



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service

With funding from the:



Federal Ministry
of Research, Technology
and Space

National, regional, and EU funding programmes to strengthen Syrian academic capacities and resilience

Date: Friday, 26 June 2026, 9:00 – 14:00

Venue: Le Louise Hotel Brussels, Avenue de la Toison d'Or 40, 1050 Brussels

Background, objectives and structure of the roundtable

The conflict in Syria has had a profound impact on the country's higher education system, disrupting academic institutions, displacing students and scholars, and threatening the continuity of education, research and knowledge production. At the same time, Syrian students, doctoral candidates, and academics continue to demonstrate resilience and commitment to their education and professional development. Supporting this human capital is essential not only for individual futures but also for the capacity, reconstruction and development of Syria's higher education system and society as a whole.

This event brought together key stakeholders from national, regional, and international higher education to share insights and experiences in rebuilding the higher education sector in Syria.

Key takeaways

A clear message emerged from the roundtable on National, Regional and EU Funding Programmes to Strengthen Syrian Academic Capacities and Resilience. Higher education is a core pillar of long-term recovery and institutional resilience in Syria. Rebuilding universities goes beyond the investment in infrastructure. It requires restoring institutions, governance, leadership, academic capacity, and trust in public knowledge systems.

The roundtable showcased the role of scholarship programmes, research mobility, capacity building, leadership development, and institutional partnerships in the reconstruction of the Syrian higher education system. Furthermore, it emphasised the contributions of the Syrian diaspora in this respect, which is a solid basis for engagement at the anticipated higher, more political and systemic level in the future. It was inspiring to hear from alumni, how DAAD's "Leadership for Syria" programme, created a sustainable impact on individuals by enabling them to build bridges with Syrian institutions, and establishing international academic networks that play a crucial role in inspiring reform processes.

The roundtable confirmed the following priorities:

- **National ownership and alignment:** International engagement must align with national priorities and strengthen Syrian ownership of reform processes. Cooperation should be demand-driven and anchored in Syrian-defined priorities, in close collaboration with existing institutions in Syria.



- **Support should go beyond individual capacity-building** and focus on governance, institutional commitment, and systemic reform, including academic freedom, curriculum development, and institutional capacity.
- **Coordinated support and long-term partnerships:** A structured coordination framework is needed to align efforts by Syrian, European, regional, and institutional actors, to avoid fragmentation and duplication.
- Sustainable recovery requires a **shift from project-based assistance to strategic, coordinated, and locally owned partnerships** involving universities, public authorities, SME's, chambers of commerce, and civil society, linked to national, regional and European support measures.
- **Higher education as a driver of recovery:** Higher education is central to rebuilding human capital, fostering dialogue, peacebuilding and trust, and supporting long-term stability, resilience, and social cohesion. Syria requires a skilled workforce across key sectors, including engineering, education, health, public administration, digital technologies, agriculture, and renewable energy. In this context, universities are not only actors of reconstruction but also instruments of it.
- **Link to EU priorities:** Although higher education is not explicitly identified as a priority sector in the EU Implementing Decision on special measures in favour of Syria (30 September 2025, [link](#)), the decision focuses on rebuilding state institutions, creating jobs and livelihoods, supporting returns, strengthening local governance, restoring essential services, and fostering trust, social cohesion, private sector engagement, and diaspora mobilisation. Higher education is essential to achieving these objectives.
- **Labour market relevance and university–industry links:** Higher education curricula should improve graduate employability, address skills gaps, and support the integration of returnees, requiring closer alignment with labour market needs. Universities can act as anchor institutions supporting SMEs through incubation, applied research, entrepreneurship support, access to finance, and public–private partnerships.
- **Recognition of prior learning:** Universities play a key role in recognising qualifications of returning refugees and displaced persons, verifying credentials, and developing bridging and requalification programmes.

DAAD and the players and organisations present in the roundtable are committed to join forces with local, national, regional, and European partners to make this vision a reality.

Words of welcome and keynote speeches

Words of Welcome

Dr Kai Sicks, Secretary General, DAAD, underlined that according to the strategy of DAAD, rebuilding Syria's higher education system requires support for both individuals and institutions. While universities continue to operate under difficult conditions, fragmented structures, damaged infrastructure, and the loss of academic staff pose major challenges. At the same time, Syria benefits from a strong academic diaspora and resilient higher education institutions and a community that are key drivers for reconstruction. Drawing on programmes such as *Leadership for Syria* and *HOPES*, DAAD – with its support of scholarships, leadership development, academic mobility, and institutional partnerships – can leverage a powerful diaspora and institutional network with meaningful engagement in bridging between Syria and Europe. He emphasised that the successful reconstruction of Syrian higher education requires coordinated



national, regional, and European engagement, combined with local ownership, trust-building, curriculum reform, quality assurance, and internationalisation efforts.

Keynotes on rebuilding Syria within a regional context

Professor Jens Hanssen (Director, Orient-Institut Beirut): Rebuilding Syria the academic and research landscape in Syria requires institutionally coordinated European engagement, focusing on curriculum reform, restoring academic freedom, and creating governance structures worth returning to for the Syrian diaspora.

Professor Dr Hani Harb, German-Syrian Research Foundation: Rebuilding Syria requires long-term, collaborative efforts to restore intellectual and institutional capacities—beyond infrastructure—by fostering knowledge creation, empowering local talent, building sustainable international partnerships, and strengthening bridges to Syrian institutions.

First session

The first session of the programme focused on the diverse initiatives of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), including scholarships, capacity-building workshops, and leadership programmes that aim to strengthen the academic skills of Syrian students and scholars and foster a new generation of leaders prepared to contribute to Syria's reconstruction.

Reflections on the impact of DAAD's Leadership for Syria programme

DAAD perspective

Dr Christian Hülshörster, Head of Division, Scholarship Programmes Southern Hemisphere, shared how the Leadership for Syria programme, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by DAAD, created a sustainable network by providing scholarships in combination with leadership training to Syrian students and researchers between 2015–2021. The programme was designed to educate future Syrian professionals who could contribute to rebuilding the country's institutions after the conflict. The skilled alumni and diaspora have created strong ties between Germany and Syria such as through self-organised initiatives (e.g., Syrian Science Council) and volunteer initiatives (e.g., online teaching at Syrian universities, alumni events, short-term stays in Syria).

Alumni perspective

Three Leadership for Syria alumni shared their individual pathways and how the programme contributed to this.

Mustafa Karahamad, doctoral candidate at Goethe University Frankfurt, explained how he and his peers gained international perspectives, collaborated with peers from across Syria, and learned about post-conflict challenges. Today, he acts as a multiplier and partner for implementing Syrian-led projects supporting Syrian academics in Syria and abroad. Around 30 alumni have launched the Syrian Science Council (SSC), an independent think tank of Syrian researchers and academics living in Syria and around the world. SSC's dialogue activities and policy papers support Syrian academia by promoting free debate and contributing to teaching, supervision of academic work, and curriculum development.



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Orwa Eyade, Research Associate at the University of Hildesheim, highlighted that the Leadership for Syria programme provided more than financial support; it enabled Syrian students and researchers to remain connected to an academic community during years of disruption, thereby preserving academic continuity. Drawing on his research in media, conflict, and peace journalism, he emphasised that rebuilding Syrian higher education requires strengthening research culture, academic cooperation, and long-term partnerships. He also argued that Leadership for Syria alumni should be seen not only as scholarship recipients, but as knowledge multipliers who can help transform individual opportunities into sustainable institutional capacity.

Jumana Alasaad, Trainee at the European Commission, emphasised that the Leadership for Syria programme equipped her not only with academic expertise but also with knowledge of democratic governance, human rights, and women's rights; Skills she hopes can strengthen Syria's future educational institutions. She is committed to building bridges between Europe and Syria, such as through lectures and academic visits, and shared her plan to return to Aleppo University.

DAAD programmes to strengthen the Syrian higher education system and Syrian higher education students, doctoral candidates and post docs.

Moderator: **Michael Hörig**, Director, DAAD Brussels Office

Short-Term Research mobility scheme to Syria

Muhammad Khaskeia, Head of Section, Scholarships North Africa, Middle East, shared how DAAD's Short-Term Research Mobility Scheme to Syria contribute to rebuilding Syria's higher education system by fostering academic exchange and collaboration between Syrian and German academics, in particular through volunteer teaching and knowledge transfer at Syrian universities as well as support of alumni engagement through self-organised events and short stays in Syria.

Regional activities of the DAAD offices in Amman and Cairo

Dr Hebatallah Fathy, Director of the DAAD Regional Office Amman, shared that since 2015, the office has been offering three master's scholarship programmes for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon with funding from BMZ and the EU: JoSY, HOPES Lebanon, and currently the Edu-Syria programme. DAAD's role in regional higher education programmes has moved from delivering scholarships, to leading a regional consortium to being the specialised expert for master scholarship programme within the Edu Syria-consortium led by the GJU. A survey conducted last year among alumni and scholarship holders showed the positive impact on employability and further academic careers. The needs for rebuilding Syrian academia include restoring physical and digital infrastructure, strengthening faculty through capacity building, training and academic exchange, fostering research collaboration and engagement with the Syrian academic diaspora, modernising curricula with a stronger focus on STEM, IT/AI, technical English and practical skills, and expanding access to higher education through scholarships, vocational pathways and trauma-informed psychosocial support.



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Dr Wiebke Bachmann, Director of the DAAD Regional Office Cairo, introduced the DAAD Kairo Akademie (DKA), established in 2011 with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office to strengthen higher education and scientific research in Egypt and the wider region. Since its inception, the DKA has trained more than 20,000 participants through over 1,200 training modules delivered in cooperation with more than 44 Egyptian universities and research institutions, covering management, communication, research, teaching, institutional development. Beyond Egypt, the DKA has expanded its activities to Tunisia, the Maghreb and Jordan, while also supporting institutional cooperation with the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) as well as a pillar DKA-EU cooperation through tailored capacity-building and policy-oriented workshops, promoting participation in EU research programmes such as Horizon Europe and PRIMA. DKA will launch a Syria programme in 2026, comprising online training modules (June-July 2026) as well as a two-day conference on assessing the needs of the Syrian higher education system and four workshops on strategic planning and management, team communication and academic research skills for PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, team leaders and administrative staff, developed in consultation with the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education and the Rectors of Damascus and Aleppo Universities.

Projects in support of Syrian Higher Education

Stefan Bienefeld, Head of Division, Transnational Education and Cooperation Programmes, shared that DAAD activities supporting Syrian higher education were halted during the civil war but that currently two short-term initiatives are contributing to reconstruction. The “Syrian Innovation in Academia” pilot (2026–27) with the German Jordanian University, University of Hamburg, and German-Syrian Research Foundation focuses on needs assessment, capacity building and training for Syrian participants in Arabic language, and regional networking. In parallel, 2026 pilot projects between Syrian and German universities support joint proposals across seven Syrian institutions to rebuild academic contacts through exchanges and trust-building. DAAD programmes such as HAW International, and university partnerships remain open for Syrian cooperation. Key challenges for the cooperation with universities in Syria include language barriers and travel constraints.

Participant contributions to the discussion

Professor Ala’aldeen Al-Halhouli, President of the German Jordanian University, expressed the need for openness in the higher education sector to collaborate with other sectors as cross-sectoral experience can contribute to and support reconstruction.

Marcello Scalisi, Director of UNIMED, highlighted the importance of inviting Syrian universities to work together and of avoiding only supporting leading universities (Aleppo, Damascus). There are many other universities that face problems. We should think about the harmonisation of the Syrian higher education



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system, otherwise we risk supporting only the best ones. Syria should be considered as one country and as many actors as possible need to be involved.

Michael Gaebel, EUA: The European University Association has been implementing the European Higher Education Reform Experts initiative of the European Commission for more than a decade. Syria was part of the initiative in the early years and would be welcomed back. He wondered whether there would be interest and capacity for Syrian institutions and the government to support partnerships between individual institutions to modernise higher education including their values.

Dr Roman Luckscheiter, Secretary General of the German UNESCO Commission informed about UNESCO's Action plan for Syria, focusing on safeguarding cultural heritage and supporting education. UNESCO also offers an interface function with additional information.

Anna Fleischer, Director Global Unit for Democracy and Human Rights at Heinrich Böll Foundation, underlined that European research should empower both Syrians who left the countries as well as those who stayed. The focus of attention and support must go beyond the discussions about the return of the diaspora. A holistic approach based on the involvement of as many actors as possible is required.

Dr Conrad Rein, Secretary General of the Global Flagship Initiative for Food Security, launched at the UNCCD COP16, explained that the Initiative aims to support Syria's reconstruction by fostering resilient, safe and competitive agri-food systems and rural development. Higher education is a key pillar of this approach, helping to build the human capital, innovation, and institutional capacities required for long-term recovery. The Initiative has defined ambitious KPIs for the coming years, including engaging 100 universities and at least 100,000 practitioners. By bringing universities together with governments, international partners, and the private sector, it seeks to strengthen research, education, and innovation ecosystems while leveraging private-sector investment to support sustainable reconstruction.

Anke Reiffenstuel, Director for Culture, Education and Science Diplomacy, Federal Foreign Office, Germany, in response to Anna Fleischer, mentioned that meetings and conferences are important to address challenges and progress publicly and politically in the sense of a balanced debate that goes beyond the return of refugees in order to also refer to topics such as cooperation in the field of education and academic exchange. She agreed that main challenges for participation include the lack of English skills as well as security and travel warnings for Syria.

Professor Ralf Roßkopf, Vice-President for International Affairs at the German Jordanian University (GJU), shared that GJU offers language translation and advice regarding security issues. The recently undertaken first physical visit to 8 Syrian universities since the end of the civil war, highlighted security and language challenges as most critical barriers.

Professor Hani Harb, German-Syrian Research Foundation suggested a more flexible approach and exceptions regarding German government travel warnings would be needed. He agreed that language barriers persist and considers agriculture rehabilitation and digital transformation as priority topics. A third



obstacle are the hierarchy-based rules and the mentality at universities, which need to be changed. Capacity building for younger generations is crucial in this regard. In September a meeting will take place that will bring together universities and researchers to discuss the rehabilitation of higher education in the agriculture sector. The digitalisation of the country is also a huge challenge in Syria, but there is an ongoing engagement in this area in Aleppo. Finally, he concluded that the people who stayed during the war require the most attention, in order not to leave them behind after years of isolation.

Dr Kai Sicks shared that the German-Syrian academic relations are currently in a trust-building and exploration period, during which new networks evolve and personal ties are deepened. The Syrian diaspora are crucial bridge builders. In this context, DAAD's current funding instruments strive for a broad, trust-based network that also includes the Syrian government. Starting from and building on such a network is a good basis for then moving the engagement further to the political and structural level in order to inspire long-term relations and HE reforms.

Second session

In the second session, participants discussed the alignment of national, regional, and EU-supported initiatives.

Towards a coordinated approach: aligning national, European and regional support for the reconstruction of the higher education sector in Syria

Dr Marwan al-Halabi, Minister for Higher Education and Research of Syria (presented by Ambassador Abdullatif Dabbagh), called for rebuilding the Syrian higher education system in a way that preserves human dignity, restores the institution, and unlocks the country's capacity for revival. He emphasised that investing in human capital is not just a matter of educational relief, but rather a strategic choice in reconstruction and development. Higher education plays a central role in producing knowledge, developing talent, informing policy, and driving transformation. The Minister argued that the reconstruction of higher education requires a coordinated framework aligning national priorities with regional and European support, rather than a multitude of fragmented initiatives. Consistent partnerships, long-term institutional paths, and true investment in sustainability, leadership, and resilience are key. The DAAD Leadership for Syria programme is exemplary for not only developing individual talent, but leadership capacities that know how to build institutions, manage transformation, and balance reality with ambition. Academic mobility is not sufficient if it is not connected to pathways of return, contribution, and knowledge transfer.

For a coordinated approach, five fundamental principles are needed:

1. Support must stem from Syrian national priorities, not from external assumptions about them.
2. Funding must shift from solely supporting individuals to supporting institutions as well.
3. Scholarships, capacity building, governance, and academic reform must be linked in a single chain.



4. The role of Syrian researchers at home and abroad must be integrated and merged in a single network for knowledge production and transfer.
5. The university must be viewed as an active agent in reconstruction, development, and social cohesion, not as an educational institution isolated from its context.

The Minister highlighted the importance of the Short-Term Research Mobility to Syria programme as important in bridging knowledge acquired abroad with the country's reconstruction needs, linking academic mobility to national development. He emphasised that rebuilding Syria means not only rehabilitating buildings, but also trust, capability, institutions, and standards. Universities and civil society, he argued, remain inseparable partners in a shared future, ensuring that higher education contributes to a broader national agenda for recovery, development, and stability.

Henrike Trautmann, Director Middle East, DG MENA, European Commission, underlined that the EU is scaling up its support to Syria, shifting from humanitarian aid towards long-term recovery, with around EUR 620 million planned for 2026-2027. Regarding the education sector, she highlighted coordination between donors and with the Syrian authorities through the Syria Partnership Coordination Forum (SPCF) and its education working group to ensure that international support remains aligned with Syrian priorities, cost-efficient and well-coordinated. She stressed the importance of moving beyond service delivery and the reconstruction of schools towards broader system strengthening, particularly in higher education, TVET, governance, quality assurance and labour-market relevance.

She also referred to practical cooperation tools such as the EU Technical Assistance Hub, the expansion of Erasmus+, and the forthcoming establishment of a National Erasmus+ Office in Damascus to strengthen academic links and institutional capacity. Needs remain considerable, this is why she pointed to tangible regional initiatives such as the Mediterranean University under the Pact for the Mediterranean. All of this should be seen in the context of a strengthened partnership with the Syrian authorities, as demonstrated by the SPCF and in the follow up to the High Level Political Dialogue of May 2026.

Georgiana Plesu, Policy Officer at the International Cooperation Unit of DG EAC at the European Commission, was unable to attend the roundtable. In her written contribution delivered after the event, she shared that the Erasmus+ programme does not finance physical reconstruction or infrastructure but supports Syria's recovery for example by investing in scholarships, mobility opportunities and capacity-building projects. Since 2021, the programme has enabled almost 400 planned student and staff mobilities from Syria and 58 Erasmus Mundus scholarships for Syrian students. Due to past restrictions on public entities, which were lifted for calls launched in autumn 2025, project funding was more limited, with 3 Capacity Building in the field of Youth projects and 1 virtual exchange project since 2021. Under the international dimension of Erasmus+, there are no country allocations; 333.1 million € is allocated to the overall South Neighbourhood region (2021-2027), with all 10 Southern Mediterranean countries participating under the same competitive calls. National Erasmus+ Offices exist in all Southern Mediterranean countries except Syria and Libya, however work is ongoing to set up such offices also in Syria and Libya. The EU Delegation in Syria works closely with the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education to establish a National Erasmus+ Office in Syria, aiming at strengthening Syria's participation. Broader regional cooperation in higher education is being reinforced especially through the Commission's work with partners such as UNIMED and the planned Union for the Mediterranean. The first-ever Union for the Mediterranean Ministerial Meeting on Higher Education is envisaged to take place in 2027, if geopolitical



conditions allow, to strengthen cooperation on higher education and launch a dedicated platform facilitating operational exchanges and supporting the implementation of ministerial commitments.

Anke Reiffenstuel, Director for Culture, Education and Science Diplomacy at the Federal Foreign Office, emphasised that Germany – as the largest bilateral donor for the stabilisation and reconstruction of Syria and one of the largest donor of humanitarian assistance for Syria for many year – has a strong interest in a stable, peaceful Syria where citizens enjoy security, dignity, and economic opportunity. Germany provides the largest share of funding, via the Federal Foreign Office, to the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF), which implements, among other things, local healthcare, reconstruction and financial aid projects. Economic and financial stability is seen by the government as a prerequisite for long-term stabilisation and reconstruction, which is why it is a priority for Germany's engagement. The Federal Government also supports activities in the spheres of health, infrastructure rehabilitation, education, water, local economic development, good governance and the rule of law. The private sector is incorporated into these activities to ensure sustainable economic development and the creation of job opportunities. In the field of higher education, the focus of the Federal Foreign Office is to foster institutional partnerships between Germany and Syria, and to facilitate the short-term exchange of experts. After the long period of isolation, it wants to reintegrate the Syrian higher education sector into the international academic community, building on our shared history while looking towards the future. Ms Reiffenstuel stressed that higher education is not only a sector of reconstruction, but a key enabler as HEIs train essential professionals – teachers, doctors, engineers, journalists, and public administrators. They also promote dialogue, trust-building, and international cooperation, while academic exchange can help reconnect Syria with regional and international partners and contribute to long-term stability and reconciliation. To swiftly leverage the potential for academic collaboration, the ministry is currently providing additional funding for DAAD's programmes in Syria. The key elements of Germany's cooperation resonate with the priorities that have been outlined in the speech of the Syrian Minister, with a focus on fostering institutional partnerships between Germany and Syria, and facilitating short-term exchange of experts, aiming at reintegrating the Syrian higher education sector into the international academic community. The ministry also offers funding to the German-Syrian Research Foundation as it plays a vital role through its capacity-building programmes for female academics, among a range of other activities it supports.

Augustus Della-Porta, UK Trustee at Educate a Child International, Education Above All Foundation (EAA) and Partner at Bateswells, explained the Foundation's work in partnership with local, Syria-led NGOs to build skills and expertise on the ground to foster social cohesion and education, among others by integrating the Syrian diaspora and regarding them as partners, not as recipients and strengthening Syrian higher education institutions rather than bypassing them. EAA invests in scholarship programmes – often with co-funding, supports credential recognition, connects HE and TVET interventions, and emphasises the importance of meaningful, long-term cooperation and institutional recovery, which it prioritises over temporary project-based structures, aiming for sustainable, locally anchored results.

Professor Dr Ala'aldeen Al-Halhouli, President of the German Jordanian University (GJU), shared the outcomes of the successful SyriA Fact-Finding Mission in preparation of the DAAD-SyriA Programme. The mission involved visits to eight Syrian public universities in May 2026, implemented by GJU together with the University of Hamburg and the German-Syrian Research Society. Through the project, among others,



400 faculty will be trained as a Train-the-Trainer programme. He stressed that effective reconstruction of the Syrian higher education system depends on accelerated, coordinated partnerships. In the next month, a project-related stakeholder event will be convened, also to explore funding opportunities. In November 2026, the plan is to launch a Jordan-Syria presence-based forum, following a gathering, in which the project will be aligned with wider reconstruction efforts. He emphasised that in fact, higher education is a priority sector to build capacities in fields such as health, transportation, and energy and that without cooperation, progress will be limited. He called for urgent action as an opportunity for influence (shaping outcomes) will be more limited later.

Marcello Scalisi (UNIMED) shared that UNIMED is active in providing support and in reconnecting efforts in close collaboration with universities in fragile contexts, such as in Gaza. This also applies to Syria, with Syrian universities remaining member of UNIMED. Even though they were not so active in the last years, relationships with them were maintained, among others through the Erasmus+ programme. He highlighted that reconnecting Syrian universities with Mediterranean partners requires trust-building and internationalisation, moving away from capacity building towards collaborative partnerships. He shared that UNIMED works together with partners and is not just transferring solutions. For Syria, Erasmus+ and consortia initiatives can foster mobility, scholarships, and joint projects, enabling researchers in Syria to participate in the Mediterranean academic environment. Unfortunately, capacity building projects often stop after the funding period ends. For him, working together should be based on long-term partnership models. He agrees that supporting individuals is important, but so is supporting institutions. He recommends for Syrian universities to create an inter-university coordination platform to avoid duplication of initiatives and double funding. Universities should not only be supported to create capacities, but they should also play an important role in connecting the civil society.