

Securing Syria's academic knowledge and industrial future: a case study of agricultural engineering education

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Cara Syria Programme

- Supporting at-risk academics since 1933
- Scholars at Risk UK Universities Network of 117 UK universities
- 'Cara's independence, neutrality and academic mandate, allow it to occupy a unique space in the context of crisis-affected countries, to function independent of political agency whilst maintaining Ministry relations' (Cara, 2017).



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Cara Syria Programme

- Launched in 2012, in partnership with the 117 universities that make up the *Cara Scholars at Risk UK Universities Network*.
- In 2016, Cara sought to extend its UK-based Programme to Syrian academics in exile in the three main receiving countries neighbouring Syria: Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon.
- Working directly with Syrian academics in exile (n=160), across strategic strands:
 - *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*
 - *Academic Skills Development (ASD)*
 - *Research Incubation visits (RI)* – 4 to 8 week placements at UK/EU universities to explore collaborations
 - *Research (R)- UK/Syrian collaborations on topics of relevance to Syria.*

Cara Syria Programme

- Dedicated online space hosted by Sheffield University
- Weekly one-to-one tuition in English for Academic Purposes (online via Skype)
- Fortnightly webinars targeting themes and issues arising from needs analysis (via Adobe Connect, typically 20 participants)
- Quarterly residential workshops in Istanbul (6 days, typically 50 participants)
- Collaborative research projects
- Informal networking and interaction on WhatsApp, Skype, facebook etc.
- Participation by Kent, Reading, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Queen Mary's, Middlesex, South Wales, Cardiff and Newcastle Universities
- Resource support from partners inc. Elsevier



Introduction

A humanitarian disaster



Higher Education in Syria Pre-Crisis

- Syria's education sector was relatively well developed prior to the current crisis (King, 2016).
- 10202 academics working in higher education institutions prior to the crisis (CBS, 2011)
- Around 25% of Syrian young people participated in university
- Around 350,000 students were enrolled in higher education when the war broke out in 2011
- Theoretical rather than practical focus, and lack of practical expertise relating to the needs of communities and industry

Higher Education in Syria post-2011

- ‘The impact of conflict in the region can be detected in all the major dimensions of higher education: physical, human, institutional, and social’ (Bakarat and Milton, 2015, p.3).



Explosion at Aleppo University,
Student residence, 2013

Higher Education in Syria post-2011



Higher Education as a response to crisis

- Higher education was declared a strategic priority for the first time in the UNHCR's Education Strategy 2012-2016 (UNHCR, 2012)
- Higher education is uniquely placed to act 'as a bridge between emergency response and sustainable development' (Kirk and Sherman, 2016, p.13)
- '[in Iraq] over a decade of war and economic blockades cut academia off from international exchanges of knowledge and resources' (Bakarat and Milton, 2015, p.4).
- Supporting projects **led by local academics** can help prevent structural dependency

Agricultural Engineering Education

Why the agriculture sector?

- more than 65% of the population work in Agriculture
- Higher education was the primary skills provider for agricultural engineering prior to the crisis



Agricultural Engineering Education

Project background:

- Lack of skilled engineers inside Syria
- Knowledge specific to the Syrian context (climate, soil, diet, impact of war etc) is not being sustained
- There is currently very little knowledge share between scientific (academic) and farming communities
- Urgent need to sustain and secure the future of the sector on which so many Syrians' livelihoods depend
- Successful pilot distance learning on mushroom production, dairy products etc. has been undertaken



Agricultural Engineering Education – A case study

Protein project: Course on mushroom production

- Theoretical and practical knowledge

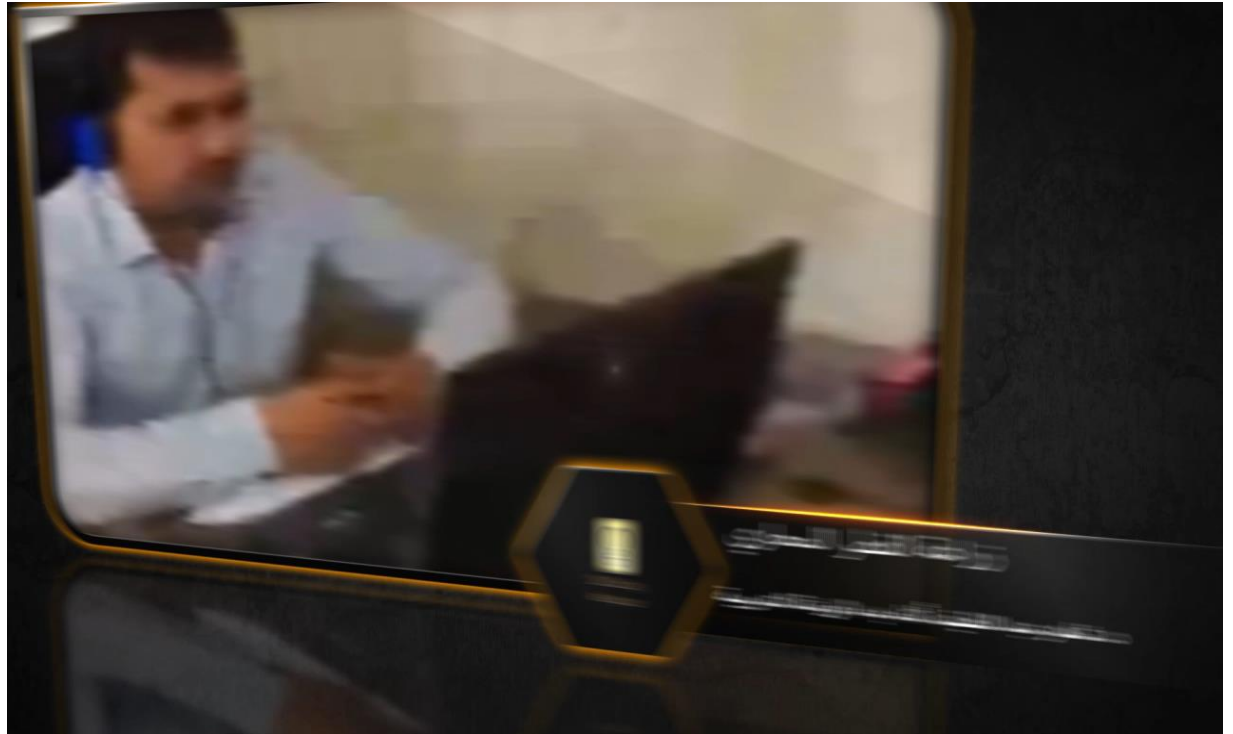


Further technical assistance for participants (WhatsApp group)

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Protein project: Course on mushroom production

- 4 community centers (80 participants)
- NGOs



Agricultural Engineering Education – A case study

Basma (smile) project: Course on production of dairy products

- Theoretical and practical knowledge
- Rural women's associations and NGOs
- Start-end assessments



Further technical assistance for participants (WhatsApp group)

Agricultural Engineering Education – A case study

Basma (smile) project: Course on production of dairy products



Research questions

- What are the most effective methods of educational delivery to learner populations inside Syria?
- What are the challenges and barriers to learner engagement?
- What factors characterise learners' experiences of course delivery?
- What are the technological requirements and existing opportunities for delivering educational content to populations inside Syria?

Agricultural Engineering Education: Pilot Study

- Modest funding of £3000 from Open Society Foundation, plus significant in-kind support
- Identify and recruit academics in the field of agricultural engineering to deliver sessions
- Recruit and enrol participants from the following stakeholder groups:
 - students, farmers, women's groups, professionals, **partner organisations (NGOs, civil society organisations etc)**
- Design and deliver a programme of 5 sessions in the pilot period (6 months, till end 2018), via video-linked community centres and WhatsApp
- Trial different delivery approaches across the 5 sessions
- Collect session-level and programme-level evaluative data
- Revise and develop the programme for subsequent iterations and other modules

Challenges

- Limited access to academics with experience of online learning environments
- Severe restrictions to resources and connectivity within Syria
- Scope of the project is dependent on level of funding, in-kind contributions and volunteer labour
- Safety concerns
- Unpredictable political landscape

Project Needs

- Suitably-qualified academic staff- **International *and* Syrian**
- Voluntary/*pro bono* contributions across all aspects of delivery: curriculum design, delivery, administrative support, resource provision, technology
- Funding (funding applications submitted to ESRC GCRF, discussions with regional and international NGOs)
- Accessible web platform
- Visibility and marketing

Longer Term Aims

- To establish a workable online platform for distance learning
- To scale up the project to cover different areas of agriculture, and other industries and disciplines
- To design and deliver modular courses
- To longitudinally evaluate all aspects using qualitative and quantitative methods
- To revise and develop the programme within a spiral cycle action research framework

Wider Picture

Supporting engagement between academia and industry in the context of war and humanitarian crisis

- Providing opportunities for at-risk academics to continue teaching and maintain the currency of their knowledge
- Providing opportunities for students, graduates and professionals in war-torn regions to refresh and sustain their knowledge and gain new skills
- Developing skills and husbanding knowledge to maintain base levels of industrial and disciplinary activity
- Supporting educated individuals and communities in leading the regeneration of their countries
- Protecting the intellectual heritage of countries besieged by war and humanitarian crisis

Thank you for listening!

All questions, comments and feedback are welcome

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