

Higher Education Partnerships in Conflict-Affected Regions

March 2025

Executive summary

Higher education partnerships have historically been used to improve educational opportunities for students, foster research collaboration, and promote cultural exchanges between both staff and students. In recent years, higher education partnerships have been reconceptualised as a tool for international development, with the capacity to improve the human capital of a country and foster sustainable economic growth. A growing number of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are pursuing partnerships with HEIs in conflict-affected regions as part of their internationalisation strategy. Additionally, many higher education institutions are looking for ways to extend their global impact through supporting reconstruction efforts in conflict-affected regions. Higher education partnerships provide the opportunity to support the social, political, and economic reconstruction and development in conflict-affected regions.

This report explores the role of UK higher education partnerships in conflict-affected regions, providing key case studies and outlining some of the opportunities and challenges faced by existing partnerships. This study found that there is a growing emphasis on equitability in these partnerships to ensure sustainability, however, both partners need to ensure constant ongoing communication to navigate the contextual nuances and challenging environments in both countries. UK higher education institutions can assist in accessing resources which are constrained in conflict affected regions, as well as navigating the logistical constraints faced by higher education institutions in conflict-affected regions and supporting institutional capability building. Higher education partnerships are vital for the development of human capital and for advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion values, as well as contributing to a culture of peacebuilding and reconciliation and supporting the development of peace.

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Introduction

International HE partnerships as a development actor

Whilst universities are becoming more internationalised in their approach, many are becoming more conscious about the role that they play in building a fairer, more equitable society. In recent years, international HEI partnerships have been reconceptualised as a tool for international development, playing a key role in accelerating economic development and building inclusive societies¹. The importance of HEI partnerships in contributing to global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has received growing attention, with higher education enabling students, academics, industry, and wider society to share knowledge and ideas, build skills and drive research and innovation². There has also been increased attention from policymakers around the world to find sustainable solutions for addressing political instability and conflict, highlighted by the global commitment to the SDGs and an increase in research funding allocated to this topic.

SDG16 places an emphasis on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for all, highlighting the steep rise in violent conflict and consequential displacement and the impact this has on sustainable development. Peaceful and inclusive societies are marked by their commitment to quality education, gender equality and reduced inequalities, all of which are priority areas for universities around the world – demonstrated by the growing emphasis on EDI principles and improving access to higher education. There is a growing emphasis on the role that higher education institutions can play in international development, with global overseas development aid (ODA) funding increasing by 193 percent per cent to higher education institutions between 2002 and 2019.³

In times of conflict, HEIs often face devastation and collapse, making HE an ‘unrecognised casualty of war.’⁴ Universities are often one of the main targets during conflict, motivated by either the targeting of critical community infrastructure and services, or as an attack on

ideas and freedom of thought. In conflict-affected regions, higher education provides young people with vital continuity in their educational development, supporting peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts and enabling them to make strategic choices about their futures⁵. In the aftermath of conflict, HEIs can play a pivotal role in recovery, through the improvement of the human capital and capacity required to stabilise, recover, and develop politically, socially, and economically.

In recent years, increased funding has been given to HEI partnership programmes with the objective of supporting conflict-affected regions, such as the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme which ran between 2016 and 2022. This resulted in new quality standards for HEIs in Sierra Leone, the redesign of degree programmes in Somaliland and Sierra Leone, and the engagement of public and private sector with HEIs in Tanzania and Uganda. More recently, there has been over one hundred universities signing up to the UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative, managed by the Cormack Consulting Group and Universities UK International.⁶

¹ Feuer, H.N., Hornidge, A.K. and Schetter, C., 2013. Rebuilding knowledge: Opportunities and risks for higher education in post-conflict regions (No. 121). ZEF Working Paper Series.

² Pherali, T. and Lewis, A., 2019. Developing global partnerships in higher education for peacebuilding: A strategy for pathways to impact. *Higher Education*, 78, pp.729-744.

³ Milton, S. and Barakat, S., 2018. Higher education as the catalyst of recovery in conflict-affected societies. In *Education, conflict, and globalisation* (pp. 77-95). Routledge.

⁴ Milton, S. and Barakat, S. (2016) ‘Higher education as the catalyst of recovery in conflict-affected societies’, *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(3), pp. 403–421. doi: 10.1080/14767724.2015.1127749.

⁵ Millican, J., 2017. Universities and conflict. The role of higher education in peacebuilding and resistance.

⁶ <https://www.ukri.org/news/research-england-invests-in-uk-ukraine-university-twinning-scheme/>

Types of partnerships

For this research, various forms of higher education partnerships were explored, including:

- **transnational education partnerships,**
- **collaborative research partnerships, and**
- **student and staff mobility partnerships.**

Transnational education (TNE) is education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based. TNE can take various forms, such as branch campuses, joint degrees, franchise programmes and distance learning. In 2022–23, 166 UK universities delivered some form of TNE to 571,185 students in over 230 countries and territories worldwide, with the net economic benefits of TNE in the UK estimated at £37.4 billion.

Collaborative research partnerships are a partnership between two or more parties who work together to achieve a common goal in research, either inter-institutional or international.⁷ Between 2012 and 2022, almost 62% of the UK's research output was produced with an international co-author, with total international research funding for 2022-2023 amounting to £1,510,564,000. Of this sum, 79.4% came from UK sources, 10.6% came from EU sources and 10% came from non-EU sources.⁸

Student and staff mobility partnerships are an agreement between institutions that outlines the terms and conditions for sending and receiving students and staff. The UK is the second most popular study destination for international students, with approximately 10% of the global market share, with the 2021/22 cohort generating approximately £37 billion for the UK economy over the entire period of their studies.⁹

⁷ J. S. Katz, B. R. Martin. (1997). "What is research collaboration?" Research Policy, 26(1), p1-18.

⁸ HESA Finance Record, 2022–23

⁹ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/international-students-boost-uk-economy#:~:text=Aggregating%20across%20the%20entire%202021,generated%20by%20non%2DEU%20students.>

Methodology

Purpose of the study

The primary objective of this study is to understand the role and impact of international HEI partnerships in conflict-affected regions. The sub-objectives of this study are as follows:

- To understand how UK universities contribute to peacebuilding and stability in conflict-affected regions through HEI partnerships.
- To understand how local partners perceive and engage with HEI partnerships in conflict-affected regions.
- To understand the impact of HEI partnerships in conflict-affected regions on civic engagement, social justice, and EDI principles.
- To understand the impact of HEI partnerships in conflict-affected regions on employment outcomes for young people and local economic development.
- To identify the challenges experienced by HEI partnerships in conflict-affected regions and outline key recommendations for future HEI partnerships.

Scope of the study

For this study, conflict-affected region is defined as “countries affected by violent conflict, identified based on a threshold number of conflict-related deaths relative to the population,” in accordance with the World Bank’s ‘FY25 Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations annual report of 2024.’¹⁰ Whilst there are many forms of HEI partnerships that occur between UK HEIs and HEIs in conflict-affected regions, the scope of this study is outlined as follows:

- Partnerships involving at least two universities, including one based in the UK and one in a conflict-affected region.

- One case study included in the study (Linda Norgrove Foundation) used to be a partnership which involved a UK and an Afghanistan HEI, but due to the current political environment, this was discussed retrospectively as this partnership is no longer operational.
- Partnerships focusing on teaching and learning, on research and innovation, and on community development.
- This includes TNE, research collaborations and mobility partnerships.

Research design

This publication is based on mapping desk research and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in seven case studies. This research was conducted between August - October 2024. Desk research involved mapping out UK HEI’s international partnership activity in conflict-affected regions, utilising HEI’s international office websites to identify partnerships and HESA data. Stakeholders were identified through purposive sampling by mapping their involvement in the partnerships, and through snowball sampling. It also involved analysing available documents from the case study projects websites to analyse the impact of the projects.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen stakeholders from seven international partnerships that operate in conflict-affected regions. Stakeholders represent both the UK and local partner perspective and are those working on one of the six partnerships. The case studies were examined and broken down into the type of partnership they represent (Figure 1). These case studies are also discussed in further detail (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Case Studies and Partnership Type

Transnational education	Research collaboration	Student and staff mobility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British University Erbil • UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling University Peace Education (EUPE) • Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linda Norgrove Foundation • Friends of Birzeit University (FOBZU) • Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL)

Figure 2: Case Studies Overview

Country	Case Study Name	Partnership Details
Afghanistan	Linda Norgrove Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides grants to fund education for women and children affected by war in Afghanistan. Worked in partnership with universities in Afghanistan to sponsor female students studying STEM degrees. Resulted in changing Scottish law regarding international fees and supporting students to come to the UK.
Ethiopia and Sudan	Enabling University Peace Education (EUPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides peace education courses for young men and women in universities, co-created with local academics. Supporting communities of practice in peacebuilding through collaborative activities and research with universities. Training local researchers to create context-driven and gender-sensitive peace research and publish collaboratively.
Iraq	The British University in Erbil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An authorised teaching partner of the University of London in Erbil, and the only site of UK higher education in Iraq. Working in partnership with local businesses in the region to foster work experience opportunities for students. Supporting academics to develop research collaborations with international partners to improve research quality.
	Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership between Ulster University and University of Koya focused on strengthening research capacity in education. Bilateral Research Chairs are working to develop networks, mobility, and exchange between institutions. Creating policy-relevant evidence on “what works” to deliver education to children affected by conflict and protracted crises.
Occupied Palestinian Territories	Friends of Birzeit University (FOBZU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working to promote the advancement of Palestinian education under occupation and in exile. Provide funding through a travel fellowship for academics from the UK to visit Palestine to build educational links. Worked with University of London to strengthen capacity for Palestinian academics to deliver accessible education online. Creating a toolkit on navigating barriers to partnerships and building connections in Palestine for the HE sector.
	Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HESPAL aims to create the next generation of academics who can maintain international quality standards at Palestinian universities. Works to develop renewed and sustainable links between Palestinian and UK universities. The scheme upgrades academic staff in Palestinian universities through a master’s or PhD Scholarship.
Ukraine	UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An institution-to-institution collaboration model aimed at supporting universities in Ukraine amidst and post-war. Twinning entails a minimum of 5 years commitment between participating institutions to foster sustainable partnerships. Providing practical assistance, such as access to resources, capacity building, staff mobility and dual degree programmes.

Impact of Conflict on HEI Case Studies

Between 2022 and 2023, there were approximately 6,000 reported attacks and incidents of military usage on education institutions, inflicting harm on over 10,000 students and educators globally. Over 2,460 higher education students or staff are reported in this figure, with 760 killed, injured, or abducted, and 1,700 detained or arrested.¹¹ This is a 20% increase on the previous year, highlighting the growing challenges and risks facing higher education. This report focuses on case studies from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan, and Ukraine.

The education system in Afghanistan has been devastated by over four decades of violent conflict. Since the takeover of the Taliban in August 2021, any developments made in the education system have been reversed through the destruction of education institutions, the removal of women and girls from education institutions and the use of educational buildings as military sites.¹² In December 2022, the Taliban banned women from attending university entirely, and by the end of 2023, girls and women were banned from attending secondary schools. Between 2022-2023, more than seventy students and academics were reportedly killed, injured, or abducted while over sixty-five were arrested or detained.

In Ethiopia, approximately 2,681 education institutions (primary, secondary, and higher) have been destroyed, whilst 4,158 have experienced extensive damage. This has affected more than 4.2 million higher and secondary education students, and approximately 200,000 teaching personnel. According to Ministry's Director- General of Schools' Improvements highlighted how thirteen million higher and secondary education students did not register for the 2022/23 academic year because of the conflict, Ethiopia's lowest levels of enrolments in 40 years.¹³

Between 2003 and 2005, at least 84% of Iraq's higher education institutions were burned, looted, or destroyed, and 154 university professors were assassinated. Since then, at least 40% of these institutions have reconstructed, however, there are ongoing challenges in relation to the reconstruction and operation of higher education institutions. Over half of universities in Iraq in 2021 were owned by prominent political figures, limiting the development of academic freedom, and highlighting the challenges of corruption in the higher education system.¹⁴ Between 2022 and 2023, there were reported

attacks on students and staff at the University of Baghdad and the University of Sulaymaniyah protesting their housing conditions in the university and unpaid stipends, emphasizing the constraints on freedom of speech in academia.¹⁵

The highest number of attacks on education occurred in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Between October and December 2023, at least 352 schools were damaged in the Gaza Strip, representing more than 60% of all schools.¹⁶ In the 2022-2023 period, twenty-eight attacks on higher education institutions were reported, with attacks predominantly in the West Bank. In Gaza, all universities and approximately 80% of schools had been damaged or destroyed by April 2024.¹⁷

Over one hundred universities have been severely damaged or destroyed in Sudan, primarily through intentional targeting and looting. In the 2022-2023 period, there were twenty-eight reported attacks on higher education, of which the majority (24) were attacking infrastructure and four were attacks on students and staff. Attacks on students and staff were primarily committed by security forces and the police, whilst many of the attacks on infrastructure were through airstrikes and arson.¹⁸

In Ukraine, Russia has shelled and destroyed one in five higher education institutions.¹⁹ Most attacks on education institutions have occurred in the southern and eastern regions, and involved explosive weapons, including airstrikes and shelling. In late 2023, the MoES reported that half of the educational institutions in Kharkiv and Kherson regions had been damaged, and more 80% of schools had been damaged or destroyed in Donetsk region.²⁰ Most higher education institutions have continued to operate despite these conditions, either through teaching in bomb shelters or pivoting to online teaching provision, to ensure the continuity of higher education.

¹¹ <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

¹² <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

¹³ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230125103404764>

¹⁴ Youssef, Seer Al-Din, 'In Iraq: 'Militia Universities' Generating Huge Profits and Fake Degrees for Parliament Members', 2019. Available at: <https://7al.net/2019/07/09/أموال-تدر-ممثل-ش-هاوية-جامعات-ال-عراق-فيس/>

¹⁵ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2024). Education under Attack: Iraq Country Profile

¹⁶ <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

¹⁷ <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>
<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230125103404764>

Youssef, Seer Al-Din, 'In Iraq: 'Militia Universities' Generating Huge Profits and Fake Degrees for Parliament Members', 2019. Available at: <https://7al.net/2019/07/09/أموال-تدر-ممثل-ش-هاوية-جامعات-ال-عراق-فيس/>

¹⁸ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2024). Education under Attack: Sudan Country Profile

¹⁹ <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

²⁰ <https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/>

Size and shape of UK international partnerships in conflict-affected regions

This report utilizes the World Bank's measure of conflict-affected regions, outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3: FY25 Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations

Conflict-Affected Regions	Institutional and Social Fragility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghanistan • Burkina Faso • Cameroon • Central African Republic • Congo, Democratic Republic of • Ethiopia • Haiti • Iraq • Lebanon • Mali 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burundi • Chad • Comoros • Congo, Republic of • Eritrea • Guinea-Bissau • Kiribati • Kosovo • Libya • Marshall Islands • Micronesia, Federated States of
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mozambique • Myanmar • Niger • Nigeria • Occupied Palestinian Territories • Somalia • South Sudan • Sudan • Syrian Arab Republic • Ukraine • Republic of Yemen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Papua New Guinea • São Tomé and Príncipe • Solomon Islands • Timor-Leste • Tuvalu • Venezuela, RB • Zimbabwe

There are currently 132 international partnership arrangements in 'conflict affected regions, mapped between September – November 2024, and laid out in the following section'.²¹ These were mapped by searching through the 130 public higher education institutions websites, specifically the 'international' component of the website, to identify where current partnerships are operating. Out of the 132 international partnerships identified in the mapping activity, eighty-seven of those were in Ukraine (Figure 4). This is due to the success of the UK-Ukraine Twinning Scheme launched in summer 2022, in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. The next most popular countries for international partnership arrangements were Nigeria (10), Myanmar (6), Occupied Palestinian Territories (6), Iraq (5) and Lebanon (5). Figure 4 maps out the existing arrangements publicly available on HEI websites.

²¹

This figure is based off a mapping activity conducted by reviewing each institutions international office website to identify any partnership arrangements. This number is likely to be an underestimation of partnership arrangements due to transparency surrounding international partnerships and UK HEIs. There is no distinction between TNE and non-TNE partnerships in this figure, as many HEI websites did not make this distinction.

Figure 4: UK HEI Partnerships in Conflict-Affected Regions

Number of HEI Partnerships in Conflict Affected Regions

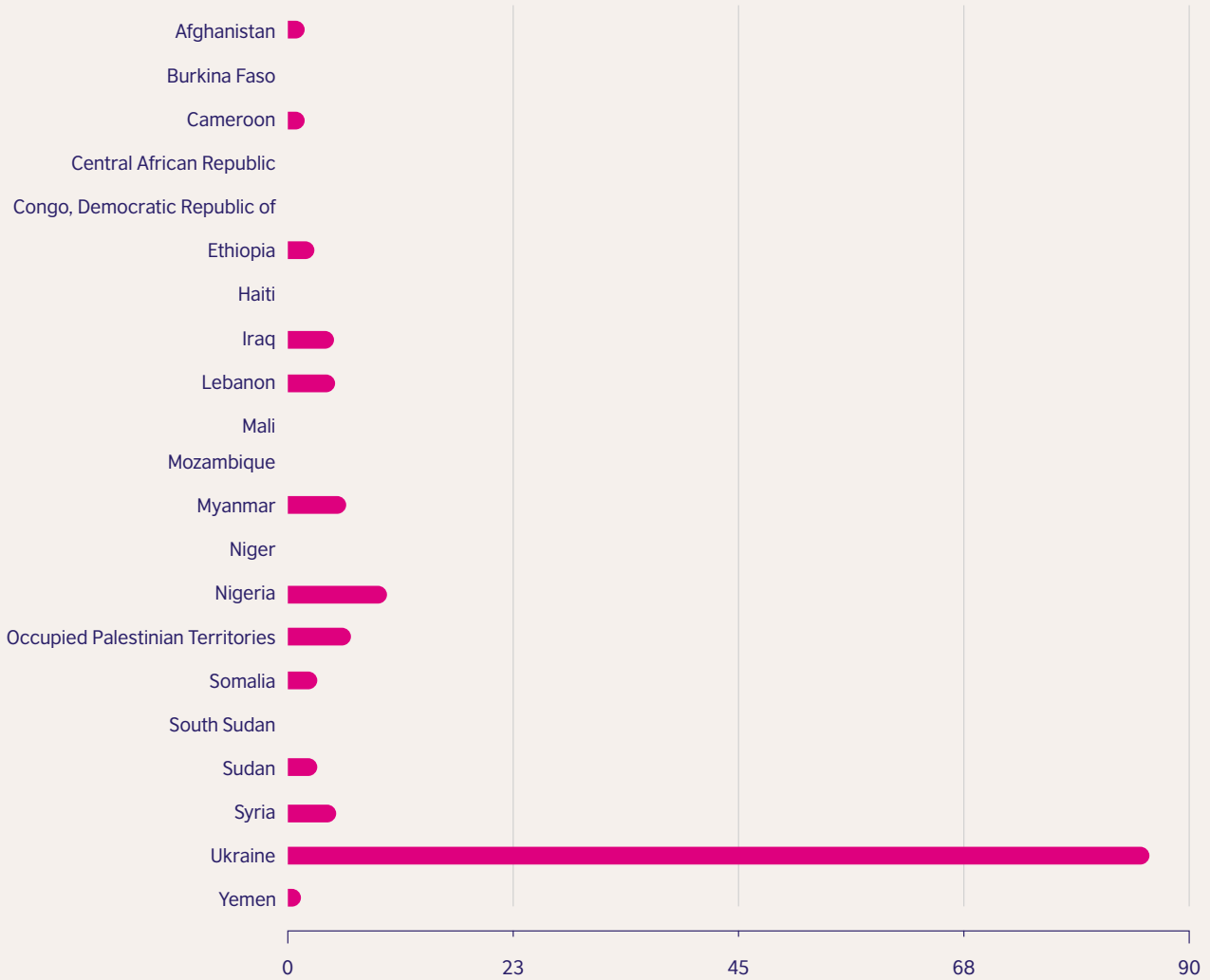


Figure 5 uses HESA data to outline the number of individual students engaged in TNE activity in conflict-affected regions, and the rate of change between 2018 and 2023. There has been a 38% increase in students in conflict-affected regions participating in TNE between 2018 and 2023. The largest percentage increase in this period has been in South Sudan (213%) and Yemen (178%), whilst Nigeria and Lebanon have had the largest volume of students engaging in TNE in this period. Whilst TNE is not the only form of HEI partnership this study looks at; it provides a useful insight into the growth of demand for UK higher education in conflict-affected regions.

This highlights the growing remit of UK HEIs in conflict-affected region, with the increase in TNE students demonstrating the importance of international partnerships. The largest providing UK institutions of TNE in conflict-affected regions in terms of total numbers are the Open University (2,665 students), Liverpool John Moore's University (1,790), the University of Suffolk (1,780), the University of Salford (1,070), and the University of London (830). Regarding diversity, the University of Salford had TNE students in all the regions explored in the analysis, receiving the most TNE students from Nigeria, Iraq, Congo, and Mozambique.

Figure 5: TNE students in conflict-affected regions (HESA, 2024)

Country	2018/19	2022/23	Total % Change	Number of UK Institutions
Afghanistan	80	110	38%	11
Burkina Faso	15	20	33%	2
Cameroon	115	210	83%	17
Central African Republic	15	20	33%	2
Congo, Democratic Republic of	105	135	29%	8
Ethiopia	225	190	-16%	17
Haiti	20	25	25%	1
Iraq	145	315	117%	27
Lebanon	2,030	2,695	33%	35
Mali	20	35	75%	3
Mozambique	120	225	88%	16
Myanmar	2,655	1,995	-25%	22
Niger	10	15	50%	1
Nigeria	3,625	6,115	69%	69
Occupied Palestinian Territories	50	85	70%	6
Somalia	70	120	71%	11
South Sudan	80	250	213%	12
Sudan	275	600	118%	20
Syria	55	130	136%	8
Ukraine	270	435	61%	17
Yemen	45	125	178%	10

There are various forms of TNE arrangements, of which online and distance learning was the most popular amongst students in conflict-affected regions (42.2% of total TNE). This is attributed to accessibility issues, where

distance learning is often the most affordable and most physically accessible (due to gender-based violence issues, geographical issues, wartime destruction of infrastructure, etc).

Interview findings

There were eight key thematic areas that appeared during stakeholder interviews:



Equitable partnerships



Contextual understanding



Challenging narratives



Advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles



Human capital development



Access to resources



Logistical constraints and institutional ability building



Peacebuilding and reconciliation

Equitable Partnerships

Existing research highlights how North-South partnerships are primarily dictated and managed by the Northern partner, from start to conclusion.

The partnership then often becomes more reflective of the priorities of the Northern partner than the Southern partner. This has resulted in an ongoing discussion about what constitutes equitability in a partnership, and how to build equitable partnerships, as well as broader discourse surrounding the issues of extractive behaviour and unequal power dynamics in these partnerships. This was reflected in the conversations with stakeholders, both local and UK-based, about partnership arrangements and the way support was being mobilised.

Equitable partnerships are developed with respect for the needs of the institution, as articulated by the institution, in which the UK institution collaborates based on how they can meet these needs, as opposed to imposing their own priorities or agenda. One example of equitable partnership best practice was in the Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts project between Ulster University and the University of Koya, by appointing Bilateral Research Chairs to represent each institution in the project leadership.

“For us, the partner dictated what was necessary really, in which direction we took it. And whilst we are still doing the research, but our focus is really building the infrastructure in the university, such as the administrative mechanisms, which is what they wanted.”

The UK stakeholder explained how this Bilateral Leadership enabled the UK institution to manage funding (due to compliance challenges with British Academy funding), while the Kurdish institution was able to lead the strategy. This was supported by a local stakeholder, who explained how the basis for equitable partnerships should centre around the needs of the institution being supported.

“The starting point must be the needs of the institutions in that sector, as articulated by them, and that’s the normal approach for global partnerships, whereby you reach out to your institutional counterparts to explore means of collaboration based on principles of equitability.”

Amongst the case studies examined, local partners highlighted how, often-times, the UK partner would lead with their own priorities and ideologies about what works, and due to issues surrounding lack of contextual understanding, this led to tensions between project partners. This was discussed by another local partner when discussing the use of ‘scholarships’ as a support provision, such as individual university Humanitarian Scholarships and INGOs like UNHCR’s Emergency Scholarship Programme.

Mobility as a tool to support students in conflict-affected regions is seen as a means of providing stability and education to students in need and providing a pathway out of the region. However, a stakeholder from a local institution highlighted how scholarship programmes can often be extractive in the context of a conflict-affected society.

“The sector, in their response, has by default turned to providing individual scholarships, and that is the comfort zone of crisis response for universities in the UK. They already have a formula or a programme for supporting people in crisis, and they can fit it into that. Not only can that inadvertently end up weakening a system which is trying to survive, you know by taking people out and causing brain drain, it also ends up erasing the institutions and their role, when currently, we are already facing a military attempt to erase them.”

Many partners reflected on how to find a balance through helping the individual students (through scholarships) with benefiting the wider society (through infrastructure investment), and how this was often contingent on access to resources.

One scholarship-providing stakeholder highlighted the importance of letting the local higher education sector lead in decision-making surrounding scholarship provision. They explained how:

“British universities come to identify the best proposals that came to them and tell us this is who we think we wish to support. What are your priorities? Who do you want? And in this case, we usually give the decision to the Palestinian universities to decide who of their scholars they wish to support... There is really a high level of ownership on both sides, so the Palestinian universities, they own the right and the ability and the freedom to nominate who they wish based on their priorities and needs.”

They described a recruitment process that was led by the local partner, merit-based, and with outlined objectives and goals for the scholarship – which resulted in over 65 per cent of participants returning to the country to work in the higher education sector after completing the scholarship. This highlights the importance of allowing the local partner to take a leadership role in the partnership, as they are better positioned to identify priorities and maximise impact in the wider community.

Contextual understanding

A core component of equitable partnerships in HEI is contextual understanding from both the UK and local partner. However, a prominent challenge identified amongst stakeholders was the limited understanding of the social, political, economic, and institutional context in which both parties in the partnership are working in, and the impact this has on the management and delivery of the project. This was discussed in the context of the structure of the institution and organisational bureaucracy, the responsibilities of project partners and the impact of conflict on day-to-day operations.

For both UK and local partners, there was limited understanding surrounding the structure of the partnering institution, which affected the development and delivery of the project. A UK stakeholder highlighted the expectations from funding providers for local project partners to have similar institutional arrangements to the UK:

“There was this expectation that the institutional set-ups are similar. Here in the UK, we have a counterpart who does the due diligence, and there was an assumption that they would have the same in their institution... It is not the same for these universities in the global south, so there is that kind of expectation that everybody needs to be the way that we are, which applies to how the funding is awarded and how due diligence lines up with the Western standard”.

Funding providers do not consider the institutional and resource limitations that HEIs in conflict-affected regions may have, nor the differing arrangements – such as different approaches to due diligence or limited access to

administrative assistance. This led to limitations on the types of HEIs which UK institutions could partner with, which has a broader impact on the development of higher education institutions in conflict-affected regions. When only the most established and resource-rich institutions can engage in international partnerships, this results in the underdevelopment of newer institutions who do not currently have the ‘right’ institutional arrangements in place, who would benefit extensively from engaging in international partnerships.

An added challenge identified by a UK stakeholder was the lack of clarity about role and responsibilities of project partner, in relation to their role at the university.

“So, for example, we are not teaching heavy, but our colleagues in Ethiopia and Sudan are teaching heavy and they do not really get much time to do research. There wasn’t a lot of knowledge when the bid was written of what it meant to work in a university just in general, and then what it meant to work in a university in Ethiopia or in Sudan or in the UK, so there was no real understanding of what it’s like day-to-day, if that makes sense.”

Many partnerships are run by UK partners with limited teaching responsibilities, as UK HEI staff can either be employed in research-focused roles or shed teaching hours by winning research grants and project funding. This was assumed to be the case in the partner institutions, which meant projects were designed with limited comprehension of the role academics played in the local institutions. This was reflected in the delivery of the project and the expectations of the partners role in the project, with a local stakeholder expressing frustration at mismatched standards for supervision.

“Even some of the co-supervisors did not know their role, did not understand the role, had expectations that the researchers will chase them and not the other way around. In environments like ours, if you are a supervisor for a student, you chase the students. The student does not chase you, but they did not know this”.

A recurring theme amongst stakeholders was the need to outline the informal institutional assumptions and arrangements that the HEIs in the partnership have, such as the role of the ‘supervisor’ and how students engage in the learning process. There is a wealth of literature that examines the different approaches to education globally, particularly surrounding the relationship between teacher and student– but this did not appear to translate into the design and delivery of projects.^{22,23} This led to frustration on both sides about the expectations for the project, which were worsened by the impact of conflict on the local partners.

Local partners expressed the need for empathy of the role that the conflict plays on the mental wellbeing of project partners.

“It is difficult to keep doing what you are doing after a

²² Eaves, M., 2011. The relevance of learning styles for international pedagogy in higher education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(6), pp.677-691.

²³ Shahjahan, R.A., Estera, A.L., Surla, K.L. and Edwards, K.T., 2022. “Decolonizing” curriculum and pedagogy: A comparative review across disciplines and global higher education contexts. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(1), pp.73-113.

night attack because if you see a missile coming and thank God if it is not coming your way, but sometimes it is difficult to then calm down, refocus, and keep going. That is what we are trying to do, but it is something that our partners need to remember, that this is sort of emotional exhaustion is coming, and if it was not that obvious at the beginning, at the initial stage of the full-scale war, it is getting more obvious now”.

This highlights the importance of ongoing communication, and designating time and resources during the partnership to provide the required support to local partners. Where HEIs are equipped in managing mitigating circumstances for students, extending existing support mechanisms to project partners is vital for the development of successful partnerships. This support could be practical, in terms of provision of counselling support and wellbeing services that are currently provided to students (and budgeting for this in funding applications, if necessary). It could also be more subtle, such as providing flexible deadlines to project partners to accommodate challenging circumstances, or regular ‘check-in’ meetings to provide a sense of routine for the partner. This would require partners to work together to devise a strategy that works, for funders to allocate portions of budget to wellbeing, and existing partnerships to develop examples of best practice and guidance.

Challenging narratives

Stakeholders highlighted how prior to the partnership, the reputation of the UK as a funder or partner for the project was a hindrance to the project locally, due to the negative reputation of the UK (primarily surrounding government and foreign policy) within the local community. This led to scepticism surrounding the intentions of the project, resistance to engagement with the project, and difficulties building trust with local communities. This was highlighted in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Iraq, with two outlined ‘rationales’ for this highlight: a) the UK ‘brand’ had been abused by private institutions which had led to distrust, and b) UK foreign policy had a detrimental impact on the country, resulting in scepticism and resistance. Regarding the UK brand abuse, this referred to private institutions setting up with ‘UK’ (or ‘USA’) branding and providing sub-standard services, leading to consumers of these services feeling distrustful towards UK-branded services.^{24, 25}

In Iraq and Ukraine (where TNE arrangements were in place), stakeholders highlighted how the partnership made a UK higher education feel accessible to the local community, leading to a more favourable perspective towards the UK. However, due to a history of private HEI providers falsely representing themselves as ‘Western Institutions,’ this had led to a distrust in institutions who used British or American branding.

“I’ve had students come to me, saying that this university would accept me and it’s quite clearly a fake university, somewhere that will take anybody with a

pulse, but they were branding and portraying themselves as an American medical school and I had to sit down and say, you need to be aware.... there was a massive court case in Iraq internally and in America, and ever since then, it is synonymous with a fraud. So, I have had to answer those questions from the day we opened. That is why visual confirmations of us at the UK partner were so important.”

This became such a prominent issue across the MENA region that the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research hosted a symposium in 2019 to address the challenges this presented (specifically focusing on the GCC).²⁶ It is also addressed in academic literature, in which the growing challenge of detecting fake degrees in the digital era is a recurring theme of discussion.²⁷

Both UK and local partners highlighted the negative attitude towards the UK as a funder, due to the impact of foreign policy and political action in the MENA and SSA regions:

“We did have some reluctance to work with British funding. Someone once said to me, “surely it opens doors for you,” but no, it shuts them, because a lot of people still associate the UK with divide and rule, and that contextual history. If you historicise that relationship and how that might be understood, rightly or wrongly, by, just a normal person that doesn’t really engage with politics... our international expertise in higher education is great, but we also have a political impact that’s not so great... it makes people hesitant to get involved”.

In some of the case studies, this hesitance towards the UK as a funder led to delays in the project and local resistance to engaging with the project. Delays in the project stemmed from local politicians blockading the projects with extensive administrative barriers, which was worsened by local elections – as soon as a project was finally approved, new politicians were appointed, and the process of approval started again. This resistance was due to concern about the priorities and agenda of the project, with one stakeholder explaining how “there’s a perception that we’re coming in to enforce Western values that aren’t wanted.”

This was particularly relevant to projects which had publicized values relating to the inclusion of women, particularly in countries where women have higher barriers to engaging in higher education. Local partners had to strategically navigate these challenges by emphasizing the involvement of men in the projects, as well as highlighting the monetary value of the project to local politicians. However, whilst there was initial hesitance to these projects due to the perception of enforcing Western values, these barriers were overcome, and the projects have had varying levels of success in advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion values across the partnership.

²⁴ <https://culturico.com/2020/11/07/fake-degrees-and-bogus-universities-a-growing-problem-in-the-middle-east/>

²⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190514134050816>

²⁶ <https://www.eccsr.ae/en/events/the-scourge-of-fake-academic-degrees>

²⁷ Børresen, L.J., Meier, E. and Skjerven, S.A., 2020. Detecting fake university degrees in a digital world. In *Corruption in higher education* (pp. 102-107). Brill.

Advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles

The advancement of equality, diversity and inclusion was a benefit discussed by both UK and local partners. This was discussed in the context of gender equality and disability inclusion, with a biproduct of the partnership being changing attitudes towards women in education and employment, and improved infrastructure for students disabled by conflict. A partner in the UK-Ukraine Twinning scheme discussed the significant role the partnership played in supporting the local institution to develop inclusive infrastructure on-campus for students injured during the conflict.

“Our academic community is getting more inclusive because we are talking about the injuries that the soldiers are having as part of the fighting process. As a society are also changing and we are getting more and more inclusive, so for example, in terms of the infrastructure for soldiers injured, it has helped a lot.”

Whilst the Twinning scheme was primarily for the purpose of keeping education afloat through providing resources and teaching support, a biproduct of these relationships has led to a greater understanding surrounding the inclusion of students with additional needs.

This was discussed in other TNE partnerships, where the UK institution had provided support and training on how to support students with neurodivergence or learning disabilities, of which existing support was lacking.

“There is absolutely no structure or support in this country for students with autism. None. They are forced through the local system with no support at all, as it is not considered valuable to invest in special needs education here. What better way to build peace than to make sure that the most vulnerable members of society are taken care of, and that this is seen as valuable.”

This highlights that the valuable of partnerships goes beyond publications and conference presentations but reflects in the way that marginalised groups are treated in society. These discussions further highlighted the importance of partnerships in raising awareness of the issues of marginalised communities in both the local context, and to the UK partner. For example, a research project in Iraq moved to a model of ensuring representation of marginalised groups in research about these groups – such as inclusion of Yazidi researchers in publications about Yazidi history and culture. This contributes to the ongoing discussions across academia surrounding decolonisation of knowledge, and how decolonisation is not just important for Western institutions – but in institutions globally.

The inclusion of women was identified as an objective, a barrier, and an accomplishment across most of the case studies. In many of the case studies, it was widely acknowledged that women are underrepresented in the sector due to cultural expectations of women keeping them out of the formal labour market. One stakeholder explained how “it’s harder to recruit women who can commit to the course because there’s a lot of other pulls on women’s time because of the cultural expectations on

women.” This meant that many of the women joining the partnership needed additional support in participating in the projects, such as supplementary training, flexible scheduling, and additional accommodations for caregiving duties.

This was highlighted as a barrier by a UK partner, as women were joining the project from a lower ‘starting point’ than their male counterparts, and the preliminary skills mapping for the project had been conducted based off men’s reported skill levels.

“They wanted to have women involved. I think what happened is, for some cultural reasons, there’s not a lot of women who are researchers. So, they put through the best, which compared to others might have been the weaker candidates... what you are doing is pushing people into positions or situations for which they are not ready. And then the chance of failure is higher there because they are not as prepared.”

This showed the importance of contextual understanding surrounding gender dynamics in a country, as well as the value in upskilling training – however, this needs to be managed sensitively, and with the right support and resources in place to aid with the human capital development of marginalized groups.

Human capital development

Universities play a vital role in developing the human capital, of which international partnerships further enhance the human capital of those involved. A key challenge identified by both UK partners and local partners was the gap between expected and actual skills. UK partners identified weak human capital as a challenge for the partnership, primarily relating to research skills, including ethical knowledge, data collection, data analysis and writing skills, and was a challenge for both local staff involved in the project and participants for the project.

“We wanted to do something different, and they did provide us with a survey of the skills for the researchers, like the skills and the gaps that people felt that they had, but this did not align. We still tried to fill that gap, but in all honesty, you cannot do much in two days, you can only just give the basics, the core foundations.”

This stresses the importance of accurate ‘skills mapping’ and other forms of understanding context prior to designing the project. This was primarily discussed in the lack of understanding from the UK partner about the skills gap that women experienced in the partner country, with local partners emphasising the importance of equity in support provision as opposed to equality. This was discussed in the Iraq context:

“In our context, there still needs a lot more support to bring women to the same stage that men are at, because they’ve got a lot more freedom to engage and are accepted more in the spaces that we’re talking about.”

This highlights the challenge of providing targeted support for women in regions where women have less freedom to engage, without being perceived by local

stakeholders as imposing ‘western values’ – and the role that partnerships can play in supporting the economic empowerment of women.

Local partners highlighted the importance of the international partnership in developing the soft skills of participants, which contributed to the overall human capital in the HEI.

“We brought in testimonies from young people who engaged in the social action projects, and, for example, they gained skills they never thought they would get, like project management, time management, financial management, these were all unintended consequences.”

It was not just the projects themselves which nurtured the soft skills, but the participation in international higher education – whether through short-term projects or longer-term TNE arrangements, which had significant impact on both the human capital development and prospects of participating students.

“The continuation of that education, which will still churn out graduates, it’s so important to develop those soft skills of understanding different perspectives, global perspectives that will undoubtedly, stand them in good stead for their employability in the future.”

International higher education provides students with the necessary soft skills to navigate the future workplace, such as communication, relationship building, intercultural understanding and a broader world view. This was felt as a benefit not just to the local students, but to the UK students involved in these partnerships.

Access to resources

The discussions surrounding scholarships as a mechanism of extracting human capital more broadly reflect discussions surrounding access to resources in higher education partnerships – where the UK partner is by default in greater proximity to resources, which imposes unequal power dynamics into the partnership. Many of the partnerships used the often short-time funding opportunities to reduce resource constraints through investing in physical and digital infrastructure, increasing the resilience of the higher education sector through strengthening infrastructure capacity. A UK stakeholder explained how “the key roles that we have played has been providing access to technical and digital resources that might have been lost because of infrastructure being destroyed.” UK HEI’s are in greater proximity to larger-scale funding opportunities for research, due to existing relations with large funding organisations and donors (who are primarily based in the Global North). Many UK partners highlighted that the funding was restricted to specific timeframes and outputs, which meant that longer-time impact was hard to achieve due to these constraints, highlighting how “We’ve tried to bring other faculty members in with other parts of the project except to try to be more inclusive, but there’s only so much you could do in three years with a certain amount of money.”

Discussions with both UK and local partners highlighted that TNE arrangements were viewed as most successful

when they had long-term sustainability – where TNE arrangements often had more time and resources distributed to them, as opposed to shorter-term research projects and mobility programmes. However, the bureaucracy and due diligence involved in setting up TNE arrangements meant for partnerships in conflict-affected regions, shorter-term projects were more likely to be funded – as they were more aligned to development goals as opposed to internationalisation goals. This highlights how long-term investment into such partnerships is only seen as workable when there is a financial incentive to engage, and due to the nature of conflict-affected regions, these partnerships are primarily financed short-term. The short-term financing means the sustainability of the interventions is weaker, creating less impact, and not living up to the intended goal of strengthening HE systems in conflict-affected regions.

The knowledge and capital needed to successfully apply for research funding was tied up in institutional knowledge in western HEIs, in which the partnership allowed for the sharing of this knowledge. Additionally, due to the new-ness and perceived instability of many of the HEIs in conflict-affected regions, being associated to a higher-ranking western institution when applying for funding meant greater success in accessing finance.

“We’ve got access to funding so that we can share that, you know, resource mobilisation we have the mechanisms to manage that funding and allow it to be sent to them, whereas a lot of the time, they probably wouldn’t pass the due diligence set by the funder, they couldn’t get it directly. So, we bring that to them, we bring expertise in research standards and these conversations that are taking place internationally around decolonisation and research methods.”

This was both due to association with the western institution, and the funding criteria requiring certain expertise that is primarily attributed to western institutions. In many of the case studies, UK partners discussed challenges surrounding the local institution meeting due diligence requirements of funders, and how this required the UK HEI to incorporate institutional capacity building into projects.

Logistical constraints and institutional capacity building

HE partnerships support institutional capacity development in conflict-affected regions through the transmission of resources and provision of guidance and support.²⁸ There were two key challenges identified by stakeholders: logistical constraints and weak institutional capacity.

Logistical constraints primarily referred to difficulties in transferring resources to conflict-affected regions, particularly where international sanctions were in place. This was a significant issue for projects in the UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative, where parts of Ukraine (such as Kherson) were under international sanctions that had not been fully lifted in light of its liberation. A logistical challenge highlighted in the UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative was the complexities of international financial transfers to parts of Ukraine. One stakeholder highlighted the challenges of transferring money to Kherson due to the international sanctions that had been put in place prior to its liberation.

“We had to use a third party, from which the money was transferred initially from the UK site to an institution in another area of Ukraine which was not under occupation, before transferring the money to Kherson, creating this triangle to ensure they could access the funds.”

This was also an issue highlighted by a UK stakeholder who managed TNE in regions of economic and political crisis, where often, banking and finance become more complex due to sanctions – which hinders the development and delivery of programmes and projects. This required empathy and flexibility on behalf of the UK institution in managing financial transfers, and creative approaches to navigating this – such as repeat, smaller transactions (where there was a maximum transfer limit in place in Lebanon), or the use of third-party mechanisms (such as in Egypt during Arab Spring). However, this needed effective communication from local partners and UK partners, including administrative staff on both sides, to develop solutions to these challenges – which many partnerships highlighted as an initial barrier. UK stakeholders highlighted how this should be a core part of the start period of the grant.

“The inception period of a grant should be much longer, and it should allow you to really set boundaries and understand each other’s context. This process should be at the beginning of a grant funding period, they need to extend the time frame of funding programmes so that isn’t quite so pressured to get the research started on day one, to get the training started, so you can really navigate these differences and understand them”.

Challenges surrounding weak institutional capacity refer to issues surrounding due diligence and meeting the expectations of funders. Stakeholders in both the UK and local institution highlighted the lack of understanding

funders had about the complexities of setting up partnerships in conflict-affected regions (or more broadly, institutions in developing countries).

Whilst many funders prioritised international development as a key objective, the actual institutional requirements for the local partner led to difficulties in setting up partnerships. The UK partner of a British Academy-funded project explained how they were initially cut at the application stage due to this challenge but circumvented the situation by prioritising institutional capacity building in the project objectives.

“So, they were going to cut us from the application process at that stage, but we appealed and said, you are asking us to work on capacity development with universities in conflict affected context. Of course, they are not going to pass due diligence, it is a contradictory thing to ask us to do this and then cut us for them not being at the level you want them to be.”

Funders prioritise due diligence and compliance to both follow UK laws and regulations and protect their investments, looking to finance ‘development’ projects without providing concessions for the developing institutional environments. This provides harsh limitations on who can be supported and how – prioritising more financially privileged institutions and further contributing to inequality and underdevelopment.

Whilst partners identified this as a significant barrier to initially setting up the arrangements, when partners went above and beyond to navigate these barriers and secure financing for the partnerships, local stakeholders highlighted how this promoted stability and confidence for the local institution.

“Having the government here, supporting the institutions, having the UK institutions directly involved in this, having the UK consulate supporting us, it has really created a trusted environment for the community and the people to come forward to the university and I think it’s important that they continue to provide that support because you know, in a society where political instability is common, you constantly need to remind the people that this is real and genuine, and we are trying to provide the best of qualities for you.”

In conflict-affected regions, resources are constrained, and there is limited scope to increase institutional capacity which would enable access to international financing opportunities. However, conversations with local stakeholders highlighted the role forging partnerships with UK institutions plays in promoting stability and security, which plays a key role in the peacebuilding and reconstruction process.

Peacebuilding and reconciliation

A well-functioning higher education system is a lifeline for developing the human capital necessary to rebuild a country post-conflict and ensure a sustainable, peaceful future. In conflict-affected regions, higher education systems are often one of the first targets, and the last to be rebuilt. This leads to brain drain, which hinders the ability to sustainably rebuild society. A core rationale for the UK-Ukraine twinning scheme was to prevent brain drain and enable Ukrainian institutions to keep providing education in any capacity. This was explained by a local stakeholder in the UK-Ukraine scheme, who highlighted the importance of the scheme in supporting the education system.

“To prevent the brain drain, we wanted still to ensure that the Ukrainian education remained strong and so the universities had students to teach, because we all know that in active warfare it is difficult for students and academics to stay where they had been before the full-scale war started. Both students and academics had to either leave their permanent residency just to move to another city or country, or some of the males and females have gone to fight for the country, and so we wanted to ensure that the Ukrainian universities had the instruments to continue.”

The role of young people is often understated in peacebuilding, with an emphasis on politicians and community leaders as gatekeepers of peace. However, many of the local stakeholders highlighted the importance of the projects in promoting young people as playing a key role in maintaining peace.

“We received so many messages from students saying that this has changed their lives, their perspective towards peace, and even their own behaviours, like previously they might have been drawn towards violence or this stuff, but now it’s changed, and they discovered that they actually have a role in enhancing peace in their community.”

Young people are more likely to be drafted or voluntarily take on combat positions – so targeting interventions towards young people helps challenge the narrative surrounding their role in conflict. In projects specifically focused on peacebuilding (such as EUPE), this sent a message to both the young people and the key decision makers in society about the role that young people can play societally.

However, in projects not specifically focusing on peacebuilding (such as TNE), the use of education as a tool to build sustainable peace was discussed. This was discussed in both the case of addressing the underlying societal challenges that may cause conflict (such as resource scarcity), and in preventing the brain drain that occurs from conflict. TNE partnerships provide accessible education in places where access to education is constrained, either due to cost or proximity. A local stakeholder in a TNE project discussed the importance of providing necessary subjects to support peacebuilding.

“Peace can sometimes be built other ways, so through agriculture for example. Instead of looking at the glamorous subjects like international relations, peace

can be achieved through providing and pushing skills that are not valued, like agriculture, those skills that are needed, that is also a way of pulling a region out of conflicts as well, and it serves many, many purposes. It does not have to be such a straight line between peace building and higher education.”

Where in-demand subjects may refer to industries perceived as more profitable, such as computer science, stakeholders expressed the importance of providing relevant courses which are needed in the post-conflict context – such as agriculture, medicine, and engineering or architecture. Incorporating values such as the SDGs into the curriculum aids in embedding these values into young graduates, which supports sustainable peacebuilding.

A local stakeholder explained the importance of collaboration for peacebuilding and reconstruction of society.

“It brings expertise, innovative ideas, and new perspectives. When we are talking about the rebuilding because it will come, we have the combination of the local context and local expertise, but also the expertise from abroad. And I think this can result in fantastic achievements and fantastic projects at the end, not just rebuilding, but rebuilding better.”

These partnerships offer the opportunity to tie in local knowledge expertise with international expertise, to provide a more sustainable reconstruction pathway.

Recommendations

This report highlighted the growing prevalence of higher education partnerships in conflict-affected regions, profiled six case studies and three methods of higher education partnerships, and outlined the key challenges and opportunities for higher education partnerships in conflict-affected regions. There are significant socioeconomic and institutional constraints to higher education partnerships, but through communication and collaboration, these can be effectively navigated.

There are substantial benefits from higher education partnerships, such as human capital development, advancing the equality of women and other marginalised groups, challenging narratives surrounding the UK and contributing to peacebuilding and reconstruction. Peacebuilding through higher education partnerships can be done formally (through specific peacebuilding projects) or informally (through broader education provision in conflict-affected regions), and both modes are important for sustainable peacebuilding and reconstruction.

Following on from discussions with key stakeholders, there are six key recommendations outlined for the sector:

Funders and policymakers

Longer project inception periods

Allocating additional time in project inception periods for partners to develop contextual understanding of the partner institution. This would include guided support on understanding institutional setups, cultural norms and values, and practical knowledge regarding working in HE in both partner countries.

Flexible approach to due diligence

Providing additional support mechanisms for institutions to meet due diligence requirements, to qualify for funding. This can be in the form of pre-application training workshops for interested HEIs to complete, specialised guidance for interested HEIs and support for UK partner institutions to improve due diligence in partnering organisation.

Universities and departments

Responding to local needs and priorities

Collaborating with local partners and stakeholders to identify the needs and priorities of the sector and allowing local partners the space to communicate the support they require. This would replace the current model of the UK HEI presenting their own support package prior to discussing the local needs.

Access to wellbeing support and resources

Providing local partners with support to the resources available at the UK HEI for wellbeing, such as counselling and wellbeing support services. This demonstrates understanding of the complex conditions which the partner is in and support for their wellbeing, which will aid in the successful delivery and completion of partnerships.

Individual project partners

Ongoing contextual understanding

Designating specific time in meetings on an ongoing basis to provide updates on the current developments in each country, including political, social, and economic. This aids both partners in better understanding the context of their partner institution and allows for more empathy surrounding the ongoing situations.

Equitable collaboration and co-authorship

Ensuring there is representation in the management and leadership of the project from all partners, and the local partner engages in the decision-making process and dissemination activities. This includes co-authorship when publishing from the project and co-presenting the project (when geographically possible) when opportunities arise.

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Case Study 1: Linda Norgrove Foundation

The Linda Norgrove Foundation was established in October 2010, in memory of humanitarian aid worker Linda Norgrove who was kidnapped in Kunar in Afghanistan and died on the 8th of October 2010 after a failed rescue attempt. The foundation was set up by her parents to continue her work and its primary goal is to help women and children, through giving grants to fund education, health and childcare for women and children in Afghanistan.

They are developing programmes with special emphasis on providing education and incomes for women because they believe that these are most likely to create a positive lasting change for the country. Primarily, the Foundation funded the tuition of female students to study at the Sheefa Midwifery Institute in the northern province of Badakhshan each year, consulting with the university through a third-party who oversees the program. As well as medical students, they sponsored young women studying law, economics, or business studies at the Gawharshad Institute in Kabul. Each year they funded around forty scholarships, allowing many young women to continue their education in Afghanistan.

Following the 'suspension' of higher education for women in Afghanistan, they are no longer able to offer scholarships and are no longer able to consult with local universities to facilitate the education of women and girls. In 2021, the Linda Norgrove Foundation began to campaign for changes in Scottish law that would facilitate Afghan young women's ability to study in Scottish higher education institutions. Despite the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme and the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy, there was no support to allow Afghan students to be eligible to pay home tuition fees (making them eligible for free tuition).

The Linda Norgrove Foundation campaigned for three years for changes in Scottish Law, until in February 2024, they were informed by the Scottish Government that student funding regulations could be amended, allowing Afghan women to be treated as home students, meaning they are eligible for free tuition. Since then, the foundation has worked to clear hurdles to attend, such as TB tests, English tests, university interviews, accommodation, student funding applications and other support, which has included consulting with both Afghan universities (where they were formerly registered) and Scottish universities to ensure the smooth transition of students.

On the 21st of August 2024, 19 female Afghan medical students barred by the Taliban from university arrived in Scotland to continue their medical studies. Students have enrolled at institutions such as the University of Dundee, the University of Glasgow and St Andrews to complete their studies, with the Linda Norgrove Foundation supporting students.

Case Study 2: Enabling University Peace Education

Enabling University Peace Education (EUPE) is a peacebuilding partnership project between universities in the UK, Ethiopia, and Sudan, co-funded by the EU and the British Council. EUPE supports young people across Sudan and Ethiopia to participate more effectively in peace processes and works through five key areas: developing a peace curriculum, training researchers on peace research, creation of a community of practice, development of social action projects and implementation of regional collaboration visits. Despite the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, EUPE continues to support peace in Sudan. The partnership involved the universities in the following countries:

United Kingdom

- Coventry University

Ethiopia

- Bahir Dar University
- Hawassa University
- Jimma University
- Dire-Dawa University
- Wollo University
- Wolkite University

Sudan

- University of Kordofan
- Red Sea University
- University of Kassala
- University of West Kordofan
- University of Gadarif
- University of Khartoum
- University of Geniena
- Al Neelain University

The peace curriculum was developed in partnership with Coventry University and resulted in 1671 students in Ethiopia and 3,000 students in Sudan being trained in peace education, as well as 352 Ethiopian lecturers and 72 Sudanese lecturers trained to deliver the curriculum. This led to forty-five social action projects in Ethiopia and twenty-seven in Sudan being ran by graduates of the peace education curriculum.

Additionally, the project aimed to train sixty researchers in Sudan and Ethiopia on peace research in collaboration with Coventry University. This resulted in 28 Ethiopian researchers and 19 Sudanese researchers receiving research grants, however, due to the conflict in Sudan,

some of these were unable to be completed. These research projects are still being finalised, before being published in a journal special edition.

Communities of practice were created in both Ethiopia and Sudan, with fourteen seminars/talks/workshops held in local communities in Sudan and eleven in Ethiopia. Many of these were in collaboration with Coventry University and has led to ongoing research collaborations between UK and local partners. Additionally, a regional collaboration visit was held to Rwanda by project partners and professors representing local universities in Sudan and Ethiopia, which included a visit to the Peace Research Centre in Kigali.

Case Study 3: The British International University in Erbil

The British International University is a private university in Erbil, in the Kurdistan region, providing British higher education awards. It was founded in 2023, with the first cohort of students expected to move into graduate courses in 2024. It is a branch campus offering University of London and University of Surrey degrees at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. An international branch campus (IBC) is a form of international higher education where one or more partnering institutions establishes a physical presence in a foreign location, for the purpose of expanding global outreach and student exchange.

It is the only institution in the region to offer undergraduate and postgraduate study with graduation in the UK, and the first higher education site in the Middle East to offer direct British awards. There are currently three American institutions in Iraq (including one in Kurdistan) and a Lebanese institution. It has the capacity for 8,000 students in the first six years and aims to be a hub for international students from across the Middle East, boasting of a purpose-built campus with dedicated student accommodation. The accommodation was built with the idea that students from across the Middle East would reside in Iraqi Kurdistan for study, making British higher education more accessible and affordable for students within the region.

The campus consists of the schools of Medicine and Health Sciences, Engineering and Technology, and Humanities, with a school of Professional and Vocational Education planned for the near future. The current undergraduate degree programmes on offer are in Law, Business Administration, Engineering and Computer Science. It also provides an International Foundation Programme, which is a pre-university programme of study, in which successful completion leads to the awarding of the University of London International Foundation Certificate. The programme is designed to equip students with the necessary academic skills and knowledge to excel in higher education and covers a comprehensive curriculum that includes subjects such as Mathematics, Economics, International Relations, Social Sciences and more.

Case Study 4: Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts

The Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts is a British Academy project which is funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). This project forms one part of a wider Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) programme, which is a six-year programme (2021-2027) with the objective of delivering and maximising uptake of new, operationally- and policy-relevant evidence on “what works” to deliver education to children affected by conflict and protracted crises.

Political Economy of Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts seeks to develop networks, mobility and exchange between institutions and will play an active role in developing the research capacity, profile and sustainability of the institutions involved and their future researchers. Delivering programmes of institutional strengthening, they will address the challenges of building research and institutional strength in areas of conflict and crisis.

The project operates under a Bilateral Research Chair model, where the project is led by a representative from Ulster University and the University of Koya collaboratively. The project focuses on strengthening research capacity in political economy analysis (PEA) of education in the Middle East. The aim of the project is for insight gathered from the project to support decision making processes in the education sector in Iraq, and to support the development of adept education researchers.

Activities of the project include holding regular seminars and training sessions to provide academics working in the country with skills and knowledge to forensically study education. Members of the research groups will then propose research projects of their own as their skills and knowledge develop.

Case Study 5: Friends of Birzeit University

Friends of Birzeit University (FOBZU) is a UK charity championing the right to education for Palestinians under occupation and in exile. It was founded in 1978, and its work has furthered the cause of Palestinian education by raising awareness in the UK about the needs of Palestinian students and academics, supporting educational projects, and providing scholarships and bursaries to students in financial need. It was established by UK academics in response to the crisis facing Palestinian higher education in the 1970s.

During its early years, FOBZU supported Birzeit University by raising awareness among the UK academic community about the difficulties of education under occupation, fostering cooperation between UK universities and Birzeit and campaigning on the treatment of Palestinian students and academics by Israel's occupation authorities. FOBZU organised guest lecturers and delegations to visit the occupied Palestinian territories to demonstrate the solidarity of UK academics with their Palestinian colleagues. Two key projects that FOBZU operate are the Palestine-UK Academic Links Seminar programme (PALS) and the Distance Education Capacity Building project (which ran during 2021).

The PALS programme is designed to address the urgent need to build educational links and promote mutual understanding between UK and Palestinian faculty. It consists of a 5-day visit to Palestine by academics based at UK universities to undertake an educational itinerary of roundtable discussions, visits to Palestinian higher education and cultural institutions and meetings with Palestinian colleagues. The key outcome of the programme is the establishment of long-term relationships that can support the delivery of quality higher education to Palestinian students living under military occupation.

The Distance Education Capacity Building project comprised a series of interactive online workshops and a programme of cascade training designed to support Palestinian university faculty in delivering accessible and engaging education online during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was delivered by the internationally leading Centre for Distance Education (CDE) at the University of London in partnership with key Palestinian stakeholders. It was an intensive four-week programme supporting staff development in online and blended learning was held with key Palestinian faculty at four universities in the occupied Palestinian territories: Birzeit, An-Najah, Bethlehem and Al-Azhar. The training reached 160 staff members across four Palestinian universities and contributed to institutional capacity building and the improvement of digital teaching and learning pedagogy.

Case Study 6: Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians

The HESPAL scholarship programme is dedicated for Palestinians and is developed in partnership with Palestinian Universities to cater for their needs and priorities. Founded in 2010, the Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL) programme aims to create the next generation of senior academics who can maintain international quality standards at Palestinian universities, develop renewed and sustainable links between Palestinian and UK universities, and create lasting professional networks to sustain scholar's longer-term career. Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL) supports the provision of scholarships for Palestinian students in UK universities.

HESPAL is led by the British Council working in partnership with UK and Palestinian universities and funding partners, including:

- **The Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development**
- **Pears Foundation**
- **Amjad & Suha Bseisu Foundation Pears Foundation**
- **The UK Department for Education**

Since its inception, HESPAL has awarded 241 scholarships to Palestinian academics and researchers (132 female, 109 male), enabling them to pursue postgraduate studies (182 master's degrees and 59 PhDs) in the United Kingdom.

In the academic year 2024/2025, 13 promising Palestinian scholars were awarded HESPAL scholarships to pursue their MA or PhD studies in the UK, beginning in October 2024. The new scholars joined eight continuing PhD scholars from previous years, making a total of 21 HESPAL scholars studying in the UK. An additional track was launched in 2024 within the HESPAL scholarships, dedicated specifically to Gazan University academics and scholars. This initiative provides opportunities for MA and PhD studies at UK partner universities, with programmes commencing in January or March 2025.

Case Study 7: UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative

The Twinning scheme is an institution-to-institution collaboration model aimed at supporting universities in Ukraine amidst and post-war by creating meaningful partnerships between Ukrainian and international higher education institutions. The main drive behind Twinning is to keep the integrity of the Ukrainian higher education system, prevent brain drain, and help universities in Ukraine to come out of the crisis with added resources, skills, and robust international experience. Twinning entails a long-term commitment (a minimum of 5 years) between participating institutions to foster sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships.

The Initiative is coordinated by Cormack Consultancy Group with the support of Universities UK International, the President's Fund of Ukraine for Education, Science, and Sports, and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Twinning is an institution-to-institution partnership framework to support Ukrainian higher education, both through short-term aid and long-term activities that help sustain and rebuild Ukrainian universities, economy, and society. Twinning partnerships provide a wide range of practical assistance, such as:

- **English language support**
- **Access to academic resources, i.e. libraries and databases**
- **Upskilling programmes for Ukrainian staff**
- **Student and staff short-term mobility programmes**
- **Joint research projects & consortia for grant application**
- **Development of dual degree programmes**

There are currently 108 published twinning partnerships between UK and Ukrainian universities, with includes approximately 83 UK institutions and 97 Ukrainian institutions. According to the Year 2 progress report, approximately 4,000 Ukrainian students have benefitted from the Twinning activities during year 2, as well as nearly 1,000 academics at Ukrainian universities have undergone professional training and upskilling.

