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Research Article

Higher Education in Conflict Settings: Realities, Challenges and Possibilities of International Solidarity and Support

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ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks key issues, realities, challenges and possibilities linked to higher education in conflict settings. The focus is on the impact of violent conflict on higher education, and the neglect of the sector when it comes to recovery and rebuilding in the aftermath of conflict. The paper touches on the externally driven initiatives aimed at capacity building and supporting local higher education in conflict settings, and highlights key challenges related to this. The paper further explores how to develop networks of solidarity and provide support to countries, institutions and colleagues in need despite the challenges and pressures linked to neoliberalism, geopolitics and dominant development policies and agendas which do not see the need to rebuild and strengthen higher education in fragile and conflict-ridden settings. Finally, the last part discusses what epistemic changes may be needed in the quest to tackle the failed and destructive development policies and hegemonies that are preventing us from approaching what needs to be done differently.

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Higher education, conflict, development, recovery, solidarity, decolonisation

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Introduction

Violent conflicts affect and often damage or even completely destroy many aspects of life and society, including higher education. Fighting can lead to destruction of campuses and facilities, and death, injury and displacement of staff, academics and students. Conflict-affected countries require assistance when it comes to the protection and functioning of higher education in the midst of fighting, as well as support for strengthening and rebuilding the sector in the aftermath of conflict. Strengthening higher education in conflict settings is important as the sector and institutions play a key role in providing education and developing skills and competencies for societal development and progress, as well as in cultural and historical preservation (Milton, 2018; York Accord, 2015). Beyond this, rebuilding higher education can contribute positively to the broader socio-economic recovery and peacebuilding (Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016). Tristan McCowan (2021, 241) highlights that ‘there is no escape from the reality that all countries, however poor [fragile or conflict-affected], need high-quality higher education systems’. Despite this, all the available evidence points to the neglect of higher education in in-conflict and post-conflict settings (Milton, 2018; York Accord, 2015).

This paper focuses on key issues linked to higher education in conflict settings that require our attention. What do we know about the impact of violent conflict on higher education? To what extent is higher education supported or neglected by local and international actors in conflict settings? What can external actors do to support countries and institutions in need, and what can we learn from past practices? How can we develop networks of solidarity and provide support to countries, institutions and colleagues in need despite the challenges and pressures linked to neoliberalism, geopolitics and dominant development policies and agendas which do not see the need to rebuild and strengthen higher education in fragile and conflict-ridden settings? Finally, what epistemic changes may be needed in the quest to tackle the failed and destructive development policies and hegemonies that are preventing us from approaching what needs to be done differently? The paper is structured around five key issues: The first section will discuss the negative impact of violent conflict on higher education. The next section will unpack the neglect of higher education in conflict settings. The third section will zoom in on the problems with externally driven initiatives to build local capacity or rebuild and strengthen higher education. Section four discusses the importance of solidarity, and the challenges and possibilities linked to this. The last section is a call to work on building a decolonised field of study for protecting, rebuilding and strengthening higher education after conflict and destruction.

Destruction of higher education

War and violent conflict lead to widespread destruction and suffering. Armed conflict destroys countries and societies, leading to death, injury and displacement of many. Fighting destroys economies, communities and institutions, as well as people’s property, possessions, hopes and dreams. Armed conflict and violence also have a negative effect on different levels of education. Often, schools, colleges, universities and other institutions are damaged or destroyed. Pupils and students frequently lose months, even years of schooling and education due to instability and fighting. In this paper, I am focusing on the impact of violent conflict on higher education around the world, and the destruction that conflict and instability bring to the sector. Focusing on the effects of armed conflict on higher education is important as destruction of infrastructure cripples the institutions, destroying the facilities and the ability to perform basic educational and research functions. Loss of life among staff and students is another frequent occurrence in conflict zones, as is the displacement of many. All this has a negative impact on the sector and its ability to function. As highlighted in the York Accord (2015), 2), one of the key global documents about the need for and importance of rebuilding higher education after conflict,

Higher education is increasingly caught in the crossfire of violent conflict, with devastating consequences for the sector and for conflict-affected societies. Institutions of higher education have sustained physical damage as well as significant losses among students and faculty – through death or displacement – while communities of learning have faced isolation and fear.

The impact of violent conflict on higher education is not a new occurrence. The sector has been negatively affected in many conflicts across the globe over the past decades. However, in more recent years, we have far more information about attacks due to comprehensive monitoring of the attacks in conflict zones. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (Gcpea, 2024), for example, has recorded thousands of violent attacks on the higher education sector in many conflict settings around the world in 2022 and 2023, including in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Myanmar, to name only a few countries. Worryingly, the GCPEA report highlights that the attacks on higher education – from destruction of infrastructure to the loss of life, injury and displacement among academics, staff and students, are on the rise globally. The report further notes the significant increase in the number of countries experiencing these challenges in 2022 and 2023 when compared to the previous years.

The obliteration of all higher education institutions in Gaza since October 2023 is one of the most extreme examples of destruction of the sector in a violent conflict. [FN\_1]  While the higher education sector in Palestine has faced repression, attacks and closures for many decades (Abu Lughod, 2000), and the sector in Gaza has been under relentless attacks by the Israeli army during the four other wars over the past two decades, the most recent destruction has been particularly brutal, seen as an attempt to completely erase the sector (Gaza Academics and Administrators 2024). The United Nations (UN) experts have called the systematic destruction of the education system in Gaza an attempt to eradicate the Palestinian education system through ‘scholasticide’ (United Nations, 2024). This devastation will have a lasting impact on primary, secondary and higher education institutions in Gaza, on the pupils, students, staff, teachers and academics, the Palestinian people as a whole, and their future. Importantly, the use of the term scholasticide by the UN experts in the current conflict, which has been coined by Karma Nabulsi in 2009 to describe the deliberate targeting of educational institutions in Gaza with the aim of completely eradicating them (in Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009), highlights the unrelenting and systematic nature of attacks on Palestinian education under Israeli occupation and siege.

Beyond the physical destruction of infrastructure and lives, and beyond the displacement caused by violent conflict, there are other kinds of violence and destruction that higher education frequently experiences. In many countries and settings, political instability, in times of conflict but also in times of relative peace, has led to political and ideological attacks on higher education and academic freedom. These attacks, too, can in some cases lead to physical violence, displacement and loss. Organisations such as the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (Gcpea, 2024) and the Scholars at Risk (2023) have recorded thousands of such attacks over the years. The York Accord (2015) has called for both the monitoring of the attacks on higher education and the protection of the sector in conflict zones. Yet, as highlighted above, the attacks and destruction have continued unabated and have even increased in many settings.

Neglect of higher education

In 2015, John Law from the British Council wrote a short piece titled *Food, shelter or higher education: What's most needed*? The piece focused on the priorities in conflict settings, asking what should be prioritised by international actors in the midst of a crisis, or in the aftermath of a large-scale destruction. While for most people, including many working in higher education, the answer is likely to be food and shelter, Law highlights that higher education should ‘not be neglected, even – or especially – in times of crisis’ (Law, 2015). While food, shelter and other similar basic necessities are immediate priorities in conflict-affected countries, protecting, supporting, rebuilding and strengthening higher education cannot be left out and ignored until such time when all other priorities are sorted out first. This way, the sector would face further deterioration, with enormous negative consequences for the institutions and societies in which they operate. Similarly, Mario Novelli (2023, 926) reminds that education in conflict settings, including higher education, should not be a ‘peripheral afterthought, but a central process and societal institution that effects the distribution and circulation of opportunity, of life chances, of futures’.

However, in conflict-affected and post-conflict environments, higher education is often seen as a luxury and something that can wait until all other priorities are dealt with (Heleta, 2015; Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016). Destruction of higher education leaves a lasting impact on the sector. In many conflict settings, universities and other educational institutions require rebuilding and strengthening to be able to reopen and serve their key purpose – the provision of education, research and knowledge production. Often, buildings, libraries, classrooms, labs and other important infrastructure require repairs or rebuilding. Apart from this, investment in new learning materials and rebuilding of academic capacity is a much-needed necessity before the institutions can get to some form of normalcy. The York Accord (2015) highlights the importance of the sector for peacebuilding, recovery and progress in the aftermath of violent conflict. However, in most conflict settings and the countries that have moved into a post-conflict stage over the past few decades, rebuilding higher education systems and institutions has been neglected. Frequently, higher education does not feature at all in the rebuilding plans in the aftermath of violent conflict. This neglect has had a detrimental impact on the ability of the sector and institutions to recover and function (Milton & Barakat, 2016; York Accord, 2015).

While there is some limited scholarship and key global documents such as the York Accord that highlight the neglect of higher education in conflict settings (Heleta, 2015; Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016; York Accord, 2015), we do not know much about the specifics of the neglect. For example, we do not know what the trends in aid flows for rebuilding higher education institutions have been over the past decades. To get some sense of the neglect, we often have to rely on the more general research about aid flows to higher education in developing countries. For example, research by UNESCO (2018) shows that while the foreign aid to higher education has seen substantial growth between 2002–2016, the countries that need the aid the most – low-income and least developed countries, which also include most conflict-affected countries globally – have been the recipients of a small portion of the aid provided to developing countries. Most of the aid has gone to middle-income developing countries, arguably those that have lesser needs. In addition to this, when we take a closer look at the types of aid to higher education, it becomes evident that about 70% of the aid is provided in scholarships for individuals from developing countries to study at universities in donor countries. Only about 30% is earmarked for rebuilding and/or strengthening local institutions and systems (UNESCO, 2015). Similar trends have been observed in a more recent comprehensive study by UNESCO (Galán-Muros et al., 2022). While these studies refer to the broader trends in aid to higher education in developing countries, it is likely that similar trends and patterns can be found if we zoom in on the aid flows to conflict-affected countries.

The neglect of higher education in conflict settings is not an anomaly, but rather a policy choice of powerful global actors that can be traced back to the neoliberal impositions linked to the structural adjustment programmes that began in the 1980s. For decades, higher education in least developed and conflict-affected countries has been neglected by both the local actors and international donors. International donors and organisations such as the World Bank saw the sector as a luxury for many developing countries. They imposed strict aid conditions on these countries, forcing them to cut spending on higher education. At the same time, international actors promoted the provision of international scholarships for a small number of citizens of these countries as a solution for the poor state of local higher education (Heleta & Bagus, 2021). Unfortunately, the same practices largely continue to this day, as we can see from the above discussion about the trends in aid flows to higher education in developing countries. We can also see this in the Sustainable Development Goals, which have adopted the same approach regarding higher education in developing countries (Heleta & Bagus, 2021; McCowan, 2019).

The neglect of higher education in conflict settings is often linked to the lack of funding and the lack of prioritisation of higher education by local and international actors. This is a real issue and more support, particularly when it comes to foreign aid and assistance, could alleviate a lot of challenges facing many struggling higher education systems. However, we must also be cautious about the foreign aid and ask critical questions about the purposes and politics of aid and assistance to higher education. In an essay about the Italian aid and assistance to Somalia in recent years, Iman Mohamed (2023) writes about the support provided by an Italian foundation for promotion of the Italian language through courses at Somalia’s universities and other organisations, as well as the scholarships for Somali students to study in Italy. If we for a moment ignore the fact that Italy is a former colonial power that colonized Somalia in the past, and that these efforts are linked to the Italian [neocolonial] attempts to rebuild the influence in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa region, funding and support for language courses and scholarships for Somali students to study in Italy do not seem too concerning. However, there is more to this. The foundation providing funding for Italian language courses and scholarships is a ‘cultural arm’ of Italy’s top defense company. This company sees the support for learning the Italian language as a useful entry point in its engagements with the Somali government, with the main purpose being the potential selling of arms to Somalia. Another key purpose is to bolster the capacity of the Somali army to prevent migration from Somalia and the rest of the Horn of Africa across the Mediterranean. At this point, it is unclear whether this example is an isolated case or similar practices happen frequently; we need more critical research on this to explore if foreign aid is used in similar ways in other settings. Nevertheless, the Somali example highlights that asking for more funding from international donors in conflict settings to rebuild or strengthen higher education is not all that is needed. Critical questions about the sources of funding, and the purpose of funding and support, must be raised and answered before any commitments are made.

**Problems with externally driven initiatives**

Despite all the challenges and the neglect of higher education discussed above, there are numerous initiatives to support higher education in in-conflict and post-conflict settings across the world. While many of these initiatives provide much-needed support and assistance to local institutions and systems, they also tend to be fragmented, sporadic, ad hoc, and externally designed, driven and implemented, with little involvement of local actors (Heleta, 2015; Milton, 2018). I was part of one such initiative in South Sudan. Here, I will briefly outline what we did, and what I think today were the major shortcomings of our approach.

In 2008, while I was busy with my postgraduate studies in South Africa, my university was approached by a British charity working in South Sudan to design, develop and run a leadership programme aimed at offering training and education to a group of high-ranking South Sudanese government and army officials. As the focus of much of my research was on South Sudan, I was asked to be part of the project. The university developed a leadership programme which focused on post-conflict reconstruction, development, peacebuilding, state-building and conflict management. The programme, funded entirely by the South Sudanese government, was developed largely by academics and staff working in South African higher education, with some input from a few South Sudanese academics and diplomats working in South Africa. The South Sudanese higher education institutions, or South Sudanese academics and experts based in South Sudan, were not consulted or involved at any stage. The programme ran from 2009 until the end of 2013. South Sudanese government and army officials who took part in the programme as students attended some training in South Africa, and some training was delivered in Juba, the capital of South Sudan (Heleta, 2013).

While the programme ended up providing capacity building and educational opportunities to a small number of government and army officials, who saw it as an important contribution to their development and growth (Heleta, 2013), it failed structurally in several ways. While we were busy with our programme, there were other similar initiatives run by two other South African universities, similarly designed to assist with capacity building in South Sudan. Our three projects were developed separately, without any engagement between the institutions or people who were responsible for them. While some South Sudanese diplomats attempted to bring the South African academics and university administrators together to engage and find ways of collaborating, this ultimately never happened. The decision-makers at the three South African universities were not interested in collaboration; they wanted to ‘protect’ their spaces, turfs and projects, as well as the monetary aspects of running the projects. They saw collaboration and sharing of tasks as a possible threat to the profits they were making. In addition to this, the project I was involved in, even when some aspects of it were delivered in South Sudan, operated as an entirely external affair disconnected from local higher education realities. We found venues in Juba, brought in academics and facilitators, and ran everything ourselves. No effort was made to develop links with local higher education institutions in South Sudan and find ways to collaborate on the programme with them.

In the beginning of 2013, the programme welcomed a new group of more than 70 students. Due to the size of the group, a decision was made to deliver all classes in Juba. I was in South Sudan in November 2013, working with the students over a two-week period. I did not know at the time that this would be my last time in South Sudan. A month later, a war broke out in the country. My university immediately made a decision to stop the project. While the attempts were made over 2014 and 2015 to find ways to restart the programme, everything came to a standstill due to instability in South Sudan and the lack of funding to continue the project. Looking at the entire experience today, the failure to establish links and partnerships with local higher education institutions in South Sudan was the biggest shortcoming of our approach. If we had links with local institutions and academics, some aspects of the project could have continued once there was some form of relative stability in South Sudan. However, as the project was entirely externally designed, developed and delivered, the people who were involved were not interested, and/or were unable to continue once there was armed conflict in South Sudan and the funding for the project dried up. In the end, while we did provide education to a small group of students, we failed in helping build local capacity to provide education and training in the long run. When I read today what I wrote about this project more than a decade ago, and how positive my views of it were (Heleta, 2013), I find myself wondering how I could not see fundamental systemic and structural problems of our approach back then. But this is what experience, learning and time allow us to do. We cannot go back in time to fix our mistakes, but we need to critically reflect, write about this, engage with others, and ensure that similar mistakes are not repeated in conflict settings in the future.

International solidarity

Institutions, scholars, staff and students in conflict settings often require meaningful and lasting international solidarity, support and assistance as they try to recover from conflict-related interruptions and destruction. This includes speaking out for those who are under threat or attack, expressing solidarity with colleagues in conflict zones, creating opportunities for continued academic collaboration, supporting displaced students and scholars, and supporting projects and initiatives aimed at recovery, rebuilding and strengthening higher education in the aftermath of conflict and destruction. York Accord (2015), for example, calls on the higher education sector around the world to increase the efforts aimed at monitoring the attacks on higher education, academics and students, and collaborate with and support institutions recovering from instability, conflict and destruction. However, while there is quite a lot of rhetoric around this from many higher education circles around the world, solidarity and support are often superficial, paternalistic and/or selective. Frequently, solidarity is expressed through statements that mean very little in practice, or through initiatives that erase local agency and impose external ideas and solutions.

Importantly, we have seen in recent years how solidarity can be selective. Some crises and peoples are provided with comprehensive support and assistance, while others are neglected. The conflict in Ukraine, the attacks on higher education there, and the displacement of Ukrainian scholars and students are a case in point. We have seen an outpour of support and initiatives aimed at supporting Ukrainian institutions, students and scholars in Europe and other parts of the Global North (Protsyk, 2025). At the same time, institutions, scholars and students from other conflict settings, such as Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and others, have been largely neglected. In the case of Palestine, apart from the neglect, we have also seen systemic silencing and repression of solidarity with the Palestinians, and criminalisation of pro-Palestine and anti-genocide activism on university campuses in many European countries, in the United States, Britain and Canada, to name a few (Hajir & Qato, 2025).

This is not to say that Ukrainians should not be supported in their time of need. They require and deserve all the support they can get to protect, strengthen and rebuild their higher education, and allow scholars and students to continue with their work and studies. However, we must challenge the normalisation of selective solidarity. We have to call out the governments, donors and institutions that are placing value on and offering support to some people, higher education institutions and places, while blatantly neglecting others. And we must call out racism in all this, because this is what this is, and has been out in the open for all of us to see. The support for Ukraine from the Global North is a case in point (Mayaleh et al., 2024). It is important to highlight that this has nothing to do with Ukraine or Ukrainians, but is the fault of the Western governments, institutions, donors, leaders and the media who support Ukrainians just because they are, in the words of American and British journalists, the ‘people with blue eyes and blond hair’ who are ‘relatively civilized, relatively European’, and as such, deserve the support that others in Africa, Middle East, or South-East Asia do not deserve (Bayoumi, 2022). This hierarchy of who matters and who deserves support and solidarity and who does not is rooted in racism and dehumanisation (Mayaleh et al., 2024; McCloskey, 2022).

Another key issue linked to international solidarity is our existence and work within the neoliberal higher education systems, institutions and societies. Universities across the globe are largely neoliberal institutions that exploit workers and precarious or temporary academics, researchers and postdocs. The same institutions see their own students as nothing but customers. The systems and institutions profit from various forms of exploitation, driven largely by managerialism, commodification and profit making by any means necessary. What kind of solidarity with struggling colleagues, students and institutions in distant places can we expect from them? And if we cannot expect any genuine solidarity to come from our compromised, toxic and profit-driven institutions that are not interested in social justice and solidarity with the oppressed beyond seeing and using these concepts and words as mere buzzwords, how do we provide support and assistance to the colleagues, students and institutions facing attacks and destruction?

There are no easy answers and quick fixes to any of this. We have to understand that the neoliberal and Eurocentric university in the Global North but also in many parts of the Global South is not an institution genuinely interested in the struggles for social and racial justice, equity and equality, or anything else, both at home and abroad. Robin Kelley, in his 2018 paper *Black study, black struggle*, reminds that the Eurocentric, neoliberal and corporate university has never been and will never be an institution interested and invested in the promotion of social, racial, economic and other forms of justice and freedom, or an engine of social transformation (Kelley, 2018). This refers to the issues and struggles for justice and transformation within the university, as well as the broader national and international struggles. This has real implications for mobilising within, across and beyond our institutions to offer international solidarity, support and assistance to our colleagues in conflict settings.

Not everything is lost, however. We can still organise, mobilise, critique, lobby, and work towards fundamentally transforming and decolonising our universities and societies, and, at the same time, offer support to colleagues and institutions in countries experiencing conflict, repression and instability. In his paper, Kelley (2018, 167) writes about the Black Lives Matter student activists in the United States, and their struggles within and against the neoliberal, Eurocentric and often structurally racist higher education institutions. He notes that their main aim ‘is to create in the present a future that overthrows the logic of neoliberalism… these students are demonstrating how we might remake the world. They are ruthless in their criticism and fearless in the face of the powers that be… They are *in* the university but not *of* the university’ (original emphasis).

I often go back to Kelley’s paper and am particularly drawn to the last part of the above quote: being ‘*in* the university but not *of* the university’. This, I believe, is how we need to think about and exist in the neoliberal university in general, while working hard to dismantle the neoliberal and Eurocentric hegemony and decolonise higher education and knowledge. This is also how we need to think about international solidarity, support and assistance for our colleagues and their institutions in conflict settings. Being in the university allows us to use our privileges, networks, capacity, infrastructure and facilities to organise, mobilise and provide assistance and solidarity wherever it is needed despite the limitations and lack of genuine interest from our neoliberal institutions. To do what is needed, we may have to build solidarity networks and implement the initiatives outside the formal university structures. Most importantly, any form of solidarity and support we offer to our colleagues in conflict settings must be informed by and aligned with their priorities, visions and demands.

Concluding thoughts: importance of decolonising our work and challenging the status quo

This paper has unpacked key issues, realities, challenges and possibilities linked to higher education in conflict settings. The focus was on the impact of violent conflict on higher education, and the neglect of the sector in the aftermath of conflict. The paper has discussed externally driven initiatives in conflict settings and highlighted key challenges related to this. The focus was also on how to develop networks of solidarity and provide support to countries, institutions and colleagues in need despite the challenges and pressures linked to neoliberalism, geopolitics and dominant development policies and agendas. As part of the concluding thoughts, this section discusses what epistemic changes may be needed in the quest to tackle the failed and destructive development policies and hegemonies that are preventing us from approaching what needs to be done differently.

Part of our critical work, research and efforts geared toward protecting, supporting and rebuilding higher education in conflict settings needs to focus on decolonising our work, scholarship and praxis. Much of what we do, and the institutions we are part of, is heavily influenced by colonial and neocolonial frames, fallacies and practices, and the Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. Tarak Barkawi (2015, 200), in his paper titled *Decolonising war*, explains what it means to decolonise our thinking, our scholarship, and our worldviews:

To decolonise, in my usage here, is to consider critically how Eurocentrism has informed the basic categories and vocabularies of social and political inquiry, across a range of disciplines. Western histories and societies supply the substantive objects of inquiry in most studies and disciplines. Those histories and societies are conceived in specifically Eurocentric ways that sever them from their constitutive connectedness to other parts of the world, to the histories and societies of others.

While his focus is on decolonising the study of violent and armed conflict, the above quote points us in the direction we need to take when thinking critically about our efforts aimed at supporting recovery and rebuilding of higher education sectors and institutions negatively impacted by violent conflict. This is particularly important as unequal power dynamics between the Global North and South have until now meant that much of the recovery and development work in conflict settings, including the rebuilding of higher education, has been designed, conceptualised and driven by experts, scholars, practitioners, institutions and donors from the Global North, with little input from the affected people. This is often driven by the ‘values, goals and practices of development … [which] reflect a Eurocentric interpretation of modernity and progress. This means that when programmes are implemented, they impose these values on the beneficiaries of aid’ and development assistance (Paige, 2021, 15). Decolonising aid and development work in conflict settings requires that the status quo and ‘existing norms be fundamentally disrupted and dismantled. It requires a commitment to the redistribution of power and resources’ (Paige, 2021, 37).

While most of us in academia have no power or influence to impact the distribution of resources, funding and power during a recovery and rebuilding phase in conflict settings, we have the responsibility to challenge the status quo through our research, teaching and engagement in higher education. As Mario Novelli (2023, 926) points out,

[We] have agency – even if that is conditioned, constrained and facilitated by a range of factors and actors. These constraints often push us towards compliance, policy service for the powerful, and work against the pursuit of social justice – in and through education. We can choose to become ‘implicated’ in these processes, or we can resist, challenge and forge alternative paths.

We need to ask critical questions regarding what decolonial thinking means for our study and praxis about rebuilding and strengthening higher education in the aftermath of violent conflict. We need more critical research about past trends, practices and initiatives, analysing the design, power dynamics, aims, funding mechanisms and outcomes of external initiatives to strengthen or rebuild higher education. We need to revisit the York Accord (2015), which has been in existence for a decade. While much of what is contained in this document remains as relevant as ever, we need to engage with it critically, involving different global actors, experts, scholars and policymakers, as well as the stakeholders and institutions from different conflict settings. We need critical analysis of aid flows to higher education in different settings, including the analysis of conditionalities, aims, objectives and outcomes of projects and initiatives. We also need to learn from successful practices and initiatives, particularly the ones that were designed and driven by local actors. Finally, our work and research must challenge the Eurocentric and neoliberal hegemonies and strive to develop and promote scholarship and practices rooted in epistemic plurality and critical engagement with diverse knowledges, perspectives, worldviews and ways of knowing from all corners of the globe.

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Footnote-body

[AN\_1] This paper was delivered as a keynote at the Political Economy of Education Research (PEER) Network symposium on *Supporting and learning from universities in times of conflict: Towards resilience and resistance in higher education*, which took place at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom on 6–7 July 2023. In the keynote, I reflected on my research on rebuilding and strengthening higher education after violent conflict, as well as my work and experience in South Sudan. In this paper, I unpack the keynote in more detail, reflecting on key issues and challenges linked to higher education in conflict settings I have identified over the years through my work, research and engagement.

[FN\_1] The keynote on which this paper is based was delivered in July 2023, while the paper was finalised in mid-2024. The example of the destruction of higher education in Gaza since October 2023 has been added as this is arguably the most extreme example of deliberate targeting and destruction of the sector in a violent conflict.

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[bib3]##AuthST##Barkawi, T.##AuthEN## 2016. “Decolonising #inST#War#inEN##dlST#war#dlEN#.” *European Journal of International Security* 1 (2): 199#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#214. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2016.7#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN####CMST##The reference Barkawi 2016 is listed in the references list but is not cited in the text. Please cite the reference in the text. If no citation is supplied we will delete the unwanted.##CMEN##

[bib4]##AuthST##Bayoumi, M.##AuthEN## 2022. #inST#“#inEN##dlST#They are ‘civilised’ and ‘look like us’: #dlEN#The racist coverage of Ukraine#inST#.”#inEN##dlST#.#dlEN# The Guardian. 2 March 2022.#inST# #inEN#*#inST#They are ‘civilised’ and ‘look like#inEN#*#inST#. #inEN##inST#us#inEN##inST#:#inEN# https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/civilised-european-look-like-us-racist-coverage-ukraine##CMST##Reference Type: Newspaper -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib5]##InstAuthST##Gaza Academics and Administrators##InstAuthEN##. 2024. *Open #inST#Letter#inEN#*#dlST#letter#dlEN# *by Gaza #inST#Academics#inEN#*#dlST#academics#dlEN# *and #inST#University Administrators#inEN#*#dlST#university administrators#dlEN# *to the #inST#World#inEN#*#dlST#world#dlEN#. Al Jazeera. 29 May 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/29/open-letter-by-gaza-academics-and-university-administrators-to-the-world##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing publisher location for the Name, date references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib6]##AuthST##Galán-Muros, V.##AuthEN##, ##AuthST###inST#E.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Chacón##AuthEN##, #dlST#E. #dlEN#and ##AuthST###inST#M.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Escribens##AuthEN###dlST#, M#dlEN#. 2022. *Exploring #inST#International Aid#inEN#*#dlST#international aid#dlEN# *for #inST#Tertiary Education#inEN#*#dlST#tertiary education#dlEN#*: Recent #inST#Developments#inEN#*#dlST#developments#dlEN# *and #inST#Current#inEN#*#dlST#current#dlEN# trends. Paris: UNESCO, and Caracas: UNESCO IESALC. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381747##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib7]#inST###AuthST###inEN##inST#Gcpea#inEN###AuthEN###dlST#GCPEA#dlEN#. 2024. *Education #inST#Under Attack#inEN#*#dlST#under attack#dlEN# *2024*. New York: Global Coalition to Protect Education From Attack. https://protectingeducation.org/publication/education-under-attack-2024/##CMST##Reference Type: Other -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib8]##AuthST##Hajir, B#inST#.#inEN##inST###AuthEN###inEN##inST#,#inEN##dlST#.#dlEN# and ##AuthST###inST#M.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Qato##AuthEN###dlST#, M#dlEN#. 2025. “Academia in a time of genocide: #inST#scholasticidal#inEN##dlST#Scholasticidal#dlEN# tendencies and continuities.” *Globalisation, Societies and Education*#dlST#,#dlEN# 1#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#9. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2024.2445855#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing volume number for the Hajir and Qato, 2025 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib9]##AuthST##Heleta, S.##AuthEN## 2013. “Building #inST#Leadership Capacity#inEN##dlST#leadership capacity#dlEN# for #inST#Post-War Recovery#inEN##dlST#post-war recovery#dlEN#: The #inST#Case#inEN##dlST#case#dlEN# of South Sudan.” *Journal for Development and Leadership* 2 (1): 63#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#77.#inST# #inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib10]##AuthST##Heleta, S.##AuthEN## 2015. “Higher #inST#Education#inEN##dlST#education#dlEN# in #inST#Post-Conflict Societies#inEN##dlST#post-conflict societies#dlEN#: Settings, #inST#Challenges#inEN##dlST#challenges#dlEN# and #inST#Priorities#inEN##dlST#priorities#dlEN#.” *Handbook Internationalisation of European Higher Education*, Issue 1 (2015): 1-20. Stuttgart: Raabe Verlag.##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib11]##AuthST##Heleta, S#inST#.#inEN##inST###AuthEN###inEN##inST#,#inEN##dlST#.#dlEN# and ##AuthST###inST#T.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Bagus##AuthEN###dlST#, T#dlEN#. 2021. “Sustainable #inST#Development Goals#inEN##dlST#development goals#dlEN# and #inST#Higher Education#inEN##dlST#higher education#dlEN#: Leaving #inST#Many Behind#inEN##dlST#many behind#dlEN#.” *Higher Education* 81 (1): 163#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#177. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00573-8#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib12]##AuthST##Kelley, R.#inST# #inEN#D.#inST# #inEN#G.##AuthEN## 2018. “Black #inST#Study, Black Struggle#inEN##inST#.”#inEN##dlST#study, black struggle.”#dlEN# *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40 (2): 153#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#168. https://doi.org/10.5070/F7402040947#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib13]##AuthST##Law, J.##AuthEN## 2015. *Food, #inST#Shelter#inEN#*#dlST#shelter#dlEN# *or #inST#Higher Education: What's Most Needed#inEN#*#dlST#higher education: What’s most needed#dlEN#*? British Council*. 30 September 2015. https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/food-shelter-higher-education-most-needed##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing publisher name and publisher location for the Law, 2015 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib14]##AuthST##Mayaleh, A.##AuthEN##, ##AuthST###inST#B.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Hamamra##AuthEN##, #dlST#B. #dlEN#and ##AuthST###inST#R.#inEN##inST# #inEN##inST#R.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Gould##AuthEN###dlST#, R.R#dlEN#. 2024. “The #inST#Hierarchy#inEN##dlST#hierarchy#dlEN# of #inST#Victims#inEN##dlST#victims#dlEN#: Media #inST#Coverage#inEN##dlST#coverage#dlEN# and the #inST#Limits#inEN##dlST#limits#dlEN# of Euro-American #inST#Solidarity#inEN##inST#.” #inEN##dlST#solidarity.” #dlEN#*Journal of Intercultural Studies*#dlST#,#dlEN# 1#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#19. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2024.2374557#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing volume number for the Mayaleh et. al., 2024 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib15]##AuthST##McCloskey, S.##AuthEN## 2022. #inST#“#inEN#The #inST#War#inEN##dlST#war#dlEN# in Ukraine #inST#Has Revealed#inEN##dlST#has revealed#dlEN# a #inST#Hierarchy#inEN##dlST#hierarchy#dlEN# of #inST#Victims#inEN##inST#.”#inEN##dlST#victims.#dlEN# *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*#dlST#,#dlEN# 34#inST#:#inEN##dlST#, #dlEN#138#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#149.#inST# #inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib16]##AuthST##McCowan, T.##AuthEN## 2019. *Higher #inST#Education#inEN#*#dlST#education#dlEN# *for and #inST#Beyond#inEN#*#dlST#beyond#dlEN# *the Sustainable Development Goals*. #dlST#London: #dlEN#Palgrave #inST#Studies in Global Higher Education#inEN##inST# #inEN##inST#Cham#inEN##inST#: #inEN##inST#Springer International Publishing#inEN##inST#. #inEN##inST#10.1007/978-3-030-19597-7#inEN##dlST#Macmillan.#dlEN###CMST##Reference Type: book -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib17]##AuthST##Milton, S.##AuthEN## 2018. *Higher #inST#Education#inEN#*#dlST#education#dlEN# *and #inST#Post-Conflict Recovery#inEN#*#inST#. #inEN##inST#Cham#inEN##inST#: #inEN##inST#Springer International Publishing#inEN##inST#. #inEN##inST#10.1007/978-3-319-65349-5#inEN##dlST#post-conflict recovery. London: Palgrave Macmillan.#dlEN###CMST##Reference Type: book -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib18]##AuthST##Milton, S#inST#.#inEN##inST###AuthEN###inEN##inST#,#inEN##dlST#.#dlEN# and ##AuthST###inST#S.#inEN##inST# #inEN#Barakat##AuthEN###dlST#, S#dlEN#. 2016. “Higher #inST#Education#inEN##dlST#education#dlEN# as the #inST#Catalyst#inEN##dlST#catalyst#dlEN# of #inST#Recovery#inEN##dlST#recovery#dlEN# in #inST#Conflict-Affected Societies#inEN##dlST#conflict-affected societies#dlEN#.” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14 (3): 403#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#421. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2015.1127749#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib19]##AuthST##Mohamed, I.##AuthEN## 2023. #inST#“#inEN#Words #inST#Exchanged#inEN##dlST#exchanged#dlEN#​: Italophone Somalia, #inST#Then#inEN##dlST#then#dlEN# and #inST#Now#inEN##inST#.”#inEN##dlST#now.#dlEN# *The Drift*#dlST#.#dlEN# Issue 9. 28 February 2023. https://www.thedriftmag.com/words-exchanged#inST#/#inEN##inST#.#inEN##dlST#/#dlEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Grobid##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing volume number and page number for the Mohamed, 2023 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib20]##AuthST##Novelli, M.##AuthEN## 2023. “Politics, #inST#Power & Partnerships: The Imperial Past#inEN##dlST#power & partnerships: the imperial past#dlEN# and #inST#Present#inEN##dlST#present#dlEN# of #inST#International Education#inEN##dlST#international education#dlEN# and #inST#Development#inEN##dlST#development#dlEN# (BAICE #inST#Presidential Address#inEN##dlST#presidential address#dlEN# 2022).” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 53 (6): 915#inST#–#inEN##dlST#-#dlEN#929. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2234277#inST#.#inEN###CMST##Reference Type: journal -- Crossref##CMEN##

[bib21]##AuthST##Paige, S.##AuthEN## 2021. *Time to #inST#Decolonise Aid#inEN#*#dlST#decolonise aid#dlEN#*: Insights and #inST#Lessons#inEN#*#dlST#lessons#dlEN# *from a #inST#Global Consultation#inEN#*#inST#.#inEN##dlST#global consultation.#dlEN# London: Peace Direct. https://www.peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib22]##AuthST##Protsyk, H.##AuthEN## 2025. “Higher #inST#Education Amid#inEN##dlST#education amid#dlEN# the #inST#War#inEN##dlST#war#dlEN#: A #inST#Resilience Test#inEN##dlST#resilience test#dlEN# for #inST#Ukraine's Integration#inEN##dlST#Ukraine’s integration#dlEN# into the European Higher Education Area.” *#inST#Ukraine's#inEN#*#dlST#In Ukraine’s#dlEN# *Thorny Path to the EU*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics#inST# #inEN##inST#279#inEN##inST#–#inEN##dlST#, edited by M. Rabinovych and A. Pintsch, 279-#dlEN#310. Cham#inST#: #inEN##inST#Springer Nature#inEN##dlST#,#dlEN# Switzerland#inST#. #inEN##inST#10.#inEN##dlST#: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.#dlEN#1007/978-3-031-69154-6\_12##CMST##Reference Type: Edited Book -- Crossref##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing editors name for the Protsyk, 2025 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib23]##InstAuthST##Scholars at Risk##InstAuthEN##. 2023. *Free to #inST#Think#inEN#*#dlST#think#dlEN#*: Report of the Scholars at Risk #inST#Academic Freedom Monitoring Project#inEN#*#inST#.#inEN##dlST#academic freedom monitoring project.#dlEN# New York: Scholars at Risk. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023/##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN####CMST##Please provide missing publisher name for the Scholars at Risk, 2023 references list entry.##CMEN##

[bib24]##InstAuthST##UNESCO##InstAuthEN##. 2015. A #inST#Growing Number#inEN##dlST#growing number#dlEN# of #inST#Children#inEN##dlST#children#dlEN# and #inST#Adolescents#inEN##dlST#adolescents#dlEN# are out of #inST#School#inEN##dlST#school#dlEN# as #inST#Aid Fails#inEN##dlST#aid fails#dlEN# to #inST#Meet#inEN##dlST#meet#dlEN# the #inST#Mark#inEN##dlST#mark#dlEN#. *UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Education for All Global* Monitoring Report. Policy Paper 22/Fact Sheet 31. Paris: UNESCO.##CMST##Reference Type: Other -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib25]##InstAuthST##UNESCO##InstAuthEN##. 2018. *Aid to #inST#Education: A Return#inEN#*#dlST#education: a return#dlEN# *to #inST#Growth#inEN#*#dlST#growth#dlEN#. Policy Paper No. 36. Paris: UNESCO.##CMST##Reference Type: Other -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib26]##InstAuthST##United Nations##InstAuthEN##. 2024. *UN #inST#Experts Deeply Concerned Over ‘Scholasticide'#inEN#*#dlST#experts deeply concerned over ‘scholasticide’#dlEN# *in Gaza. Geneva: The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza##CMST##Reference Type: Other -- Grobid##CMEN##

[bib27]##InstAuthST##York Accord##InstAuthEN##. #inST# #inEN#2015. *York Accord: The #inST#Responsibility#inEN#*#dlST#responsibility#dlEN# *to #inST#Protect#inEN#*#dlST#protect#dlEN# *and #inST#Rebuild Higher Education During#inEN#*#dlST#rebuild higher education during#dlEN# *and #inST#After#inEN#*#dlST#after#dlEN# conflict. Doha: Brookings Doha Center. https://www.york.ac.uk/media/news-and-events/pressreleases/2015/york-accord/yorkaccord.pdf##CMST##Reference Type: book -- Grobid##CMEN##