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A Space for Collaboration

Scottish higher education
support to conflict settings



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Foreword

This is an important and timely scoping report, offering practical advice and an overview of the current initiatives supported by Higher Education Institutions in Scotland. The origins of this report began with the convening of a roundtable of Scottish Higher Education participants at the RSE, chaired by Professor Mona Siddiqui as RSE VP International, and supported by the RSE International Committee. It consists of the results of desk research and interviews with key stakeholders across HEIs in Scotland who have all, to a lesser or greater degree, placed resources into supporting those who are at risk in conflict or who have a well-founded fear of persecution.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the Right to Education. It is easy for those in the sector to focus on children and on schooling, particularly focused on the damage done by schooling that is interrupted. It is clear, however, that tertiary education is a vital element in both continuity of resource and education at the highest level, during conflict and for those experiencing a well-founded fear of persecution. In situations where there is a plausible risk of genocide then it is vital that scholars are given the opportunity to sustain the cultural, scientific and educational dimensions of the life that is under erasure. In the past the UK has indeed ensured that often small numbers, but vital cohorts of people seeking asylum or in need of humanitarian protection can be brought to safety in Scotland, offered space for the sustaining and restoration of their studies,



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and vitally, can be custodians of what is being destroyed, while living in safety in the diaspora. Such 'elite' scholars are vital to the work, post-conflict, of rebuilding, acting as co-ordinators, and organisers in exile and often serving as important knowledge diplomats for the work that is required, in the absence of functioning, peace-time governments.

For Scotland, the presence of such scholars, and the work of enabling the continuation of studies, and of education in emergencies is also an important measure of a truly international higher education sector, and one which enables positive relations between countries once peace is established.

As the Convener of the UK and Ireland Academies Human Rights Committee, the secretariat for which the Royal Society of Edinburgh is hosting, over a two-year period. I commend this report to your attention, and most importantly, to act as a resource for action and collaboration.

It is clear, however, that tertiary education is a vital element in both continuity of resource and education at the highest level, during conflict and for those experiencing a well-founded fear of persecution."

1. Executive Summary

1. Executive Summary

1.1 About the Scottish higher education support to conflict settings scoping project

The Scottish higher education sector offers a diverse range of support to those in conflict settings:

- **Scholarships and fellowships.** These provide important lifelines to at-risk individuals. However, the sector needs more robust frameworks and practices to support the transition to Scottish HEIs. While visiting students and scholars report positive experiences in Scotland, scarcity of accommodation and precarious future employment and research opportunities can cause stress and anxiety. Additionally, there are concerns about 'brain drain' from conflict settings.
- **Institution to institution partnerships.** Formal twinning partnerships and memoranda of understanding have the potential to benefit staff and students at both institutions. Online mentoring and supervision can support institutions in conflict settings. Facilitation of remote examinations is also valuable, where practicable.
- **Peer networks.** Small grants and funding initiatives can lay the groundwork for such institutional partnerships. Close collaboration can be scaled up by institutions to take the burden from individual scholars, who find themselves leading in times of stress.
- **Digital resource sharing.** This is an essential area for further development. HEIs are currently sharing lectures, teaching materials, and training methods.
- **Key stakeholders.** Senior institutional management are key advocates and enablers who can champion initiatives in line with HEIs' strategic plans. The Scottish Government can facilitate sector coordination within Scotland.

Recommendations:

- **Ongoing advocacy and dialogue within the Scottish HE sector** leveraging the collective willingness to enhance and implement the Universities UK International and Halpin education and humanitarian framework for future education support to HEIs conflict settings.
- **Explore establishment of a Scottish HE sector working or coordination group** to facilitate collective responses to conflict settings, and could be hosted by a group such as the RSE, Scottish Government, or Universities Scotland.
- **Explore establishment of Scottish HE sector information sharing fora.** Organisation such as the RSE and Young Academy of Scotland can play facilitation roles.
- **Explore allocation of grants directly to researchers or staff at international institutions in conflict settings** to facilitate knowledge production and support ongoing capacity development.
- **Advocate for improved visa processes to enable at-risk individuals and explore sector frameworks to aid transition to study and work in Scottish Institutions** working with partners such as the Scottish Government and Cara.
- **Explore how the Scottish Government can enable and celebrate the Scottish HE sector's educational support to conflict settings**, including championing successes and facilitating dialogue within the sector and with potential partners.

1. Executive Summary (continued)

Report structure:

This report details the findings from qualitative interviews with individuals working, studying or researching in the Scottish HE sector, as well as desk research and discussions with organisations who support HEIs.

The introduction provides background, including the methodology and report terminology. The next section details the four main support types provided by Scottish

HEI evidenced with quotations from the qualitative interviews. Key stakeholders, meaning those individuals, groups or organisations who are impacted by, can influence decisions and/or resources to deliver successful initiatives, are then described and grouped into categories of support provision. Key lessons learnt are shared, as are recommendations for a suggested support framework and to enable provision of more support. Finally, the Conclusion summarises the opportunities for the Scottish HEI sector.



2. Introduction

2. Introduction

This scoping project was commissioned by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in its role as a convening body to support and inform the Scottish higher education sector address gaps in coordination, funding, and information around current educational support provision to conflict settings. The aim of this project was to answer the research question: How can the Scottish higher education sector support colleagues and institutions in conflict settings? The intended outcomes are:

- a written report on the findings of the scoping research;
- identify stakeholders facilitating education support to conflict setting
- recommendations for a response framework.

There were conflicts recorded in over 160 countries in 2024, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).¹ The consequences for higher education are often significant. In Gaza, since October 2023, over 100 university buildings have been destroyed including all four of its universities.²

In Sudan, over 100 universities have also been severely damaged and looted since April 2023.³ In Ukraine, at least six HEIs have been destroyed and over 60 damaged since February 2022.⁴ These are not comparative examples, but instead serve to illustrate the scale of the physical consequences of conflict, and subsequent disruption to academics and students' research and studies. The individual human impact cannot be understated either. Many people, including those in HEIs, will experience displacement, serious injury, and the loss of life, colleagues, family members, and friends during a conflict. Their partners in HEIs in Scotland also experience the secondary impacts of these conflicts, in a widely internationalised HE sector.

Scottish HEIs have a long history of providing educational and humanitarian support to institutions affected by conflict, both domestically in Scotland and internationally through longstanding relationships with institutions. This report intends to provide a snapshot of the recent and planned educational support provisions to conflict settings and during international crises in order to enable the Scottish HE sector to align collective efforts and share lessons learnt. It is not intended to be a definitive exercise, much rather a starting point for future collaboration and responses.

“Many people, including those in HEIs, will experience displacement, serious injury, and the loss of life, colleagues, family members, and friends during a conflict.”

¹ ACLED. Data search period: all countries, 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024: <https://acleddata.com/explorer/>

² Israel destroys last university in Gaza as strikes continue, Laura Pollock. *The National*. 18 January 2024: <https://www.thenational.scot/news/24059315.israel-destroys-last-university-gaza-strikes-continue/>; Palestinian Ministry of Education statistical update on X (Twitter). 21 January 2025: <https://x.com/PalestineMoE/status/1881619318250852736>

³ Academic freedom: Sudan worst affected amid year-long war, Wachira Kigotho. *University World News*. 8 October 2024: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20241008004422188>

⁴ Ukraine seeks international support to stem brain drain, Brendan O'Malley. *University World News*. 28 October 2023: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231028073035837>

2. Introduction (continued)

2.1 Methodology

1. **Desk review.** Collation of information provided by Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs) to the RSE in 2024. Internet research using keyword searches of institutions and other organisations' websites, general keyword web searches for educational support programmes and initiatives to conflict settings.
2. **Qualitative interviews.** Thirty-six interviews were conducted with university management, administrators, support staff, academics, researchers, scholars, fellows, and students from 13 different HEIs. Interviews took place in-person or via video conferencing; one written interview took place. Interviewees were initially identified through the Human Rights Working Group, the Young Academy of Scotland's At-Risk Academics and Researchers members, and at the University of Glasgow's Reconstructing Gaza conference on 11 December 2024. Snowballing was then used to identify and contact other individuals. The sample comprised of 20 women and 16 men, including nine current or former at-risk scholars, students, and fellows. Over one-third of the interviewees self-identified as non-White ethnicities. Please note all quotes are provided without attribution and some have been lightly edited for clarity and length⁵

"A university, in my mind, is not a political actor [...] the community that we serve is made up of people from all over the world, of all different backgrounds. Trying to maintain that while recognising human catastrophes is important."

The term 'conflict settings' is used throughout this report to reflect the dynamic nature of conflicts, the violence, scale, and boundaries of which can change rapidly. The phrase 'international crises' is also used to capture mass displacement events such as natural and man-made disasters, as well as conflicts. 'At-risk individuals' is used for colleagues and students at institutions both in and from conflict settings, reflecting sector language.

However, it is important to note some research participants, particularly at-risk individuals or those with personal connections to conflict settings, pushed back on neutral language to discuss international crises and conflicts.

"In UK, people that want to use ... very light words because they don't want to reflect the reality, so they just try to cover reality with some soft words like a crisis or conflict or something like this. But if reality is a war maybe the more correct approach is to use the right words for these things."

Since this report explores educational support to conflicts in the broadest sense, terminology such as 'war' is only used in reference to specific examples. A suggestion for future research and reports on this subject would be to include 'persecution' along with conflict settings and international crises to be inclusive of those academics, researchers, and students who are vulnerable in their home countries but not necessarily experiencing conflict, as well as people seeking asylum in the UK. A full list of abbreviations can be found in Appendix 1.

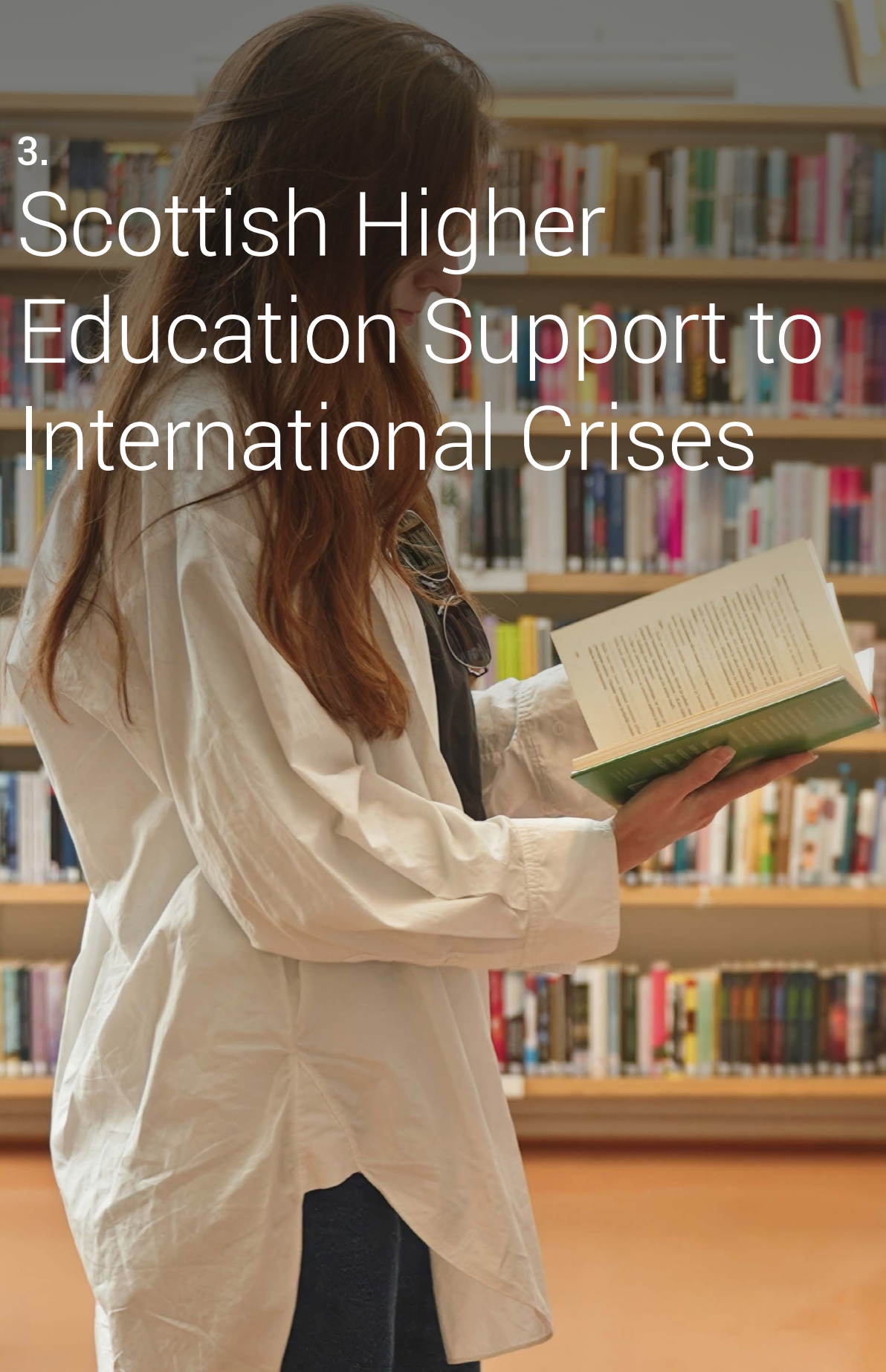
2.2 A note on terminology

Conflicts exist in an often highly polarised and politicised sphere, and HEIs may be impacted by this even as they are committed to preserving academic freedoms and political neutrality.

⁵ The detailed methodology, including limitations, can be found in Appendix 2.

3.

Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises



3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises

The diverse nature of Scottish higher education institutions produces a diverse range of educational support efforts. While the scale and number of initiatives vary greatly, HEIs agree this is an area for collaboration rather competition.

"This [education support to conflict settings] is an area where we're not in competition, so it's actually really primed for collaboration."

"Maybe more open communication or some centralised, coordinated action would be helpful ... especially with people who work on these issues so that we are not replicating efforts, and maybe we can learn from each other if we [already] found ways around a particular issue."

There appears to be little awareness of other institutions' educational support to conflict settings. This led to some Scottish HEIs believing their efforts were not of interest to the scoping research, despite having recent or active initiatives to provide educational support. Larger institutions such as the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow do benefit from comparatively greater financial resources, such as scholarship funds and specific fundraising drives. However, smaller institutions exhibited greater potential for adaptability and flexibility to deliver targeted educational support initiatives when international crises occur.

"[We have] quite limited engagement partly because of the size of the institution, partly because [specialist] institutions like ours are rare in the sorts of conflict zones that we're talking about."

"As you know within Scotland there's great variations in the sector in terms of, you know financial [resources]. We've got universities with billion-pound turnovers and much smaller institutions as well, so the level of support that you provide [as an institution] is different."

Educational support types can be grouped into the following areas:

- Scholarships and fellowships to at-risk individuals
- Formal institution to institution partnerships
- Peer networks through individuals in institutions
- Digital resource sharing

3.1 Scholarships and fellowships to at-risk individuals

Institutions play an important role in providing continued educational support and research opportunities for at-risk individuals, particularly those who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict.

"When I opened my passport and saw the visa, I felt that, oh, I'm so happy that I will come to Scotland. Yes, my dream will come true!"

"Finding a place which you can call a safe haven ... is the most comforting thing you can get on Earth because when you come from a country of conflict, you wish there is a parallel world where you are not [from a conflict setting]."

While disaggregated figures for Scotland were unavailable from the Home Office, over 80% of applicants for sponsored study visas to the UK from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), between 7 October 2023 and 31 December 2024, successfully entered the UK. Of the 255 applications made, 223 were granted (32 refused), and 208 arrived in the UK (81.6%).⁶ Participants reported at least two Scottish institutions supported multiple individuals from OPTs to relocate to Scotland for their studies and research during this same period.

⁶ Home Office UKVI FOI2025/02063 response, dated 12 March 2025.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

Support provided at-risk individuals includes:

- Specific institutional scholarships and fellowships
- Membership of the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara)
- Membership of the British Council's Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL)
- Partnerships with charities (both long- and short-term programmes)

The number of scholarships and fellowships provided to at-risk individuals varies by institution and year. The sponsorship of at-risk individuals is a significant financial commitment, particularly for at-risk academics and researchers who often have dependents. However, the scholarship and fellowship schemes deliver important benefits to institutions and the schemes' recipients.

"Having [displaced Ukrainian students] with us and working their way through various programmes has been quite transformative for our population here, because it's brought an awareness to our students with lived experience [brought] into the learning environment."

"I've no doubt that as [at-risk students] progress through the programme, their cultural experience and diversity will ultimately enrich the experience for all of our students. And I think that that's an important element."

Support is often the result of collaboration with other organisations. For example, the British Academy's Academics At-Risk Fellowships, Cara and HESPAL are UK-wide schemes supporting academics and researchers. Typically, these organisations administer and co-fund the visa applications, travel, and other logistics in partnership with institutions. Some Scottish institutions expanded their commitments to Cara and made applications to join HESPAL in response to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, with seven HESPAL member HEIs in Scotland.

"When I came [to this institution] we were more or less paying our [Cara] membership, but we didn't actually have any ring-fence funds to support Cara fellows... And so, we've got somebody from Sudan who I'm hoping will arrive early summer."

Other charities who provide funding, administrative, and logistics support to enable at-risk individuals to travel to Scotland for study and research include the Linda Norgrove Foundation and STEPS (St Andrews Education for Palestinian Students). The Scottish Government also provides funding for two projects aimed at providing educational support opportunities to non-academic professionals and activists. The Beyond Borders Scotland charity organises a twice-yearly seven-day Women in Conflict 1325 fellowship, and the Human Rights Defenders fellowship (six-months to one-year programmes) based at the University of Dundee.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

Table 1. Institutions providing scholarships in Scotland to at-risk individuals⁷

Institution	Support initiatives for at-risk individuals	Number of places available
Edinburgh Napier University	Ad hoc scholarships at TNE partners in response to international crises	Varies depending on individual situation.
Queen Margaret University	HESPAL membership	3 postgraduate (PGT or PGR) scholarships available for Palestinian students (do not have to be domiciled). Fee waivers and stipend.
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	Ad hoc	Currently supporting 28 Ukrainian students on undergraduate and PGT programmes.
University of Aberdeen	Undergraduate At-Risk Scholarship	1 undergraduate scholarship available for forcibly displaced people, people seeking asylum or refugees (UK domiciled). Fee waiver, stipend and single occupancy accommodation.
	The George and Lilian Adam Smith Scholarship	1 PGT scholarship available for forcibly displaced people, people seeking asylum or refugees (UK domiciled). Fee waiver, stipend and single occupancy accommodation.
University of Dundee	Humanitarian Scholarship Programme	Varies based on annual budget, scholarships provide full funding for undergraduate or masters programmes.
	Human Rights Defenders fellowship	5-6 per cohort for 6-12 months, varies depending on applications and funding levels.
	Ukraine crisis fund	8 Ukrainian students, including 6 on full undergraduate scholarships.
University of Edinburgh	Education Beyond Borders	30 masters scholarships for forcibly displaced individuals (UK domiciled). Funding for tuition fees and stipend. No accommodation.
	Mastercard Foundation	Approx. 35 in-person master students from Sub-Saharan Africa. 70-100 online students from Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁷ **Researcher note:** This list was developed from qualitative interviews from individuals at the 13 participating institutions and as such is not intended to be comprehensive nor exhaustive of the support provided by the Scottish HE sector. HESPAL membership was in-progress for several Scottish HEIs at time of research and so the numbers of available places for new HESPAL members in 2025/26 were unclear. Cara membership and other Academics At-Risk Fellowships are not included due to the tailored nature of the programmes, and variable numbers due to how fellowships allocated. Two institutions (the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh) do not provide scholarships as they are member organisations.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Institution	Support initiatives for at-risk individuals	Number of places available
University of Glasgow	Sanctuary Scholarships	20 for 2024-25, increasing to 30 for 2025-26 for people seeking asylum and refugees (UK domiciled). Full funding for tuition fees, a stipend, university accommodation if needed. Available to undergraduates or PGT.
	Dima Alhaj Scholarship	1 scholarship, undergraduate or PGT, to Palestinian nationals (do not have to be UK domiciled).
University of St Andrews	Sanctuary Scholarships	10 scholarships minimum available to undergraduate, PGT and PGR students for forcibly displaced people, people seeking asylum, refugees (UK domiciled). Funding for tuition fees, a stipend, university accommodation if needed.
	STEPS (St Andrews Education for Palestinian Students)	At least 1 scholarship for PGT Palestinian nationals (do not have to be UK domiciled).
University of Strathclyde	Asylum Seeker Scholarship	Variable number of undergraduate and PGT scholarships available (8 awarded in 2024/25) for people seeking asylum or in the UK on humanitarian grounds or refugees (UK domiciled). Tuition fee waiver and stipend. No accommodation.
University of Stirling	Sanctuary Scholarships	2-3 access programmes, 2-3 PGT, variable number of undergraduate scholarships available for people seeking asylum or in the UK on humanitarian grounds (UK domiciled). Includes stipend and fee waiver. No accommodation.
University of the West of Scotland	Ad hoc	Reallocation of Vice Chancellor's undergraduate, PGT and PGR scholarship funds as needed.
Multiple institutions	Linda Norgrove Foundation	19 Afghan medical students placed in medical schools at the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and St Andrews. Fee waivers, stipends, and accommodation provided.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

CASE STUDY 1

Afghan medical students at the University of Glasgow School of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing



What:

Three-year campaign from the Linda Norgrove Foundation to bring 19 female Afghan medical students to Scotland to complete their studies



How and where:

The Linda Norgrove Foundation enabled and facilitated the applications of female Afghan medical students to apply to Scottish institutions to continue their studies, including working closely with the UK and Scottish governments. Nineteen arrived in Edinburgh in August 2024.

The School of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing at the University of Glasgow accepted seven of the students, with the other students enrolled at Aberdeen, Dundee, and St Andrews universities.



Challenges:

- Difficult to recognise prior medical studies at Afghan universities
- Students could not bring their families
- Protracted and expensive travel and visa process



Outcomes:

Amendments to the Scottish Government funding regulations meant the students could be allocated home fees status enabling access to free tuition and financial support for accommodation.

The Glasgow-based students are currently enrolled in Glasgow Medical School's Gateway to Medical Studies programme and have access to pastoral support and extracurriculars to help enable their transition. The University of Glasgow also provided pre-sessional English classes.

The students are adjusting to life in Glasgow, and their confidence continues to grow – both as a cohort and individually. Some may be able to accelerate their studies depending on progress to recognise their previous education.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

3.1.1 Challenges and obstacles

a) Cost of sponsorship. The cost of hosting scholars and fellows can be substantial, particularly fellows with dependents. Consequently, some institutions can only offer one placement at a time: a course lasting three (such as PhD study) or four years (such as undergraduate study) means only one student or fellow can be supported from a specific scheme. At least one institution was considering pausing scholarships for the next academic year due to wider, sector-level financial challenges.

"[Cara] provides some financial support, although it really relies on the university providing a full tuition fee waiver and the majority of the stipend costs, which actually can be really high because you're also providing all the funding for family members as well."

b) Cost of online study. International study fees for online courses present a barrier to participation to individuals from conflict settings. Consequently, digital scholarships for at-risk individuals are under consideration at some Scottish institutions in support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' goal of 15% enrolment of refugees in higher education by 2030.⁸ However, institutions are mindful of how digital scholarships to overseas at-risk individuals could be interpreted by the Home Office. Institutions are required to advise the UK Government on the number of matriculated international students in order to meet their UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) obligations, including those undertaking remote study. Thus, HEIs desire clarity around how UKVI might interpret increased international scholarships for digital courses.

c) Brain drain. The focus on supporting at-risk individuals to travel to Scotland raises concerns of creating a 'brain drain' of academics, researchers, and students from conflict settings.⁹ Short-term schemes such as the Cara fellowships, which are for up to two years, are seen to support capacity development. However, such initiatives are reliant on individuals being able to safely return to their home countries.

"We all assumed that [we should] offer scholarships and offer people a way out of the conflict zone to come and work with us and we can look after them, and I remember someone saying but don't drain all their intellectual and academic infrastructure out of a country, that's not what they want. What they want is to be supported in remaining resilient in their own context."

d) Practical difficulties. Transition to Scottish HEIs for at-risk individuals is uneven and challenging due to a lack of consistent processes between organisations or a sector-wide framework, despite the New Scots initiative and HEIs applying lessons learnt from previous scholars and fellows' experiences. Some at-risk individuals may enter the UK through non-Scottish routes, meaning they do not receive information about the support available through New Scots. Furthermore, while four Scottish HEIs are Universities of Sanctuary,¹⁰ most processes around arrivals and induction developed initially ad hoc within the individual institutions. However, the pastoral support (including through institutions' chaplaincy or wellbeing services) and access to English language learning (such as pre-sessional English language or English for academic purposes courses) are well received and much needed.

⁸ 15by30 Roadmap: Expanding Higher Education, Skills and Self-Reliance for Refugees, UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/15by30-roadmap-expanding-higher-education-skills-and-self-reliance-refugees>

⁹ See also: 'Partnerships with Palestine: An introductory guide to UK-Palestinian higher education collaboration', FOBZU. February 2025: <https://fobzu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Partnerships-with-Palestine-Guide-Fobzu.pdf>

¹⁰ The Universities of Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews. <https://data.cityofsanctuary.org/universities/list>

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

The below challenges are caveated with an acknowledgement that, nonetheless, scholarships and fellowship provide a lifeline to at-risk individuals.

"I applied to Cara, submitted my documents... Finally, after nearly 10 months of this process I and my wife and three kids, we safely arrived in [Scotland]."

i. Visas and travel. Securing a visa can be logistically difficult or near impossible if the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has closed its visa processing facilities and mobility out of a country may be difficult or near impossible, such as in Afghanistan and Gaza. The process is also often very lengthy, taking in some cases 18 months or more for at-risk individuals to be granted their sponsored study visa by the Home Office. Travel to third countries for visa processing is possible, but this can be dangerous and adds financial burden. Once at-risk individuals arrive in the UK travel to their institution in Scotland can be complicated by financial hardship. For example, since they are not yet matriculated, they cannot necessarily access their stipends to pay for train fares from London airports to Scotland, creating another layer of complexity to their travel needs.

"It took almost 24 months for the [scholar's] visa to come through, and only then it was because we were told we should speak with our MP because apparently they can contact UKVI and make a representation on the individual's behalf, whereas we couldn't."

ii. Accommodation is scarce and expensive, and the application process is largely unknown to at-risk individuals. This is further complicated by many at-risk individuals coming to Scotland with dependents. Most institutional accommodation is not suited to families; however, at-risk individuals cannot apply for external accommodation in advance without their visa and a bank account (should they know how to apply for rented accommodation in the first place). This means some individuals interviewed had stayed with family or friends elsewhere in Scotland or northern England and commuted to institutions, adding further financial and mental burdens to already challenging circumstances. Furthermore, it negatively impacted their scholarships or fellowships because they had to prioritise administrative tasks in order to find accommodation closer to their institution.

"I didn't find any accommodation in Edinburgh, and I have some connections in the Newcastle, so they offered me a room [there]."

iii. Gender-sensitivity. There was a perceived lack of gender-sensitivity, driven by struggles faced by at-risk individuals securing childcare, school registration, and maternity/paternity leave. Some at-risk individuals had difficulties placing their children in schools, unaware of how catchment areas work in relation to their accommodation location. Some were unaware of their maternity/paternity leave rights and the process to apply for that leave. Childcare is expensive in the UK, and not all at-risk individuals were eligible for state funding support. All of these combined to negatively impact individuals' ability to study and research as their time is taken up with other duties.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

"I have the maternity leave which is paid by the university for around 6 months, but I can't do this because of the visa regulations, so it's only for 2 months, which is good. Two months is enough for me. But I didn't apply on time because I was so busy searching for a house and accommodation, and no one told me that it had a deadline."

iv. Unfamiliar academic system and culture.

The Scottish academic system was unfamiliar to some at-risk individuals, who come from countries with different pedagogical traditions and assessment systems. The lack of awareness of these differences at some institutions made the adjustment periods to the Scottish system were longer than individuals would have liked. Other at-risk individuals also struggled to integrate due to some departments insular working practices, which made it hard to meet peers. One at-risk individual suggested a peer-mentorship scheme connecting international students with scholars, separate from their supervisor. There is also a focus on English language knowledge production, meaning some at-risk individuals cannot demonstrate their prior work and (at times extensive) experience effectively. At least one at-risk individual had also experienced a violent racist attack, despite the general positive view that Scotland is welcoming towards refugees and people seeking asylum.

"I think we need a safe space to talk about things we're actually afraid to talk about ... Each person has their difficulties, so we need a safe confidential space to talk about those things [with peers]."

"I think it's really hard to access anything. And not just information as well. Once you have the information, it's really difficult to make applications and stuff. It's so bureaucratic and it takes so long time to process all of this."

v. Uncertain future. There was a sense of precarity among at-risk individuals. Their uncertain future legal status and employment opportunities create stress and anxiety. Multiple at-risk individuals in the research arrived in the UK expecting a temporary stay of two years and the intention to return home once a conflict had subsided; however, all of those individuals found themselves unable to return and with their future legal status unconfirmed. Furthermore, the academic job market is highly competitive and reliant on English-language research outputs. Sector-wide job cuts also reduce potential opportunities for at-risk individuals. Similar to other practical challenges detailed above, this precarity negatively affects their mental health and so their studies or research.

"I need to find some funding and because I need to pay for rent and everything."

"It's good to be in Scotland, there are a lot of food banks [here], but this is not a long-term option."

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

3.2 Institution to institution partnerships

Scottish HEIs have a range of partnerships with institutions across the world, including in conflict settings. Some partnerships in conflict settings pre-date current international crises, including transnational education (TNE) agreements, though these partnerships may be suspended due to the risk posed to institutions and their staff in conflict settings such as in Afghanistan or Myanmar. Others have been established as a result of conflict, such as in Gaza or Ukraine.

Support provided through formal institution to institution partnerships include:

- Visiting programmes
- Joint research projects
- Online teaching and mentoring
- Supply of equipment, when appropriate and achievable

The scale and scope of these partnerships varies and is dependent on the needs of the partner institution and the funding mechanism in place. For example, the Ukraine education response was anomalous due to the significant financial support provided by the UK Government, without which the response would not have been possible. However, because that support originated from the UK Government the response was inherently politicised – and so cannot avoid comparisons with subsequent responses such as for Gaza or Sudan, where there is not the same high-level political will nor funding.

“I feel like the support for Palestine has been a lot less than what has been offered for Ukraine, because the policy and the money is not there.”

Nonetheless, the Ukraine response provides a potential template for what can be achieved when the HE sector combines efforts for collective educational support. The coordination through Universities UK International (UUKi) with Cormack Consultancy Group enabled 13 Scottish institutions to twin with 15 Ukrainian institutions (the University of Glasgow twinned with three institutions in Ukraine).¹¹ At least one Scottish HEI is developing a dual award taught masters programme, with teaching from both the Ukrainian institution and (in English) from the Scottish HEI. See Case Study 2 for an example of how these partnerships can developed to the mutual benefit of the Ukrainian and Scottish HEIs with engagement from both institutions.

“There’s a real need and want for dual award programmes... The students participate in the degree and they come out with the two awards. Both the universities in Scotland award and their own university. We were delighted that our partner, our twin, was really keen as were we to develop something like this.”

Visiting programmes fulfil education and cultural sharing, as well as respite from conflict settings. These programmes grant students and staff from conflict settings the opportunity to resume studies and research in Scotland, which are particularly valuable for displaced individuals and if institutions (including hospitals) have been damaged or destroyed by conflict. This institution-to-institution knowledge and resource sharing relies on successful visa applications and often involves protracted travel for the visiting staff and students.

“We have hosted two [Ukrainian university] undergraduates last year on scholarships and just got some great feedback from them about how grateful they were for that opportunity.”

¹¹ ‘Responding to International Humanitarian Crises: Lessons from the UK Higher Education Sector Response to the Invasion of Ukraine’, Halpin and Universities UK International. August 2023: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-09/Halpin%20UUKi%20final%20report%20Sept%202023_0.pdf

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

For example, the University of Glasgow School of Medicine, Nursing and Dentistry has a long-running partnerships with the medical schools at Islamic University in Gaza and Al-Azhar University. Glasgow School of Medicine intended to host a visiting programme for Palestinian students in autumn 2024, but which remains in the planning process due the closure of British visa centres and movement restrictions for Palestinians.

"The most important thing in these challenging times it to build memorandum of understanding agreements between Scottish universities and Palestinian universities to

support them officially through delivering teaching, recorded materials, tuition fees, research, and hosting academics in the future... We can support academics and students through legal frameworks like memorandum of understanding agreements."

Online teaching and mentoring provide a valuable means to support ongoing study, particularly when institutions have been closed, damaged, or destroyed. Online mentoring and supervision enable displaced students, including those whose supervisors may have been wounded or killed by conflict, to continue working towards their final degree award. Loss of practical laboratory or clinical

Table 2. Thirteen Scottish institutions joined the Ukraine-UK twinning initiative with 15 Ukrainian institutions¹²

Scottish HEIs	Twinned Ukrainian HEIs
Abertay University	Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics
Edinburgh Napier University	Lutsk National Technical University
Glasgow Caledonian University	University of the State Fiscal Service of Ukraine
Glasgow School of Art	Lviv National Academy of Arts
Queen Margaret University	Poltava VG Korolenko National Pedagogical University
Scotland's Rural College	Bila Tserkva National Agrarian University
University of Dundee	Dnipro State Medical University
University of Edinburgh	Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
University of Glasgow	1. Danylo Halytsky Lviv National Medical University 2. National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy 3. Poltava State Medical University
University of the Highlands and Islands	Ukrainian National Forestry University
University of St Andrews	National University of Ostroh Academy
University of Stirling	Odesa State Environmental University
University of the West of Scotland	Ukrainian State University of Railway Transport

¹² Twinning Partnerships, UK-Ukraine Twinning Initiative: <https://www.twinningukraine.com/signed-partnerships>

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

CASE STUDY 2

Ukrainian university twinning programme

What:

UK-Ukraine Twinning Scheme: National University of Ostroh Academy and the University of St Andrews



How and where:

The University of St Andrews partnered with the National University of Ostroh Academy in 2022. A number of introductory and planning meetings were held between Ostroh and St Andrews representatives throughout 2022-23, and an MoU between the two institutions was signed in November 2022.



Challenges:

- While St Andrews had various research links across Ukraine, the partnership with Ostroh Academy was new and so required time at the outset to build relationships and agree collaborative projects.
- In the context of the war, travel both ways to develop partnership projects has been challenging.



Outcomes:

The partnership between Ostroh and St Andrews has developed considerably over the last three years with fruitful collaboration across education, research and leadership, working to support the Twinning scheme's goals including to maintain the integrity of Ukrainian HE and prevent brain drain.

Professor Victoria Donovan and Dr Emily Finer (Modern Languages) were the principal investigators on a successful UK-Ukraine R&I Twinning Grant project with Ostroh Academy in 2023. The joint research project enabled five Ostroh fellows to spend six weeks in St Andrews in 2023, and supported non-residential fellowships for those unable to travel.

Collaborative links were established and strengthened between Ostroh fellows, St Andrews faculty and PhD students, researchers at the Lviv Centre for Urban History, and colleagues from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Durham Universities at two major workshops: St Andrews / Ostroh Workshop for Advancing the Public Humanities held at St Andrews on 2 June; Public History in the Context of War: Rethinking Approaches and Formats held in Lviv, Ukraine from 16-19 August.

Two residential fellows from Ostroh contributed specialist expertise and interviewing to the '5 a.m. 24.02.2022. Testimonies from the War' project, a Europe-wide public history consortium to document the forced displacement of Ukrainians following the full-scale invasion. Further collaboration and co-production work between University of St Andrews, Center for Urban History in Lviv, and Ostroh Academy on digital archive and capacity building project 'City in a Suitcase', documenting displaced heritage from the occupied and destroyed territories.¹³

Other collaboration between the universities has so far included:

- Collaborative teaching online
- English language teaching
- Professional book scanner sent to Ostroh Academy
- Joint application for the British Council Gender Equality Partnership grant on women's leadership in HE with a focus on crisis situations (unsuccessful). However, St Andrews and Ostroh Academy are still progressing with some elements of the proposal to jointly undertake research on women's leaders in HE.

¹³ City in a Suitcase: Saved (Family) Archives, Lviv Center for Urban History: <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/updates/city-in-the-suitcase-2/>

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

spaces complicate remote educational support, as does the challenges of online examinations, but digital lectures and mentoring via audio or video conferencing can maintain some ongoing study. The lack of capacity to hold examinations at institutions in conflict settings remains a gap that Scottish HEIs have limited ability to facilitate, especially for sciences, engineering, technology, and medical students because of the practical element often required for course completion.

"The focus of this [joint digital] programme is to support the next generation of graduates coming through to help rebuild, reshape a conflict-stricken country."

"We're plugging the gaps of our killed colleagues, we're supervising masters programmes online. We're taking quite a flexible approach to that; I've just done a PhD examination of a student [in Gaza]."

In some instances, sending equipment can be appropriate but only with the international institution's consent. Thus, asking institutions in conflict settings what they require extends to physical needs such as generators or specialist scanning equipment and, in reconstruction phases, laboratory supplies.

"We have not done anything like sending generators or computers or any equipment. We did look at it but [our partner] was quite small university and frankly they didn't need it."

3.2.1 Obstacles and challenges

a) Establishing partnerships. Facilitation is generally required to establish initial connections with partner institutions. This can begin as between academics at different institutions or it can be through third-parties (such as Cormack Consultancy Group). Commencing meaningful and equitable partnerships without an interlocutor remains very difficult. Some Scottish HEIs seeking partner institutions struggled to establish communication, potentially due to the

partners' own capacity challenges.

b) Maintaining partnerships. Resources and capacity are required to build, develop, and maintain partnerships with institutions in conflict settings. Thus, partnerships can wither without sustained communications. Administrative and academic staff may struggle for capacity to support partnerships without specific ring-fenced hours and funding.

c) Funding challenges. Establishing sustainable and long-term partnerships requires commitments to ongoing or long-term funding. Consequently, managing the partner institutions' expectations about feasible and length of educational support is important.

3.3 Peer networks

Initiatives are also established by academics and staff in Scottish HEIs with peers in international institutions. These typically comprise of grant programmes (to an academic or team of academics) or individual fundraising initiatives.

"We're in touch with our colleagues in Gaza to identify which fields might need urgent support at the moment. And, hopefully, we will provide some online workshops and mentoring in these different fields."

Institutional staff who have networks in conflict settings may establish research projects or educational support efforts through collaboration with peers and research grants. These initiatives can take place in the conflict setting, in third countries (such as refugee camps or through international institutions), or, more recently, online. These projects often provide essential opportunities for researchers and students to continue their own work and studies.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

"Our Palestinian colleagues told us the project was a lifeline. It was the only chances they had, the only hour a week they had to feel like students again, or like academics again. In the moment they could just get a sense of normality in the worst possible circumstances."

Flexibility in these initiatives was key to ensure continued delivery, adapting to power cuts or escalations in violence. Successful project teams also include members at Scottish HEIs who speak the native language(s) in the conflict setting to ensure clear communication and avoid misunderstandings.

"We learned that what we need to do, and this is what our Palestinian partners always suggest, is that we need to first have Plan A, the ideal scenario, and then you need to have a Plan B, Plan C, Plan D in mind."

"The key lesson is you don't need to wait. You need to act... We don't need to wait until you get all the resources and everything, [instead] we can start with small group and then you can scale up."

Challenges of sending project funds to partners also requires flexibility and local facilitators. International sanctions may preclude sending of funds to institutions. Scottish institutions also may be risk averse to sending money to collective bank accounts. Thus, having an individual such as a lawyer (approved and officially employed as an agent by the international institution) can enable the sending of money for specific purchases or purposes. Similarly, non-resident fellowships or grants that provide money directly to academics, such as employing at-risk individuals as research assistants, can facilitate legal obligations via background checks and individuals' employment at accredited partner institutions.

"The British Council had a call for funding ... [and] the UK-based University would bid for the funding, and manage the funding, then set up a memorandum of understanding with the [international] university and so we wouldn't actually be employing the research assistant through [my institution]."

Individual initiatives by academics at institutions can also include fundraising by leveraging crowdfunding, multiple small grants, or by contacting external benefactors (such as the online course providers described in Case Study 3, below) to deliver targeted educational support. This form of educational support, driven by an individual's resourcefulness, has little to no administrative assistance and will be delivered alongside their main teaching and research duties. Thus, increasing or maintaining the education support can be challenging due to individuals' capacity and other commitments. Furthermore, formal agreements with institutions are still often required to facilitate sending funds overseas.

"What else could universities do to support? Seed funding. I know that's a business term, but sometimes academics have little sparks of ideas about things they'd like to do so creating space for projects that could then grow into something larger [would help]."

These peer-to-peer projects place a mental burden on the Scottish institutional staff collaborating with colleagues in conflict settings. These initiatives typically are run by a small team or one individual, and often in addition to their institutional workload. Some institution staff experience emotional and mental exhaustion potentially a result of vicarious trauma from providing support to, and regularly checking in with, colleagues who are in danger. This is not to diminish the hardships experienced by at-risk individuals in conflict settings, but rather to acknowledge the need to provide pastoral care for staff at Scottish HEIs as well as to at-risk academics, researchers and students.

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

"I've lost 120 people this year. This is not something that anybody ever trained me to be able to cope with. I've learnt what I need to do. I've become a bit like a medic, but I think there needs to be [rest] ... I need to be able to do the restorative work. That means we can then get back [to our research] and we don't burn out in a way that is medically catastrophic."

3.3.1 Obstacles and challenges

a) Long-term sustainability. The longevity of initiatives is directly tied to funding secured and so may only be a few months to two-years in length. Thus, sustainability of educational support could consider trainer-of-trainers approaches to develop local capacity for continued learning in some instances.

b) Funding payments to partners. The political complexity of providing educational support to conflict settings can limit the means of sharing grant or other funding. International sanctions, government requirements, or HEIs low appetite for risk can all negatively impact the ability to send funds to conflict settings. However, one solution is sending money to individuals, with appropriate permissions and due diligence, can receive funding.

c) Limited capacity. Institutional staff delivering peer-to-peer and individually run initiatives have limited personal capacity, both in terms of available time but also emotional and mental health. Individually run projects are often personal projects in addition to pre-existing workload and research. Peer-to-peer projects involve close collaboration with colleagues in conflict settings, who may be living and working under the threat of escalations of violence. Some academics had lost colleagues or knew of peers who had lost colleagues as a result of conflict, which takes an emotional toll.



3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

CASE STUDY 3

Provision of online digital courses individual licences to Palestinian students

What:

Edinburgh Napier academic Dr Imed Romdhani established a financial aid and digital education initiative for Palestinian engineering students.



How and where:

Dr Romdhani had previously run smaller financial aid for individual digital learning licences support to students in Tunisia. In response to the war in Gaza, and in collaboration with Scot Aid, the initiative was scaled up following successful award of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funding in February 2024 to mitigate disruption to HE students' education in Palestine. Gazan universities facilitated students' registration of interest in the initiative. Discounts from course providers and crowdsourcing was also used to fund further individual licences.



Challenges:

- Unreliable access to internet and electricity for students
- Loss or destruction of computer equipment
- Courses in English language only
- Transfer of funds to Gaza
- Adminstrating initiative alone



Outcomes:

Over 20,000 students registered for the initiative. As of 12 March 2025:

- 2,044 students enrolled in edX,¹⁴ with 8,208 course enrolments and 2,232 certificates obtained
- 309 students enrolled in Coursera,¹⁵ with 1,230 course enrolments, 655 courses completed
- 3,749 students enrolled in DataCamp,¹⁶ 9,810 courses completed
- Amboss also provided 340 licences,¹⁷ plus 12 more purchased by the initiative, for doctors and medical students

English language pre-courses or free internet was made available to 50 forcibly displaced students via a partnership with Professor Haynes Miller at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to enable further skills development.¹⁸

Dr Romdhani and Scot Aid work with Jreas Hub,¹⁹ Deir Hub²⁰ and hubs managed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Tamkeen Insan Foundation²¹ and Sumood Foundation²² to provide access to internet cafes for students to ensure quiet workspaces supplied with free internet and electricity. The hubs are run by local young leaders, providing them with transferable skills.

¹⁴ edX: <https://www.edx.org/>

¹⁵ Coursea: <https://www.coursera.org/>

¹⁶ DataCamp: <https://www.datacamp.com/>

¹⁷ Amboss: <https://www.amboss.com/us/clinicians>

¹⁸ SPOCs for Gaza, MIT: <https://sites.mit.edu/spocs4gaza/about-us/>

¹⁹ Jreas Hub: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/jreas-hub>

²⁰ Deir Hub: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/deirbalahub>

²¹ Tamkeen Insan Foundation: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/tamkeen-insan-foundation>

²² Sumood Foundation: <https://www.sumoodfoundation.org/>

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

3.4 Digital resource sharing

Scottish HEIs recognise the opportunities to deliver educational support through digital avenues. The shift to online education during and post-COVID has enabled greater adoption of digital learning and sharing of resources across the world.

"If you'd asked me pre-COVID we would have struggled, but I think we're a lot more up to speed now. We used the technology during COVID because of necessity and it's actually driven enormous change that we're utilising the benefits of and trying to expand and build on."

Sharing of lectures, teaching materials, and training courses were all mentioned by Scottish institutions. For example, some institutions used pre-existing platforms and made their materials free at point of use for medical professionals in conflict settings, including using IP addresses to automatically provide free access. Another institution created a specific Moodle, external to the institution's network, where lectures (delivered in English) were uploaded for at-risk individuals in the partner institution to access them. Others were exploring potential partnerships with massive open online course (MOOC) providers to add specific courses for at-risk individuals to access.

"I think we could probably possibly get staff who are committed to this area to work together to put something together a bit like a sort of MOOC, but one that is specifically designed and delivered by the Scottish sector. Now there's Universities Scotland that could convene or maybe it's something that the Scottish Government could lean into drawing on the expertise of this sector."

"We now have ... from our first two years of the curriculum, just upwards of 230 lectures that are recorded and we've put them on to an external Moodle site."

Online educational support to conflict settings remains relatively nascent, despite the general recognition of the opportunity presented by digital resource sharing. Institutions struggled to scale the volume of resources shared online, some were restricted by their licence agreements or had concerns over maintaining the academic integrity of their courses.

"You need to be able to have the resources to develop an effective digital campus ... Also, in terms of how you carry out assessments, et cetera, in a secure way, ensuring credibility of your programmes and not being undermined in any way or jeopardised by individuals falsely presenting themselves."

Furthermore, English is the primary language of instruction. Consequently, some institutions and Scotland-based academics also provided (limited) access to online English language learning, particularly through formal partnerships like the UK-Ukraine twinning programme or as in Case Study 3, above, to improve access to online content.

"We do have things that we could supply online access to, short courses, tuition, whatever it might be. I think the thing that struck me was how useful is that? If it's not in the home language that people need?"

"We had an approach from an Afghanistan network asking if we could provide online materials to a university in Afghanistan and [our institution] does not have Pashtun or Arabic or anything like that."

3. Scottish Higher Education Support to International Crises (continued)

3.3.1 Obstacles and challenges

a) Reliable internet and electricity. While challenges exist with reliable electricity and internet supplies in conflict settings, some Scottish institutions mistakenly assumed that the internet creating a barrier to expanding digital educational support. Thus, participants emphasised the need to communicate with and listen to the needs and capabilities of individuals and institutions in conflict settings and adapt online support accordingly.

b) At-risk individuals' safety. This challenge has two aspects: risks associate with connecting to the internet in a single location, and online monitoring by malign actors.

i. Physical security and internet connection. Repeated or group connections to the internet may be flagged by hostile security services as a potential target for military action. Thus, sometimes it may not be possible for at-risk individuals to reliably access online resources at the same time and day.

ii. Online monitoring. In some conflict settings the internet is closely monitored, including access to social media sites and the use of VPNs. Individuals who communicate with foreign institutions or connect to foreign education resources could be arrested and detained. Thus, it may not be possible nor appropriate to provide digital resources to some conflict settings.

"[Individuals in Myanmar and Sudan] are able to access online material ... but we're not in direct contact with them because that could put them at risk."

c) English language. The vast majority of digital resources shared are provided through the medium of English language. While some initiatives provided English language learning to improve access to online content, this still functions as a limitation to wider access.

d) Hosting digital resources. Uploading lectures, training course, and other educational materials requires server space and online portals for at-risk individuals to access them. These resources need managing and maintaining to ensure they remain accessible, which comes with some financial costs. There were also some concerns about uploading content to MOOCs and the risk of counterfeit registrations (i.e. exploiting the free access provided to at-risk individuals) or illegal distribution.

e) Sharing library and journals licences. This remains challenging, though not insurmountable, due to various contracts and licences signed by Scottish HEIs. Similar to challenges around digital fees and scholarships (see 3.1.1 above), adding at-risk individuals as associate students or staff presents potential UKVI complications.

4. Key stakeholders

4. Key stakeholders

A range of stakeholders were identified through the qualitative interviews, summarised in the table below:

For analysis purposes, these stakeholders were grouped into three categories:

- **Advocates:** Potential champions and promoters raising awareness for educational support initiatives
- **Enablers:** Providing access to educational support, such as through logistics, organisation, and visa provision
- **Partners:** Co-implementation of educational support initiatives through close collaboration

Notably, funding is not differentiated among these categories as all three can provide financial assistance to varying degrees. Nor should these categories be viewed as discrete or fixed, as some stakeholders sit in more than one category as visualised in the Venn diagram below. Furthermore, the funding cuts to aid and the development, as well as Scottish HE sector funding issues, occurred during the research; while these were not discussed in depth, funding remains a significant issue to maintaining and growing educational support to conflict settings.

4.1 Key stakeholders: Discussion

Senior institutional management were important for developing successful and long-term educational support initiatives.

Senior internal champions act as both **advocates** and **enablers**, providing internal endorsements and funding, as well as external promotion and celebration.

"I'd say at [my institution], there's a lot of support from senior management ... It's good to have someone who in that position is pushing things forward."

The **institutional student** body were seen as potential **advocates**, though at times tensions could develop as a result of developments in conflict settings, or through perceived institutional unfairness or lack of satisfactory institutional response. Engaging the student body in dialogue and participatory consultations helped to alleviate tensions.

"Students are advocating for institutions to take a stand, and that obviously is against our charitable instrument, but also our point is that we're here for everybody... We're not here to make statements and comment on political matters, however awful they may be. But for our students, that's not enough."

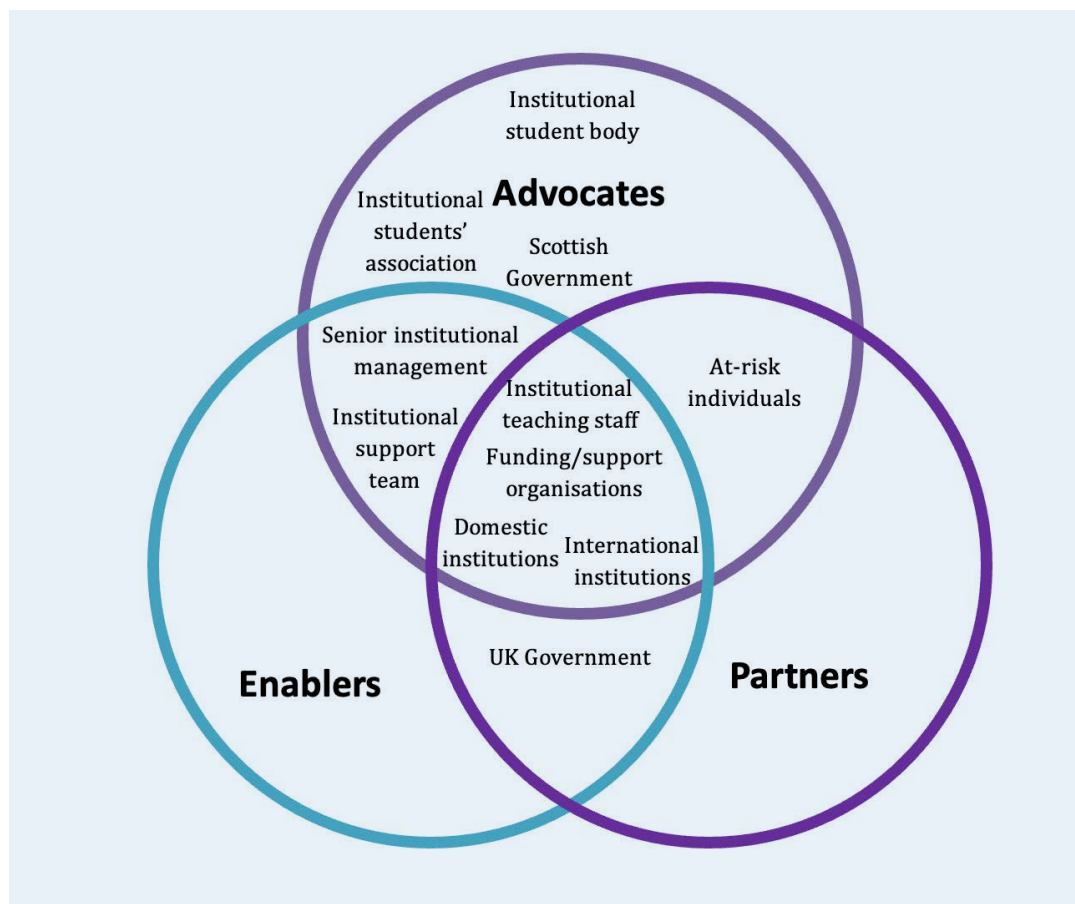
"What we've noticed is when there is a particular escalation in the conflict or it's particularly in the news ... [then] the students are on high alert, understandably enough. Unfortunately, they have seen a poster up, for example, advertising a play, or they've become aware of something in a [teaching] programme and that has just become a kind of touch paper for things flaring up; [however,] it's been quite localised and it's been well managed."

Table 3. Stakeholders in Scottish HE sector educational support provision to conflict settings

Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior institutional management • Institutional support staff/team • Institutional teaching staff • Institutional student body • Institutional students' association/ union • At-risk individuals (current scholars and fellows) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Government (Home Office, FCDO) • Scottish Government • Other Scottish or UK HEIs • International HEIs • Funding and support organisations • At-risk individuals (prospective scholars and fellows)

4. Key stakeholders (continued)

Figure 1. Stakeholder mapping Venn diagram



Students' associations and unions were mentioned as valuable **advocates** at some institutions, particularly for initiating constructive internal dialogue between senior management and the student body amid simmering tensions as a result of developments in conflict settings.

"I think the one thing that I think is special at [my institution] is that there is an extremely strong connection between the student union and the management. And the student union is seen to represent the student voice. ... I think that kind of two-way dialogue between student union and management has led to a neutral but positive environment."

Different bodies within the **UK Government** function as **enablers**, such as the Home Office for visa grants (or refusals) and the FCDO for visa applications (often in third countries).

"There are universities, particularly King's College London, who are way ahead of the rest of us in terms of their links with the Home Office and what they're able to do. They actually sponsor people coming into the country, but it's hugely complicated. And so as far as I'm aware, no Scottish university has got into that area."

4. Key stakeholders (continued)

CASE STUDY 4

Engaging staff and students in dialogue: a University Assembly



What:

The University of Aberdeen convened a University Assembly to engage staff and students to consider the question “How can the university respond to international conflict?”



How and where:

The University adopted the Assembly model previously used in Ireland and within the climate policy arena. The model engages communities on topics with diverging opinions and to inform policy decisions. The format includes expert presentations and independently facilitated discussion. The University committed to hold the Assembly after the summer 2024 Elphinstone Lawn encampment. It was originally scheduled for December 2024 and took place on 14 February 2025 to accommodate speakers' availability.



Challenges:

- Availability of speakers and attendees in December
- Registration numbers lower than hoped
- Expectations of some Assembly delegates did not necessarily align with the question under consideration



Outcomes:

The Assembly design hoped to achieve 80 delegates (40 staff, 40 students) with a stratified random selection process to ensure attendees would be broadly representative of the University community. However, only 55 delegates registered meaning all were invited, and only 33 individuals attended.

Expert talks were delivered by conflict and post-conflict dynamics specialist Claire Hajaj (Executive Director, Inter Mediate), and Professor Paul Gready (Co-Director of the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York). Facilitators were Sabbatical Officers and members of staff who supported to group discussions. The final plenary session was facilitated by Rebekah Widdowfield (Vice-Principal for People and Diversity at the University of St Andrews).

The Assembly has an advisory function, rather than being part of the University's governance structure. As such it is not a decision-making body and instead provides direction for future responses, including recommendations to establish a framework for supporting decision-making and continue participatory decision-making.

Some delegates were disappointed by the broad consideration of conflict, rather than a specific focus on Israel-Palestine, leading to some emotive exchanges during the plenary session. After the conclusion of the Assembly, senior representatives of the Students' Association engaged delegates in conversation to discuss constructive next steps, highlighting the importance of 'safe spaces' and respectful dialogue.

The University published a report with findings and reflections from the Assembly in March 2025.²³ Partnership with the Students Association and other relevant stakeholders (staff and student representatives) was highlighted as essential for ongoing engagement on the subject of conflict response (including educational support and other tangible steps).

²³ 'University Assembly: How can the University Respond to International Conflict', University of Aberdeen. March 2025: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/media/site/news/documents/Assembly-Report-Final.pdf>

4. Key stakeholders (continued)

The **Scottish Government** primarily functions as an **advocate**. It has the potential to be a key voice for the HE sector championing educational support efforts from the beginning, through to celebrating and crediting the sector's achievements. While it provides some financial support, the uneven application of home fees status policy means it was not necessarily an enabler. It could also become a partner by facilitating coordination of education support between Scottish HEIs. Furthermore, it is seen as an interlocutor with the UK Government (including specifically UKVI) to facilitate visas for at-risk individuals. It also has the potential for coordination with other UK institutions and organisations or bilateral relationships with international institutions (including HEIs in conflict settings) in locations where the Scottish Government conducts outreach, such as parts of Africa.

"The voice the Scottish Government can have with the UK Government to look at ways in which we can make it easier to support those that are fleeing conflict to come to the UK because quite often we have given scholarships to or offers of a place to students who then can't leave and get here to take up their studies. So, what are the ways and means that we could be better supporting that and trying to create safe routes for, for those individuals to come to the UK? ... I suppose it's just the Scottish Government being an advocate for the work that we're doing in, in this space would be tremendously helpful."

External **funding and support organisations**, such as Cara, the British Council, and charities like the Linda Norgrove Foundation and Friends of Birzeit University (FOBZU), can play important roles as **advocates**, **enablers**, and **partners**. These organisations provide a wide range of diverse support to Scottish HEIs. Network connections, funding programmes, and administrative support were all highly valued and gratefully received.

"We've moved towards trying to think [about how we can] work more directly with agencies like Cara ... It's all very well and good that you've got a scholarship for student from Afghanistan. If you can't get here, then how useful is that? And the good thing about again working with Cara is that they can get people in [to the UK] or they can support the logistics."

Domestic and international institutions also fulfil **advocate**, **enabler**, and **partner** functions. Other Scottish and UK institutions provide opportunities for all three roles to jointly deliver educational support initiatives. Third country international institutions similarly offer enabler and partner opportunities, particularly to provide educational support for forcibly displaced individuals. International institutions in conflict settings are partners in, and not only recipients of, educational support. Thus, programmes should be developed collaboratively to ensure effective and efficient initiatives.

"We're looking at working with different partners ... so partnership across Scotland, partnership across the UK, partnership with Qatari universities."

At-risk individuals, discussed extensively above in 3.1, are both **advocates** and **partners**. They receive support in Scotland and in conflict settings and can become champion to facilitate further initiatives as well as establish partnership within Scotland and beyond.

5. Lessons learnt and recommendations

5. Lessons learnt and recommendations

5.1 Lessons learnt

a) Equitable partnerships: listen to and communicate with international institutions and at-risk individuals to adequately and effectively respond to their educational support needs. Team members at Scottish HEIs ideally should include native speakers of a conflict setting's main language(s) to avoid miscommunications

b) Proactive response: providing some support quickly is better than no support at all, allowing for a stop-and-think stage to ensure the response is appropriate and meaningful. Initial pilot initiatives can be scaled up and adapted to circumstances.

c) Planning and facilitation spaces: committees and working groups enable collaboration within HEIs (and other peers) to facilitate delivery of educational support. They also allow for preservation of institutional knowledge to adapt support approaches when new or unforeseen scenarios inevitably occur.

d) Information sharing spaces: sector-wide and internal institution discussion spaces enable senior management and staff to constructively discuss concerns, issues, and suggestions; Chatham House Rule-style spaces may be appropriate in some circumstances to enable frank and open conversations. They also provide respite for at-risk individuals who can discuss shared experiences with peers.

e) Protection and security: duty of care is essential for ensuring the safety staff, students, scholars, and fellows at domestic HEIs as well as for those receiving the support. This also includes looking after the mental wellbeing of the academic and administrative staff providing educational support, as well as that of at-risk individuals.

f) Identify local partners: on-the-ground and neighbouring country facilitation are important success factors, can include international HEIs, FCDO, British Council, local NGOs, and local lawyers – in addition to the institutions in conflict settings. Language, legal, and geographic expertise should ideally be based on information from individuals with strong links to the conflict setting. Twinning or MoU agreements provide valuable legal mechanisms to enable support and joint research.

g) Expectation management: avoid overcommitting and overpromising. It is important to consider as the expectations at-risk individuals and partner HEIs may have for institutions' capabilities and capacity. At-risk individuals often lack the knowledge to ask the "right" questions on arrival to Scotland; however, it is also important to strike the right tone to avoid condescension when providing information to them. Similarly, joint projects in conflict settings should clearly state the minimum likely period of educational support to avoid abrupt cessation of activities.

h) Consistent communications: institutions' messaging around educational support to conflict settings has been interpreted as uneven and, at times, unfair due to comparison between responses to different international crises. Engaging the staff and student body early and through participatory methods helps to address any potential internal tensions.

5. Lessons learnt and recommendations (continued)

5.2 Framework recommendations

The Halpin and UUKi report on the UK HE sector's Ukraine response provides a robust framework suggestion for higher education humanitarian partnerships and support, using the below headings:

- **Comprehensive environment analysis** (including political, economics, technological, legal, and environmental constraints);
- **Preparedness and capacity building** (including identifying support objectives, engaging with those receiving the support, and expectation management);
- **Initial and ongoing capabilities and needs assessment** (including required expertise, adaptability to deliver, and key partners);
- **Resource assessment, allocation, and mobilisation** (including required resources, physical considerations, and key partners);
- **Ongoing monitoring and evaluation** (including checking validity of support and measuring impact, delivery or success).²⁴

The framework emphasises the need for centring the response on the those who will be impacted by the education and humanitarian support, working in partnership for greater effectiveness and efficiency, and to ensuring the response is within the legal and regulatory capacities of the institution and geography.

Additionally, the following could also be included as a preparatory step for current responses and pre-emptive one for future responses, particularly with a view to the Scottish-specific context:

- **Ongoing advocacy and dialogue within the sector:** collective willingness to engage fellow Scottish institutions and other domestic partners to deliver educational support to international crises and conflict settings. This should include advocacy from and dialogue with key stakeholders such as: the Scottish Government, institutional senior management, and local MSPs and MPs.

5.3 Recommendations for the Scottish higher education sector

- **Explore establishment of a Scottish HE sector working or coordination group.** The group should include representatives from institutions' senior management and sanctuary or scholarship teams; organisations such as Cara, the British Council and charities; and individuals from conflict settings. One organisation or body should host the group such as the RSE, Scottish Government, or Universities Scotland.
- **Explore establishment of Scottish HE sector information sharing fora.** Building on ongoing initiatives, the sector should continue facilitation of information sharing through conferences, workshops, and discussion spaces (including Chatham House Rule-style spaces). These will enable collaboration, networking, and sharing of lessons learnt. Organisations within the sector, such as the RSE and YAS, can continue to facilitate information sharing.

²⁴ For the full framework, including suggested questions to guide a cyclical response, see pp. 50-55. 'Responding to International Humanitarian Crises: Lessons from the UK Higher Education Sector Response to the Invasion of Ukraine', Halpin and UUKi. August 2023: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-09/Halpin%20UUKi%20final%20report%20Sept%202023_0.pdf

5. Lessons learnt and recommendations (continued)

- **Explore allocation of grants directly to researchers or staff at international institutions in conflict settings.** Funding to and knowledge production in conflict settings is incredibly challenging. For institutions to survive and continue functioning after a conflict requires financial and research capacity. Can Scottish HEI explore allocating whole funding grants to individual researchers with the Scottish academics working 'pro bono'?
- **Explore how the Scottish Government can enable and celebrate the Scottish HE sector's educational support to conflict settings.** What role can the Scottish Government play in championing the sector's successes and enabling implementation of lessons learnt for future educational support? How can the Scottish Government facilitate dialogue within the sector and with potential international partners?
- **Advocate for improved visa processes to enable at-risk individuals to study and work in Scottish Institutions.** The Scottish HE sector and its partners, including the Scottish Government, Cara or other bodies, should in engage in advocacy and dialogue with UKVI to streamline the processes for at-risk academics, researchers and students to come to Scotland to study and work at HEIs.



Conclusions

Conclusions

The Scottish HE sector has delivered and is delivering a diverse range of educational support initiatives to conflict settings. Information sharing and collective efforts from HEIs would likely enable more effective and more efficient educational support, especially as the sector's financial turbulence means budgets are increasingly constrained. However, it is during tumultuous times that education and humanitarian support efforts are most needed and most impactful. Research collaborations with international institutions provide meaningful projects and unexpected benefits for HEIs, including expansion of research networks (formal and informal), culture sharing experiences, and joint funding opportunities.

Institutions agree this is an area where agree that they can collaborate, rather than compete. Scotland and Scottish institutions have the opportunity to leverage the country's prowess and diversity in higher education in order to provide educational support to international crises. There is also an opportunity to enable a uniquely Scottish story to flourish: Scottish HEIs are working to give what help they can to colleagues, peers, and students in need.

Lastly, this scoping research focused on support to conflict settings, rather than post-conflict initiatives. Thus, a key question to consider for future support to international crises is: **how can the Scottish HE sector make the most of peace?** Higher education is key to post-conflict reconstruction and revival of societies, thus, there are opportunities for Scottish HEIs to enable capacity development and restoration of international HEIs once conflicts subside.

Appendices

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Appendix 1: List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
Cara	Council for At-Risk Academics
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HESPAL	Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians
MOOC	Massive open online courses
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OPTs	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PGR	Postgraduate research
PGT	Postgraduate taught
RSE	Royal Society of Edinburgh
TNE	Transnational education
UKVI	UK Visas and Immigration
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UUKi	Universities UK International
YAS	Young Academy of Scotland

Appendix 2: Detailed methodology

A total sample of 36 qualitative interviews was achieved. The interviews were conducted between 16 January and 7 March 2025.

The RSE Human Rights Working Group provided an initial list of contacts for potential interviewees, additionally YAS At-Risk Academic and Researcher members were contacted. More contacts were made at the University of Glasgow's Reconstructing Gaza conference on 11 December 2024. Contacts were then 'snowballed' through the interviews and via email conversations.

Interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing; one person completed a written qualitative interview. Verbal interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours, with most lasting 1 hour.

The interviewees were asked their self-identifying ethnicity and gender:

- 20 women;
- 16 men;
- 21 White British, Irish, or European;
- Other ethnicities included: Afghan, Arab, Eritrean, Indian, Iranian, Tigrayan, Palestinian (including British-Palestinian), Syrian, and Ukrainian;
- One participant did not provide their ethnicity.

Limitations

The qualitative methodology means that quantitative qualifiers and significance cannot, and should not, be applied to the data. The diverse nature of the Scottish HEIs also means it is difficult to quantify the scale of educational support provided to conflict settings in any meaningful way; any attempts to establish the quantitative scale of educational support to conflict settings may result in unfair and unhelpful comparisons between large, medium, small, and specialist HEIs.

Participants opted in to the research, meaning not all Scottish institutions took part. This could potentially have resulted in a self-selection bias.

While significant efforts were made to include non-White participants, over half the sample self-identified as White (58%). Almost half the sample (55%) identified as female.

Consent and safeguarding

All interviewees were provided research information sheets and gave informed consent, which was re-confirmed at the start of the interviews. All interviewees were informed their participation was voluntary, which could be withdrawn after the interview. The interview questions were designed with trauma-informed practices in mind and support resources were provided after the interview, where necessary.

In line with research and protection best practices, all quotes from at-risk individuals and other potential identifying information have been anonymised in an effort to ensure interviewees' confidentiality and safety. Quotes were also lightly edited for clarity and length.

Any documents containing personally identifying information were anonymised or deleted to ensure participants' confidentiality. The RSE's data privacy policy, including GDPR compliance, can be found here: <https://rse.org.uk/about-us/our-policies-and-corporate-information/privacy-policy/>

Appendix 3: Participating institutions and organisations

The RSE expresses sincere thanks to all participants, Scottish HEIs, and other organisations who gave their time, took part in, and contributed to discussions for this research scoping exercise.

Edinburgh Napier University

Queen Margaret University

Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

Royal Conservatoire Scotland

University of Aberdeen

University of Dundee

University of Edinburgh

University of Glasgow

University of St Andrews

University of Strathclyde

University of Stirling

University of West of Scotland

British Council, Scotland

Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara)

Friends of Birzeit University (FOBZU)

Institute of International Education (IIE)

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Scottish Government

Universities UK International (UUKi)

Young Academy of Scotland (YAS)



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