaps in continuity negatively affecting the learning process, as buildings were unusable or inaccessible and water and electricity supplies often interrupted.

Even before the war, university programs were generally seen as poorly aligned with the market needs and still are seen to be so today. The process of transitioning into employment is also obstructed by bureaucratic red tape, including the security restrictions. Job opportunities are scarce and wherever possible, students seek employment abroad, although often lacking the proper skills to do so.

Students are ill-equipped for work, partly due to the ongoing disconnection between academic study and everyday practice or applied research.

If Syrian Higher Education is to be recognized in the future, current students will need to fill gaps in their learning caused by the disruption of conflict. Future students will need a broader and more comprehensive education; they will also need to improve their levels of English if they are to benefit from scientific journals produced by the broader academic community.

Some scholarships and open-learning programs have been developed in response to the conflict; these need to be made more broadly available, equipping those who remain or are able to return. Such support could impact significantly on the lives of current students, those of their communities and those of future generations of students.

The enquiry identifies a number of priority areas for response from the existing government, those of neighboring countries and the role of the international community, including UN and NGOs. Even though the majority of Syrian universities were only founded starting 2000, they have drawn a sizable number of students from both the native and displaced populations, which has resulted in the growth of the Syrian Higher Education sector. The Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) grants license and accreditation to Syrian universities. However, Syrian universities lack effective oversight and international recognition and accreditation. The lack of international accreditation has a negative impact on the transfer of students to universities outside

of Syria, undermines the trust that students and their parents have in these institutions, may have an effect on enrollment, and may increase the risk of financial instability for the universities. Due to the regional political complexity and reality, it also lacks linkages to other countries. However, despite a context of multi-party warfare, foreign intervention, and territorial fragmentation, MHE continues to operate, since such complexities could have easily resulted in the sector's collapse.

Quality assurance

In order to better address their conflict-affected realities and the need for a more open and democratic management approach to decision-making, management/staff/student relations, and communication, MHE should be able to design strategies, policies, and practices using a risk-management strategy. To enable the establishment of management policies, strategies, and practices that minimize risks to the delivery of high-quality higher education services, a set of risk-management quality assurance suggestions are made available for consideration by all Syrian Universities.
It is also crucial to recognize the universities' adaptability and resilience, as well as their dedication to maintaining local and displaced communities' access to higher education amid persistent instability and deteriorating economic and social situations.
In addition to the complicated and fragile environment in which the sector has developed, the lack of explicit quality management models and strategies in the documentation of either the 13 study universities also reflect the absence of any Quality Management (QM) tradition in Syria prior to the conflict and, as a result, the lack of awareness of the advantages of QM strategies as a tool to improve the quality of higher education services. The lack of a formal QM model should be viewed as an opportunity to introduce a more appropriate model than the standard models created for stable environments, which are being adopted throughout the world, including a good number of Syrian universities now fairly well established in conflict-affected countries and environments.
Even though no clear Quality Management strategies and policies

To cope with the detoriation of the quality of teaching and learning, MHE shall design strategies and policities using a risk-management strategy.

The conception of Quality Management in areas affected by conflict needs to include context at the center of its design in order to be immediately relevant.

were found, the investigation nonetheless uncovered a number of high-risk areas that either had a detrimental influence on the 13 universities' capacity to provide high-quality Higher Education presently or had the potential to do so in the future. The dangers that have been discovered fall within the traditional categories of MHE in fragile and unstable situations, such as academic, strategic, financial, operational, and reputational.

The conception of QM in areas affected by conflict needs to include context at the center of its design in order to be immediately relevant. A widespread desire to prevent potential risks is addressed by a risk management approach to quality management. Identifying and categorizing the risks is an essential first step in using a risk management method.

To make QM strategies more effective, it is essential to understand the factors that contribute to or obstruct their performance. By doing this, stakeholders will be better able to address or at the very least establish mitigation plans for the risks they face. "A planned and structured process aimed at assisting the project team in making the correct decision at the right time to identify, classify, quantify the risks and then to manage and control them" is what risk management is (Srinivas, 2019). Additionally, he contends that risks can be better managed if they are recognized early on and a well-thought-out mitigation strategy is created.

Managing and making decisions

The introduction of a more democratic management style, which has democratic decision-making processes at its core, could address actual lack of transparency or perceptions of lack of transparency in decision-making and recruitment.

Democratization

Effective institutional management is essential to reducing the risks affecting the provision of high-quality HE. This requires the organization and mobilization of an institution's entire human (academic and non-academic staff), material (facilities, etc.), and financial resources. Coherence throughout the whole university structure, including departments, divisions, faculties, and chairs,

as well as the administrative and teaching staff, is necessary to do this in a unified calm working atmosphere.

A horizontal network organizational structure, collective decision-making, democratic ownership, power, and accountability, as well as the value of ongoing, long-term employment inside an institution are all highlighted by many as crucial democratic management practices. When combined, these criteria ought to encourage the provision of high-quality instruction as well as the growth of a high-quality institution.

Recruitment, Retention, Motivation, and Commitment Risks in Staffing

The universities in question must be aware of the negative effects of what may appear to be nepotistic practices on staff confidence, morale, and loyalty to the organization, if posting job openings is not actually done or proper hiring/appointment procedures are not followed. By establishing a panel of qualified management and teaching personnel to assess and approve the employment of candidates, democratization might be extended to the hiring process.

Fulfilling labor market demands is crucial

Universities support job search through the Career Guidance Center. Unemployment has increased in the last 10 years as a result of the war and the collapsing economy of Syria in general. Graduates are keen to travel abroad and find better opportunities and a better future for themselves. Universities employ some of graduates, other find job in Syria or abroad, some continue their higher education. Job Fairs for graduates in collaboration with different local companies and institutions are organized on campus. The university appoints the first graduates to work at the university. Engineering graduates are appointed in all governmental institutions according to their interests.

Some business administration faculty are adopting an internship program for all graduates that help them build their practical experience.

The institutions' financial uncertainties represent a significant "risk" that hinders longer-term planning.

In order for students to work within their areas of specialty, it is crucial for universities to analyze the needs of the labor market before launching new departments. According to the poll, 59 students' qualifications were relevant to their jobs for 85% of them. The university's reputation is enhanced and there is a greater chance of an increase in enrollment when graduates show evidence of employment success. Few vocational training courses are included in university curricula in pharmacy and business administration faculties, these courses prepare the undergraduates for the market in addition to continual vocational training in other facilities like engineering, occupational therapy, architecture and dentistry faculties.

Some universities have two main centers: SCC (Skills and Career Center) which addresses the students and prepares them for their career. The other is the Training & Qualification Directorate which addresses both academic and administrative staff in the university and outside the university.

Vocational training is very important in supporting the student's scientific and practical capabilities. This is done at the university through training, workshops, and field training courses in the business sectors outside the university. Vocational training has an important role in employment, but the level of training is not sufficient to prepare a competitive graduate.

Expanding teaching staff income opportunities

To give teaching staff the ability to supplement their meager salaries, opportunities must be developed. The introduction of *evening classes* to attract more students, who are unable to attend classes during the day, may create new institutional revenue streams that will be beneficial to the staff.

Economic insecurity

The institutions' financial uncertainties represent a significant risk that hinders longer-term planning. To enable MHE to engage in longer-term planning, funders should be asked to guarantee amounts and payment dates, and strategies should be devised to attract new funders.

Transparency

Greater openness and honesty regarding the difficulties encountered and the constraints that follow would aid in fostering understanding and boosting faculty morale. Another significant difficulty, that necessitates the formulation of a clear strategy to attract new funders or pave the path for more reliable funding, is raising salaries to a level that supports individual living expenditures and attracts competent teaching staff.

Evaluation of teachers and professional development

To prevent any decline in standards and teaching quality, the MHE must increase its capacity to monitor compliance with its requirements, including the routine evaluation of teaching personnel at its licensed and accredited MHE. In order to invest in the capacity-building of their employees and improve the quality of instruction, MHE should collaborate to plan and implement collaborative professional development programs for their personnel. This needs to be viewed as an investment in the caliber of their educational offerings as well as a way to foster staff dedication and institutional loyalty and to improve their institutions' standing in the larger international community. The research revealed priorities for academic development that are in line with areas of focus in the field of academic development globally, but it also highlighted the need for specialist professional development to assist staff in addressing the particular challenges of the resource-poor and precarious Syrian HE context.

Student Life

At various levels, students are represented in all academic councils (Department, College, University Council). The Student Union is governed by delegates chosen by the students.
Each academic council and the university's general council each have a student representative. All of the councils, including the faculty, department, and university council, are attended by union members. Students join the Students National Union, which

At various levels, students are represented in all academic councils.

speaks on behalf of all students in the University Council and other important forums. Students take part in all activities that are part of campus life through the Student Union. Students take part in a variety of university-related activities, including sporting and artistic competitions, exhibitions, events, and festivals. Their participation in university councils is represented and faculty administrations.

Community involvement

Universities have a responsibility to identify community needs and provide programs with an international focus in response. Building trust between local communities and universities is a smart move that can reduce the threat of competition from other universities. To ensure that both can better serve the goals of the MHE, particularly their community-facing duties, the relationship between both universities and the community should be strengthened.

The role of Higher Education in the national and regional contexts

After many years of conflict, Syrian Higher Education Institutions continue to function. The most significant impact over the HE sector has been on the quality of the education provided, and on the capacity of Syrian HEIs to maintain stable relations with foreign universities around the world. Academic cooperation has suffered deeply due to the political instability, the collapse of infrastructures, and the isolation of the country.

Syrian HEIs used to be partners in European funded projects with Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and to have several collaborations with foreign universities. Recently, projects have been for the most part closed, and also the National Erasmus Office in Syria closed in 2017. Cooperation starts and moves up-to-date along bilateral agreements between universities, for staff exchanges, academic staff mobility, training and skills development. Moreover, due to the difficult relation with Europe, and the difficulties for students and staff to be granted a visa to enter European Member States, Syrian HEIs are recently looking elsewhere, pursuing collaborations with Russia, Iran, China, Indonesia.

Syrian universities have clearly expressed their will to restore academic cooperation and international relations with foreign universities, especially with European ones. Most universities (especially public universities) are equipping themselves with staff and offices dedicated to international relations. However, we must acknowledge that most Syrian HEIs still do not have statements or written strategies for international relations, nor has an official roadmap for internationalisation on behalf of the Ministry of Higher Education been designed. Moreover, International Relations Offices seem to be competing with each other for internationalisation opportunities.

Syria has always been a preferred destination for foreign

> *Due to the fact that studying abroad is not formally recognized, mobility is managed differently at private and public universities, and at different level of education.*

undergraduate and postgraduate students particularly for those who specialize in Arabic and Islamic studies. Today, mobility is a very small part of university life for Syrians. The international community takes responsibility for reintegrating Syrian refugees into higher education through scholarships from international donors such as UNESCO and programs (e.g, DAFI), and through a number of projects funded by the European Union such as HOPES. However, Syrian students, from inside Syria, have no access to such scholarships, and limited access to other opportunities. Mobility for Syrian students is financed with ICM funds of the European Commission and through scholarships financed by the university itself or the MHE and distributed along public universities.

Due to the fact that studying abroad is not formally recognized, mobility is managed differently at private and public universities, and depends on the level of education. At the undergraduate level, mostly students of private universities, with a wealthy background, are likely to go on mobility and to come back to Syria. On the contrary, at public universities, almost only master and PhD students go on mobility: they do research abroad as part of their study programs or do a training period at a foreign university as part of their thesis design. These are usually students with English proficiency which are most likely seeking working opportunities abroad. Mobility for academic and administrative staff is instead pursued as a means for acquiring skills, language competences and exchange knowledge, within the framework of cooperation agreements. As a general reflection, very strong travel restrictions are imposed on Syrians, along with a very high risk of brain drain and migrations with no return; and many are unable to fund their learning journeys abroad.

Collaborations with other Universities in Syria

Collaborations between different universities in Syria are activated at the level of agreements. Cooperation in the areas of teaching faculty, students' exchange, research exchanging information and experiments, conferences, seminars and sporting, cultural, social and artistic activities plus using each other's laboratories. Some agreements deal with educational

and technical assistance between different private universities in Syria, and specifically exchanging information and data from research. Agreements also relate to the exchange of teaching staff between Syrian institutions (specifically from public to private universities). Main topics of agreements are: cooperation in joint scientific actions (researches, conferences), exchange of visits for students, administrative and academic staff mobility for training, participation to conference, meetings, exchange of faculty members, training of staff, students, periodicals and publications, events and activities.

Collaborations with Foreign Universities

Many agreements with foreign countries are also established for example Iran, Iraq, Russia, Europe (especially through the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission) with specifically France, Italy, Germany, Spain, England, Portugal, Holland, Sweden, then Latin America, North America, Canada, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova, Switzerland. Topics of the agreement vary as follows: cooperation in joint scientific actions (researches, conferences, publications and journals), students mobility, administrative and academic staff mobility, international projects, joint programmes, shared research, training of staff and students, events and collaborative projects. However, many of the agreements are inactive or suspended or terminated due to the embargo imposed by the EU and USA. Among the main challenges to international cooperation, besides visa issues, participants listed: funding, long time to establish mutual trust, the rules set by the Ministry of Higher Education, financial restrictions and limited resources. Moreover, due to the sanctions on Syria and the political situation related to the Syrian crisis, cooperation with Arab Higher institutions is limited in terms of mutual projects and exchange of events and staff.

Impact of the pandemic

Understanding COVID-19's effects and Syrian Higher Education's response necessitates a comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of the connections between ongoing, complex

Many agreements are formally signed between Syrian and foreign HEIs but they are mostly inactive or suspended due to the embargo imposed on the country.

Outdated legislation, poor facilities and infrastructures, the distrust towards online education, all deeply impacted the capacity of institutions to properly adapting and adjusting to the COVID-19 restrictions.

issues that are at the core of the country's Higher Education system, the effects of a protracted conflict, and structural forms of violence that are imposed from outside Syria. The underlying structural constraints of Syria's Higher Education system as a whole have a significant impact on the challenges of adjusting to institution closure and utilizing official and trustworthy digital academic platforms for communication. The global imperative of digitalization has been made clear by COVID-19. Many HEIs were forced to move faster towards digitalization and the use of ICT tools in education, to compensate for the restrictions of movement and in-presence life. The digital dimension of education had an impact also on internationalisation activities, which had a great stop (it was impossible to perform mobilities and organize international events). Virtual mobility, virtual exchanges, practices of internationalisation at home were developed further as a response to the limitations caused by the COVID-19 crisis, potentially opening new opportunities for universities, and in some cases pushing the national decision-makers, reluctant to fully recognize online learning, to adapt to the changes. However, Syria's Higher Education system is unable to offer the bare minimal digital academic services. Online learning management systems are lacking in universities. In the majority of public universities, neither students nor staff have access to electronic libraries or to pertinent sources for scientific literature. They lack any formal tools or university email addresses that would allow them to communicate with one another and with international peers.

All of this, in a context of poor infrastructure, electricity cuts and lack of proper facilities.

Conclusions

Admittedly, it is illogical to criticize a war-torn nation's education system for not keeping up with the rapidly changing international landscape. However, the scenario prior to 2011 was tragically comparable, indicating a gravely problematic unwillingness to alter current working practices. In the end, issues with traditional forms of teaching, learning, and assessment that restrict critical thinking and heavily rely on rote learning and memorization are intrinsically linked to digitalization, or the lack thereof. It also has to do with the fact that there isn't a healthy research community as a result of inadequate research training, a lack of incentives, and a lack of adequate research financing.

Conflict has resulted in a continual *brain drain,* infrastructure loss, general capacity reduction, and an accompanying decline in teaching quality. These issues are further aggravated. International pressures and sanctions have had a significant impact on Higher Education in Syria due to the contemporary integration of academia within the national and international economy (imposed as a coercive tool). Sanctions have caused a loss of relationships, cooperation, and connections with foreign organizations and universities because they lack clarity and specific criteria. Most Syrian professors and universities do not qualify for grants. Universities also have limited access to foreign research databases.

Recommendations

Strengthening universities

- Universities shall train academic staff to raise the quality of teaching and research, and invest resources in teaching and research infrastructures. While improving the quality of their programs, universities are going to perform closer to international standards, increasing graduates' employability and placement nationally and internationally.
- At institutional level, universities shall introduce more appropriate models and standards for Quality Assurance and clear strategies for Quality Management.
- Democratization of the hiring process of staff in Higher Education Institutions and increased institutional autonomy and financial capacity.

Higher Education Institutions in the country and in the region

- The Higher Education sector in Syria needs a more open and democratic management approach to decision-making, therefore the Ministry of Higher Education shall design strategies and policies to guide the sector coherently.
- Investing in providing universities with infrastructures to fully exploit the digital dimension of education and the opportunities provided by virtual mobility, virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning, delivery of international lectures, etc.
- Strengthening the role of International Relation Offices and drafting long-term strategies for internationalisation, to return playing a role in the international scenario, reducing the country's isolation and becoming an actor for stability in the region through science diplomacy actions and scientific cooperation across borders.
- Enhancing the social relevance of universities in cooperation with local actors to generate stability, drive economic development, fill political divisions and serve the community.

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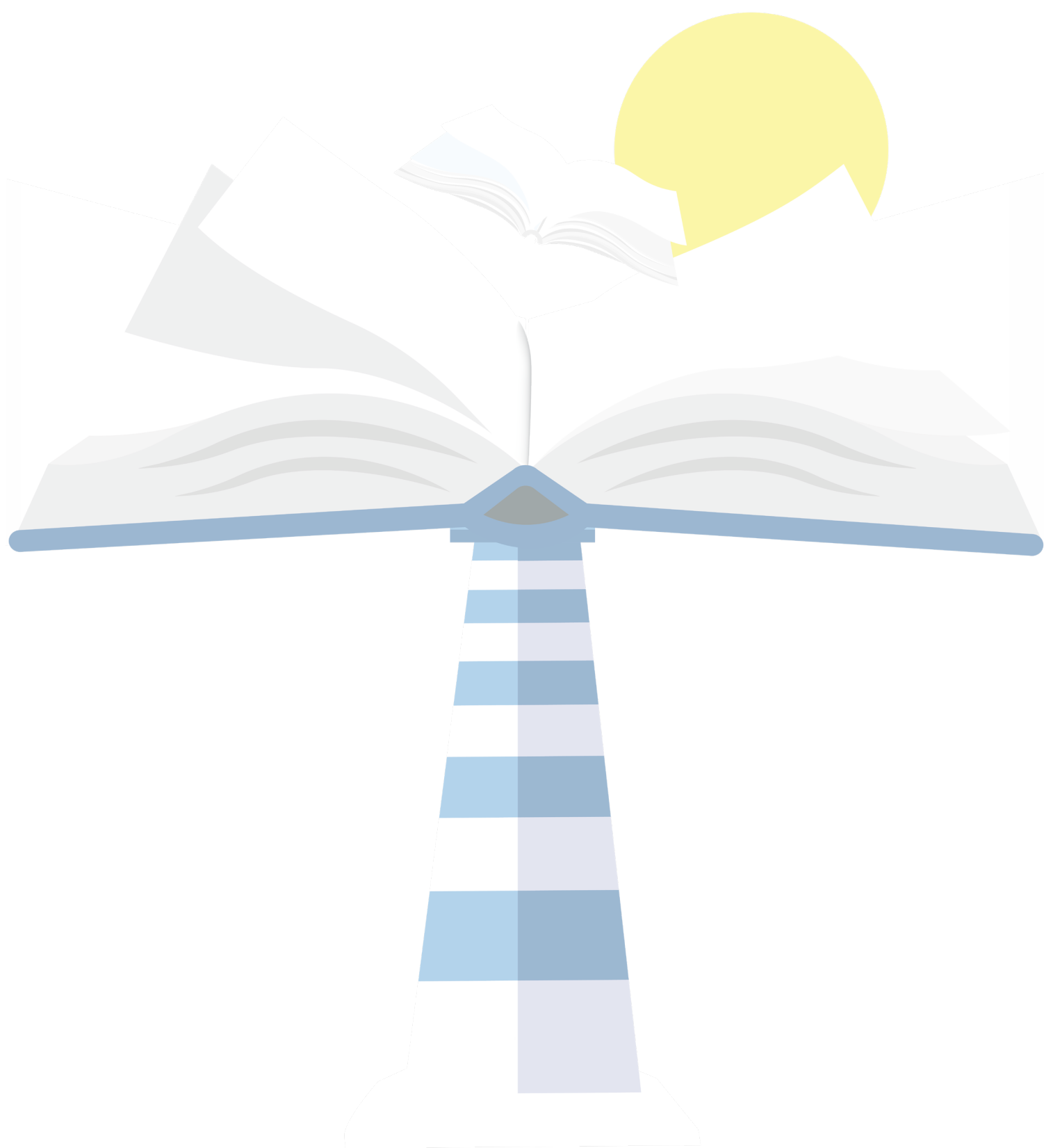- MHE (2016) the electronic bags for the curriculum books year.

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