



**Syrian Academic Forum
for Innovation, Education,
Research and Reform**

Syrian Academic Forum for Innovation, Education, Research and Reform (Syrian Academic Summit) Report.

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Table of Contents

1- Introduction	5
2- Theme 1 – Higher Education Governance & Infrastructure	6
2-1 Participant Feedback.....	8
2-2 Session One: How Do We Foster Participatory Governance and Fight Corruption?	8
2-2-1 Academic Freedom: The Cornerstone of University Reform	9
2-2-2 Institutional Autonomy and Participatory Governance	9
2-2-3 Systemic Corruption: Barriers to Reform and Modernization.....	10
2-2-4 Funding and Financial Autonomy	10
2-2-5 Regional Disparities: The Case of Al-Furat University.....	11
2-2-6 Quality Assurance and Institutional Culture.....	11
2-3 Session Two; Digital Transformation, AI, Admissions Transparency, Quality Assurance, and Infrastructure Gaps	11
2-3-1 Digital Transformation: Foundation for Modern Higher Education Governance.....	12
2-3-2 Artificial Intelligence in Student Services and Academic Governance	12
2-3-3 Equitable and Transparent Admissions ("Mofadaleh")	13
2-4 Recommendations	15
2-5 National Reform Roadmap (2025–2032)	18
2-6 Final Conclusion	20
2-7 Call to Action	21
3- Theme 2 – Economic & Social Role of HE	22
3-1 Higher Education and Future Growth	23
Student Completion and Success.....	23
3-2 Relevance to MENA	25
3-3 Towards Syria's Knowledge Economy	26
3-4 Institutional and Collaboration Deficiencies	26
3-5 Structural Impediments in the Technical Education Sector	26
3-6 Requirements for Developing Curricula and Teaching Methods.....	27
3-7 Mechanisms for Achieving Partnership and Integration with the Labor Market	27
3-7-1 Responsibilities of Universities and the Private Sector	27
3-7-2 Governmental Responsibilities and Strategic Vision.....	28
3-7-3 Required Legislation and Enabling Laws.....	29



3-8 The Social Role of Higher Education.....	29
3-8-1 Universities as Agents of Social Cohesion	30
3-8-2 Education for Peace and Transitional Justice	30
3-8-3 Civil Society Engagement and Civic Education.....	30
3-8-4 Promoting Equality and Inclusion.....	31
3-8-5 Rebuilding Intellectual Freedom and Academic Integrity	31
3-9 Recommendations	31
4- Theme 3 – Research & Innovation	32
4-1 Current Status of Higher Education, Research and Innovation	33
4-2 Key Challenges and Opportunities.....	34
4-2-1 Cultural and Administrative Challenges.....	34
4-2-2 Legal and Legislative Challenges.....	34
4-2-3 Material and Financial Challenges.....	34
4-2-4 Research Governance, Productivity, and Implementation.....	35
4-2-5 Infrastructure and Quality Assurance	35
4-2-6 Funding and Resource Allocation.....	35
4-2-7 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Timelines.....	36
4-3 Strategic National Research System and Multidisciplinary Priorities.....	36
4-3-1 Multidisciplinary Research for Reconstruction.....	36
4-3-2 Strategic Priority Areas.....	37
4-3-3 Infrastructure, Integration, and Funding	37
4-4 Integrating Scientific Research into Higher Education	37
4-4-1 Academic Cooperation and International Partnerships	38
4-4-2 Research Values and Ethics.....	38
5- Theme 4: Partnerships.....	39
5-1 Academic Partnerships as Lifelines for Recovery	39
5-2 Panel 1: Connecting National and International Institutes	39
5-3 Panel 2: A Gateway to the World – Mobility and Global Integration	40
5-4 Recommendations	41
6- Theme 5 – Transformative Pedagogies	42
6-1 Panel 1 – Beyond the lecture: Fostering dialogue, critical thinking and engagement in the classroom.....	43
6-2 Panel 2 – What We Teach and How We Measure.....	44
6-3 Recommendations	44



7-	<i>Theme 6 - Empowering Teachers</i>	45
7-1	Keynote – Reinvesting in Faculty for a New Reconstruction Era	45
7-2	Panel 1 – Securing the Profession: Sustainable Careers, Fair Compensation, and a Supportive Workplace	46
7-2-1	Contribution 1 – Rebuilding the Syrian University to Empower Teachers (Dr. Ammar Aljer)	47
7-2-2	Contribution 2 – Securing the Syrian University Professor: Challenges and Pathways to Reform (Dr. Ammar Joukhadar)	47
7-2-3	Contribution 3 – Rehabilitating Academic Cadres in Post-Liberation Syria (Dr. Muafak Jneid)	48
7-2-4	Contribution 4 – Defining the Role of the Academic (Dr. Amal Alachkar)	48
7-2-5	Contribution 5 – Empowering Academic Professional Development for Research and Collaborative Excellence (Dr. Nada Ghneim)	48
7-3	Panel 2 – The Evolving Academic: Capacity Building for New Roles and Responsibilities	49
7-3-1	Contribution 1 – Empowering University Professors in Syria's Higher Education Reform: A Pedagogical and Digital Agenda (Ms. Massa Mufti)	49
7-3-2	Contribution 2 – The Evolving Academic in the Age of Digitization and Artificial Intelligence (Dr. Fadi Alshalabi)	49
7-3-3	Contribution 3 – Empowering Teaching Staff through Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Solutions (Dr. Mariam M. Saïi)	50
7-3-4	Contribution 4 – Digital Competencies for Higher Education Faculty: A Conceptual Framework for Damascus University (Dr. Noha Abdulkarim Hussian)	50
7-3-5	Contribution 5 – Qualification of Lecturers and Teachers (Mr. Abdul Ghani Hajbakri)	51
7-4	Recommendations	51
8-	<i>Recommendation Matrix</i>	52
9-	<i>Conclusions</i>	56
10-	<i>List of Speakers (Alphabetically Ordered)</i>	58
11-	<i>Sponsors and Supporters</i>	<u>58</u>

1- Introduction

The Syrian Academic Forum for Innovation, Education, Research and Reform (SAFIERR) emerged as a landmark initiative to address one of Syria's most pressing and overlooked challenges: the need to reform and rebuild the country's higher education system after decades of centralization, stagnation, and the devastating effects of over 14 years of war. Held from September 15–18, 2025, at the historic Rida Saïd Center at Damascus University, SAFIERR brought together more than 300 participants from across the Syrian academic community inside the country and in the diaspora, including university leaders, policymakers, researchers, students, civil society organizations, and international partners.

The summit was designed not merely as a conference, but as a national platform for participatory dialogue, strategic planning, and coalition-building. Its overarching goal was to co-develop a bold, inclusive, and actionable roadmap for higher education reform that reflects Syria's social realities, developmental needs, and long-term recovery vision. SAFIERR's programme was built around six core themes, each representing a critical pillar in the transformation of Syria's academic future.

The first theme, Higher Education Governance & Infrastructure, examined the urgent need to decentralize decision-making, promote transparency, and ensure academic institutions are governed through inclusive and participatory structures. The discussions also highlighted the physical and digital infrastructure gaps that prevent universities from delivering quality education or adapting to modern needs.

The second theme, The Economic & Social Role of Higher Education, explored how universities can re-establish their relevance to society and the labor market. Participants addressed the disconnect between graduate skills and employment demands, the marginalization of key disciplines, and the potential for universities to contribute meaningfully to social cohesion and national recovery.

Under the third theme, Scientific Research & Innovation, SAFIERR created space to envision a revitalized research ecosystem grounded in national priorities, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ethical integrity. Discussions centered on barriers to research productivity, lack of funding, and the role of research in solving urgent developmental and public health challenges.

The fourth theme, Globalization & International Collaboration, examined how Syrian academia can reconnect with regional and global academic networks, re-engage its vast

diaspora, and build durable international partnerships that support mobility, joint degrees, and shared research platforms.

Transformative Pedagogies formed the fifth theme, emphasizing the necessity of moving away from rote memorization and passive instruction towards student-centered, critical, and problem-based learning. This track challenged participants to consider how teaching methods and assessment systems must evolve to equip students with the creativity, adaptability, and agency required for 21st-century challenges.

Finally, the sixth theme, Empowering Teachers and Faculty Development, focused on the professional conditions and evolving responsibilities of Syria's academic staff. Sessions addressed the need for fair compensation, continuous professional development, and the institutional support systems required to attract, retain, and empower qualified faculty in an increasingly complex academic landscape.

Together, these themes framed a summit that was both diagnostic and visionary—honoring the resilience of Syria's academic community while laying the groundwork for systemic reform, regional cooperation, and inclusive national renewal through higher education.

2- Theme 1 – Higher Education Governance & Infrastructure¹

The Syrian Academic Summit (SAFIERR 2025) marks a critical milestone in the national conversation on rebuilding and transforming the higher education (HE) sector. After more than a decade of the Syrian uprising, the Syrian higher education landscape presents profound structural, governance, infrastructural, and human-capital challenges. Yet it also embodies extraordinary potential, driven by a highly committed academic community, a growing diaspora engaged in global research networks, and a national demand for modern, transparent, and high-quality education.

As Syria moves toward reconstruction and institutional renewal, the reform of its higher education sector is not merely desirable—it is indispensable. Higher education institutions (HEIs) form the backbone of national human capital development, scientific research, healthcare training, digital transformation, and innovation ecosystems. They produce

¹Speakers and moderators: Ghmkin Hassan, Mohammed Osama Raadoun, Marwan Al-Halabi, Mustafa Saim Aldaher, Munir Muhammad Al-Aroud, Ammar Aljer, Nawar Al-Awa, Mustafa Salouci, Amira Al-Noor, Fadi Al-Shalabi, Marwan Al-Raei, Alexander Farley.



teachers, engineers, medical professionals, administrators, and public leaders. Universities are also repositories of cultural heritage, intellectual capital, and socio-economic mobility.

However, the sector continues to face systemic dysfunctions: excessive centralization, weak institutional autonomy, limited digital infrastructure, fragmented governance frameworks, inconsistent admission practices, corruption risks, outdated quality assurance structures, underfunded campuses, and severe disparities across regions. These challenges, intensified by war, displacement, economic deterioration, and infrastructure collapse, have significantly undermined academic performance, international competitiveness, and public trust.

Against this backdrop, SAFIERR 2025 convened a diverse group of university presidents, national policymakers, higher education experts, digital governance specialists, and diaspora academics to identify viable solutions. The theme “Higher Education Governance & Infrastructure” was chosen because governance and infrastructure constitute the foundation upon which all education reform efforts depend.

The theme consisted of two major sessions:

Session One: How Do We Foster Participatory Governance and Fight Corruption?

This session examined the structural governance challenges facing HEIs, including institutional autonomy, academic freedom, corruption, administrative efficiency, and departmental governance. The session explored how participatory governance structures, empowered councils, and digital anticorruption systems could create a more transparent and accountable sector.

Session Two: Digital Transformation, AI, Quality Assurance, and Admission System Reform

This session focused on the modernization of HE infrastructure, emphasizing digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), transparent admissions processes, quality assurance systems, university rankings, and addressing infrastructural gaps that hinder educational equity.

Together, these two sessions form a coherent narrative: systemic governance reform must be tightly integrated with digital transformation, quality assurance mechanisms, and infrastructure development to achieve lasting institutional modernization.



2-1 Participant Feedback

The participant feedback forms an important empirical component of this report, drawing on 56 responses from approximately 300 attendees. Overall, the survey results indicate high levels of satisfaction, with the majority rating the conference sessions as "Very Good," suggesting strong alignment between the event's thematic focus and the expectations of the academic community. Opening lectures received similarly positive evaluations, and speakers were largely rated between "Good" and "Very Good," reflecting both the quality of the content and the suitability of the selected experts. Notably, the most highly rated session was Session One, "How Do We Foster Participatory Governance and Fight Corruption?", a finding that underscores the central importance of governance, corruption, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy for Syrian academics. Respondents clearly view governance reform as both urgent and foundational, expressing a desire for deeper engagement on institutional structures and mechanisms for transparency. Participants also showed a strong preference for dialogic and panel-style formats, as well as hybrid mixed models, over traditional lecture-style sessions—an insight that should guide both future SAFIERR meetings and the broader design of participatory governance practices in Syrian universities. Feedback further confirmed high satisfaction with the diversity of speakers, which included university presidents, the HE minister, specialists in digital transformation and quality assurance, diaspora academics, and international education researchers. Participants emphasized the value of networking, noting the importance of opportunities to meet new colleagues, reconnect with peers, and build professional relationships—an affirmation of SAFIERR's role in strengthening academic communities. Several constructive suggestions were also noted, including calls for more technical workshops on quality assurance, artificial intelligence, and digitalization; expanded time for debate and open discussion; and stronger channels for dialogue between the Ministry and the academic sector. These insights directly inform the recommendations and strategic roadmap presented in this report.

2-2 Session One: How Do We Foster Participatory Governance and Fight Corruption?

With the title, How Do We Foster Participatory Governance and Fight Corruption, Session One was delivered by a high-level panel featuring university presidents, The HE ministers, and a digital governance expert. The combination of senior leadership and technical expertise provided a multi-perspective exploration of governance challenges.

Session One centered on five interconnected pillars that collectively define the foundations of higher education governance: Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, Participatory Governance, Corruption and Transparency, and Bureaucratic Structures and Institutional Efficiency. These themes formed a cohesive analytical framework through which the panel examined the structural challenges facing Syrian universities and explored the reforms



necessary to support a modern, accountable, and internationally engaged higher education system.

2-2-1 Academic Freedom: The Cornerstone of University Reform

Academic freedom emerged as the most fundamental precondition for meaningful reform. It encompasses the freedom to teach, research, publish, debate, and travel—elements that lie at the heart of any vibrant academic institution. Without these liberties, universities lose not only their intellectual vitality but also their capacity for innovation, critical inquiry, and international collaboration. Globally, academic freedom is strongly associated with higher research productivity, stronger international partnerships, improved university rankings, and stronger safeguards against institutional decay. When academics possess autonomy, they are able to attend conferences, publish without intervention, pursue politically neutral research, critique institutional shortcomings, and contribute constructively to national policymaking.

In the Syrian context, the panel highlighted significant barriers that hinder academic freedom. These include restrictions on travel for conferences and training, administrative hurdles that complicate even minor academic activities, difficulties in publishing work, and a persistent fear of retaliation when addressing governance issues. The absence of protective legal frameworks exacerbates these challenges, leaving academics vulnerable and discouraging open discourse. Participant feedback strongly reinforced the centrality of this theme, with many attendees' emphasizing academic freedom as essential to governance reform and expressing appreciation for the candid and substantive discussion it received in the session.

2-2-2 Institutional Autonomy and Participatory Governance

The panel also examined the structural limitations imposed by Syria's highly centralized governance model. Under the current system, decision-making authority flows rigidly from the Ministry of Higher Education to university councils, then to faculty councils, and finally to departmental councils. This hierarchical structure produces slow curriculum updates, inefficiencies in procurement and resource allocation, restricted local problem-solving, and widespread feelings of disempowerment among faculty members. Such over-centralization stifles innovation at the departmental level, where subject-matter expertise resides, and limits universities' ability to respond dynamically to academic or societal needs.

A key argument presented during the session was that participatory governance can meaningfully address these limitations. By redistributing decision-making authority to the appropriate levels—especially departmental and faculty councils—universities can democratize academic leadership, improve accountability, and strengthen the relationship



between faculty and administration. This model also helps rebuild trust within institutions and fosters a culture in which academics feel ownership over their academic environment. The panel emphasized several proposals to advance this goal, including the establishment of democratically elected department councils with binding authority, greater transparency in academic decisions, clearer differentiation between academic and administrative responsibilities, and active involvement of students, early-career researchers, and staff in institutional planning processes.

2-2-3 Systemic Corruption: Barriers to Reform and Modernization

Corruption was identified as a pervasive and deeply embedded barrier that undermines institutional credibility and impedes broader reform. The session highlighted multiple forms of corruption, including administrative corruption manifested in procedural delays and favoritism, financial corruption seen in procurement manipulation, academic corruption affecting promotions and assessments, and regulatory corruption that enables rules to be bent for influential individuals. These issues are reinforced by structural weaknesses such as outdated manual processes, a heavy reliance on central approvals, weak internal accountability mechanisms, and the absence of digital oversight systems capable of generating transparent audit trails.

The panel underscored digitalization as one of the most powerful tools for combating these entrenched problems. By automating admissions, hiring, and procurement processes, universities can significantly reduce opportunities for manipulation. Digital platforms also allow for real-time dashboards, transparent record-keeping, and traceable administrative actions, all of which increase institutional accountability. In this sense, digital transformation is not merely a technological upgrade—it is an anti-corruption strategy integral to governance reform.

2-2-4 Funding and Financial Autonomy

Another major theme centered on financial autonomy and the constraints imposed by current funding mechanisms. Today, universities depend heavily on central authorities for predefined budget lines and require ministry approval even for minor expenses. These restrictions slow down essential operations, impede laboratory and hospital functioning, delay maintenance work, and prevent institutions from reallocating funds in response to urgent or emerging needs. This lack of financial flexibility curtails innovation and limits universities' ability to fulfill their academic and societal roles.

The session's recommendations for addressing these limitations included granting universities the authority to prepare and execute their own budgets, establishing internal auditing bodies to ensure transparency, and diversifying revenue sources through grants,



institutional partnerships, continuing education programs, and the commercialization of innovation and intellectual property. Financial autonomy, supported by internal accountability mechanisms, was framed as essential for enabling universities to operate efficiently and innovate effectively.

2-2-5 Regional Disparities: The Case of Al-Furat University

The panel drew particular attention to the severe regional disparities that characterize Syria's higher education landscape. Al-Furat University was highlighted as an example of the extreme inequities that result from the Syrian uprising, displacement, and chronic underinvestment. Challenges include acute faculty shortages, minimal laboratory and classroom equipment, significant student displacement, and deteriorated or fragmented infrastructure. These disparities threaten national cohesion and limit educational access for large segments of the population. The session emphasized that addressing regional inequities is not merely a technical matter—it is a national priority that directly affects social stability and long-term development.

2-2-6 Quality Assurance and Institutional Culture

Finally, the discussion turned to quality assurance and institutional culture, both of which are essential for sustaining long-term academic excellence. Many universities lack robust QA offices and rely on outdated assessment models that fail to measure teaching effectiveness or research impact. Heavy teaching loads further limit faculty engagement in research, undermining the quality and competitiveness of academic programs. Participants noted widespread concerns about weak institutional belonging and the need to cultivate a more cohesive academic identity. The session reinforced that governance reform cannot be limited to administrative restructuring. Rather, it must also seek to reshape the cultural and ethical foundations of higher education, promoting a performance-oriented environment grounded in integrity, collaboration, and shared purpose.

2-3 Session Two; Digital Transformation, AI, Admissions Transparency, Quality Assurance, and Infrastructure Gaps

Session Two explored how digital transformation, admissions reform, quality assurance, and AI implementation can help modernize the Syrian higher education system. The insights from participant feedback underscore the high demand for these topics, confirming that academics see digitalization and QA as essential pillars of reform.



2-3-1 Digital Transformation: Foundation for Modern Higher Education Governance

Digital transformation emerged during the session as a foundational requirement for rebuilding and modernizing the governance of Syrian higher education. Around the world, universities are transitioning to digital governance systems, cloud-based student services, AI-supported academic planning, and virtual learning environments. These tools have become essential for promoting efficiency, transparency, equity, and data-driven decision-making. They also play a critical role in reducing opportunities for corruption, improving student satisfaction, and enhancing research performance. In contemporary higher education, digital transformation is no longer an optional innovation; it is a minimum operational requirement for institutions seeking to function effectively and remain competitive.

The session highlighted the stark gap between Syria and regional peers. Panelists noted that the national digital service readiness index stands at only 16 percent, compared with an Arab regional average of 45 percent. Internet costs consume 4 to 7 percent of monthly income—well above regional norms—while mobile penetration remains at 70 percent compared with the regional benchmark of 101 percent. These structural weaknesses are compounded by conditions inside universities, many of which lack adequate servers, stable electricity, fiber connectivity, modern data centers, digital textbooks, and basic online academic services. The audience expressed strong enthusiasm for more digital content and greater focus on AI, admissions technology, and digitalized quality assurance processes. This demand reflects not only academic interest but also the system's urgent infrastructural needs. Participants repeatedly emphasized that digital transformation is the operational engine that will enable governance reform to succeed.

2-3-2 Artificial Intelligence in Student Services and Academic Governance

The session also explored the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in reshaping student services, academic management, and governance structures. AI was discussed as a strategic tool capable of automating time-consuming administrative tasks, improving fairness in admissions decisions, and supporting predictive analytics for student performance and institutional planning. AI applications can provide personalized academic advising, identify at-risk students before they disengage from their studies, align curricula with labor-market demands, and significantly reduce the administrative workload on faculty.

Several AI-driven models were suggested. These included student guidance platforms that help match academic interests and capabilities with labor-market opportunities; algorithmic admissions systems that promote fairness by reducing human bias; AI-based chatbots that provide 24-hour student support; and analytical tools that enhance quality



assurance by evaluating program performance, student outcomes, and teaching feedback. AI was also positioned as a critical facilitator of research management, capable of detecting plagiarism in local journals, tracking research outputs, and supporting the preparation of grant proposals. Despite these benefits, panelists identified key challenges such as insufficient digital infrastructure, limited human capacity for AI deployment, ethical and regulatory gaps, and the absence of robust data-protection frameworks. These challenges explain why participants requested additional technical workshops, more AI-focused sessions, and broader opportunities for practical training.

2-3-3 Equitable and Transparent Admissions (“Mofadaleh”)

Admissions reform—commonly referred to as “mofadaleh”—was presented as a critical component of governance modernization and digital transformation. The session highlighted deep systemic problems in the current process, including limited transparency, over-centralized manual procedures, inconsistent admissions criteria across institutions, regional disparities in placement, insufficient real-time data, and a weak connection between admissions patterns and labor-market needs. These structural issues not only undermine fairness but also weaken the efficiency and responsiveness of the entire higher education system.

Participants discussed the importance of shifting to a fully digital national admissions portal capable of processing student preferences online, generating real-time data, and improving placement fairness through AI-based recommendation systems. Such a platform would allow students to rank their preferred universities, create transparency around admissions outcomes, and establish a formal mechanism for appeals. Harmonizing admissions policies among universities was viewed as essential for ensuring consistency and equity. Additional discussion focused on the need to incentivize universities in underserved regions so that admissions processes contribute to reducing, rather than reinforcing, regional inequality.

2-3-4 Quality Assurance and Accreditation Reform

Quality assurance (QA) was characterized as the backbone of any modern higher education system. Strong QA mechanisms ensure the quality of teaching, support research enhancement, facilitate international recognition of academic programs, and promote alignment between curricula and labor-market needs. QA frameworks also protect students' educational rights and strengthen institutional accountability. Panel discussions emphasized that effective QA processes are essential to rebuilding trust in academic institutions and restoring the integrity of the system.

However, Syrian universities face substantial challenges in this area. Many QA units are understaffed and lack the authority, resources, and tools required to oversee institutional



performance meaningfully. Existing QA models are outdated, and universities rarely utilize digital dashboards or centralized systems for collecting and analyzing performance data. Institutional planning remains fragmented, with little coordination between faculties or administrative departments. Participants repeatedly highlighted the need for stronger QA systems.

2-3-5 University Rankings as Instruments of Visibility and Benchmarking

Panelists also discussed the strategic role of university rankings in global higher education. Rankings serve not merely as external evaluations but also as instruments of institutional visibility and benchmarking. They influence global recognition of academic programs, allow degrees to be more easily compared internationally, support the mobility of students and scholars, and enhance opportunities for international collaboration. Rankings also help institutions measure the quality and impact of their research, offering valuable comparative data for internal planning.

Despite their importance, several structural challenges limit the ability of Syrian universities to improve their ranking performance. These include high student-to-faculty ratios, heavy teaching loads that restrict research productivity, insufficient funding for scientific research, weak digital infrastructure, and limited opportunities for international mobility. Panel discussions stressed the importance of improving institutional data reporting, enhancing English-language research output, and increasing collaboration with the Syrian academic diaspora to strengthen research visibility. Participants agreed that ranking improvement should be seen as part of a broader strategy for raising the quality of institutions and aligning Syrian universities with global higher education systems.

2-3-6 Infrastructure Gaps and Regional Disparities

A recurring theme in the session was the substantial infrastructure gap across different regions of Syria, particularly in the eastern and center parts of the country. Universities in these areas face damaged buildings, insufficient laboratories, poor internet connectivity, and severe shortages of instructional and research equipment. These physical shortcomings limit the ability of institutions to deliver quality education, restrict access to digital tools, and exacerbate existing regional inequalities. Panelists argued that rebuilding academic infrastructure in underserved regions should be treated as a national priority and framed within a broader strategy of social and institutional equity.

Strategies discussed during the session included targeted funding allocations for the most affected universities, expanded deployment of mobile digital learning units, and emergency interventions to rehabilitate essential facilities. Participants also emphasized the need to ensure that all institutions—regardless of geographic location—have equal access to national



digital platforms and quality academic resources. Addressing regional disparities is essential for restoring national cohesion and ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities for academic success.

2-3-7 Institutional Culture and Belonging

Finally, the panel underscored the importance of strengthening institutional culture, which encompasses recognition systems, incentives for research and teaching, transparent evaluation criteria, and opportunities for professional development. A healthy academic culture also requires adequate protections against corruption and a general sense of belonging among faculty, staff, and students. Participants noted that breaks and networking sessions during the event were particularly valuable, as they facilitated meaningful connections, collaboration, and the formation of professional communities.

The discussion made clear that institutional culture is not an intangible add-on but a critical component of governance reform. Universities must cultivate environments where individuals feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute to academic life. Strengthening institutional belonging is essential for improving performance, retaining talented faculty and students, and fostering a sense of shared purpose aligned with national development goals.

2-4 Recommendations

These recommendations reflect consensus from the panel discussions, global best practices, and the empirical insights from the participant survey. They form a unified agenda for modernizing Syrian higher education.

A. Governance, Autonomy, and Academic Freedom

1. Reform the University Regulatory Act

- Redefine roles and powers at all levels (Ministry, university councils, faculty councils, department councils).
- Grant universities clear legal autonomy in academic, administrative, and financial domains.

2. Empower Department Councils

- Department councils should be elected democratically.
- Provide authority over curriculum development, course distribution, academic evaluations, and program proposals.

3. Protect Academic Freedom

- Enact a national “Academic Freedom Charter.”



- Guarantee rights to research, publish, travel, and collaborate internationally without excessive approvals.
- Establish mechanisms for reporting violations.

4. Strengthen Participatory Governance

- Include students, junior researchers, and administrative staff in decision-making structures.
- Publish council decisions for community transparency.
- Integrate training on governance and leadership for council members.

B. Anti-Corruption and Transparency

1. Digitalize Administrative and Academic Processes

- Implement digital systems for:
 - Admissions, hiring, procurement, exams, promotions, and financial approvals

2. Establish Secure Whistleblower Channels

- Allow confidential reporting of misconduct.
- Protect whistleblowers from retaliation.

3. Create Independent Anti-Corruption Committees

- At both national and university levels.
- Include legal experts, academics, and independent auditors.

4. Mandatory Integrity Training

Required for: Deans, Council members, administrative staff, and Finance officers. Participants repeatedly emphasized that transparency, fairness, and governance were major concerns needing attention.

C. Digital Transformation & Infrastructure Development

1. National Digital Transformation Master Plan

- A 5–10-year strategic plan aligning with ESCWA standards.

2. Build Digital Infrastructure in All Universities

That includes, High-speed internet, Cloud storage, Secure servers, Modern data centers, and Campus-wide Wi-Fi

3. AI Integration Across HE Functions

- AI advising tools, AI-supported QA dashboards, AI research assistance, and AI monitoring of admissions fairness.

4. Digital Learning Ecosystem

- Convert textbooks to digital formats
- Develop e-learning platforms
- Provide training for faculty and students

D. Admissions (“Mofadaleh”) Reform

1. Unified Digital Admissions Platform

- National portal with online ranking of university preferences.
- Introduce AI-based placement algorithms.
- Link to labor market data and regional needs.



2. Address Regional Inequality

- Introduce regional quotas or incentives.
- Improve access for remote regions.

E. Quality Assurance and Accreditation Reform

1. Strengthen QA Units

- Provide staffing, training, and legal authority.
- Integrate digital tools for monitoring performance.

2. Annual Program Reviews

- Mandatory external and internal evaluations.

3. National QA Network

- Coordination across universities.
- Standardize program review processes.

4. International Benchmarking

- Use regional and global QA standards.
- Work toward international accreditation for priority programs.

F. National University Ranking Strategy

1. Ranking Coordination Council

- Collect reliable institutional data.
- Guide universities on ranking improvement.

2. Increase Research Visibility

- Support publication in indexed journals.
- Strengthen English academic writing.
- Encourage diaspora collaboration.

3. Improve Data Reporting Capacity

- Adopt digital dashboards for ranking metrics.

G. Equity & Support for Underserved Regions

(Al-Furat University as a key example)

1. Infrastructure Investment

- Labs, classrooms, digital networks, and faculty housing.

2. Staffing Support

- Incentives for faculty to work in marginalized regions.

3. Special Funding Windows

- Dedicated grants for universities in remote areas.

4. Digital Connectivity

- Local servers and satellite internet access.

H. Institutional Culture and Belonging

1. Recognition Systems

- Awards for research excellence, community service, and teaching quality.

2. Transparency in Evaluations

- Clear criteria for promotion and appraisal.

3. Strengthen Collegiality and Community Engagement



- Academic social events
- Research symposia
- Student-faculty forums

2-5 National Reform Roadmap (2025-2032)

A combined roadmap integrating governance, infrastructure and digital transformation.

A. Short-Term (0-12 Months)

Governance & Anti-Corruption

- Draft amendments to the University Regulatory Act.
- Begin forming elected department councils.
- Launch national anti-corruption training modules.

Digital Transformation

- Establish the National Digital Transformation Committee.
- Conduct an audit of technology readiness in all universities.
- Begin building a digital admissions pilot platform.

Quality Assurance

- Launch QA training workshops.
- Establish QA guidelines.

B. Medium-Term (1-3 Years)

Governance

- Implement restructured governance model.
- Shift academic decisions to departments.

Digital Transformation

- Deploy cloud servers and secure data centers.
- Digitalize hiring, procurement, and exam systems.
- Launch a national AI-based student advising system.

Admissions

- Implement a nationwide digital system with annual reporting.

Quality Assurance

- Roll out performance-based budgeting.
- Introduce digital QA dashboards.

Infrastructure

- Upgrade facilities in underrepresented regions.

C. Long-Term (3-7 Years)

Governance

- Full autonomy in academic and financial affairs.
- Mature participatory governance at all universities.

Digital Transformation



- Fully digital ecosystem for all HE operations.
- Successful integration of AI governance tools.

Quality Assurance

- International accreditation for top programs.

Infrastructure

- Equitable infrastructure across regions.

Institutional Culture

- Strong belonging, accountability, and research culture.

6. Monitoring & Evaluation (KPIs)

A robust monitoring framework ensures accountability and alignment with national goals.

A. Governance KPIs

- % of decisions made at department vs central level
- Number of democratic council elections
- Academic freedom score (annual rating)

B. Anti-Corruption KPIs

- % of digitalized processes
- Number of reported integrity violations
- Resolution rate of complaints

C. Admissions KPIs

- Processing time per application
- Equity index across regions
- Student satisfaction rate

D. Digital Transformation KPIs

- % of courses available digitally
- Number of digital services adopted
- AI adoption score

E. Quality Assurance KPIs

- Number of accredited programs
- Student learning outcome improvement
- Annual QA compliance score

F. Infrastructure KPIs

- Internet bandwidth per student
- Number of functioning labs
- Regional infrastructure parity index

G. Institutional Culture KPIs

- Staff retention rate
- Institutional belonging index
- Participation in professional development



2-6 Final Conclusion

Toward a Modern, Transparent, Digitally Enabled Higher Education System in Syria. The SAFIERR 2025 theme on “Higher Education Governance and Infrastructure” convened leaders, researchers, policymakers, and experts from Syria and abroad to envision a transformed higher education system—one capable of supporting national reconstruction, social stability, economic recovery, and long-term development. The two major sessions—one focusing on governance and anticorruption, the other on digital transformation, AI, admissions, quality assurance, and infrastructure—revealed a coherent, interdependent reform landscape.

Session One highlighted how deeply entrenched governance structures—centralized decision-making, limited academic freedom, bureaucratic inertia, and corruption—have impeded Syrian higher education for decades. Without a systemic reorganization of legal frameworks, institutional autonomy, participatory governance, and anticorruption mechanisms, investments in infrastructure, digitalization, or quality assurance risk being ineffective.

Session Two emphasized that without modern digital infrastructure—broadband networks, cloud systems, AI-enabled platforms, and digital student services—the Syrian HE system cannot compete regionally or globally. Digital transformation enhances transparency, combats corruption, supports fair admissions, and enables real-time evaluation and performance monitoring.

A fair and transparent admissions system (“mofadaleh”) is a cornerstone of educational justice. The shift from manual, opaque processes to AI-supported digital admissions will ensure fairness, reduce human bias, and promote regional equity. This is especially important given Syria’s demographic displacement patterns, labor market shifts, and regional inequalities. Strong QA systems and ranking strategies are essential for:

- Securing international recognition of Syrian degrees
- Enabling student mobility
- Improving research visibility
- Building institutional credibility

The massive disparities between universities—especially those in remote or conflict-affected regions such as Al-Furat University—are among the greatest threats to national cohesion and educational justice. Reform must include targeted infrastructural investment to rebuild campuses, labs, libraries, digital networks, and student services in underserved areas. For governance reform and digital transformation to succeed, universities must cultivate a culture of:



Accountability, academic integrity, collegiality, research excellence, staff development and community belonging. The combined insights from both sessions and the participant feedback paint a clear and compelling vision:

A modern Syrian higher education system is democratic in its governance, transparent in its operations, data-driven in its decision-making, equitable in its admissions, globally connected in its research, digitally enabled in its infrastructure, and committed to national development. The reform of higher education is not a standalone endeavor—it is a national project that intersects with economic development, digital transformation, public sector reform, and societal resilience.

2-7 Call to Action

The SAFIERR 2025 Summit establishes a blueprint, but the responsibility for implementation lies with:

Government actors to update regulatory frameworks, enable autonomy, fund infrastructure, and reduce centralization. **University leaders** to champion participatory governance, empower departments, and cultivate institutional culture.

Quality assurance bodies to enforce standards and guide program improvement. **Digital transformation teams** to build the platforms, networks, and AI systems that make modern HE possible. **Faculty and researchers** to uphold academic freedom, pursue international collaboration, and innovate in teaching and research.

Diaspora academics to contribute expertise, mentorship, and international visibility to Syrian institutions. **Students** to actively participate in governance, demand accountability, and engage in their educational journeys. This collective responsibility forms the foundation for a resilient, equitable, and globally connected higher education system.

Finally, higher education is at the heart of Syria's reconstruction. Governance reform provides the structure. Digital transformation provides the tools. Quality assurance provides the compass, and the institutional culture provides the soul.

The SAFIERR 2025 Higher Education Governance & Infrastructure theme represents a historic opportunity to rebuild the Syrian HE system in a way that reflects global best practices, national aspirations, and the deep commitment of Syrian academics everywhere.

This report—drawing on expert insights, cross-session synthesis, theoretical framing, and participant feedback—constitutes a comprehensive roadmap for change. Implemented wisely, these reforms can restore public trust, elevate student outcomes, strengthen national capacity, and prepare Syria for a future defined not by conflict, but by innovation, excellence, and collective achievement.



3- Theme 2 - Economic & Social Role of HE²

Higher education in Syria stands at a critical juncture, positioned to play a central role in national recovery, economic revitalization, and long-term social stability. As the country works to rebuild its institutions and renew its human capital, universities and technical institutes must evolve into strategic drivers of growth, innovation, and civic development. The expansion of higher education across the Middle East and North Africa underscores the growing importance of knowledge-based economies in global competitiveness; however, the region continues to face persistent challenges in quality, relevance, and alignment with labor market needs. Syria's higher education system reflects these regional patterns while also confronting additional constraints resulting from years of war, resource scarcity, and fragmented governance.

Global evidence shows that higher education systems capable of aligning learning, innovation, and labor market demands achieve stronger economic performance and more inclusive social outcomes. In contrast, systems that expand access without improving program quality or institutional capacity tend to experience rising graduate unemployment and diminished economic impact. This pattern is visible across the Arab region, where rapid enrollment growth has not been matched by comparable improvements in teaching quality, research output, or employability. Structural deficiencies combined with demographic pressures, limited resources, and weak collaboration between universities and productive sectors have intensified the region's vulnerability to economic stagnation and social inequality.

Within this broader context, Syria's higher education and technical education sectors require a coherent and long-term reform agenda aimed at enhancing relevance, equity, and institutional performance. The system faces multiple interconnected challenges: persistent misalignment between graduates' skills and labor market needs; limited coordination between universities, technical institutes, and private industry; outdated curricula and pedagogical practices; insufficient research and innovation capacity; and a regulatory framework that restricts flexibility, partnership, and accountability. Technical institutes, in particular, struggle with low staffing levels, outdated equipment, and governance structures that hinder their ability to deliver quality, market-responsive training.

Addressing these challenges demands comprehensive reform measures that integrate higher education into Syria's economic reconstruction strategy. Program modernization is essential: universities and technical institutes must revise curricula to reflect emerging fields, technological developments, and the demands of critical sectors such as construction, energy, agriculture, and health. Strengthening the links between education and employment is equally important, requiring structured university-industry partnerships, dual education

² Speakers and moderators: Abdulkarim Najjar, Alexander Farley, Abdullah Alfares, Rana Maya, Munir Abas, Mustafa Moualdi, Oudai Tozan, Mohammed Osama Raadoun, Yaman Sabek, Ehab Badwi, Saiid Hijazi,



models, and Career Linkage Offices capable of coordinating internships, practical training, and collaborative research.

Equally necessary is the revitalization of research and innovation ecosystems. Universities should develop technology transfer offices, incubators, and applied research centers that foster entrepreneurship and contribute to a broader national innovation system. Legislative reforms are needed to support university–industry collaboration, regulate shared intellectual property, modernize research governance, and improve compensation structures for academic and technical staff. These reforms will enable institutions to attract qualified professionals, expand international partnerships, and enhance overall program quality.

Beyond their economic role, universities serve an essential social function in rebuilding trust, strengthening civic engagement, and promoting social cohesion. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to support dialogue, inclusion, gender equity, and academic freedom, foundational principles for reconciliation and long-term peacebuilding. Reintegration of displaced students, advancement of civic and political literacy, and cultivation of ethical leadership are central to this mission. By equipping youth with skills, values, and opportunities for civic participation, universities contribute directly to the reconstruction of Syrian society.

Taken together, these reforms establish the foundation for a stronger, more resilient higher education and technical education system capable of supporting Syria's transition to a knowledge-driven economy. By aligning educational outcomes with national priorities, enhancing institutional performance, and reinforcing both economic and social contributions, higher education can play a transformative role in Syria's recovery and future growth.

3-1 Higher Education and Future Growth

Student Completion and Success

The goals of higher education today are changing. In the past, the principle behind liberal arts education, in the American tradition, was to provide balanced, rounded education to young adults, particularly from privileged families. During the middle decades of the 20th century, the focus became to increase access to institutions of higher education (IHEs) and address racial and class disparities.

After several decades of expanding access and economic transformation toward an innovation and service-based economy, several new realities have presented themselves:



1. The demand for higher education in the future labor market continues to increase,³ and 2. Though access has increased, retention and completion rates remain low⁴—access alone was insufficient in creating skilled workers for the labor market, especially since poor or first-generation students are far more likely to drop out. Therefore, the key to economic success for any nation today is to balance access, retention, and completion of degrees.

In the Arab World in particular, the problem is compounded by gaps in quality and market relevance. The region followed a similar path of expanding access starting in the early 1990s, but institutions did not adapt to new economic demands and quality control fell behind the rush to establish new IHEs for a growing youth population.⁵ In addition, economic growth and new business formation remained low, failing to create sufficient opportunities for new graduates. Therefore, countries in the region tend to exhibit a high degree of unemployment specifically among graduates of IHEs.

To illustrate, according to the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, by 2031 42% of jobs in the US will require at least a bachelor's degree, while only 28% will require high school or less. This is a stark contrast to 1983 when 68% of jobs required a high school diploma or less and only 19% of jobs required a bachelor's degree or above. Today most jobs require some amount of post-secondary education, and two-year degrees represent a middle road between academic and vocational pathways.⁶ Ultimately, even jobs that once did not require postsecondary education are increasingly requiring additional training after high school.

The increasing demand for higher education exposes the vulnerability of weak completion rates. In the US, only 61% of students achieve a credential within six years (the course for most bachelor's degrees in the US is four years). The disparities are far greater between socio-economic backgrounds; 75.8% of students from wealthy neighborhoods achieve a credential after six years while only 48.2% from poor neighborhoods accomplish the same.⁷ Poorer and first-generation students are faced with many more challenges with completing

³ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. 2023. "After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031." CEW Georgetown, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2025. [\[cew.georgetown.edu\]](https://cew.georgetown.edu)

⁴ "Yearly Progress and Completion." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 4 Dec. 2024, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.

⁵ Wilson Center. (2023). Ready for work: An analysis of workforce asymmetries in the Middle East and North Africa.

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/mep_workforce_report.pdf

⁶ Georgetown University CEW. 2023

⁷ "Yearly Progress and Completion." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 4 Dec. 2024, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.



their post-secondary course. They're more likely to balance job responsibilities, caretaking, or experience precarious housing. IHEs must be better equipped to help these students finish the post-secondary course.

In addition, outcomes for graduates in the US are generating skepticism in higher education, particularly from traditional providers. Student debt continues to climb while job markets become more challenging for recent grads. But while demand for degrees increases, particularly among sectors once thought to be low-skilled, vocational training has taken on new relevance, albeit at a higher-skilled and more technical level. IHEs should embrace this change by offering more interoperability between vocational and academic pathways to give students more choice, labor market access, and opportunities for career advancement.⁸

3-2 Relevance to MENA

Returning to the example of the Middle East the challenges of transition in the higher education sector are compounded by existing challenges. According to research conducted at the Wilson Center, in addition to steady increases in enrollment and rapid expansion of IHEs especially through private institutions, lack of quality control, accreditation, and highly didactic pedagogy created a skills mismatch with the labor market. Unemployment among graduates remains high, 21.7% in Tunisia and 26.6% in Jordan, for example.⁹

Countries in the region face a dual problem of increasing quality and relevance in higher education and generating sufficient economic growth. In addition to strengthening accreditation agencies and rankings within countries, they should develop stronger national qualifications frameworks and embrace more digital transformation of IHEs and student experience. Qualifications frameworks introduce objective criteria for both IHEs and employers to measure skills and achievement and increase confidence in hiring.

Digital transformation must take place on many levels, but many tools can be implemented by IHEs to improve student tracking and progress. Learning management systems allow smoother enrollment and evaluation practices, keeping students aware of their progress on their degree course. IHEs can further provide access to consumer devices to students and create common recognition of credit hours across institutions. This together with improved advising and teaching quality standards are within Syria's means in the near term.

⁸ Education Strategy Group. (2021). Multiple paths to success. https://edstrategy.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ESG_5B_MultiplePathstoSuccess.pdf

⁹ World Bank Development Indicators

3-3 Towards Syria's Knowledge Economy

Syrian universities and technical educational institutions are witnessing a continuous increase in the number of graduates. However, this growth is met with a significant disparity between educational outcomes and the actual, fundamental requirements of the labor market and recontraction in Syria. The primary goal of higher education must be to build a robust bridge between theory and practice, thereby effectively enhancing the practical and applied capabilities of graduates.

Bridging this skills gap and activating effective institutional partnerships is paramount. This is crucial because it not only promotes innovation but also directly positions the university as a strategic partner in both economic and social development, making it a fundamental leverage point for the knowledge economy and sustainable development. According to the SAFIERR summaries, "Bridging the gap is not an academic luxury; it is a fundamental prerequisite for Syria's advancement."

3-4 Institutional and Collaboration Deficiencies

The limitations in the higher education sector are further manifested through specific institutional weaknesses concerning practical support and external collaboration. These deficiencies restrict the vital exchange of knowledge and expertise necessary for market relevance:

- Communication and partnerships between universities and both the public and private sectors are limited, hindering the establishment of regular cooperation channels necessary for curriculum alignment and knowledge transfer.
- There is a significant scarcity, or outright absence, of practical training opportunities, which critically contributes to weak applied support for students. This deficiency is severely exacerbated by the lack, or rarity, of operational business incubators and innovation centers within universities. This structural gap hinders students' early integration into the labor market and limits their ability to transform theoretical knowledge into marketable, practical solutions.
- Practical research often remains theoretical and fails to translate into actionable, applied solutions that serve the specific needs of society and its productive sectors.

3-5 Structural Impediments in the Technical Education Sector

The technical education sector faces unique structural, administrative, and financial challenges that directly compromise the quality of its outcomes. This sector, which comprises 250 institutes and 5 applied colleges, is confronted by the following key issues:

- The majority of technical institutes are affiliated with non-educational bodies, negatively impacting their overall performance and ability to align curricula with labor market demands.



- The institutes suffer from a critical shortage of teaching, technical, and administrative staff.
- Securing qualified personnel is made difficult by the significantly low rates for hourly wages and restrictive compensation ceilings.
- The operational environment is undermined by the dilapidated state of equipment and facilities, coupled with a major deficit in the essential resources required for student practical training.

3-6 Requirements for Developing Curricula and Teaching Methods

To effectively further address the current challenges, it is essential to periodically update the scientific content and integrate practical and technical skills in line with technological advancements. Curricular plans must also be developed to include courses that foster innovation and scientific research. This necessitates a shift away from the traditional rote learning approach towards adopting interactive education centered on dialogue and problem-solving, alongside the strategic use of educational technology. It is also crucial to cultivate essential 21st-century competencies, such as critical and creative thinking, teamwork, and entrepreneurship. To similarly achieve these goals in the technical education sector, the following actions are mandatory:

- Curricula must be revised to align with scientific developments and labor market demands.
- Curricular standardization across all institutes with the same specialization must be unified.
- Admission to saturated or stagnant specializations must be frozen or reduced, and some specializations should be merged.

Ultimately, all curricula must undergo periodic review in collaboration with labor market experts to ensure their continuous relevance to evolving needs.

3-7 Mechanisms for Achieving Partnership and Integration with the Labor Market

Achieving the desired integration requires a concerted effort from the State, Universities, the Private Sector, and Civil Society. "Today's universities are the factories of tomorrow's leaders, and their connection to reality is the guarantee for building a strong and productive nation." These responsibilities are summarized as follows:

3-7-1 Responsibilities of Universities and the Private Sector

Entity	Core Responsibilities and Mechanisms
Universities & technical education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Establish Career Linkage Offices (CLOs) and career guidance centers within universities.- Launch Dual Education programs and mandatory practical training (internships).



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Engage labor market representatives in curriculum development to ensure alignment with actual economic needs.- Promote applied research directed towards solving problems facing industrial and service sectors.- Organize periodic employment forums and job fairs to enhance direct communication between students and employers.- Conclude cooperation agreements with companies to provide practical training and joint projects.
Private sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Provide practical training opportunities and support for students.- Activate Research and Development (R&D) offices within companies to coordinate with academic institutions.- Provide support for technical institutes and vocational training centers.
Civil Society (NGOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Act as a flexible and effective bridge, offering non-traditional initiatives to support employment, <i>example</i>: The Human Resources Management Foundation contributed to finding jobs for over 30,000 job seekers.

3-7-2 Governmental Responsibilities and Strategic Vision

Governmental bodies bear the ultimate responsibility for creating the enabling environment and strategic direction:

- Undertake restructuring and development of technical education to ensure its effectiveness, efficiency, and linkage to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.
- Form a Ministerial Committee for Labor Market Linkage (to include representatives from ministries and liaison entities) to develop an integrated plan and monitor performance.
- Formulate clear labor market policies in cooperation with Chambers of Industry and Commerce, specifying high-demand professions for the next 15 years to accelerate the reconstruction process.
- Adopt the concept of the "Knowledge Economy" within the governmental strategy and allocate the necessary funding.

3-7-3 Required Legislation and Enabling Laws

Partnership cannot be fully achieved without a clear legal framework that regulates essential educational and professional processes. This framework should include the following pieces of legislation:

Legislation / Regulation	Purpose and Impact
Co-op Education Law	To mandate a specific portion of the academic program for practical training (Co-op Education).
University-Industry Partnership Law	To regulate the establishment of joint research centers and the sharing of intellectual property revenues.
University Entrepreneurship Law	To permit the establishment of incubators and accelerators within universities and set clear operating policies.
Project Financing Laws	To legislate the funding of applied research through the state budget and grant tax exemptions to supporting companies.
Legislation for Faculty & Administrative Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a specialized academic and functional track for teaching staff in technical institutes. - Regulate the practice of the profession by faculty members outside working hours. - Amend the compensation provided to teaching, technical, and administrative staff. - Emphasize the setting of quality assurance standards and follow-up on output evaluation.

3-8 The Social Role of Higher Education

Higher education in Syria has a profound social mission that extends beyond knowledge production to rebuilding trust, social cohesion, and civic responsibility in a society fragmented by decades of dictatorship and years of war. The historical marginalization of certain regions and communities under the defunct regime in Syria led to deep inequalities in access to education and participation in public life. These disparities, combined with the systematic suppression of critical thought, contributed to political alienation and weakened social awareness across generations.

Today, universities are called upon to play a transformative role in overcoming these legacies. By promoting inclusivity, dialogue, and civic engagement, higher education



institutions can become catalysts for reconciliation, transitional justice, and the reactivation of Syrian civil society.

3-8-1 Universities as Agents of Social Cohesion

Universities mirror the structure and diversity of Syrian society. As microcosms of the nation, they provide the ideal environment for fostering mutual understanding and rebuilding trust among students from different backgrounds and communities. Through dialogue programs, cultural initiatives, and joint research projects, universities can reduce sectarian tension and promote a culture of tolerance and coexistence.

Following liberation, universities made significant efforts to reintegrate students who had been displaced or forced to leave during the war. For instance, more than 25,000 students reportedly returned to their studies at University of Aleppo, supported by flexible administrative measures that facilitated re-enrolment and encouraged social reintegration. These experiences demonstrate the vital role of universities in promoting reconciliation and restoring normal academic life.

3-8-2 Education for Peace and Transitional Justice

Higher education can serve as a key platform for advancing transitional justice and long-term peacebuilding. By supporting open discussions on collective memory, accountability, and reconciliation, universities help prepare society for a future based on truth and justice rather than exclusion and revenge.

- Academic departments, student unions, and civil-society organizations should jointly organize forums for dialogue on Syria's recent history, identity, and national belonging.
- Research centers and national libraries should revive Syrian cultural heritage and correct distorted narratives through documentation and academic debate.
- Comparative studies of international post-conflict experiences can inform national reconciliation processes and guide policy design in the coming decades.

3-8-3 Civil Society Engagement and Civic Education

The development of a vibrant civil society depends on the active participation of educated youth. Universities should act as incubators for civil society organizations, providing them with space, expertise, and networks to implement community projects. Partnerships between universities and NGOs can promote volunteerism, youth leadership, and civic education focused on citizenship, accountability, and democratic participation.

Educational programs should also emphasize political awareness and civic literacy, helping students understand governance, social responsibility, and the values of democracy and active citizenship. Professors and lecturers play a crucial role in guiding students to engage



critically and constructively in political life, cultivating a generation of leaders committed to justice and public service.

3-8-4 Promoting Equality and Inclusion

Persistent inequalities in access to education, particularly between urban and rural areas, and between men and women, remain a major obstacle to social progress. Higher education reform must ensure equal opportunities for all, focusing on women's empowerment, leadership training, and participation in decision-making positions. Universities should strengthen policies promoting inclusion, disability access, and gender equity at every level of academic life.

3-8-5 Rebuilding Intellectual Freedom and Academic Integrity

Decades of authoritarian control have eroded independent thinking and academic freedom. Universities must restore these values by safeguarding freedom of thought and inquiry. Academic spaces should allow for critical debate and open exchange of ideas, recognizing that intellectual pluralism is essential for rebuilding democratic culture. Education in this sense becomes not only a means of professional advancement but also an instrument of peace, personal transformation, and collective renewal.

Strengthening the social role of higher education will contribute directly to Syria's post-conflict recovery by:

- Rebuilding trust and fostering dialogue among diverse social groups.
- Promoting civic engagement, social responsibility, and reconciliation.
- Restoring intellectual independence and ethical leadership within universities.
- Empowering youth and women as active agents in reconstruction and peacebuilding.
- Reinforcing the role of universities as pillars of both academic excellence and social transformation.

3-9 Recommendations

- Rebuild trust and social cohesion by integrating students from diverse regions and backgrounds through dialogue-based learning, and joint community-oriented research activities.
- Use universities as platforms for open, evidence-based discussion on Syria's recent history, collective memory, accountability, and reconciliation, supported by interdisciplinary teaching and comparative post-conflict studies.



- Strengthen civic engagement by incubating student-led initiatives, partnering with civil society organizations, and embedding civic education, governance literacy, and service-learning within academic programs.
- Promote equality and inclusion through targeted access policies for marginalized regions, women, and persons with disabilities, alongside leadership training and expanded digital and hybrid education.
- Restore academic freedom and intellectual integrity by protecting freedom of inquiry, ensuring independent academic governance, applying merit-based hiring and promotion, and prioritizing critical-thinking and inquiry-based pedagogy.
- Position universities as long-term drivers of reconciliation, ethical leadership, youth empowerment, and sustainable peacebuilding in Syria.

4-Theme 3 – Research & Innovation¹⁰

Scientific research and innovation are essential pillars of Syria's post-war recovery and its transition toward sustainable, knowledge-based development. As reconstruction unfolds, universities, research centers, and technical institutes must evolve from largely teaching-focused institutions into active engines of problem-solving, innovation, and economic transformation.

Syria's higher education system is institutionally broad but functionally weak. Despite nine public universities, dozens of private universities and institutes, and hundreds of technical colleges, research remains underfunded, fragmented, and loosely connected to national priorities and productive sectors. Postgraduate research is often theoretical and poorly aligned with reconstruction needs. Obsolete infrastructure limited digital resources, and weak supervisory systems further constrain quality and impact.

Based on national consultations under SAFIERR, proposes a framework to revitalize Syria's research system. Central to this vision are modern research governance, performance-based, transparent funding, improved infrastructure, integration of research into higher education; strong international and diaspora partnerships; and a robust ethical framework.

A National High Committee for Scientific Research and Innovation, linked to institutional Research Councils, should coordinate policy, prioritize thematic areas, and ensure transparent allocation of resources. A National Research and Innovation Fund would

¹⁰ Speakers and moderators; Abdulkarim Najjar, Ghaith Warkozek, Ghmkin Hassan, A. H. Abdul Hafez, Mohammed Hayyan Alsibai, Muhammad Manhal Alzoubi, Hani Harb, Aula Abbara, Ala-Eddin Al Moustafa, Mustapha fawaz Chehna



distribute performance-based, milestone-linked funding, co-financed by the state, private sector, and diaspora, and open to international partners. Reference laboratories supported by satellite units, shared infrastructure, and digital platforms for data and publications would improve quality, efficiency, and visibility.

Human capacity building—through structured supervision, mandatory research and ethics training, and integration of research methods into curricula—will be crucial for raising standards. International partnerships, joint degrees, and systematic engagement of the Syrian scientific diaspora will reconnect Syrian institutions with global networks and accelerate quality improvement.

Finally, a renewed focus on research ethics, authorship transparency, and “research for societal benefit” will underpin public trust and ensure that knowledge production contributes tangibly to health, reconstruction, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

Syria’s transition from dictatorship and prolonged war to reconstruction requires more than rebuilding physical infrastructure. Sustainable recovery depends on revitalizing human capital and institutional capacities through science, education, and innovation. International experience shows that durable progress after conflict is strongly associated with placing higher education and research at the core of national development strategies.

For Syria, this means transforming universities and research centers into innovation hubs that generate evidence-based solutions to pressing challenges—healthcare, infrastructure, environment, governance, and social cohesion. Years of war, isolation, and underinvestment have weakened academic performance and disconnected research from policy. The path forward requires restructuring higher education into a responsive, networked system that links academia with government, industry, and civil society.

This theme report outlines a vision for “intelligent reconstruction”: rebuilding Syria with science-driven policies, problem-oriented research, and innovation embedded in institutions and governance.

4-1 Current Status of Higher Education, Research and Innovation

Syria’s higher education system is among the largest in the region, with a wide range of universities, institutes, and technical colleges. Yet research productivity, international visibility, and practical impact remain far below potential. Investment in research is very low relative to overall education spending, and research is treated as a marginal activity rather than a strategic national priority.

Postgraduate programs often operate in isolation from labor-market demands and national development plans. Many master’s and doctoral theses are theoretical or repetitive, with



minimal translation into policy, technology, or services. Weak coordination among universities, research centers, and productive sectors amplifies fragmentation. The absence of a national database or digital platform for ongoing projects leads to duplication and poor resource use.

Organizational culture still emphasizes individual publications and formal promotion criteria over collaborative, problem-oriented, and interdisciplinary research. Student engagement in research is limited, as teaching and research remain weakly integrated. Overall, the system produces qualified graduates but insufficient knowledge and innovation to drive reconstruction.

4-2 Key Challenges and Opportunities

4-2-1 Cultural and Administrative Challenges

A persistent culture of individualism, limited teamwork, and rigid hierarchies impedes innovation. Institutions are slow to adopt digital tools, modern research management practices, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Leadership often lacks incentives and training to drive reform.

4-2-2 Legal and Legislative Challenges

Research-related legislation is outdated. Regulations for academic leave, conference participation, international collaboration, and technology transfer do not support an open, globally connected research environment. Promotion systems reward quantity of publications more than societal relevance, collaboration, or innovation. Weak intellectual property (IP) protection, unclear rules for Technology Transfer Offices, and limited frameworks for university-industry partnerships hamper commercialization of research outputs.

4-2-3 Material and Financial Challenges

Chronic underfunding has left laboratories under-equipped and outdated. Limited resources restrict experimentation, prototyping, and fieldwork. Funding allocation is often non-competitive and not linked to performance or strategic priorities. Yet opportunities exist: international actors are interested in supporting reconstruction; the Syrian diaspora holds substantial expertise and networks; and digital tools significantly reduce the cost of participating in global research.

A coherent national strategy is needed to convert these challenges and opportunities into a modern, resilient research system.



4-2-4 Research Governance, Productivity, and Implementation

4-2-4-1 Academic Supervision and Capacity Building

Research productivity is undermined by high teaching loads, weak incentives for supervision, and limited training in modern methods. A tiered mentorship system—peer, near-peer, and expert supervision—can strengthen guidance for postgraduate researchers. Formal supervision compacts should specify roles, milestones, authorship expectations, and feedback mechanisms. Short courses in research design, statistics, ethics, and scientific writing should become mandatory elements of postgraduate programs.

4-2-4-2 Governance and Institutional Coordination

Fragmented governance demands a unified National Governance Framework for Scientific Research. A National High Committee for Scientific Research and Innovation would:

- Set national research priorities and strategies
- Coordinate funding and oversight
- Link ministries, universities, research institutes, private sector, and international partners

At institutional level, University Research Councils would coordinate research planning, ensure ethical compliance, and monitor performance. A National Research Collaboration Charter—covering authorship (e.g., CRediT taxonomy), data sharing, and collaboration rules—would support fair, transparent cooperation.

4-2-5 Infrastructure and Quality Assurance

A Reference-plus-Satellite Laboratory Model is proposed: a limited number of well-equipped reference labs serving as hubs for quality assurance, training, and calibration, connected to satellite units across the country applying standardized procedures. An “ISO-lite” national quality framework would set minimum standards for safety, documentation, and data management, tailored to resource constraints. Institutions would adopt clear SOPs and undergo periodic audits.

4-2-6 Funding and Resource Allocation

A National Research and Innovation Fund should allocate resources via transparent, competitive calls evaluated by independent panels. Funding would be milestone-based and linked to outputs such as publications, prototypes, policy uptake, or patents. Co-funding with the private sector, local communities, and international donors would expand



resources. Fiscal incentives—tax reductions, innovation credits—would encourage private investment in R&D.

4-2-7 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Timelines

A National Digital Research and Innovation Platform would record projects, outputs, partnerships, and indicators, enabling benchmarking and coordination. Annual “State of Scientific Research and Innovation in Syria” reports, with external peer input, would track progress.

Implementation phases:

- Short-term (1–2 years): Establish governance bodies, launch the fund and digital platform
- Medium-term (3–5 years): Standardize quality systems, expand training, scale co-funded programs
- Long-term (5–10 years): Deep integration of academia and industry, increased R&D spending, strong international presence

Transparency and accountability through public reporting, audits, and external evaluations will be essential for credibility.

4-3 Strategic National Research System and Multidisciplinary Priorities

A National Research System (NRS) should align institutions, funding, and priorities with national reconstruction and long-term development goals. Key elements include:

- A National Research Strategy with clear thematic priorities and measurable targets
- Coordinating councils linking higher education, research, and sectoral ministries
- Defined roles and performance indicators for public and private research institutions
- Centralized digital databases for projects, publications, and funding records

4-3-1 Multidisciplinary Research for Reconstruction

Reconstruction challenges cut across sectors—health, energy, environment, housing, social cohesion—and require interdisciplinary teams. The NRS should promote multi-faculty and multi-institutional programs focused on:

- Water and natural-resource management
- Renewable energy and energy efficiency



- Public health resilience and health systems
- Food security and climate-resilient agriculture
- Digital transformation, e-governance, and AI
- Education reform and human development

4-3-2 Strategic Priority Areas

Priority areas should be reviewed annually and include:

- Renewable/sustainable energy
- Food security and agricultural innovation
- Public health and health systems research
- Education, skills, and labor-market alignment
- Digital transformation, AI, and data systems

4-3-3 Infrastructure, Integration, and Funding

National research Centers in priority domains should be established, with clear governance, performance-based funding, and embedded incubators and accelerators to commercialize innovations. A National Scientific Research Fund, co-financed by government, private sector, and diaspora, would provide long-term support. Partnerships with international organizations and donors, as well as R&D agreements between universities and industry, would further diversify funding and expertise.

4-4 Integrating Scientific Research into Higher Education

To build a culture of inquiry and innovation, research must be integrated into the core of teaching and learning:

- Embed research methods and inquiry-based learning in undergraduate curricula.
- Engage students in small research projects early, developing critical thinking, data literacy, and communication skills.
- Make original research central to master's and doctoral programs and align topics with national priorities.
- Encourage interdisciplinary theses and joint supervision with international partners.
- Expand access to digital libraries, open-access repositories, and global databases.
- Integrate innovation and entrepreneurship into curricula and develop university incubators that help students translate research into startups and community solutions.



This integration will improve teaching quality, raise the profile of universities, and produce graduates able to link knowledge with practical problem-solving.

4-4-1 Academic Cooperation and International Partnerships

International cooperation is crucial for rebuilding capacity and reconnecting Syrian research with the global community. Long-term, structured partnerships should:

- Enable joint degrees, shared curricula, and mutual recognition of qualifications
- Promote joint research projects, co-authorship, and shared infrastructure use
- Support academic mobility through exchanges, visiting professorships, and training programs.

The Syrian scientific diaspora is a strategic asset. Structured schemes for virtual supervision, adjunct appointments, joint labs, and co-funded projects can channel their expertise back into national institutions.

Collaboration with international organizations and consortia can provide accreditation support, quality benchmarks, and access to competitive funding schemes. Stronger university–industry partnerships—backed by incentives and flexible legal frameworks—will anchor research in real-world innovation needs.

4-4-2 Research Values and Ethics

Research ethics and values underpin credibility, trust, and societal benefit:

- Academic freedom and intellectual independence must be protected by policy.
- Researchers are expected to uphold objectivity, integrity, and professionalism, free from political or personal bias.
- Methodological rigor, proper citation, and respect for IP rights are non-negotiable standards.

Institutions should establish national and institutional codes of conduct, Research Ethics Units, and mandatory ethics training. Clear procedures for reviewing proposals, handling conflicts of interest, and addressing misconduct must be in place.

A culture of transparency in data sharing, fair authorship criteria, and open collaboration strengthens reproducibility and societal trust. The guiding principle should be “research for public benefit”.



5-Theme 4: Partnerships¹¹

This theme examined how academic partnerships and mobility can serve as strategic levers for rebuilding and globalizing Syrian higher education. In a context of war-driven isolation and systemic weakness, SAFIERR participants stressed that forging robust collaborations—nationally, regionally, and internationally—is not optional but essential. The summit explored pathways to connect universities across borders, bridge the knowledge gap, and foster a culture of innovation and institutional resilience.

5-1 Academic Partnerships as Lifelines for Recovery

The partnership theme was inaugurated by a compelling keynote from Prof. Ala-Eddin Al Moustafa, titled "Academic Partnerships in Syria: Join Forces to Success." Prof. Al Moustafa framed partnerships not as an option, but as an essential "lifeline" for a system in crisis.

He powerfully illustrated how expatriate Syrian scholars can transfer critical knowledge without exacerbating the brain drain. He proposed models of remote mentorship and joint research programs with Gulf and North American universities, highlighting areas of urgent national need, such as public health and molecular biology, to address rising post-conflict health burdens like cancer.

Prof. Al Moustafa identified a multifaceted set of challenges. He cited significant external barriers, such as U.S. and EU sanctions that limit funding flows and visa restrictions that severely curtail physical mobility. He also noted critical internal barriers, including legacy bureaucratic structures within universities that stifle autonomy by often prioritizing rigid ideology over necessary innovation. Furthermore, he highlighted geopolitical risks, such as a potential over-reliance on foreign technology that must be carefully managed.

His recommendations were actionable, calling for long-term bilateral agreements for joint degrees, leveraging regional networks like the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED), establishing donor-funded digital platforms for open-access resources, and, critically, initiating ministerial reforms to ensure flexible governance and degree transparency.

5-2 Panel 1: Connecting National and International Institutes

This panel, chaired by Dr. Amal Alachkar, explored strategies for scaling individual initiatives into robust institutional and regional alliances.

Dr. Amal Alachkar emphasized the need to move from the individual, scattered efforts of diaspora academics to a *collective, synergistic* approach. Drawing from a co-authored strategic framework, she outlined five key areas where structured diaspora collaboration

¹¹Speakers and moderators; Ala-Eddin Al Moustafa, Amal Alachkar, Mohammed Abouzaid, Anwar Kawtharani, Zaher Sahloul, Ayham Abazid, Riyad Hafian, Sulaiman Mouselli, Hani Harb



could catalyze systemic change. These include governance, by collectively advising on modern quality assurance systems and sharing best-practice bylaws to dismantle authoritarian legacies; faculty empowerment, through implementing joint mentorship and professional development workshops to enhance skills and retain current faculty; transformative pedagogy, by co-teaching courses, sharing curricula, and mentoring on hybrid models that integrate global content with local delivery; the socio-economic role, by co-supervising capstone and community projects to bridge the gap between academia and societal needs; and finally, research and innovation, by running workshops on methodology, co-supervising students, collaborating on joint grants, and establishing shared research centers.

Mohammed Abouzaid presented an innovative approach to leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) for educational equity. He proposed using Large Language Models (LLMs) to translate a decade's worth of vital, contemporary textbooks and academic resources into Arabic. He stressed this requires partnerships to manage technical challenges (e.g., Retrieval-Augmented Generation for consistency) and geopolitical risks (e.g., using open-weight models like DeepSeek or Mistral instead of proprietary ones).

Dr. Anwar Kawtharani introduced the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) as a powerful gateway for regional partnerships. As a network of 184 institutions and a key partner for the European Commission, UNIMED is positioned to help Syria overcome isolation. Dr. Kawtharani, nominated to lead UNIMED's "Rebuild Syria Initiative," advocated for Syrian universities to join the network to access capacity-building workshops, mobility schemes, and EU-funded digital literacy projects.

Dr. Zaher Sahloul, co-founder of MedGlobal, shared successful NGO collaboration models transferable to education. He outlined four key models: diaspora mobilization, localization (blending international expertise with community knowledge), institutional alliances among Syrian-led entities, and broader Syrian-international cooperation. He highlighted critical lessons for the Ministry: the need to build trust via small-scale pilots, embrace adaptive management, and ensure long-term sustainability.

5-3 Panel 2: A Gateway to the World – Mobility and Global Integration

This panel, chaired by Dr. Ayham Abazid, focused on tangible mechanisms to reconnect Syrian students and faculty to the global academic community.

Dr. Riyad Hafian positioned Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as essential "watchdogs" to safeguard academic integrity and drive reform. He noted that virtual mobility (citing the Syrian Virtual University) and global platforms (Coursera and LinkedIn Learning) are practical interim solutions. He identified the core challenges to mobility, starting with recognition, as the lack of transparent data-sharing often renders Syrian degrees unrecognized internationally. He also pointed to access barriers, including visa hurdles, economic constraints, and a critical lack of institutional autonomy. Finally, he noted deep



systemic challenges, such as outdated laws that reflect an authoritarian mindset. His recommendations included developing hybrid models and leveraging NGOs as mediators.

Sulaiman Mouselli offered a focused presentation on credit mobility. He urged the Ministry to actively pursue credit mobility agreements with EU institutions, remove accreditation barriers for EU-based virtual universities, and ease the recognition of credits for mobility beneficiaries. He innovatively proposed a "student complaint box" to address mobility issues, empowering CSOs to advocate for accountability.

Dr. Hani Harb provided a crucial conceptual framework, redefining mobility beyond passports to include the flow of curricula, faculty, and recognition, both physically and digitally. He described CSOs as the "civic backbone," essential for *co-designing* and monitoring new, flexible education laws to prevent a return to authoritarian practices. He identified the problem as opaque data-sharing and centralized legacies, proposing the solution of a "stacked mobility" model that layers local presence with global content. This includes hybrid degrees, credit-bearing virtual exchanges (like co-taught seminars), and short-term physical residencies for hands-on needs. His concrete proposals included building a national academic data hub for verifiable records, mandating NGO mediator roles for accreditation, and legislating for modular degrees and micro-credentials.

5-4 Recommendations

Synthesizing the insights from all speakers, the summit forwards the following high-priority recommendations for immediate consideration:

1. Policy and Governance Reform:
 - Immediately form a joint committee, including CSOs and diaspora experts, to collaboratively rewrite outdated education laws to prioritize flexibility, autonomy, and micro-credentials.
 - Establish a National Academic Data Hub to ensure transparent, verifiable records for international degree recognition.
2. Diaspora and NGO Engagement:
 - Formally establish a "Diaspora Collaboration Framework" based on the five-pillar model (Governance, Pedagogy, Research, etc.) to move beyond individual efforts.
 - Partner with established NGOs (like MedGlobal) to fund and launch pilot programs for curricular reform and faculty training, adopting principles of adaptive management.
3. Regional and Global Integration:
 - Direct Syrian universities to formally join the UNIMED network to access EU funding, mobility schemes, and capacity-building programs.
 - Task a committee with pursuing formal credit mobility agreements with European university associations.



4. Technology and Resource Development:

- Launch a national initiative, in partnership with international AI experts, to create an AI-driven hub for translating essential modern academic resources into Arabic.
- Develop a national open-access digital platform for shared curricula and research, supported by donor funding.

5. Mobility Implementation:

- Officially endorse and support "stacked mobility" models, allowing universities to create hybrid degrees that blend in-person local instruction with virtual international content.

6- Theme 5 – Transformative Pedagogies¹²

Theme 5 of the SAFIERR summit explored how post-war teaching could transcend rote memorization and authoritarian hierarchies. In a society scarred by trauma and scarcity, transformative pedagogy offers not just instruction but healing, fostering dialogue, trust, and the creative agency essential for rebuilding. The theme featured a keynote by Dr. Bryan Reynolds and two panels: *Panel 1 – Beyond the Lecture: Fostering Dialogue, Critical Thinking, and Engagement in the Classroom* and *Panel 2 – What We Teach and How We Measure: Reforming Curriculum and Assessment Systems*. Together, these sessions presented an integrated vision linking pedagogy, content, assessment, and access as interdependent levers of reform.

Dr. Bryan Reynolds presented a vision of transformative pedagogy designed to rebuild learning and community in post-conflict contexts. Drawing on his global teaching experience, he argued that traditional, goal-oriented education reinforces passivity and fails to address the psychological and social scars of authoritarianism. Instead, he proposed dialogic learning—an interactive, reflective approach where students and educators co-create knowledge through dialogue, diversity of experience, and mutual understanding.

Reynolds emphasized the expansion of “subjective territory,” encouraging learners to broaden their emotional and intellectual horizons through empathy and adaptation. He introduced the concept of “affirmative dialectic,” where constructive dialogue transforms tension into respect and collaboration, enabling movement beyond rigid norms. Academic freedom, he stressed, was essential for nurturing creativity and open inquiry.

¹² Speakers and moderators; Bryan Reynolds, Amal Alachkar, Selim Ibrahim Al-Hasaniya, Mohammed Abouzaid, Oula Abu Amsha, Rimoun Almalouli, Mayssoon Dashash, Moumen M Alhasan.



He also examined “structures of thought,” arguing that genuine learning requires flexible, self-aware cognitive frameworks that allow individuals to reinterpret the world. Educational environments, Reynolds maintained, must provide safe spaces for productive discomfort, where challenging ideas can be explored without fear or repression. Ultimately, he advocated an education that builds resilience, empathy, and civic engagement, transforming both minds and societies through adaptive, compassionate learning.

6-1 Panel 1 – Beyond the lecture: Fostering dialogue, critical thinking and engagement in the classroom

Chaired by Dr. Amal Alachkar, Panel 1 examined pedagogies that transform learners from passive recipients to active participants.

Dr. Amal Alachkar redefined education as a process of growth and empowerment, countering the Assad regime’s legacy of obedience and rote learning. She proposed a model that moves students from comprehension to higher levels of analysis and synthesis, transforming them into active, independent thinkers. Emphasizing game-based and research-based learning, she highlighted creativity, teamwork, and inquiry as drivers of engagement. Alachkar also stressed metacognition, encouraging students to reflect on how they learn. Her approach fosters creativity, inclusion, and resilience—rebuilding confidence and preparing graduates to contribute critically and compassionately to Syria’s recovery.

Dr. Selim Ibrahim Al-Hasaniya presented his “*Sustainable Development System for Higher Education*” based on forty years of research in cadre training and distance learning. Diagnosing that 90% of Syrian students study mainly for exams and 93% lack opportunities to express creativity, he called for a shift from imitation to innovation. His model rests on two pillars—motivation and application—and transitions from linear rationality toward dialectical, intuitive thinking. Embedding sustainability, citizenship, and human rights across curricula, he argued, would link education directly to reconstruction goals such as economic recovery and environmental renewal.

Dr. Mohammed Abouzaid addressed digital equity, demonstrating how Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT can modernize curricula by translating global knowledge into Arabic. In a system hindered by outdated materials, he framed AI as a democratizing tool that frees educators for mentorship and critical analysis. To mitigate risks, he advocated open-weight models (e.g., DeepSeek) and collaborative deployment through national institutions such as the National Library or local engineering schools.

Dr. Oula Abu Amsha concluded the panel with inclusive strategies for crisis contexts. She championed the Flipped Classroom, combining self-paced study with in-class debates and projects to develop critical and collaborative skills. Drawing on John Dewey’s reflective learning principles, she showed how journaling and peer work enhance insight and resilience—vital for trauma recovery. Highlighting the Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL) blended model, Abu Amsha demonstrated how globally accredited content, delivered



through local centers, can reach women and working adults. She urged the adoption of the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge), framework for faculty training and digital inclusion, turning scarcity into opportunity through experiential learning.

6-2 Panel 2 – What We Teach and How We Measure

Chaired by Rimoun Almalouli, this panel focused on curriculum and assessment reform as structural foundations for systemic change.

Dr. Rimoun Almalouli described colleges of education as “factories for national renewal,” arguing that post-conflict rebuilding must begin with how teachers are trained. He called for replacing transmission-based teaching with dynamic, research-driven, and inclusive methodologies that foster critical thinking and sustainability. His model integrates economic, social, and ecological issues with citizenship and human-rights education, shifting values from competition to partnership and behavior toward civic responsibility.

Dr. Maysoon Dashash addressed the question of how to measure transformation. She identified a deep gap between international standards—validity, reliability, transparency, and cultural sensitivity—and Syria’s reliance on rote, exam-based evaluation. To bridge this divide, she introduced “blueprinting,” a structured method aligning assessment with learning objectives through diverse item types that measure application rather than recall. Dashash also promoted community-oriented education, where projects link assessment to real-world challenges in health, sustainability, and civic development.

Dr. Moumen Alhasan added a pragmatic perspective on access and reintegration. With more than 100,000 discontinued students and major quality gaps identified by UNESCO, he proposed granting legal autonomy to universities—similar to Article 5 of Germany’s Basic Law—to allow regional flexibility. His model includes part-time and evening programs, adult learning centers, applied colleges linked to industry, and affordable online platforms for displaced learners. Such systems, he argued, would transform higher education into an inclusive bridge for lifelong learning and national participation.

Overarching Challenges and Integrated Solutions

Speakers across the sessions identified recurring obstacles: centralized control, outdated curricula, rote pedagogy, and the enduring psychological legacies of repression and fear. Infrastructure damage, limited connectivity, and inadequate professional development further undermine innovation. Assessment remains dominated by memorization, while access for women, rural, and displaced students is restricted.

6-3 Recommendations

1. Adopt active, dialogic learning: Replace passive lectures with dialogic, flipped, and reflective approaches, supported by faculty training and inclusive classrooms.



2. Harness AI and blended systems for equity: Use LLMs for translation and curriculum renewal alongside blended platforms such as JWL to reach marginalized learners; ensure affordable digital infrastructure.
3. Renew Curricula: Embed sustainability, citizenship, and human rights across programs, linking research and teaching to reconstruction priorities.
4. Reform assessment: Apply blueprinting to ensure validity, fairness, and depth, emphasizing application and community relevance.
5. Expand access: Enable university autonomy to develop flexible, affordable learning pathways—part-time, online, and applied.
6. Strengthen faculty development: Provide continuous training in active pedagogy, technology, and ethics to counter censorship and rebuild trust.
7. Foster Partnerships: Promote regional and international collaborations to exchange expertise, mobilize resources, and reinforce community engagement.

7- Theme 6 - Empowering Teachers¹³

Theme 6 of the SAFIERR summit focused on empowering teachers and faculty as a cornerstone of rebuilding higher education and national reconstruction. Teachers were treated not as policy implementers but as agents of change and nation-builders, whose working conditions, roles, and digital capacities determine the system's quality and resilience. The theme included one keynote and two panels. The keynote outlined a strategic vision for reinvesting in faculty as a national asset. Panel 1, *“Securing the profession”*, examined the institutional, legal, and professional conditions for sustainable, fair academic careers. Panel 2, *“The evolving academic”*, explored how the academic role is changing in the age of digitisation and AI, and what capacity-building and qualification pathways are needed. Together, these sessions traced a clear narrative: rebuild institutions and secure the profession, redefine the academic role, and equip current and future academics with the pedagogical and digital competencies required for a new era.

7-1 Keynote – Reinvesting in Faculty for a New Reconstruction Era

In his keynote, *“Reinvesting in Faculty Members for a New Era of Reconstruction: From Survival to Flourishing”*, Dr. Abdul Hafiz framed teachers and university faculty as a national lever for reconstruction, not simply service providers within the education system. Positioned within SAFIERR's broader agenda of rebuilding higher education after conflict, the talk argued that real recovery must start with policies that empower faculty: improving teaching quality to rebuild public trust, directing research and innovation toward concrete

¹³Speaker and moderators; A. H. Abdul Hafez, Amal Alachkar, Ammar Aljer, Ammar Joukhadar, Muafak Jneid, Nada Ghneim, Fadi Alshalabi, Massa Mufti, Mariam M. Saïi, Noha Abdulkarim Hussin, and Abdul Ghani Hajbakri.



reconstruction needs (infrastructure, health, water, energy), and enhancing graduates' employability to support economic and social stability.

The keynote called for a shift from a narrow "teaching-only" role to a balanced academic portfolio of teaching, research/innovation, and community/industry service. This requires protected time for research aligned with reconstruction priorities, clear recognition of supervision and community engagement, and modern teaching practices that emphasise active learning, well-defined learning outcomes, and fair assessment (e.g., rubrics). To make this possible, the speaker outlined key enabling conditions: greater governance autonomy and reduced bureaucracy in academic decisions; transparent, performance-linked compensation; fair workload norms (caps on teaching hours, protected research time); and effective faculty voice in decision-making bodies, all underpinned by academic freedom and room for innovation.

A central axis of the keynote was strategic partnership with the diaspora and flexible models for the return or remote engagement of scholars. Co-teaching, joint supervision, short intensive visits, and digitally enabled teaching were proposed as high-impact, low-cost ways to raise standards and transfer expertise, supported by shared curricula and robust quality assurance. Rather than a single "all-or-nothing" return, the talk proposed flexible pathways: remote contributions, short visits, partial (10–15%) dual appointments, and fully supported permanent return tracks.

Looking ahead to 2025–2028, the keynote sketched a "faculty growth engine" based on transparent compensation and workload standards, a structured CPD and mentoring ladder, strong teaching-and-learning support in Arabic and English, and serious digital enablement (LMS, virtual labs, cybersecurity). These faculty-centered reforms were explicitly linked to SAFIERR's broader pillars of governance, research and innovation, partnerships, and transformative pedagogies, positioning empowered teachers as the backbone of any credible reconstruction roadmap.

7-2 Panel 1 – Securing the Profession: Sustainable Careers, Fair Compensation, and a Supportive Workplace

Chaired by Dr. Amal Alachkar, Panel 1 explored what it means to "secure the profession" of university teaching in Syria: rebuilding institutions, addressing the crisis of academic work, and creating credible career pathways. The contributions move from the institutional level, through the lived reality of professors, towards rehabilitation, role definition, and professional development.



7-2-1 Contribution 1 – Rebuilding the Syrian University to Empower Teachers (Dr. Ammar Aljer)

This contribution argues that teacher empowerment is impossible without rebuilding the Syrian university itself after decades of authoritarian control. Dr. Aljer shows how a rigid hierarchy and parallel security apparatus emptied real governance of meaning, paralysed councils and unions, severed links with schools, labour markets, and public institutions, and even enabled abuses on campus, reducing the university's role to issuing certificates and formal publications. To reverse this, he proposes a low-cost institutional "revival": scientific-cultural cafés and open days to reconnect with society; clear internal regulations that link goals, structures, and roles; gradual reactivation and election of university councils; and strong digital identities and platforms for communication and e-governance. Additional measures include documenting past abuses as learning cases, providing institutional and pedagogical training, creating units that tie research to societal needs, rebuilding unions on democratic foundations, and strengthening networks among Syrian, regional, and diaspora universities. In this view, teacher empowerment stems from democratic, transparent, and connected institutions—not from isolated training programmes.

7-2-2 Contribution 2 – Securing the Syrian University Professor: Challenges and Pathways to Reform (Dr. Ammar Joukhadar)

This contribution diagnoses a deep crisis in the academic profession and links it directly to the quality and future of Syrian higher education. The "normal" duties of a good professor—updating curricula, offering office hours, running practical sessions, setting fair exams, and being consistently present—are undermined by heavy teaching loads, constant interference, and a climate where stricter standards or simple mistakes can trigger harassment and retaliation. Professors face extremely low salaries, legal obstacles to resignation, and travel/employment restrictions, which fuel exodus and deter new entrants, while centralised decision-making leaves faculties with almost no room for initiative or adaptation.

Joukhadar proposes short-term, low-cost fixes—yearly contracts for new staff paid by teaching load, lifting travel bans and rigid full-time rules, allowing non-conflicting private work, guaranteeing supervision rights, and protecting staff from pressure and blackmail—alongside long-term structural reforms: full-time posts with competitive pay, enforced teaching-quality standards, financial transparency, decentralised spending, and giving colleges control over resources generated by research. He argues that decision-making must be devolved, recognising the diversity of disciplines. The conclusion is stark: the current model is unsustainable and close to systemic collapse unless bold, imaginative, and objective reforms are adopted, overcoming bureaucracy and fear of change.



7-2-3 Contribution 3 – Rehabilitating Academic Cadres in Post-Liberation Syria (Dr. Muafak Jneid)

This contribution tackles the twin crisis of Syrian professors and the higher education system in the post-liberation phase, proposing an integrated model that turns academics into drivers of sustainable development and peacebuilding. It highlights a damaging legacy of brain drain, internal migration to private institutions, poor working conditions, and the erosion of professors' status, all of which deepen inequality and push graduates to emigrate. Rebuilding higher education is framed as a psychological and social healing project, not just technical reform. He calls for diversified career pathways (consultancy, entrepreneurship, private-sector and NGO roles) backed by networking, continuous upskilling, and research translated into usable outputs, alongside fairer pay and promotion structures, supportive institutional environments, and systematic diaspora engagement. Universities are seen as spaces for peacebuilding—through critical thinking, tolerance, gender equality, and psychosocial support—with investment in academic cadres presented as the highest-yield long-term investment for a stable, prosperous future.

7-2-4 Contribution 4 – Defining the Role of the Academic (Dr. Amal Alachkar)

This contribution argues that clearly defining the academic role is a strategic starting point for moving Syrian higher education from fragmented survival practices to purposeful reconstruction. It calls for a shared value framework—intellectual integrity, social responsibility, inclusion, and collaboration—to guide recruitment, promotion, and daily academic work, and for mission-differentiated roles so that research universities, teaching-focused institutions, and regional campuses have distinct, realistic expectations for teaching, research, and service. At the same time, it urges the adoption of national minimum standards for workload, compensation, protection, and wellbeing, developed through participatory processes (value audits, institutional classification, co-designed benchmarks with ministries and unions) and monitored via retention and performance indicators. Ultimately, defining the academic role is presented as nation-building, positioning empowered academics as a core asset for Syria's intellectual, social, and economic recovery.

7-2-5 Contribution 5 – Empowering Academic Professional Development for Research and Collaborative Excellence (Dr. Nada Ghneim)

This contribution presents academic professional development as the main gateway to building research capacity and scientific collaboration. The academic role is expanded beyond teaching to mentoring, staying up to date in one's field, engaging students early in research, offering career guidance, and co-developing funding proposals. To make this possible, institutions should provide administrative and financial empowerment: protected research time, lighter teaching loads for active researchers, fair evaluation of all research outputs, and research support centres for training and proposal-writing. The contribution



stressed aligning research agendas with community needs, promoting interdisciplinary work, and offering competitive incentives for high-quality publications, underpinned by solid research funding (grants, infrastructure, conferences, events, publication fees, databases). It also highlighted collaborative empowerment through active engagement of Syrian academics abroad, international partnerships, exchanges, MoUs, and joint projects in strategic fields, framing professional development as a strategic investment in knowledge and societal advancement.

7-3 Panel 2 – The Evolving Academic: Capacity Building for New Roles and Responsibilities

Chaired by Dr. Fadi Alshalabi, Panel 2 examined how the academic role is evolving in the age of digitisation and artificial intelligence, and what forms of capacity building are needed for current and future academics. The contributions move from a broad pedagogical and digital agenda to new role profiles and AI-related challenges, and then to institutional frameworks and qualification pathways.

7-3-1 Contribution 1 – Empowering University Professors in Syria's Higher Education Reform: A Pedagogical and Digital Agenda (Ms. Massa Mufti)

This contribution presents empowering professors as a key lever for higher education reform and national reconstruction in an AI-driven era. Faculty are seen not only as knowledge transmitters, but as builders of ethical academic environments, civic renewal, and long-term development. Ms. Mufti identifies four main constraints—weak digital literacy and infrastructure, outdated curricula and centralised control, poor pedagogical preparation, and eroded academic freedom—which together stifle innovation and agency. She proposes a National Higher Education Pedagogy Empowerment Program built on three pillars: (1) the 3Rs—Relevance, Relationship, Rigor—to ground curricula in local realities and foster democratic professor–student relations; (2) higher-order learning with strong digital/AI integration through hands-on training in platforms, OER, and ethical AI use; and (3) participatory curriculum renewal via interdisciplinary roundtables and continuous feedback from students and communities. The contribution calls for incentive systems and strategic public–private and diaspora partnerships, arguing that putting well-equipped professors at the centre of reform is essential to transforming Syrian universities into engines of knowledge, innovation, and societal renewal.

7-3-2 Contribution 2 – The Evolving Academic in the Age of Digitization and Artificial Intelligence (Dr. Fadi Alshalabi)

This contribution situates the Syrian academic at the intersection of post-war reconstruction and global digital/AI transformation, arguing that professors must be reimagined as nation-builders equipped for a new learning paradigm. It describes the shift from teacher-centred “knowledge transmission” to student-centred, AI-mediated learning,



where the professor becomes a designer of digital learning experiences, mentor and supervisor in the age of AI, guide for responsible AI use, and civic leader reconnecting universities with society.

To assume these roles, academics need structured capacity-building ladders—from basic digital and AI literacy to advanced curriculum redesign and learning analytics, to peer-coach roles sustaining communities of practice—embedded in institutional promotion and evaluation systems. The contribution called for digital and AI readiness in Syrian universities through LMS platforms, virtual labs, cybersecurity awareness, and AI-resilient assessment that rewards critical thinking and originality. It emphasises adapting global frameworks (such as DigCompEdu, PSF, UNESCO AI guidance) to local constraints rather than copying them wholesale and highlights the Syrian academic diaspora as a crucial bridge via remote co-teaching, joint supervision, and short-term exchanges. Ultimately, Alshalabi frames investment in evolving academics' digital and AI competencies as both an educational reform priority and a core act of national rebuilding.

7-3-3 Contribution 3 – Empowering Teaching Staff through Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Solutions (Dr. Mariam M. Saii)

This contribution argues that Syrian universities are at a critical turning point, where traditional teaching can no longer meet the demands of an AI-driven higher education system. Faculty empowerment is defined as strengthening academic autonomy and competence through adequate tools, real decision-making power, and a supportive professional community. Saii highlights severe constraints—very low salaries, outdated infrastructure, limited AI-ready technologies, scarce training and journal access, heavy workloads, and ongoing brain drain—and proposes AI-focused empowerment measures: robust digital infrastructure, access to AI tools, continuous training, and institutional policies that encourage innovation and autonomy, supported by national and international partnerships. Key obstacles include low AI awareness, resistance to change, infrastructural gaps, ethical and regulatory concerns, and lack of time for upskilling. To respond, Dr. Saii recommends specialised training and smart learning platforms, shared decision-making on technology adoption, a culture that rewards experimentation, clear ethical frameworks, strong research collaborations, and targeted incentives for AI-related teaching and research. Investing in AI-era faculty empowerment is presented as strategic for education quality, international standing, and preparing graduates for future knowledge economies.

7-3-4 Contribution 4 – Digital Competencies for Higher Education Faculty: A Conceptual Framework for Damascus University (Dr. Noha Abdulkarim Hussin)

This contribution proposes a context-sensitive digital competence framework for faculty at Damascus University, adapted from the European DigCompEdu model and UNESCO's ICT-CFT. It starts from the reality of post-war reconstruction and a rapidly changing digital/AI



landscape, noting a serious digital skills gap, fragmented training initiatives, and the absence of a unified institutional framework to guide professional development.

By comparing DigCompEdu and ICT-CFT, Dr. Hussin identifies convergences and integrates them into a three-tier developmental model (initial, intermediate, advanced) that aligns competence levels (A1–C2) with stages of knowledge acquisition, deepening, and creation. The framework defines core domains such as professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and assessment with technology, empowering learners, and leading digital transformation.

An institutional implementation roadmap is outlined: prioritising pedagogical use of technology over tool-centric training; linking competency levels to recruitment, evaluation, and promotion; ensuring sustained capacity-building and adequate digital infrastructure; and leveraging international partnerships and communities of practice. Expected outcomes include higher digital confidence and lifelong learning skills among faculty, and at the institutional level, improved teaching quality, student satisfaction, and academic reputation—positioning investment in digital competence as a strategic pillar of national capacity-building in higher education.

7-3-5 Contribution 5 – Qualification of Lecturers and Teachers (Mr. Abdul Ghani Hajbakri)

Mr. Hajbakri's contribution calls for a systematic pathway from undergraduate study to classroom practice for future university lecturers and schoolteachers. It proposes close coordination between the Ministries of Education and Higher Education to map which departments prepare teachers for each school subject and to redesign curricula, accordingly, adding subject-specific pedagogy and didactics plus compulsory school-based practicums. Students would teach in real classrooms, receive an official training certificate, and produce a reflective portfolio counting for a substantial share of their grade, supported by specialised departmental committees that ensure coherent sequencing of methodology courses. For language disciplines, the author recommends merging “X as a foreign language” tracks into the main language departments, while language institutes focus on practical training and certification. Overall, teacher qualification is framed as an integrated combination of subject mastery, didactics, and structured practice, rather than a late, add-on step before entering the profession.

7-4 Recommendations

1. Rebuild democratic university governance: Reactivate elected councils, establish clear regulations, strengthen unions, and enhance faculty participation to restore trust.



2. Establish fair workload and compensation: Cap teaching hours, protect research time, implement transparent performance-linked pay, and recognize diverse academic contributions.
3. Redefine academic roles: Create mission-specific expectations for different institution types, based on values of integrity, responsibility, inclusion, and collaboration.
4. Implement structured CPD programs: Develop national/institutional frameworks with mentoring, bilingual support, and training in pedagogy, digital tools, AI ethics, and research.
5. Build faculty digital/AI competencies: Adopt adapted frameworks with progressive levels, tied to recruitment/promotion; provide infrastructure, LMS, labs, and cybersecurity training.
6. Reform teacher qualification pathways: Integrate pedagogy, didactics, and mandatory practicums into programs, with inter-ministry coordination, portfolios, and certification.
7. Foster diaspora/international partnerships: Support flexible models (co-teaching, joint supervision, visits, dual appointments) via MoUs and quality assurance.
8. Promote aligned research support: Create support centers, ease administrative burdens, incentivize reconstruction-relevant outputs, and encourage interdisciplinary projects.

8-Recommendation Matrix

The following table presents a consolidated summary of key recommendations emerging from the summit discussions. It organizes the recommendations by their primary focus areas while highlighting the cross-cutting themes in which they were emphasized. Each checkmark indicates that the recommendation was prominently suggested within the corresponding theme.

Recommendation	Governance & Autonomy	Equity & Inclusion	Quality & Accreditation	Digital Transformation	Labor Market Alignment	Research & Innovation
Reform HE laws for autonomy and set national standards	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓



Adopt national digital & AI strategy		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Redesign teacher education with school-HE collaboration	✓	✓	✓				
Revitalize university internal governance and participation	✓	✓		✓			✓
Reform faculty workload, recognition, and support structures	✓		✓			✓	✓
Support continuous professional development for faculty	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Integrate pedagogy, practicum, and reflection in teacher prep	✓		✓				✓
Mobilize SAFIERR, diaspora, and	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



global academic partnerships							
Clarify governance structures and empower departments	✓						
Establish anti-corruption and transparency frameworks	✓			✓			
Create a 5-10-year digital infrastructure roadmap				✓		✓	✓
Reform admissions via a national digital portal and labor-linking			✓	✓		✓	
Strengthen QA systems and external evaluation mechanisms			✓	✓			✓
Implement national university ranking coordination strategy			✓	✓			✓



Ensure infrastructure equity for underserved universities		✓	✓	✓			
Embed civic values, inclusion, gender equity in curricula		✓	✓				
Foster university–industry links and Career Linkage Offices					✓	✓	
Develop TTOs, incubators, and applied research centers					✓	✓	
Establish National Fund and High Committee for Research	✓						✓
Engage diaspora in co-supervision, teaching, research, and innovation					✓	✓	



9- Conclusions

The SAFIERR Summit offered a unique and urgent space for dialogue, reflection, and coordinated action on the future of higher education in Syria. Convening diverse stakeholders from government ministers to university leaders, researchers, technical experts, NGOs, and diaspora scholars the Summit provided an important opportunity for rethinking the role of academic institutions as drivers of national reconstruction, economic recovery, and social transformation. Six strategic pillars emerged from the Summit discussions. Each represents a crucial lever in repositioning Syria's higher education system from crisis management to forward-looking reform.

The first theme highlighted governance and policy reform as foundational to sustainable change. Effective legal frameworks, transparent administration, and stakeholder-inclusive policies are essential to enable autonomy, accountability, and resource allocation in higher education institutions and digital transformation and infrastructure rebuilding. Investing in technology access, online platforms, and resilient systems will bridge gaps in connectivity, support remote learning, and integrate data-driven decision-making across academia.

The second theme reframed higher education as an engine of economic revitalization and social cohesion. Syria's development will not be advanced by mere credentialism, but by institutions that integrate learning with employability, research with entrepreneurship, and pedagogy with civic values. Technical education and university systems must evolve beyond rote learning to embrace innovation, labor market relevance, and inclusive governance. From updating curricula to fostering dual education systems and establishing Career Linkage Offices, the alignment of academia with national development needs is essential. Yet higher education also carries a profound social responsibility: rebuilding trust, fostering dialogue, and empowering youth and women as agents of peace and progress.

The third theme centered on the imperative to rebuild a research and innovation ecosystem. While underfunded and fragmented, Syria's research sector holds vast untapped potential. A revitalized governance system anchored in transparency, performance-based funding, digital integration, and diaspora engagement can transform universities into knowledge hubs that directly serve reconstruction goals. From climate resilience and renewable energy to public health and AI, the research agenda must be interdisciplinary, solution-oriented, and nationally grounded.

The fourth theme emphasized the power of strategic partnerships. Building durable alliances between national and international institutions is no longer a supplementary activity, it is a survival imperative for Syrian academia. As shared during the opening keynote, partnerships are "lifelines" in crisis contexts. Remote mentorship, hybrid mobility, dual degrees, and university-industry alliances must form the backbone of Syria's new academic ecosystem.



Crucially, mobility must be redefined not just as the movement of people, but of curricula, ideas, and mutual recognition.

The fifth theme explored transformative pedagogies to move beyond rote memorization and authoritarian legacies. Emphasizing dialogic, reflective, and active learning approaches such as flipped classrooms, AI-supported equity, and reformed curricula and assessments these sessions highlighted pedagogy as a tool for healing trauma, fostering critical thinking, creativity, resilience, and civic engagement in post-war rebuilding.

The sixth theme focused on empowering teachers and faculty as nation-builders and agents of change. Through reinvesting in professional conditions, fair compensation, digital/AI competencies, and redefined roles, the discussions positioned empowered academics with protected research time, structured development, and diaspora partnerships as the backbone of quality education, innovation, and sustainable reconstruction. And underscored inclusivity and equity to ensure broad participation. Prioritizing access for marginalized groups, gender balance, and regional equity will foster diverse talent pools and strengthen social cohesion in the education sector.

Together, these pillars point toward a new model of “intelligent reconstruction” one that sees education, science, and innovation not as afterthoughts to physical rebuilding, but as its intellectual foundation. They demand bold legal reform, coordinated strategy, and sustained investment across sectors.

The SAFIERR Summit reaffirms that Syria’s future cannot be built on concrete alone. It must be built on ideas, collaboration, and knowledge. Universities, when empowered and reimagined, become engines of recovery, civic renewal, and peace. This Summit is not a conclusion, it is the starting point for a collective journey toward a more inclusive, resilient, and knowledge-driven Syria.



10- List of Speakers (Alphabetically Ordered)

- Dr. A. H. Abdul Hafez
- Mr. Abdul Ghani Hajbakri
- Dr. Abdulkarim Najjar
- Dr. Abdullah Alfares
- Dr. Ala-Eddin Al Moustafa
- Mr. Alexander Farley
- Dr. Amal Alachkar
- Dr. Amira Al-Noor
- Dr. Ammar Aljer
- Dr. Ammar Joukhadar
- Dr. Anwar Kawtharani
- Dr. Aula Abbara
- Dr. Ayham Abazid
- Dr. Bryan Reynolds
- Mr. Ehab Badwi
- Dr. Fadi Al-Shalabi
- Dr. Ghaith Warkozek
- Dr. Ghmkin Hassan
- Dr. Hani Harb
- Dr. Mariam M. Saïi
- Dr. Marwan Al-Halabi
- Dr. Marwan Al-Raeei
- Ms. Massa Mufti
- Dr. Mayssoon Dashash
- Dr. Mohammed Abouzaid
- Dr. Mohammed Hayyan Alsibai
- Dr. Mohammed Osama Raadoun
- Dr. Moumen M Alhasan
- Dr. Muafak Jneid
- Dr. Muhammad Manhal Alzoubi
- Dr. Munir Abas
- Dr. Munir Muhammad Al-Aroud
- Dr. Mustapha Fawaz Chehna
- Dr. Mustafa Moualdi
- Dr. Mustafa Saim Aldaher
- Dr. Mustafa Salouci
- Dr. Nada Ghneim
- Dr. Nawar Al-Awa
- Dr. Noha Abdulkarim Hussian
- Dr. Oudai Tozan
- Dr. Oula Abu Amsha
- Dr. Rana Maya
- Dr. Rimoun Almalouli
- Dr. Riyad Hafian
- Dr. Saiid Hijazi
- Dr. Selim Ibrahim Al-Hasaniya
- Dr. Sulaiman Mouselli
- Mr. Yaman Sabek
- Dr. Zaher Sahlou



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