

Syrian Higher Education in Transition

SyrIA Fact-Finding Mission to
Syrian Public Universities
(May 2026)

Implemented by the German Jordanian University in
cooperation with the University of Hamburg and the
German-Syrian Research Society (DSFG)

At the Jordanian-Syrian border

Foreword

Dear readers,

Many countries around the world, including Germany, were taken aback when Syria's leadership changed in late 2024. High expectations mixed with many questions: which path will the country and its people take? How can the international community assist in overcoming the isolation of the war years and support reconstruction? Questions like these were particularly prevalent in Germany, that hosts close to a million Syrians having arrived in Germany during the war years. Numerous academics, doctors, engineers, social scientists and other professionals were among them. Like the German government, many members of the Syrian diaspora in Germany also wish to contribute to the reconstruction of their homeland.

As we talked about these issues at DAAD, it became clear that helping to reconstruct Syria's educational system and reintegrate it with the global community is extremely difficult. Years of isolation and professional migration have left their mark. At the same time, many Syrian academics have continued their careers in Germany over the past 12 years and many young people of Syrian descent have attended and are attending German universities. Among them are alumni of the DAAD "Leadership for Syria" program, which the DAAD launched at the peak of migration to Germany. They have set up active alumni networks like the Syrian-German research foundation.

When DAAD committed itself to supporting the reconstruction of Syria's higher education and research system in 2025, four pillars were identified: First, in early 2026 DAAD published a policy paper, identifying short-, medium- and long-term measures. Second, initial short-term measures began, including funding for DAAD alumni of Syrian descent in Germany to realise short term stays at Syrian universities. This is supplemented by funding of short-term projects of German universities to reestablish institutional ties with Syrian counterparts. The selected projects will be



© DAAD/Ittermann

implemented in the second half of 2026. Third, DAAD supports capacity building for Syrian HEIs through two main activities: Trainings provided by the DAAD Kairo Akademie (DKA) at the DAAD Cairo office and by awarding the German Jordanian University a two-year "SyrIA" project to engage in capacity building, training and networking with Syrian HEIs together with German, Jordanian and international partners, primarily in Arabic.

This booklet is the first output of the SyrIA project, just weeks after its launch in May. Warm congratulations to the team at GJU for the successful project start. I genuinely believe that this is just the start of a revitalized Syrian higher education system that is once again connected to the rest of the world. I wish the project ongoing success and good faith for the months to come. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the German Federal Foreign Office for funding these initiatives.

I wish you an interesting reading experience.

Dr. Kai Sicks,
Secretary General of the DAAD

Introduction

Higher education plays a central role in recovery, economic development, and institutional transformation. In societies emerging from conflict, universities are more than places of teaching and research. They are centres of knowledge, innovation, professional development, and social cohesion.

The “Syrian Innovation in Academia” (SyrIA) project was established to support the reconstruction and modernisation of the Syrian higher education system

during a period of significant transition. Funded by DAAD with resources from the German Federal Foreign Office, the project aims to strengthen institutional capacities, accompany reform-oriented processes, and revive international academic cooperation.

The project was launched with a high-level Jordanian-Syrian Dialogue Forum for the Development of Higher Education, which was held at the German Jordanian University on 3 and 4 May 2026.



Syrian university Presidents and SyrIA project representatives at the Jordanian–Syrian Higher Education Dialogue Forum, German Jordanian University, May 2026.

The discussions showed a strong commitment on the part of the Syrian universities to modernisation, quality improvement, digital transformation, research capacity building, international networking, and institutional development. These priorities largely corresponded with the findings gained later during the fact-finding mission, confirming a strong consensus among the institutions regarding future development needs.



First Jordanian-Syrian Dialogue Forum for the Development of Higher Education 3-4 May 2026



In order to create an evidence-based foundation for further activities, a fact-finding mission was conducted to the eight physical Syrian public universities from 9 to 22 May 2026. The mission brought together university leadership, academics, and administrative staff to assess the current situation, identify priorities, and explore opportunities for future cooperation.

The discussions highlighted not only the need for institutional and human capacity development, but also the importance of reliable physical and digital infrastructure as a prerequisite for sustainable modernisation and international academic engagement.

The findings presented in this booklet represent preliminary insights from this qualitative fact-finding phase. They provide an initial overview of the perspectives, priorities, and development needs identified during the university visits.

As part of the broader SyrIA project, these findings will be further triangulated through an upcoming quantitative survey conducted by the project team and through the analysis of complementary survey data collected by the German-Syrian Research Society (DSFG) with support from the project. Together, these activities will contribute to a comprehensive evidence base on the current state and future development of

Syrian higher education. The full analytical report will be presented and disseminated during the SyrIA Conference on Syrian Higher Education, scheduled for 24–26 November 2026.

This booklet presents the key findings of the mission. It highlights the strengths, challenges, and development perspectives of Syrian universities without evaluating or ranking individual institutions. Rather, it serves as a foundation for continued dialogue, capacity development, and international partnership in support of the long-term innovation and modernisation of Syrian higher education.

Executive Summary

The Syrian higher education system is undergoing a profound transition. Despite years of conflict, economic pressure, and international isolation, universities across the country continue to function and demonstrate a strong commitment to modernisation, institutional development, and international engagement.

Between 9 and 22 May 2026, the SyrIA project conducted a fact-finding mission to the eight physical public universities in Syria. Discussions with university leadership, academic staff, and administrative personnel provided valuable initial insights into the current state of the sector and its future development priorities.

The most significant challenges identified across institutions include:

- Staff shortages and the effects of academic migration
- Limited research capacities and international visibility
- Restricted international cooperation and mobility opportunities
- Limited experience in project development and management
- Uneven levels of digitalisation and infrastructure capacities
- Weak linkages between universities and labour market needs

At the same time, the universities demonstrated considerable resilience, dedicated academic communities, and a clear vision for future development. Across institutions, reconstruction was described not primarily as a physical process, but as a process of strengthening human resources, institutional capacities, governance structures, research capabilities, and international partnerships.

8 Public Universities.

14 Days.

7 Core Domains.

1 Resilient Vision.

Five priorities emerged consistently throughout the mission:

1. Academic staff development and retention
2. Research capacity and internationalisation
3. Governance and project management
4. Digital transformation
5. Labour market integration and regional development

The findings presented in this booklet represent the initial results of the SyrIA fact-finding mission and provide an important foundation for future cooperation activities. They will be complemented by further quantitative data collection and analysis within the framework of the project. Taken together, these activities aim to support evidence-based strategies for strengthening Syrian higher education through institutional development, international academic cooperation, and targeted investments in the physical and digital infrastructure necessary for sustainable modernisation and reintegration into regional and global academic networks.

The SyrIA Project and the Fact-Finding Mission

The “Syrian Innovation in Academia” (SyrIA) project supports the sustainable strengthening and modernisation of the Syrian higher education system in a phase of political and institutional change.

The project combines:

- Evidence-based needs assessment
- Strategic dialogue
- Capacity development
- Coaching and mentoring
- International cooperation
- Institutional support mechanisms

A central component is a comprehensive fact-finding study that assesses the current situation of Syrian higher education and identifies priority areas for future support.

As part of this, a mission was conducted from 9 to 22 May 2026, visiting the following universities:



The mission included interviews, discussions, and site visits with university leadership, academic staff, administration, and ministry representatives. It was prepared in advance by a dialogue event and related discussions among others with the Syrian Minister and Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Research and all presidents of Syrian public universities at GJU on 3 and 4 May 2026.

Understanding Shared Systemic Challenges and Regional Contexts

The SyrIA fact-finding mission sought to better understand the current situation, development priorities, and future aspirations of Syrian universities during a period of national transformation. Through dialogue with university leadership, academic staff, and stakeholders, the mission explored both common challenges and emerging opportunities across the higher education sector. This allowed the mission to identify shared systemic challenges in seven core areas outlined below.

At the same time, the mission confirmed that Syrian universities operate in diverse regional environments and fulfil distinct academic and developmental functions. While institutional circumstances vary, discussions revealed shared priorities related to human capacity development, research, governance, digitalisation, international cooperation, and labour market relevance.

The university profiles further down highlight these regional strengths and development perspectives, illustrating the important role that higher education institutions can play for Syria's long-term recovery and modernisation.

Shared Systemic Challenges in Seven Core Areas

The following observations are based on discussions at all eight universities. They describe a remarkably consistent baseline of systemic challenges shared by all public universities in Syria. Decades of conflict, profound economic crises, international sanctions, and far-reaching social transformations have changed the framework conditions of higher education nationwide and led to common problems in staffing, infrastructure, and international isolation.

Universities are not isolated entities; they are fundamentally embedded in the regions they serve. As regional economic and social structures continue to evolve through the reconstruction process, each university has adapted to its specific local environment. The value of these findings therefore lies not in comparing universities with each other, but in presenting communalities and the diversity of their regional functions, local framework conditions, and development perspectives.

DOMAIN

01

Governance and Autonomy

Shared systemic challenges:

Syrian public universities navigate a rigid balance between central ministerial oversight and the need for institutional autonomy. Highly centralised decision-making in strategic planning, finance, and personnel matters leads to lengthy, multi-layered administrative processes. This heavy bureaucracy hinders agile cooperation with international partners who work with tight, fixed schedules. Because institutions have historically been embedded in top-down control structures, there is a systemic lack of experience in independent project development, strategic fundraising, and formal negotiation. This has led to a transitional phase in which leadership relies heavily on informal networks and personal initiative to maintain administrative efficiency – while long-term strategic planning documents often remain underdeveloped.

Regional contexts:

While this overarching framework is felt everywhere, university leadership in all regions increasingly views governance as a strategic necessity, linked to active change management, not merely as a passive administrative task.

Identified training needs:

- Strategic university development
- Change management, project lifecycle management
- Negotiation, risk management
- Coordination of complex multi-campus networks.

Preliminary recommendations:

Treat governance as a cross-cutting institutional dimension. Training initiatives should combine long-term strategic planning with leadership development to build a new generation of university leaders capable of driving reconstruction and systematic internationalisation.

DOMAIN

02

Staff Structure, Brain Drain, and Early-Career Academics

Shared systemic challenges:

The staffing situation represents the most severe operational crisis in the public higher education sector. Decades of conflict have caused a massive “brain drain”, depriving institutions of vital scientific experience, institutional knowledge, and international research networks. This loss is caused not only by low salaries but above all by a weakened scientific ecosystem lacking modern laboratories, adequate research infrastructure, and professional development opportunities. As a result, remaining faculty face excessive workloads and high student-to-staff ratios, forcing them to balance roles as teachers, examiners, advisors, and administrators – leaving no time for research within regular working hours. This crisis is compounded by an ageing academic workforce approaching retirement and a striking shortage of qualified early-career researchers who face limited local doctoral opportunities and restricted international mobility.

Regional contexts:

The impact of these staffing pressures varies regionally. Larger urban centres such as Damascus and Aleppo have the greatest concentration of human resources but still struggle to retain talent. Coastal universities show relative staff stability, while institutions in eastern and northern regions such as Deir ez-Zor and Idlib suffer from profound regional disadvantages and acute problems in recruiting new scholars. Despite these constraints, staff motivation remains remarkably high in all regions.

Identified training needs:

- Targeted support for early-career researchers
- Modern university pedagogy
- Research methods
- Academic writing and publishing
- Supervision of master’s and doctoral theses
- Leadership training
- Institutional human resource strategies.

Preliminary recommendations:

The development of early-career researchers and future academic leaders is the most critical area for capacity building. Targeted initiatives and international networking can achieve rapid institutional impact and ensure the long-term renewal of the system if aligned with the strategy of the university leadership.

DOMAIN
03**Curricula, Teaching, and Quality Assurance****Shared systemic challenges:**

The modernisation of curricula, teaching methods, and quality assurance is a central challenge focused on academic adaptation rather than material scarcity. While existing degree programmes remain structurally viable, many were developed under outdated socio-economic conditions and do not keep pace with changing labour markets, rapid technological advances, and reconstruction needs. This theory-practice gap is strongly pronounced in technical, engineering, agricultural, and health science disciplines, where graduates possess solid theoretical knowledge but lack professional competence – due to a lack of functional laboratories, workshops, and external internship placements. Teaching relies heavily on traditional, passive models rather than student-centred, project-based learning. Although internal quality assurance and accreditation units exist system-wide, they remain focused on rigid administrative compliance rather than on a culture of continuous improvement.

Regional contexts:

Teaching staff at all universities show a high awareness of contemporary higher education pedagogy and international standards, but they lack the flexible resource frameworks and structured professional development opportunities needed to switch to active teaching formats.

Identified training needs:

- Outcome- and competency-based curriculum development
- Modern higher education pedagogy
- Project-based learning
- Internship system design
- Quality assurance management
- Accreditation procedures
- Digital teaching formats.

Preliminary recommendations:

No isolated short-term workshops. Instead, integrated programmes that systematically combine curriculum reform, interactive pedagogy, and quality assurance metrics, using train-the-trainer approaches for sustainable internal reform capacities.

DOMAIN

04

Funding, Project Management, and Institutional Capacity for Development

Shared systemic challenges:

A critical bottleneck across the higher education system is the limited institutional capacity to plan development strategies, manage projects independently, and mobilise external resources. Historically, project development and international cooperation were handled exclusively through central government bodies. Consequently, individual universities possess minimal institutional experience in independently drafting complex grant applications, navigating international funding mechanisms, or building direct partnerships with external donors. Administrative staff are largely unfamiliar with the rigid project cycles, reporting formats, financial compliance requirements, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems demanded by international organisations. This gap is exacerbated by bureaucratic domestic approval processes that collide with tight donor deadlines, as well as regional and infrastructural uncertainties that require sophisticated risk management.

Regional contexts:

University administrations at all institutions recognise the need to transform themselves from routine administration into proactive institutional actors capable of securing international funding programmes.

Identified training needs:

- Project cycle management (PCM)
- Proposal writing
- Financial management of international grants
- Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)
- Risk mitigation
- Strategic budgeting
- Donor relations
- Multi-campus planning.

Preliminary recommendations:

Capacity-building initiatives must avoid isolated administrative training. Programmes should directly link macro-level strategic planning with practical project and financial management, establishing a fundamental prerequisite for broader university development.

DOMAIN
05**Digitalisation, IT Infrastructure, and Administrative Modernisation****Shared systemic challenges:**

Digitalisation is recognised system-wide as a strategic priority directly linked to administrative efficiency, transparency, and data-driven decision-making – not as a luxury technology project. Paper-based workflows currently dominate the system, tying up enormous administrative time in manual, error-prone processes. University leadership strongly advocates the transition to digital administrative platforms, electronic document management, and integrated campus management systems. Regarding teaching, institutions favour hybrid or blended learning models over pure distance learning, and they recognise new technologies such as artificial intelligence as future fields of action.

Regional contexts:

Institutional starting conditions vary greatly by region. Larger urban centres and coastal regions have comparatively functional digital foundations, making them receptive to immediate digital scaling. Eastern regions, by contrast, face severe deficits: at institutions such as Al-Furat University, the lack of basic computer equipment, damaged technical infrastructure, and compromised server systems are so serious that physical reconstruction is an immediate prerequisite for digital progress.

Identified training needs:

- Digital university administration
- Campus and learning management systems (LMS)
- Cybersecurity, data analysis
- Management information systems (MIS)
- Geographic Information System (GIS) applications for planning
- Digitalisation strategies including AI integration.

Preliminary recommendations:

Treat digitalisation as a cross-cutting theme affecting all governance and teaching areas. Phased capacity-building programmes should explicitly differentiate between universities with advanced baselines and those requiring basic infrastructure support in order to maximise short-term impact.

DOMAIN
06

Research, Academic Productivity, and Internationalisation

Shared systemic challenges:

Rebuilding research capacity and internationalisation is a central strategic pillar for the sustainability of Syrian universities. Decades of isolation and sanctions have severely restricted international contact, reduced scholarly mobility, and created deep knowledge gaps regarding contemporary global academic developments. Internal research activity suffers from low international visibility due to limited cooperation, language barriers, and systemic unfamiliarity with modern publication strategies and peer-review processes required by high-impact journals. Researchers often have difficulty structuring their findings according to international academic standards – a challenge exacerbated by the widespread need for improved academic English proficiency. Operational constraints further hinder scientific productivity: high teaching loads and staff shortages leave faculty little time for research; moreover, there is a lack of access to current specialist literature and international databases.

Regional contexts:

Material constraints manifest differently by region: engineering, medical, and natural sciences are hindered by damaged or obsolete laboratory equipment, while the social sciences lack access to global literature. Institutional leadership increasingly views research as an organisational responsibility and refers to international university rankings – although there is widespread uncertainty about how these ranking systems work.

Identified training needs:

- Qualitative and quantitative research methods
- Research design
- Academic writing in English
- International publication strategies
- Research data management
- Grant writing for research funding
- Understanding of university rankings.

Preliminary recommendations:

Treat research capacity building as a core component of institutional development. Combine methods training, academic writing, and strategic digital or physical mobility programmes to systematically reintegrate Syrian universities into global scientific networks.

DOMAIN
07

Technical Education, Labour Market Integration, and the Regional Development Role of Higher Education Institutions

Shared systemic challenges:

The social legitimacy of Syrian public universities depends significantly on whether they can make visible contributions to national reconstruction and economic stabilisation. Currently, there is a considerable gap between higher education and labour market requirements. Universities lack systematic alumni tracking and graduate management structures, so curriculum developers lack data on the specific qualifications required by modern employers – which severely impairs graduate employability. A structural bottleneck in solving this problem is the extreme weakness of external partner institutions. Effective practical training relies on functioning external industries, chambers of commerce, and public entities; however, these sectors have been heavily degraded by years of conflict, leaving them unable to provide reliable internship placements or cooperative project work.

Regional contexts:

Academic programmes remain closely connected to the characteristics of their local environment. Agricultural faculties focus on local production conditions, technical faculties respond to regional economic structures, and health sciences address the concrete needs of the surrounding population. Universities understand themselves not merely as educational institutions, but as primary actors in the economic and existential revival of their specific regions.

Identified training needs:

- University-industry cooperation
- Internship programme development
- Labour market analysis and skills needs assessment
- Alumni management
- Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)
- Entrepreneurship
- Public-private partnerships.

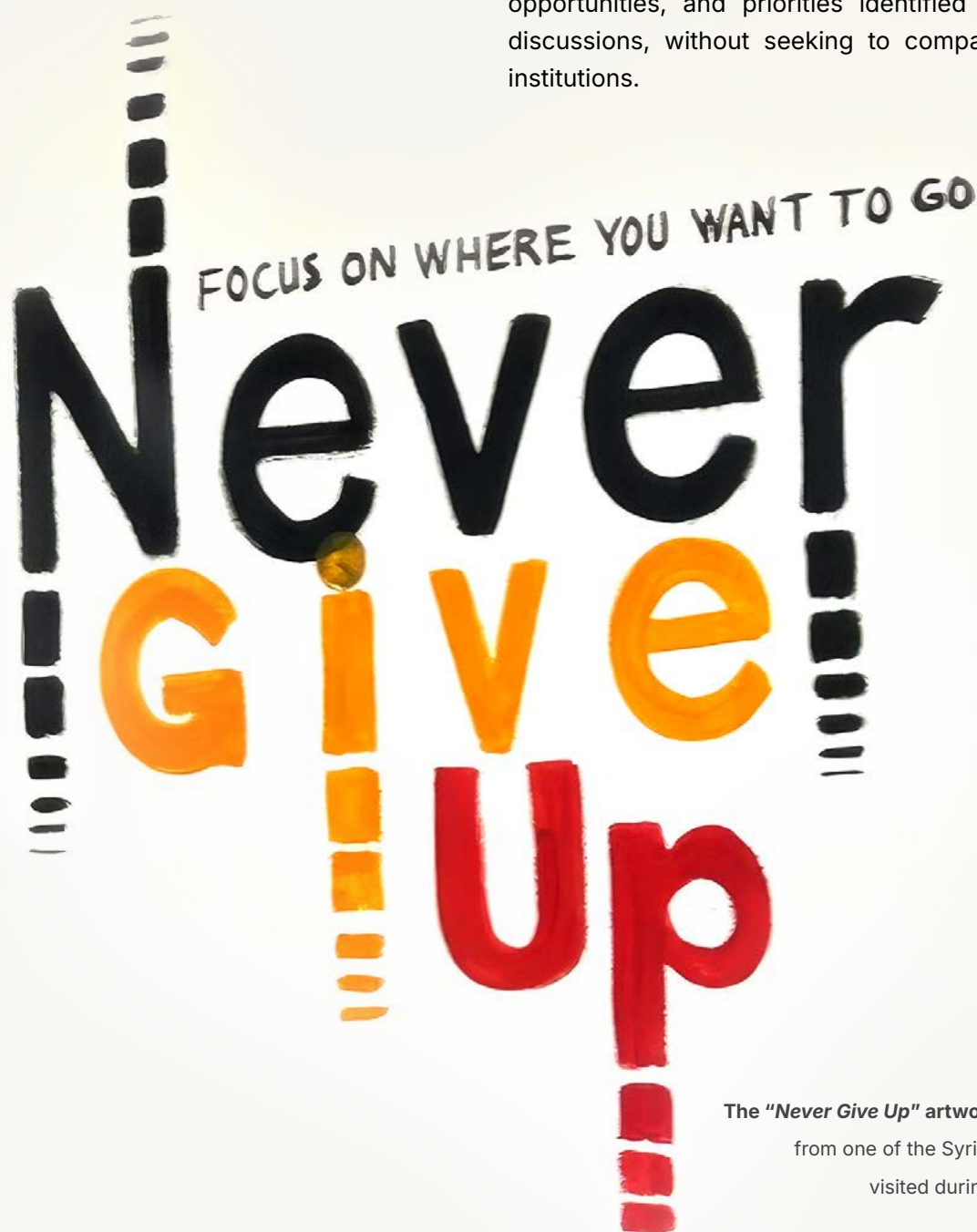
Preliminary recommendations:

Establish university-regional development integration as a distinct field of action. Programmes must bridge the gap between academia, business, and reconstruction projects while simultaneously developing standardised tools for graduate tracking and local labour market integration.

The Universities: *Regional Functions and Development Perspectives*

The universities visited during the mission represent different regions, contexts, and development priorities within Syria's higher education system. While they share many common challenges, each institution contributes in unique ways to regional development, workforce preparation, research, and community engagement.

The following profiles highlight key characteristics, opportunities, and priorities identified during the discussions, without seeking to compare or rank institutions.



The "Never Give Up" artwork is an image from one of the Syrian universities visited during the mission.



Al-Furat University (Deir ez-Zor)

Regional embedding: This university serves one of the largest and most geographically dispersed regions of eastern Syria, with significant agricultural, water, and energy resources.

Disciplinary focuses: Agriculture, water resource management, environmental sciences, energy.

Specific local manifestations: The university is particularly affected by infrastructure damage, data loss, and restricted access to technologies. The destruction of institutional data systems during the conflict period has caused long-term administrative and academic difficulties. Staff shortages and high workloads put considerable pressure on capacities. The most urgent need lies in staff development (pedagogical and digital competencies) as well as in the revision of outdated curricula.



University of Aleppo



Regional embedding: The University of Aleppo is an important centre for scientific and technical education in northern Syria, historically linked to the industrial and agricultural development of the region.

Disciplinary focuses: Engineering, agriculture, technical education.

Specific local manifestations: Discussions showed a strong institutional commitment to rebuilding research capacities and reconnecting with international networks. Particular value is placed on research methods training, applied research projects, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Regional isolation has severely affected research visibility and publication output.



Damascus University



Regional embedding: As the largest university in Syria, it serves a national catchment area and is an important reference point for academic standards and professional education.

Disciplinary focuses: Medicine, engineering, a broad spectrum of other subjects.

Specific local manifestations: The university leadership emphasised ongoing efforts in curriculum reform, modernisation of teaching methods, and quality assurance. Despite comparatively stable infrastructure, the challenges of internationalisation (access to databases, publication strategies) are particularly noticeable due to the large number of active researchers.



Hama University



Regional embedding: Centrally located in one of Syria's most important agricultural regions.

Disciplinary focuses: Agricultural sciences, engineering, technical disciplines.

Specific local manifestations: The university identified the development of highly qualified academic and administrative staff as a strategic priority. Particular attention is paid to modern educational technologies, information systems, and software applications. Investments in laboratory infrastructure, practical training facilities, and digital systems are seen as critical for improving educational quality.



Homs University



Regional embedding: The university is located in one of Syria's most strategically important regions, characterised by industry, energy infrastructure, and agriculture.

Disciplinary focuses: Engineering, energy-related disciplines, agricultural sciences, water resource management.

Specific local manifestations: The university leadership emphasises the need to align curricula more closely with labour market requirements and to strengthen practical learning opportunities. Particular strengths lie in water management and technical sciences. The need for structured feedback mechanisms, alumni tracking, and stronger engagement with employers is particularly evident here, as the region depends economically on reconstructing industries.



Idlib University



Regional embedding: Idlib University operates in a particularly difficult context, marked by years of regional isolation and restricted access to international networks.

Disciplinary focuses: General higher education with a regional focus.

Specific local manifestations: Rebuilding international connectivity is the highest strategic priority. The university needs targeted support in international publishing, proposal writing, research funding, quality assurance, and institutional networking. The university contributes not only to higher education but also to social stabilisation in north-western Syria.



Tartous University



Regional embedding: Coastal region with maritime economy, logistics, and tourism.

Disciplinary focuses: Maritime sciences, logistics, smart agriculture, entrepreneurship.

Specific local manifestations: The university increasingly positions itself as a driver of regional innovation and applied research. It has developed interdisciplinary master's programmes linked to local economy and community. Financial constraints, however, still limit the expansion of innovative activities.



Latakia University



Regional embedding: Coastal region with relatively stable infrastructure and access to the sea.

Disciplinary focuses: Medicine, engineering, marine sciences, education.

Specific local manifestations: Access to scientific resources and digital information systems is one of the most pressing challenges. Difficulties in accessing international databases and research literature limit academic productivity. The university emphasised the importance of strengthening cooperation with international partners, particularly in the areas of research networks and academic publication standards.



Encounters at Syrian Universities in Times of Reconstruction

Christine Huth-Hildebrandt, June 2026

When we agreed to undertake the Fact-Finding Mission to Syria's public universities, the task initially seemed manageable. Fourteen days, eight universities, numerous discussions with university administrations, faculties, and lecturers. Anyone with experience in accreditation procedures, evaluations, or international university visits is familiar with such formats. The schedules are tight, the programmes dense, and one knows that in just a few hours, one can only gain a limited insight into an institution. Nevertheless, an impression is formed of how a university operates, what priorities it sets, and what challenges it faces.

We had set out to visit universities. But the longer the journey lasted, the clearer it became that the universities cannot be separated from the regions in

which they operate. The journey led us not only to universities, but through very different parts of Syria. Each university was embedded in its region, responded to its economic, social, and historical conditions, and reflected these in its own way. What initially seemed like a series of university visits developed into an encounter with a country in reconstruction.

Even after the first conversations, it became clear that the situation at the universities was only partially comparable to the experiences we knew from other countries. These universities are not simply in a normal development process; rather, they operate in a country that looks back on more than a decade of war, economic crisis, international isolation, and profound social changes.



This also shifts the questions that need to be asked of such a university.

Of course, the classic dimensions of university development remain important. Questions about teaching, research, infrastructure, internationalisation, study programmes, or staff development arise at every university in the world. It was with such a framework that we set out. However, during the journey it became clear that these dimensions can only be understood in Syria if one also considers the conditions under which the universities operate. Many challenges lie not within the university itself. They lie in its social environment.

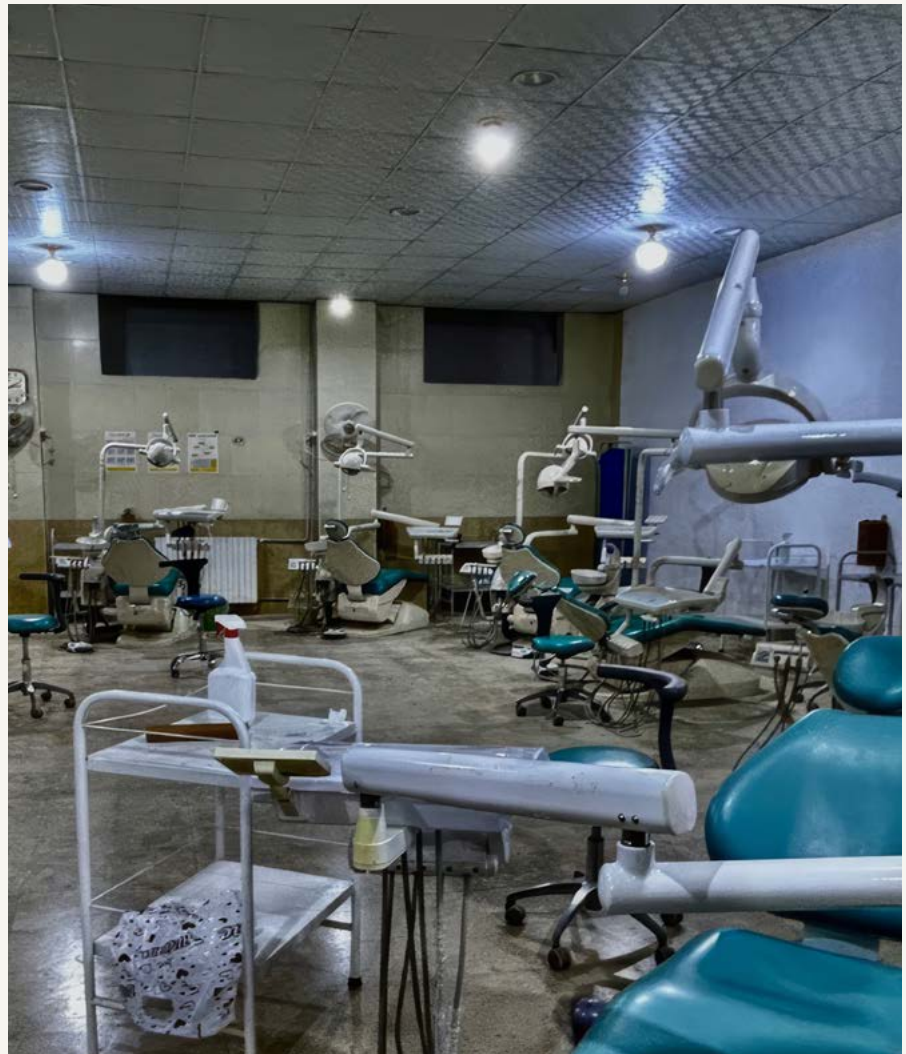
Universities are not self-contained institutions. They are part of their region and their society. If the region changes, the university changes too. When economic structures collapse, education changes. When hospitals are destroyed, this affects the medical faculties. When industrial plants stand idle, internship places for technical study programmes are lacking. When families become impoverished, students can no longer continue their education in the same way as before.

At each visit, we faced the same fundamental situation. We only had a few hours to get to know the university. What we saw was inevitably a snapshot. Universities show their guests the areas that seem important to them. They guide them through selected faculties, laboratories, workshops, or libraries. They introduce colleagues who represent specific projects. Of course, universities want to show their best side. This is no different in Syria than elsewhere.

This is precisely why the question of what was shown to us became interesting. Which faculties were in focus? Which laboratories did they want to present? Which research projects were highlighted? Which buildings were part of the tour and which were not? Behind these decisions often lay clues as to how the universities see themselves and what future they envision for themselves.

Over the course of the journey, we gained the impression that behind many of these presentations was a message that recurred in different forms at almost all universities. It went something like: We are still here. This sentence may seem self-evident at first glance. However, if one considers the history of recent years, it takes on a different weight. The universities experienced years

of uncertainty. Some regions were directly affected by fighting. Buildings were damaged. Infrastructure was destroyed. Teaching had to be interrupted at times. At the same time, economic crises and international sanctions made access to scientific literature, technical equipment, and international networks more difficult.



We only understood later why we were often taken to the lowest floors to see the labs. Protection from bombing during the war.



Separated part of a still unfinished building

Nevertheless, the universities continue to operate. Lectures take place. Students write their theses. Research projects are developed. New study programmes are discussed. The universities continue to see themselves as places of scientific education and social development.

Almost everywhere we met highly motivated lecturers and scientists. In many conversations, it became clear how great the interest in international exchange remains. The isolation of recent years has left its mark on the universities. Many describe it not only as a scientific problem but also as a personal one. Numerous collaborations have been broken off. Research networks could no longer be maintained. Travel to conferences became impossible. Joint projects came to a standstill.

It was remarkable that financial support was mentioned relatively rarely in the conversations. Much more frequently, another wish was expressed: the desire to once again be part of the international scientific community.

Time and again, people spoke of conferences they had attended in the past. Of colleagues abroad with whom contact had been lost. Of research debates that one could only follow from a distance. At the same time, it became clear that the universities do not only want to be recipients of international knowledge. They also want to bring their own experiences, research results, and perspectives into these discussions.



The longer the journey lasted, the more a different picture of these universities emerged for us. We did not see them as damaged institutions waiting for help. Rather, they appeared as living organisms that had to assert themselves in a difficult and partially destroyed environment and continue their path under changed conditions.

Many of the problems raised during the conversations lie outside the immediate sphere of influence of the universities. Students cannot attend courses regularly because the cost of transportation is too much for their families. In some regions, transport

“Today we are... unfortunately still cut off from the rest of the world after more than a decade. We no longer know exactly what exists and what we should even request. We don’t know how to reconnect with the world, what skills we need, and where the world currently stands so that we can communicate with it again.”

links are limited or unreliable. Other students have to work alongside their studies to support their families. Some routes to the university are not only long but have also become expensive.

Similar connections are evident in almost all areas of university life. Practical training components are difficult because companies or institutions that previously served as practice partners no longer exist or have lost their capacities. Lecturers reported difficulties finding suitable internships because industrial plants were damaged or are not yet fully operational again. In the healthcare sector, damaged or destroyed hospitals have a direct impact on the training of future healthcare professionals.

The universities thus face a dual task. They must secure their own development while simultaneously responding to the challenges of their regions. Many study programmes are therefore closely oriented towards the specific characteristics of their respective environments. Agricultural faculties deal with local production conditions. Technical faculties respond to regional economic structures. Health sciences are oriented towards the concrete needs of the population. The universities see themselves not only as educational institutions. In many cases, they see themselves as actors in the reconstruction of their regions.

In the course of the conversations, however, something else became visible. The consequences of the war are visible not only in buildings, infrastructure, or economic indicators. They are also visible in the people who work and study at the universities. Some observations were not formulated in official presentations or strategy papers but emerged rather casually in conversations.

For example, colleagues from an IT department told us with visible pride that women now form the majority of lecturers and students in their field. From a European perspective, one might be tempted to interpret this development directly as a success of longstanding programmes to promote women in technical professions. But the explanation we heard was different. Almost casually, the sentence was uttered: "The men are no longer here."

This sentence remained in my memory for a long time. It was neither accusatory nor politically formulated. Rather, it resonated with a mixture of sorrow, understanding, and pragmatism. Many men are no longer alive or have left the country. Some left out of economic necessity. Others sought

protection from war and insecurity. Still others saw better opportunities outside Syria for their families and their professional future. The consequences of these developments are visible in many places today, including at the universities.

At the same time, it became clear that the absence of many people is not necessarily seen as a permanent loss. In numerous conversations, the impression emerged that the connections between those who stayed and those who left the country continue to exist. Colleagues are in contact. Scientific relationships have not been completely severed. Friendships and family networks continue. Much has been interrupted, but not disappeared.

This is precisely where one of the most important resources for the future of the Syrian higher education system may lie. The past years have weakened many bridges. However, many still exist. The challenge lies less in creating completely new structures than in making existing connections visible and usable again.

We also became aware that return is not a simple process. From the outside, the question often arises as to when scientists who have left Syria will return. The conversations on the ground made it clear that the reality is much more complex. Even if the desire to return exists, numerous questions need to be answered. Where should the children go to school? What professional prospects exist? How stable are the economic framework conditions? What opportunities exist for partners and family members? Such decisions are not made within a few months. They require time, security, and trust in future development.

For this reason alone, the idea of a simple return movement seemed unrealistic to us. More likely are diverse forms of exchange between those who stayed and those who now live and work in other countries. Visiting professorships, joint research projects, digital collaborations, international teaching events, and scientific networks could play an important role in this. Not everyone has to return for knowledge to return. Not everyone has to be permanently on site for scientific cooperation to emerge.

The longer the journey lasted, the stronger the impression became that the Syrian universities are not institutions waiting to be rebuilt from the

outside. They have qualified scientists, committed lecturers, motivated students, and clear ideas about their future development. What is often lacking are the conditions that allow these potentials to be fully developed and more closely reconnected with international developments.

In retrospect, the Fact-Finding Mission was therefore far more than an assessment of individual universities. It offered the opportunity to understand universities in their social context. The visits made visible how closely academic development, regional economy, infrastructure, migration, family networks, and social stability are intertwined.

Anyone who looks exclusively at buildings, technical equipment, or rankings will only capture part of the reality. The perhaps most important insight of this journey lies elsewhere. Despite the burdens of recent years, the Syrian universities have remained living institutions. They possess expertise, experience, and the will to fulfil their role in the country's reconstruction.

At the end of the journey, I did not have the impression of having visited damaged universities. Rather, I had the impression of having visited universities that work under damaged conditions. This difference seems small, but it changes the perspective on the entire higher education system.

Perhaps the most important task of future cooperation, therefore, is not to create something completely new. Perhaps it is initially about restoring connections that were never completely lost. The universities we visited never gave up their place in the scientific landscape. For some time, this place was hardly visible to many outside Syria. Today, it is becoming visible again.

The message we perceived in different ways at almost all universities can perhaps be summarised as follows: We are still here. We have continued to work. And we want to become part of a common scientific discourse again.

Mission Reflections: A System in Transition

Institutions Operating Under Damaged Conditions

Perhaps the most important observation of the mission is that Syrian universities should not be understood as damaged institutions. Rather, they are institutions operating under damaged conditions. Throughout the visits, university leadership and faculty demonstrated commitment, resilience, and determination. Teaching continues. Research continues. Students graduate.

Academic communities continue to function. What has been disrupted are the framework conditions that enable universities to realise their full potential. In conversations, the desire to reconnect with the international academic community was repeatedly expressed. Faculty spoke less about financial assistance than about opportunities for cooperation, mobility, scientific exchange, and participation in international networks.

The mission revealed a higher education system that possesses considerable expertise, strong motivation, and significant development potential. The central challenge, therefore, is not the creation of entirely new structures, but the strengthening of existing capacities and the restoration of academic connections that support long-term institutional development.

Opportunities for Future Cooperation

The mission identified several areas where international cooperation can generate sustainable impact:

- Academic staff development
- Support for early-career researchers
- Research capacity building
- Curriculum modernisation
- Quality assurance
- Governance and leadership development
- Project management training
- Digital transformation
- International mobility programmes
- Visiting lecturer and visiting researcher schemes
- Innovation and entrepreneurship
- University–industry cooperation

At the same time, university representatives consistently emphasised that successful reform depends not only on human and institutional capacity development, but also on adequate physical and digital infrastructure. Reliable internet connectivity, modern IT equipment, digital learning environments, research facilities, and access to scientific databases are essential prerequisites for many of the modernisation efforts identified during the mission.

While initiatives such as SyrIA focus primarily on capacity building and academic cooperation, the findings highlight significant opportunities for complementary investments in infrastructure and equipment. Such support would strengthen the impact and sustainability of ongoing reform efforts and enable universities to participate more effectively in regional and international academic networks.

Universities consistently emphasised that long-term partnerships combining institutional development, academic cooperation, and targeted infrastructure support are essential for sustainable modernisation and successful reform.

Overall Assessment and Priorities for the DAAD-SyrIA Programme

The comprehensive assessment of Syrian public universities in 2026 reveals a remarkably consistent picture of systemic challenges, coupled with resilient staff motivation that views reconstruction as an opportunity for institutional renewal – not as a return to the status quo before 2011.

The assessment identifies five critical, system-wide challenges:

1. Severe staff shortages due to an ageing workforce and brain drain
2. Limited research and innovation capacities that restrict international visibility
3. Outdated governance and weak project management capacities
4. Different starting conditions for digital transformation
5. A significant gap between higher education and labour market requirements

The primary challenge facing these institutions is not merely a lack of physical infrastructure, but the urgent need to build human and institutional capacity to translate existing potential into sustainable development. To systematically address these gaps, the report categorises the most urgent training needs into seven core areas (pages 9-15).

Prioritisation for the DAAD-SyrIA Programme:

The programme should prioritise intervention areas in a multi-layered sequence:

1. **Staff and early-career support** (prerequisite for all other goals)
2. **Research internationalisation**
3. **Governance and project management capacities**
4. **Digitalisation** (as a cross-cutting theme)
5. **Labour market integration** (to secure the social relevance of universities in reconstruction)

Conclusion and Outlook

The SyrIA fact-finding mission has shown that Syrian universities are active institutions with qualified academics, motivated students, and a strong commitment to modernisation. The mission demonstrated that the reconstruction of higher education is fundamentally a process of strengthening human resources, institutional capacities, governance structures, research ecosystems, and international academic partnerships.

At the same time, the findings highlighted the importance of adequate physical and digital infrastructure as a prerequisite for sustainable reform. Reliable internet connectivity, modern IT equipment, research facilities, digital learning environments, and access to scientific resources are essential for enabling many of the modernisation efforts identified by the universities.

Syrian universities possess strong academic foundations, regional relevance, and significant development potential. Future progress will depend on continued investment in academic staff development, research capacity, governance, digital transformation, infrastructure, and international cooperation.

The findings presented in this booklet provide an initial foundation for future cooperation and investment. They will be further complemented through additional quantitative data collection and analysis within the framework of the SyrIA project, contributing to a comprehensive evidence base for future action.

The mission demonstrates that supporting higher education is not only an educational objective, but also an investment in Syria's long-term social, economic, and institutional recovery. Strengthening universities through a combination of capacity development, academic cooperation, and targeted infrastructure support can help unlock their potential as key actors in reconstruction, innovation, and regional development.



Imprint

Syrian Innovation in Academia (SyrIA)

Pilot measures to support the reconstruction and modernisation of the Syrian higher education system (2026–2027)

Implemented by

The German Jordanian University in cooperation with the University of Hamburg and the German-Syrian Research Society

Supported by

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the German Federal Foreign Office

Project Website

<https://syria.edu-all.org/>

Photo Credits

German Jordanian University (GJU)
SyrIA Project

© SyriA Project, 2026

Contact and Responsibility

Vice President Prof. Dr. Ralf Roßkopf

German Jordanian University (GJU)

Project: Syrian Innovation in Academia (SyrIA)

Amman-Madaba Street

P.O. Box 35247

Amman, 11180 Jordan

vice.president-ia@gju.edu.jo