

# Universities in Times of War and Conflict: Towards resilience and resistance in higher education

Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Library Road, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RE

Thursday 6 July (9.30am-5.30pm) + Friday 7 July (9.30am-1.30pm)

## CALL FOR PAPERS

- In what ways are universities, academics and students in conflict-affected countries supported or isolated nationally, regionally and internationally?
- What factors shape the patterns of public spending and international aid to higher education and what implications does this have for universities in societies affected by conflict?
- If universities are recognised as significant spaces of political contestation and democratic struggle, how does this inform how we support them in times of conflict and post-conflict recovery?
- What roles do transnational academic networks play and how can/do these networks support universities, academics and students in times of conflict?
- How can the knowledges and experiences of universities, academics and students in contexts of conflict be valued, harnessed and documented through research?
- How might such research contribute to illuminating and facilitating wider debates about the challenges and opportunities facing universities in increasingly polarised, unequal, authoritarian and anti-democratic contexts across the globe?

These are some of the questions that have led us to host this symposium at the University of Sussex. Having been neglected for many years in research, policy and practice, there is an emerging realisation that the economic and political abandonment of universities in times of conflict not only degrades national capacities and blights potential for economic recovery, but also forecloses the rebuilding of critical spaces where young people can encounter and contest different ideas, ideologies and identities in the aftermath of war.

The circumstances facing universities in times of conflict differ greatly according to context, relations with the state, the nature of the conflict itself, and the types of threats to universities, academics and students during civil war, foreign invasion or military occupation. Yet scope for the resilience and resistance of universities, academics and students in times of conflict is almost always shaped by the relative presence or absence of support, connection and solidarity both internally and externally and how this translates into defending and reimagining the University and its role in society.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Nicaragua, Colombia, Palestine, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Bosnia, Ukraine and countless other contexts, the trajectories of universities are powerfully shaped by the ways in which they have been supported or abandoned by national and international actors in times of conflict, with enduring consequences for post-conflict recovery and the rebuilding of a democratic society.



## **From neglect to reimagined futures**

Marginalised as a 'luxury' by international aid agencies, universities in times of conflict were for a long time assumed to be non-functioning or the domain of corrupt political elites. This was not an oversight but an ideological position, rooted in arguments for focusing exclusively on access to basic education in the global development goals of the 1990s and 2000s, alongside the neoliberal rejection of higher education as a public good.

At the same time, escalating threats to university autonomy and academic freedom, the persecution and imprisonment of students and academics, brain drain, infrastructural damage, political territorialisation, institutional division, corruption, clientelism and financial crisis ravage higher education systems in countries affected by conflict, risking long-term, chronic decline of universities in the very times they are needed most.

This politics of neglect ignores the fact that universities often continue to function in the midst of intensive, protracted violent conflict, surviving through strategies of resilience and resistance in the most adverse of circumstances. This includes the ways in which institutions and individuals have navigated and resisted extreme threats to teaching and learning in times of conflict, often creatively and sometimes radically.

## **Supporting and learning from universities, academics and students in times of conflict**

In a moment of intensifying political and economic crises for universities in many different contexts, the experiences of universities affected by conflict can powerfully illuminate challenging questions of university autonomy and academic freedom, the role of universities in reproducing and potentially transforming societal inequalities and injustice, and old and new forms of colonisation in higher education structures and processes of knowledge production across the globe.

While international efforts to scale up the provision of university scholarships for refugees offer an important escape route for many students, this individualisation of support does not engage with the institutional, systemic challenges for higher education in times of conflict.

Universities in ongoing conflicts remain largely invisible in policy discourses with little support for the resilience and resistance of institutions ravaged by war, with long-term repercussions for rebuilding a democratic society in the aftermath of conflict.

## **CALL FOR PAPERS**

To present a paper, please send your title, abstract and a short biography to Helen Murray [h.murray@sussex.ac.uk] by 28 April 2023 (*notification of acceptance by mid-May 2023*). Papers will be loosely grouped into the following themes:

1. Academic isolation and transnational solidarities
2. The politics of international aid to higher education in times of conflict
3. Universities as spaces of resilience and resistance
4. Universities, conflict and rebuilding publics.

We particularly welcome contributions from academics and students living and working in contexts of conflict, refugee students and scholars in exile, universities in exile, transnational academic networks, solidarity movements and inter-university partnerships. A small travel fund is available to subsidise expenses for selected speakers coming from overseas. If you would like to apply for the travel fund, you should include this with your submission.

Depending on the scope of the papers, we intend to publish a special issue of the *Journal of Globalisation, Societies and Education*.

Conference fees and limited catering costs are subsidised. There is also a small travel fund available to subsidise expenses for selected speakers coming from overseas. If you would like to apply for the travel fund, you should include this with your submission.

*This symposium is organised by the University of Sussex's hub of the Political Economy of Education Research (PEER) Network, an AHRC GCRF funded 3-year research collaboration between the Universities of Cape Town, Nazarbayev, Sussex and Ulster on issues of education, conflict and crisis. It is hosted by the Centre for International Education (CIE) and the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex.*

**<https://peernetworkgcrf.org>**