

DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

The Collapse of Higher Education in Wartime Sudan

Rania M.H. Baleela and Husam Eldin E. Abugabr Elhag

The ongoing war in Sudan since April 15, 2023, has resulted in the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, one characterized by famine, insecurity, genocide, and displacement. In addition to the obvious contemporary toll on the country, this war has overshadowed future generations by severely damaging the physical infrastructure of higher education, jeopardizing long-term prospects for peace, development, and intellectual sovereignty even in the post-war era.

On April 15, 2023, military clashes broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan. Initially, the Sudanese people thought that the fighting would last a few days, or at most, a few weeks. However, the escalating conflict has now resulted in two years of destruction of infrastructure and a significant death toll due to hunger, disease, bombings, and field executions.

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Over-Centralization

One of the main factors contributing to the rapid decline of the Sudanese higher education sector is the over-centralization of the Sudanese university system. Sudanese universities have historically played a vital role in shaping the intellectual philosophy and civic literacy that contributed to the concepts of Sudanese national unity, development, and social mobility. Over the years, Sudan's 62 public and private universities have provided education to over 600,000 students across various fields, supported by more than 20,000 academics. However, the over-centralization of universities and other higher education institutions in the central states, and particularly in the capital Khartoum, has led to catastrophic devastation of the sector, given the concentration of major university functions in areas most affected by the war.

Destruction of Infrastructure

Numerous institutions, including the University of Khartoum, Sudan University of Science and Technology in Khartoum, and the University of Gezira in Gezira State, have been occupied as strategic locations by military factions and suffered extensive

damage due to shelling and looting. As a result, the libraries, laboratories, and lecture halls have been ravaged and left derelict. Some of the most profound examples include the destruction of the Natural History Museum and its thousands of preserved specimens collected since the nineteenth century, the burning of the Toxic Organisms Research Centre building at the University of Khartoum, and the looting of the Plant Seed Bank in Wad Madani.

Displacement of Academic Communities

Like all of the victims of the war, thousands of students, academics and other university staff have been forced to flee their homes, causing a near complete shutdown of the education system. As the war has escalated over time, many academics have sought asylum abroad, resulting in a significant loss of human capital, leading to dire brain drain. Many have sought refuge in neighboring countries or in safer regions of Sudan, often without the means to continue their academic pursuits. Academics have been forced to pursue alternative jobs with low incomes or part-time work to support their families, while more than half of students, whose families have experienced a 40% decrease in monthly salaries, have had to take on employment as war-related inflation continues to raise the cost of living.

Several universities initially adopted online teaching to continue the academic year. However, students still face interrupted studies, uncertainty about qualifications, and limited access to online alternatives due to poor internet infrastructure. Universities in safe zones established education hubs to host the affected educational institutions, but these have mostly adopted hybrid strategies of combined face-to-face and online teaching, which have only been marginally successful at retaining students.

Furthermore, although the Ministry of Higher Education and many universities relocated their operations to the current capital of Port Sudan, where they have been better protected, a

decision was made to return universities to their original locations, requiring the mandatory return of faculty members and students, despite ongoing military attacks. This is a dangerous strategy, given the vulnerability of universities to violations, artillery shelling, or drone strikes.

Psychosocial and Economic Impacts

Beyond the physical and logistical disruptions, war has exacted a heavy psychological toll on students and educators. Trauma, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness have contributed to declining academic motivation and performance. Furthermore, families struggling with displacement and job loss are often unable to afford tuition or educational materials, further marginalizing access to higher education.

Implications for National Development

The collapse of higher education and research institutions poses a grave threat to Sudan's long-term development. Universities are not merely centers of learning but incubators for innovation, governance, and civil society. Dismantling these institutions, alongside museums and seed banks, undermines efforts to

rebuild the country and risks entrenching cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. Without a robust educational and research sector, Sudan will struggle to cultivate the leadership and expertise necessary for post-war reconstruction.

The destruction of higher education and research institutions in Sudan is both a symptom and a driving force of the national crisis. Immediate international support is necessary to mitigate the damage and lay the groundwork for future recovery. Although the Sudanese National Academy of Sciences has issued appeals to the global scientific community for assistance, these calls have largely gone unanswered, leaving Sudanese academics feeling isolated and abandoned. This lack of engagement has exacerbated their vulnerability and deepened the sense of neglect.

Humanitarian aid frameworks operating in Sudan must include educational support. Efforts should also be made to preserve academic networks, support displaced scholars, and invest in rebuilding institutions once stability returns. Protecting education in times of war is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for peace and sustainable development.

Rania M.H. Baleela is director of the Toxic Organisms Research Centre at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. E-mail: raniabaleela@gmail.com. Husam Eldin E. Abugabr Elhag is assistant professor of biology at Shendi University, Sudan. E-mail: husamabugabr@gmail.com. This article is based on a [2025 article](#) published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*.