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Universities in ruins

A Look at Higher Education in Syria

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Amjad sits behind the cash register of a takeaway restaurant. He talks to customers, takes money from them, and then answers the phone and writes down the caller's order with their delivery address. Whenever an opportunity arises, he peeks into the book lying open on his feet. Amjad is a third-year student at the Faculty of Economics. He works evening shifts in this fast food restaurant to support himself and his family, as he has done since entering university three years prior. "I am not the only one who works in addition to studies," Amjad said. "Most of my

colleagues, young men and women, work in different professions along with their studies in order to support themselves through university. I may keep this job after graduating, because it is not easy to find a job that matches my degree with an income that spares me the need for overtime.”

Before addressing university graduates and the difficulties they face, what is the reality of higher education in Syria today, especially in public universities?

Higher education after a decade of war

On 15 April 2021, a **workshop** was held entitled “Higher Education in Syria after a Decade of War” organized by the EU-funded EDU-Syria program and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Its participants, academics and experts explained that “Syrian universities face a myriad of challenges including damaged infrastructure, outdated curricula, and unqualified faculty. Additionally, there is an absence of research resources and academic freedom, as well as insecurity and lack of funding and international exchange.” Perhaps this summarizes the majority of the challenges and issues facing Syrian universities, both public and private.

This was confirmed by **Sulaiman Mouselli**, professor of finance at the Arab International University in Daraa. “The war has caused many challenges in universities both public and private. These include poor digitization of infrastructure, poor quality of education, outdated teaching methods, lack of digital skills, and faculty brain drain due to low income, instability and poor funding. The deteriorating situation has forced many students to try to fill gaps

through self-learning, by relying on open source and free online courses.” For her part, Salam Said, lecturer in economics and social sciences at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology in Germany, spoke about the importance of higher education in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. “The goal of higher education is not only to provide professional skills or conduct research, but to allow students to be critical and creative, and enable them to think outside the box,” she said. “Higher education also helps keep young people away from involvement in armed conflict, and allows them to share the values of peace, democracy and solidarity. However, universities must be completely independent, a condition that is difficult to maintain in patriarchal societies and repressive political contexts.” In turn, Nahed Ghazoul, assistant professor of linguistics at Paris Nanterre University, spoke extensively about the deteriorating state of education in Idlib and northern Syria.

Other factors that could also be considered are political and security conditions that affected universities in Syria. The threats, persecution and arrests that befell many students and teaching staff early in the Syrian revolution have forced many to either cease their studies or leave the country, which will be discussed in detail later.

Ranking of Syrian universities

Higher education in Syria has witnessed a significant decline in recent years, which is clearly demonstrated in the international rankings of Syrian public and private universities and institutes as shown in [Webometrics Ranking of World Universities](#), which publishes university rankings twice a year. It collects data in the first weeks of

January and July of each year, then publishes its findings at the end of these two months. In its ranking of universities, the site depends on indicators extracted from the websites of the universities in question, on the quality of teaching and research results, the international standing of the university, the extent of its communication with society, and whether it meets the most important standards and requirements of scientific research including contact with various sectors of the economy. At the time of this writing, Damascus University ranked 3,628 globally and first in Syria, while Tishreen University in Lattakia came in second in Syria and ranked 4,119 globally, and Aleppo University ranked third in Syria and 4,936 globally, and in fourth place in Syria came the Higher Institute for Applied Sciences and Technology in Damascus, ranking 4,999 globally. In sixth place in Syria was Al-Baath University in Homs which ranked 5,358 globally. Hama University came in 12th place locally and 8,480 globally, and in 11th place at the level of Syria was the Syrian Virtual University whose global ranking is 7,989 according to the website. As for Euphrates University in Deir ez-Zor, it ranked 20th in Syria, while Tartous University ranked 14th, and the Higher Institute of Business Administration in Damascus ranked 22nd country-wide. The remaining rankings at the level of Syria were for private universities.

Reactions to this ranking varied at the official level in Syria, as regime-aligned newspaper Al-Watan published **an article** on the ranking results issued early this year, which stated: “The new ranking disappointed earlier expectation of higher education, that the ranking of Damascus University would improve to less than 3,000 (according to a statement the former assistant to the minister. Meanwhile, the ministry remains hopeful that Syria will enter the 2,000-rank scale in

upcoming rankings.” The newspaper article added: “Information from the Ministry of Higher Education revealed new measures taken to improve the classification, with a study to support external publishing for professors and researchers, provided that the university pays half or all of the costs of international publication.” The newspaper contacted the director of assessment and evaluation in the ministry, Issam Khoury, who said: “We expected significant improvement in the ranking of Damascus University, but other universities are also moving at a strong pace.” He noted that there are present difficulties in terms of accessing the site and the reality of the Internet, in addition to the high cost of publishing internationally, which range from 200 to 800 USD. The newspaper piece obtained a copy of a statement issued by Damascus University, in which it defended the decline of its global ranking from previous years by saying: “The ranking issued in July of 2021 adopted a standard that was not adopted in the first experimental ranking in January of 2022, as was usual. Damascus University has not declined, but rather new criteria were used in the ranking that differ from earlier standards, and a new calculus different from that previously adopted.” The university referred to “efforts made to raise its international ranking, and work to achieve global presence through international agreements that have been implemented domestically and internationally, as well as agreements signed with European countries and scientific conferences at a high level of international and local coordination.” Despite these statements, the ranking of all Syrian universities has declined according to the latest figures published by the website webometrics.

Commenting on this, a university professor (who opted not to be named) told AlJumhuriya.net: “We cannot place all the

blame on the ministry or the universities, because the situation is very difficult. Education has ceased to be a priority for the government as it was years ago. Today, the priority is citizens' livelihoods, which the state is unable to secure. Imagine that, in 2010, the allocations to education in the government's public budget were 35.4 billion SYP, equivalent at the time to about 778 million USD as the exchange rate ranged between 46 and 50 SYP to the USD. However, in this year of 2022, the entire **public budget** is only 13,325 billion SYP (5.3 billion USD as per the currency exchange rates when the budget was announced), and half of this budget goes to livelihood subsidies. Furthermore, there are some controversial decisions taken annually by the Ministry of Higher Education, which take attention away from scientific and research projects that could improve the reputation of education in Syria. Therefore, I do not think that there will be a tangible improvement in the reality of education locally or at the level of global rankings in the foreseeable future."

On the other hand, the public Syrian Virtual University issued a **lengthy statement** on the ranking of Syrian universities, especially the Virtual University, entitled "The University's Message to its Students: On the Ranking of Syrian Universities Between Reality and Aspiration." The statement begins by stating: "It must be noted that this ranking is not universally recognized, being incomplete and relying on only 4 indicators." It concludes by saying: "The current situation will remain as is for the ranking of Syrian public universities and the Syrian Virtual University, and there is relative gradual progress by private universities at the level of Syria. However, our global position in webometrics rankings will remain low, and we will remain outside of the most important rankings. This cannot be

overcome, nor can we launch our universities towards more advanced rankings, without making fundamental changes to the mechanism of work of the entire system of higher education. Then, after achieving important breakthroughs, we could talk about the effects of political, economic, technical and scientific blockade against Syria, as other countries such as Iran and Cuba have managed, through developing their own capabilities, to achieve important academic breakthroughs despite all the unjust blockades that they have suffered.”

The structure of public universities today

There are eight public universities in Syria. Damascus University is the largest and oldest existing university, and it is the mother university in Syria, whose first inception dates back to the early 20th century. Its faculties and institutes are distributed mainly between the capital, Damascus, and its countryside, and it has three branches in other governorates (Daraa, As-Suwayda, and Quneitra). The University of Aleppo is the second oldest university in Syria, as its Faculty of Engineering was established in 1946 and was then affiliated with the Syrian University in Damascus. This faculty formed the nucleus for the University of Aleppo, which was then established in 1958 with its main headquarters being in the city of Aleppo. Some faculties affiliated with it were based in the city Idlib before the city emerged out of the regime’s control. Tishreen University is located in the city of Latakia. Established in 1971 and initially known as the University of Latakia, it contained only three faculties, one for Arts and Humanities, one for Science, and another for Agriculture. The university was renamed Tishreen University in 1975, and it now includes many faculties and departments in the city of Latakia, and

it had a branch in the city of Tartous that later became an independent university. Al-Baath University, located in the city of Homs, was established in 1979. It has faculties across in the city, a branch in Palmyra, and another in the city of Hama which later became an independent institution named the University of Hama. Al-Furat University was established by Law No. 33 of 2006 to serve the region of eastern Syria (Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, al-Raqqa). With its headquarters in the city of Deir ez-Zor, the university has a branch in the city of al-Hasakah in which programs are suspended from time to time due to conflicts in the region between regime forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or, as happened last February, as a result of clashes between the SDF and ISIS fighters after an escape of some ISIS members from al-Sina'a prison on the outskirts of the city of al-Hasakah. Al-Furat University has another branch in the city of Raqqa which has ceased operation since 2013 after regime forces left the city. As for the University of Hama, which contained faculties of al-Baath University, it became an independent university in 2014 and now includes a number of faculties based in the city of Hama, two faculties in Salamiyah, and one in Masyaf. The University of Tartous, the newest university to be established in Syria, also included a number of colleges affiliated with Tishreen University, before becoming an academic institution in its own right, in 2015.

Finally, the Syrian Virtual University which defines itself as follows: "In a new addition of its kind in Syria, the Syrian Virtual University saw its official inauguration ceremony on 2 September 2002. The Virtual University, the first to adopt virtual education in the Middle East established by a decision of the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education, aims to provide world-class education to Syrian students in their

country, and includes all professional categories currently available.” Syria Virtual University programs include: first university degree (two years), undergraduate “license” degree (four years), engineering degree (five years), master’s and postgraduate studies (two years), doctoral programs, and joint programs with foreign universities. In addition to the universities previously mentioned, there are four higher institutes directly supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, two in Damascus, one in rural Damascus and another in Homs, along with technical institutes in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia and Deir ez-Zor and other institutes affiliated to ministries other than Higher Education.

For the regime, the decision to establish universities in Hama and Tartous was not for purely academic reasons. Rather, it was a political and security decision made against the background of events that unfolded since 2011, especially the developments in Aleppo and its university, one of the oldest and most important universities in Syria. There was great fear that Aleppo might become completely outside of the regime’s control, as happened in Idlib and Raqqa, and thus the regime resorted to a policy of expansion towards areas where its control is secured and consolidated. This is evident by the amount of criticism leveled against Tartous University, particularly over its lack of educational staff and poor infrastructure. Most of the buildings that constitute this university are old schools ceded by the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Higher Education pending the construction of real university campuses, which was confirmed by Al-Watan Newspaper in a long discussion about the delays in construction work at Tartous University, which does not seem to be receiving a proper campus any day soon. The newspaper [report](#) says

that the land on which Tartous University is to be built was acquired in 2007, and while the government announced the opening of Tartous University in 2015, construction began four years ago on paper, but there are no completed works on the ground despite billions of SYP allocated to it.

Hassan cannot hide the shock that hit him when he was accepted into the Faculty of Economics in Tartous and went there and found that the college was a school that had been converted into a college. He says: “All my life I dreamed of entering university. When I was in high school, I watched university students and waited for the day I would become a university student, but not in the way I saw in Tartous. Most of the colleges are schools, and on top of that, there is no university city in Tartous, which is a real problem for people coming from other governorates or for rural people who struggle to move to and from the university.”

Difficulties endured by students

For a university student, the circumstances in which Amjad completes his studies are far from ideal, but he is nevertheless fortunate, and so are his colleagues who are managing to work and pursue their studies at the same time. Thousands of his peers have been forced to put their university education on hold due to the deteriorating livelihood conditions of their families. Other students have opted for theoretical fields that do not require minimum attendance commitments, while others enroll in so-called “intermediate institutes” that require only two years of study instead of four, five or six years in universities, although it exacerbates their fear of compulsory military service. Generally, students suffer from high study costs,

registration fees, and the prices of textbooks, notes and stationery, as well as the expensive equipment and supplies required in practical fields. For some, there are additional financial burdens related to transportation, especially for students who reside in rural areas or those who must travel across governorates to attend classes. However, this hardship is greatest for those who study in governorates other than their areas of origin, and who must reside far from their families with all the additional expenses that this entails. According to the students we spoke to, the financial needs of a student who lives far from their governorate of origin can be estimated at about 200,000 SYP per month, contrasted with the monthly salary of a government employee which is approximately 100,000 SYP. Of course, these are average expenses and are not constant in all cases. Maysoon, who moved from Deir Atiyah to Damascus for university, was forced to rent an apartment in the Mazzeh Jabal district of Damascus at 400,000 SYP per month. "I searched for a very long time until I found this apartment at a 'reasonable' rent compared to the huge rise in housing costs. Yet, it is a modest apartment with only some furniture. I will be sharing housing and rent with my colleague, and if I did not have a brother working in the Gulf and covering my expenses, I wouldn't have managed to complete my studies." Hussein, a government employee who holds another job after his shift, resides in Damascus while his eldest son studies at university in Homs. Hussain says: "I swear to God, I am almost begging in the streets. My son rents an apartment in Homs, and I send him all the food he needs from here, and all he needs except for university costs. His siblings are still here in school. I cannot make ends meet, and the problem is my son is studying engineering, so he cannot even hold a job while studying. I'm thinking of moving him here to Damascus to any other

faculty, as that is still better than this indignity.” In response to our question of why his son does not reside in the university dorms, Hussein said, “By God, no! I’d rather he left university altogether rather than live on campus. There is no hygiene there at all, nor a proper atmosphere for study.” In various governorates, university dormitories are considered a poor housing option for students due to their deteriorating conditions, as they lack all the necessities of life such as water, electricity and sanitation, but economic difficulties force some students to reside there due to the high rent cost of off-campus housing.

Razan moved from Deir ez-Zor to Damascus with her mother after she was accepted into the preparatory year for medical colleges. After days of suffering, she managed to get a bed in a university dorm room. Razan says: “Thirteen girls live in the same room, most of whom are not university students. I later learned that they were paying bribes to the unit’s supervisor, who gives them false enrollment papers to use to enter and exit the city, and overlooks their stay in the dorm rooms rather than paying hundreds of thousands for rent in the city. The atmosphere is never suitable for studying, especially for a medical college student who needs a lot of time to study.” The regime-aligned newspaper Al-Watan spoke on more than one occasion about the university dorm campus in Damascus, once **describing it** as “miserable housing with eight people in the same room,” and on another occasion **discussing drug busts** and possession among students, and “immoral behaviors in its gardens.”

This situation is not limited to the student dorms in Damascus, and the same can be said for other governorates. In the student dorm campus in Aleppo, for

example, the body of a university student was recently found in his room in Unit 19. The blind first-year student of Arabic literature was found hanged, and regime-affiliated media did not mention whether the student had committed suicide or was murdered. In further complication of the conditions of university students residing outside their governorates, both inside and outside the university dorms, the regime increased the price of the bundles of bread allocated to students, **raising it** from 200 to 1,250 SYP, that is, more than six times.

All of these expenses are pushing university students to seek employment to help them complete their studies. Many of them work in restaurants and shops, selling vegetables and fruits, as well as construction work, janitorial work or guarding warehouses and factories, in order to cover the expenses of their studies.

About a year ago, I was renovating my house. Among the workers was a man who worked as an electrician with 3 young men helping him. I was struck by the politeness and calm demeanor of these young men. I asked the forman about them, and he said, "They're university students, one studies Arabic literature, another geography, and the other attends the Faculty of Sociology. There are other students who work with me, and in one of my projects there are about 15 young university students." In response to my question about why he preferred to work with university students, he replied: "I was in my second year at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering when my father died, and because of economic hardships, I left university and traveled to Lebanon to work. That was many years ago, but to this day I still feel bitter, especially when I work on projects supervised by electrical engineers. It still pains me

that I could have been an engineer like them, so today I am keen to help any university student who wants to complete his studies and needs a job to help him." I asked him about their wages, and he said that he gives each of them 15,000 SYP per day and he does not oblige them to work on a daily basis, so whoever finds himself able to work any day, he receives without hesitation.

Working along with studies has negatively affected the academic performance of many students, and led to a decline in their level of educational attainment, but to many for them it remains preferable to leaving university education altogether. Maram, a second-year student at the Faculty of Education, says: "Some lectures are attended by only four or five students. Some professors are not bothered by this, and give their lectures as if the hall were full, while others are upset by the lack of attendance, and those leave the lecture hall immediately and ask us to get the printed lecture from the library. If you want to know the real number of students, you should visit the college during the exam period. You would see thousands of students sitting for exams, all of whom rely on ready-made lectures they buy from libraries, while you never see any of them throughout the year." In turn, Ahmed, a student at the Faculty of Mass Communication, confirmed that his academic performance in the third year declined substantially compared to the first and second years, as he started working to support his younger sister who joined the university. Although their father works in construction after his dayjob, the expense is greater than a father can bear.

The troubles of university students go beyond economic and livelihood concerns, as many other factors disturb university life. A large number of students were forced to

leave their universities and relocate to others as a result of intense armed conflict and difficulty of movement, as was the case in Idlib, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Daraa. In other instances, the regime bombed university campuses, such as an event in the University of Aleppo which was hit by an aerial bombardment, killing dozens of students and causing a heavy burden on the remaining universities and their infrastructure, and overcrowding of classrooms and lecture halls. Student Nidal complains about the large number of students in the Faculty of Science at Damascus University: "Perhaps students in more theoretical fields do not feel the overcrowdedness, but we in scientific faculties suffer greatly, especially in classes that require practical application in laboratories. Many students wait in the corridors because there is no room in the lab, and most of the time we don't know what's going on inside the lab, other than that there are some experiments being done." It must be noted that, despite dilapidated infrastructure, nearly 600,000 students attended the second semester in Syrian universities this year, including 200,000 students at Damascus University alone.

Other difficulties endured by Syrian university students include the curricula adopted, which were described by one person we spoke to as "out of place and out of time." The educational curricula in Syria are severely outdated, and they have not undergone any meaningful update or modification in years. Academics attribute this to restrictions on granting approvals to write new curricula and low authorship fees, in addition to the lack of foreign textbooks and their high costs. This impacted students after graduation, as they found themselves detached from the labor market due to the incongruity between what they learned at university and current labor market

requirements. Professor Imad, a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Civil Engineering at Damascus University, says: "For decades, the curricula have been the same. Is it reasonable for an engineering student, or any other in a scientific field, to study most subjects only theoretically? How is it reasonable for a class, graded out of 100, to have 30 grades for the practical component and 70 for the theoretical? I teach the practical section as a teaching assistant, while the professor who holds a doctorate degree teaches theory, which students memorize without any practical benefit. This is what students discover after graduation, as most graduates have to take special courses to learn the programs and techniques that will benefit them in their employment, because these programs are not taught at university."

Although hundreds of university students have suffered, over years of revolution and war, from persecution and arrest by the security services even inside the university campus, university is still considered a safe haven for male students to protect them, at least temporarily, from compulsory military conscription. For several years, military service has been a nightmare that haunts the lives of Syrian young men, one that worsened during the war years. Therefore, some students are forced to purposely fail at university for more than a year, especially in the last year, in order to keep their deferment papers. The Assad regime was alerted to this trend, and issued a decision banning those who fail for two consecutive years from obtaining deferment from military service.

In this regard, Raed is attempting to take advantage of all the years he can remain at university to maintain his deferment from compulsory service. "I am in the fourth

year of the Faculty of Arts, English Literature Department. I have two classes left until graduation, and I've been sitting for exams and purposefully failing," he said. "I am trying to take advantage of all possible opportunities, hoping for a chance to travel abroad as soon as I graduate."

Along with the difficulties that students face, universities themselves face issues on several fronts, the most prominent of which is the lack of educational staff after hundreds of faculty members emigrated outside the country. Some of those academics fled because of security persecution, and others to escape compulsory military service, while some left in pursuit of a better future as a result of difficult living conditions and the significant decrease in salaries and wages. Those who migrated left to various countries of the world, but most often to countries in which they completed their postgraduate studies before the revolution, as most of those who ended their doctorate degrees abroad in recent years did not return, and the Ministry of Higher Education estimates them at more than 80 percent of all exchange program participants.

To fill the gap in the teaching staff, university administrations have assigned professors to teach courses that are not their specialty, and to hire teaching assistants or master's students instead of PhD holders, leading to a decline in academic standards. In an attempt by the regime to limit the emigration of university faculty, the Higher Education Council issued a decision in 2017 requiring graduate students to obtain the approval of their academic supervisors and the dean of their faculty to submit it to the Immigration and Passports Department to obtain a travel permit, as well as approval from the military recruitment office for males. After finishing their postgraduate studies,

many resort to military deferment from compulsory service until they can get an opportunity to travel. However, this decision by the Ministry stood in their path, except for a few who managed to arrange their affairs as Ihab did after graduating from the Faculty of Arts. Ihab waited for a long time until he was able to reserve a seat in the educational qualification diploma, and as soon as he obtained the military deferment, he traveled to Egypt. Today, Ihab works in a restaurant with his relatives, while his degree sits in a box containing what other memories he managed to carry from the country.

Syrian universities are witnessing a clear shortage in the number of students accepted into graduate studies, so five students are accepted for each master's program as a maximum. This was done for **reasons** that the Ministry of Higher Education told Al-Watan are "due to the shortage in the number of professors and faculty members, as well as crisis conditions and the capabilities and infrastructure of universities, and in each department of the faculties concerned."

The shortage is not limited to faculty, and extends to university staff, as Al-Watan **reported** that, "A severe issue resurfaces in each semester, which relates to the lack of staff and employees in universities, placing pressure on graduate students who are then used as observers in exams. This staff shortage has had clear effects on students, as it leads to delays in the issuance of academic results, documents and certificates, without any new solutions from the Ministry of Higher Education." Students complain about this deteriorating reality. "The number of students is very large," says Yara, who attends the Faculty of Arts. "Years ago, the faculty used an automated exam

system in many subjects, whereby examination papers were corrected and graded digitally without interference from anyone, and very quickly. Today, although the number of students has doubled and the staff is much smaller than before, the college has abolished the modern automated system and returned to a written system, and exams are now manually graded by professors and teaching assistants. Imagine... A new academic year begins while we still await the results of the previous year, not knowing whether we passed or have to repeat the year. This is a reality in which we live.”

These problems were the focus of a report by a British organization known as the Council for At-Risk Academic as part of its Syria program, which included researchers from Cambridge University and Syrian academics in exile. The report was prepared over a period of 12 months between 2017 and 2018, and published in 2019. The BBC quoted this [report](#) entitled Syrian Higher Education post 2011: Immediate and Future Challenges, which said that the Higher Education sector in Syria was “undermined by the destruction of facilities and human rights violations as well as what it calls curriculum stagnation and the militarisation of campuses.” Those who prepared the report spoke to 19 Syrian academics living in exile, as well as 117 faculty members and students at 11 universities inside Syria; 8 of them residing in regime-controlled areas and 3 are in areas outside the regime’s control.

Academic cooperation and Iranian grants

Iran is present in many aspects of life in Syria, but especially Higher Education. At the end of 2021, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education stated that, in the presence of

Minister Bassam Ibrahim, the President of Damascus University Mohammed Yasar Abdeen, and the Director of the Iranian Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research Hamid Reza Tibi, a cooperation agreement was signed that stipulated “the exchange of scientific database and research outputs, and participation in the establishment of a business incubator and a science and technology park at Damascus University.” The agreement aims to enhance cooperation in the field of exchanging textbooks, publications, scientific materials, bulletins and periodicals, benefiting from digital libraries, and organizing joint scientific and cultural conferences and seminars. In the same context, Damascus University signed a memorandum of understanding in the field of research and graduate studies with Iran’s Malek-Ashtar University of Technology (MUT), specifically in the fields of industries, technical sciences, mechanics, robotics and computer sciences. The Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Bassam Ibrahim, **revealed** “160 scholarships offered by Iran [...] in application of the executive program signed in Tehran for scientific, cultural and research cooperation with the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.” Today, there are branches of six Iranian universities in Syria, which operate within Tehran’s policy of seeking further penetration into the public education sector in Syria.

In conclusion, a professor at Damascus University reminds us that “the educational sector is the first sector to be affected by the war, and the last sector to recover.”