

NGO Education at Syrian Higher Education Institutions: A Tale of Two Universities

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Abstract. The Syrian crisis continues to have its toll on the Syrian people. Still, it creates a unique opportunity for NGOs to demonstrate their potential and contribute towards improving the conditions surrounding Syrian people and sustainable development. However, such a call comes quickly and without adequate training or enough preparations for NGO staff, reflecting on the efficiency and quality of NGOs' interventions and activities. This study aims at uncovering the status quo of NGO education in Syrian higher education institutions by surveying students and graduates of two leading Syrian public and private universities. It also tries to find out their preferences for the type of change they request to fill the gap in NGO education. In addition, it reveals the most needed training courses that should be offered to NGO staff as part of their Life Long Learning (LLL). We find that public university graduates/students tend, on average, to have a significantly lower evaluation of the level to which NGO-related topics are being covered in their curricula in comparison to graduates/students at private universities. In addition, students from public universities seem to be more interested in introducing Bachelor's and Master's degrees than adding one module on NGO management to Business Administration curricula. Strategic planning and decision-making are at the top of priorities for almost all respondents, regardless of sex or university affiliation, with the exception of younger students. Younger students have shown more interest in basic managerial skills and human resource development topics. Soft skills are the least requested topic for all categories except for the upper age group. Graduates and professionals seem to attach less importance to communication skills and human resource development topics.

Keywords: NGO education; higher education; sustainable development; LLL; Syria.

1. Introduction

The Syrian crisis continues to have a devastating impact on the Syrian people, with 6.2 million displaced Syrians and 5.6 million persons registered as refugees (World Bank, 2020). The number of internally displaced persons continued to increase to reach 6.9 million persons in 2021, with 5.38 million in need. In 2022, 14.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.2 million from 2021 (United Nations, 2022). In fact, the escalating conflicts around the world caused unprecedented waves of migrants that put immense pressure on governments and humanitarian agencies. In this context, the role of NGOs in providing food and shelter, saving lives, and protecting rights are crucial. This requires that NGOs have financial capabilities and qualified human resources that have the ability to respond to the evolving needs of displaced persons.

Kramer (2000), in his seminal article "The third sector in the third millennium," distinguishes between three trends to conceptualize the emergence of the NGO sector. First, the exponential growth in the number and size of nonprofit organisations in the United States since the 1960s with their overdependence on public funding. Despite the later decline in public funding in the 1980s, governmental agencies remain the main source of revenues for nonprofit organisations (Salamon, 1993). Second, the wave of privatization of many governmental activities started in the 1980s, and competition with NGOs in healthcare, education, and social activities forced them to invent new forms of income generation, including their shift to for-profit status (Salamon, 1998; Ryan, 1999) with many private businesses converting to nonprofit or establishing nonprofit subsidiaries. Third, the convergence and blurring of sectorial boundaries in a new mixed social economy (Ferris and Graddy, 1999). This supports Rein's (1989) prediction that NGOs are the main invention of the welfare state.

Syrian NGOs deliver most of the assistance, which represents a good practice to empower people to help themselves and to build their capacities for the provision of support to their community. However, according to Alzoubi (2015), Syrian NGOs are facing multi-level challenges, including management issues, weak soft and hard skills, donor dependency, and logistical skills. In addition, they lacked skills in obtaining finance, human resource management, and supply chain management. Only a few NGOs, particularly international NGOs (INGOs), implement financial planning, reporting, and auditing with weaknesses in daily accounting. Cooperation with governmental authorities is hindered by bureaucratic procedures & differences between officials & NGO representatives. In addition, the relationship with the private sector is beneficial but still low.

The current capacity-building process is not satisfying the needs of NGOs on the ground (UNHCR, 2018). The UNHCR emphasized the need for improved capacity among national NGOs, particularly in project drafting, financial management, and reporting. INGOs are aware of these needs and sometimes include activities in their

grants; however, solid capacity-building must be a separate commitment rather than an add-on to ongoing projects with other aims. Building solid capacity requires strategy, experienced trainers, careful focus, delivery methodology, and effective follow-up. In Syria, UNDP recently attempted to build capacity among NGO staff in wide valuable topics through programs. However, there is dissatisfaction about the absence of follow-up after the ongoing isolated & professionally developed initiatives. NGOs staffs expect more in-depth knowledge, mentoring, flexible learning methodologies, and tools not currently available. However, being conceived with professional focus only, they are neither implemented systematically nor based on the real needs of NGOs, therefore, they do not represent a solution.

Universities play an essential role in sustainable development by strengthening the local capacities of their communities and regions and thus meeting sustainability goals (O'Hara and Naicker, 2022). Thus, only by potentiating the HE role in terms of NGOs' current and future professionals' education will there be a sustainable improvement of the competencies NGOs staff need to achieve impact in their activities. HEIs must be seen as crucial players in the training of future graduates who will work as highly skilled NGOs professionals. Only with a solid HE education will they have the knowledge/skills/competences for effective & sustainable management & operation of NGOs. HEIs also have the responsibility of LLL provision to give the opportunity to current NGOs professionals to keep updating their skills.

This article attempts to survey students on the level of knowledge they have on NGO-related topics at 2 Syrian universities; Damascus University and Arab International University. It also aims to understand their views on the best way to integrate NGO-related topics in HE curricula. This analysis is based on the undeniable need for integrating and making the HE sector, specifically Syrian HEIs, the key players in the generation of future NGOs highly skilled professionals and for the provision of LLL for NGOs professionals. In addition, it reveals the most needed training courses that should be offered to NGO staff as part of their Life Long Learning (LLL). No prior studies exist on NGO education in Syrian higher education institutions.

We find that Public university graduates/students tend, on average, to have a significantly lower evaluation of the extent to which NGO-related topics are covered in their crucial, in comparison to graduate/students of private universities. In addition, students from public universities seem more interested in introducing Bachelor's and Master's degrees than adding one module on NGO management to Business Administration curricula. Strategic planning and decision-making are at the top of priorities for almost all respondents, regardless of sex or university affiliation, with the exception of younger students. Younger students have shown more interest in basic managerial skills and human resource development topics. Soft skills are the least requested topic for all categories except for the upper age group. Graduates and professionals seem to attach less importance to communication skills and human

resource development topics.

In the second section, we will briefly present the Syrian context of NGO sector and education. The third section will explain the research methodology and the characteristics and distribution of the study sample. The fourth section concludes highlights limitations and provides recommendations.

2. The Syrian Context for NGOs and NGO Education

The early start of the Syrian NGO sector can be traced to 1880 with the establishment of the first charity in Syria, which is called the Quraish Orphans Charity (Alsabbagh, 2019). The activities of NGOs were extended and strengthened after the Independence by the issue of Law 93 in 1958, which regulated the activities of NGOs in both Syria and Egypt. Interestingly, this law remains the governing document of the Syrian NGO sector until now.

From 1963 to 2005, there were limited number of authorised NGOs and they were mainly charitable organizations founded and linked to religious institutions. Since 2010, the Interests of Syrian NGOs have diversified and covered environmental, cultural, advocacy, and health issues, with a total number that reached 1485 NGO (Aldassouky and Hatahet, 2020). The last survey of Syrian NGOs was conducted in 2017 and found that the number of Syrian NGOs has reached 1582, with 500 NGOs registered in the capital, which represents around 32 percent of the total NGO population.

Two types of NGOs dominated the NGO sector before the eruption of the Syrian conflict; traditional charities composed of religious or ethnic focus NGOs, and the Government Organized Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) that were affiliated to governmental figures (Alhousseiny and Atar, 2021). However, the scale of the Syrian crisis forced NGOs with limited or no previous experience in humanitarian aid to act immediately and independently. Such intervention is claimed to be inadequate and rather inefficient. The well-documented increase in people's needs, including basic services and livelihoods, as well as the new challenges posed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, put further pressure on the shoulders of Syrian NGOs.

The Syrian higher education system comprises 8 public universities, 23 private universities, and four public higher institutes. Public universities are the main provider of postgraduate studies. The share of public universities of students is enormous, while there is an increased number of students enrolled in private universities (Mouselli et al., 2021). Syrian higher education shows resilience despite the war but suffers from unsatisfactory student services, weak technological infrastructure, and low digital skills (Chbib and Mouselli, 2020; Mouselli & Hasan, 2022). Business administration was one of the specializations that are very common in newly established private universities. However, neither public universities nor private universities have paid attention to NGO education. There is only one institute

that offers a high diploma in social services, but it is run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour which is located in Damascus.

However, within Syria, there are a very limited number of NGO specialists. For such a large number of NGOs, there is a real shortage of qualified NGO managers and specialists. To fill this gap and to meet NGO sector needs, many private training centers and INGOs, with the support of UN institutions, such as Bunian and Tamkeen, started to offer training on NGO-related topics. However, being perceived with a professional focus only, they are neither implemented systematically nor based on the real needs of NGOs; consequently, they do not represent a solution despite that they contributed to the country's development or at least interest in NGO education.

The institutional theory can be used as a rich framework to explain the impact of the environment on organisations (Zhang et al., 2014). Such impact causes institutions to seek survival by behaving independently of what efficient management of organizational activities stipulates. There are three types of pressures that usually lead the change in education; mimetic, normative and coercive pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

Mimetic pressures arise when organisations engage in a competition seeking superior performance. NGOs' staff become interested in developing their competencies to outperform competitors. Universities also are keen to offer new programs to distinguish themselves and enhance their images. Normative pressures usually come from governing bodies and professional entities that require certain modifications to norms. However, these pressures are not valid in the case of NGOs due to the absence of such governing bodies and professional associations.

Coercive pressures explain the noticeable increase in interest in NGO education among both NGOs and higher education institutions. On the one hand, international donors exert coercive pressures on NGOs because they control their access to finance and condition their funding on acquiring certain competencies. On the other hand, universities are forced to rationalize their programs and course offerings to meet market demands.

NGO education has long been considered part of public administration education, with NGOs considered part of the public administration environment and a key player in this space (Jeong, 2021). Salamon (1999) indicates that public administration schools should integrate NGO education into their curricula to prepare professional managers for the comprehensive public and nonprofit sectors. Smith (2012) asserts that understanding the principles and concepts of NGOs is vital for public administration education. Jeong (2013) argues that a large number of NGOs enter into social work as hybrid organisations that combine a social mission with business skills.

The Syrian crisis and the huge burden that is transferred to the Syrian NGO sector have given the further interest in NGO education among volunteers. Volunteers find this sector quite promising in terms of job opportunities and salaries in the crisis time.

Such increased interest in this sector meant that more people entered this sector for the first time without enough preparation and training.

In October 2019, the Syrian Government issued the Strategic Plan "Syria 2030" to illustrate its guiding policies and implementation framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. One of the five pillars of this strategic plan is human development which represents the social and educational dimensions. Such government support of NGO education paves the way for universities to modernise their curricula to accommodate the increased demand for NGO education.

3. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

In order to understand the status quo of NGO education from students' perspectives in Syria, a structured questionnaire method was applied. It consists of three parts. The first part is related to students' demographical characteristics such as sex, age, higher education institution type (public or private university), an education level (undergraduate or postgraduate), and specialization type. The second part of the questionnaire is related to their attitude toward current curricula coverage of NGO-related topics and their evaluation of the need for a module, bachelor or master's degree. The third part is related to their level of interest in attending courses on each of the NGO-related skills. A Likert scale measured respondents' evaluation of each statement from 1 to 5, where "1" means strong disagreement, and "5" means strong agreement.

The sample size was 201 respondents, and the population (the total number of Syrian students in higher education institutions) is around half a million. The research was conducted in Syrian public and private universities in June 2020. The questionnaire was distributed online through Syrian higher education institutions' students' representatives and social media students' groups (e.g., Facebook). In this research, 201 Syrian students from different higher education institutions participated. Students' demographical characteristics show that 58.2% of females and 41.8% of males were involved in the survey. 51.2% of respondents were in the age category between 20 and 25 years old. 67.2% of students are undergraduate students, 19.9% are postgraduates, and 12.9% of the survey participants are alumni (Table 1).

Distribution results of students by specialization demonstrate that most students (29.4%) have studied management, 22.9% of respondents have studied Banking & Finance, 16.9% of students in Accounting, and 11.9% of students studied Economics (Table 2).

Table 1: Sample's demographical characteristics (created by the authors)

Characteristic	Respondents number	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>	201	100

Female	117	58.2
Male	84	41.8
Age category	201	100
Less than 20	23	11.4
20-25	103	51.2
More than 25	75	37.3
Higher education institution type	201	100
Public university	117	58.2
Private university	84	41.8
Education level	201	100
Undergraduate education	135	67.2
Postgraduate education	40	19.9
Alumni	26	12.9

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Specialization (created by the authors)

Specialization	Respondents number	Percentage (%)
Accounting	34	16.9
Banking & Finance	46	22.9
Economics	24	11.9
Management	59	29.4
Marketing	14	7.0
Others	24	11.9
Total	201	100

A Mann-Whitney test of the difference between responses from public/private university students, with respect to the coverage of NGO topics in the curricula, shows that public university students tend, on average, to have a significantly lower evaluation of the extent to which NGO-related topics are covered in their curricula, in comparison to students at private universities (Table 3). In fact, a simple cross-tabulation of university affiliation vs. views of NGO topic coverage (not reported here) shows that these views or evaluations are not independent of university affiliation.

This can be explained by the fact that private universities have more flexibility in choosing up-to-date English-written textbooks and learning materials, while public universities usually use textbooks or handouts written in Arabic by faculty members. Global editions of English-written textbooks are usually richer in content and more up-to-date. Nonetheless, it is interesting that students of both public and private universities have shown the very similar distribution of opinion with respect to the need to teach a module on NGO, to introduce a Bachelor's degree, and, to some extent, to introduce a Master's degree as well. This is shown in the three histograms in Figure

1.

Table 3: Respondents' Evaluation by University Type (created by the authors)

Statement	University Type	Mean Rank
Current curricula cover topics related to NGO management!	Public	93.44
	Private	111.53
Mann-Whitney Test	4029.500	
Wilcoxon W	10932.500	
Z	-2.247	
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.025	

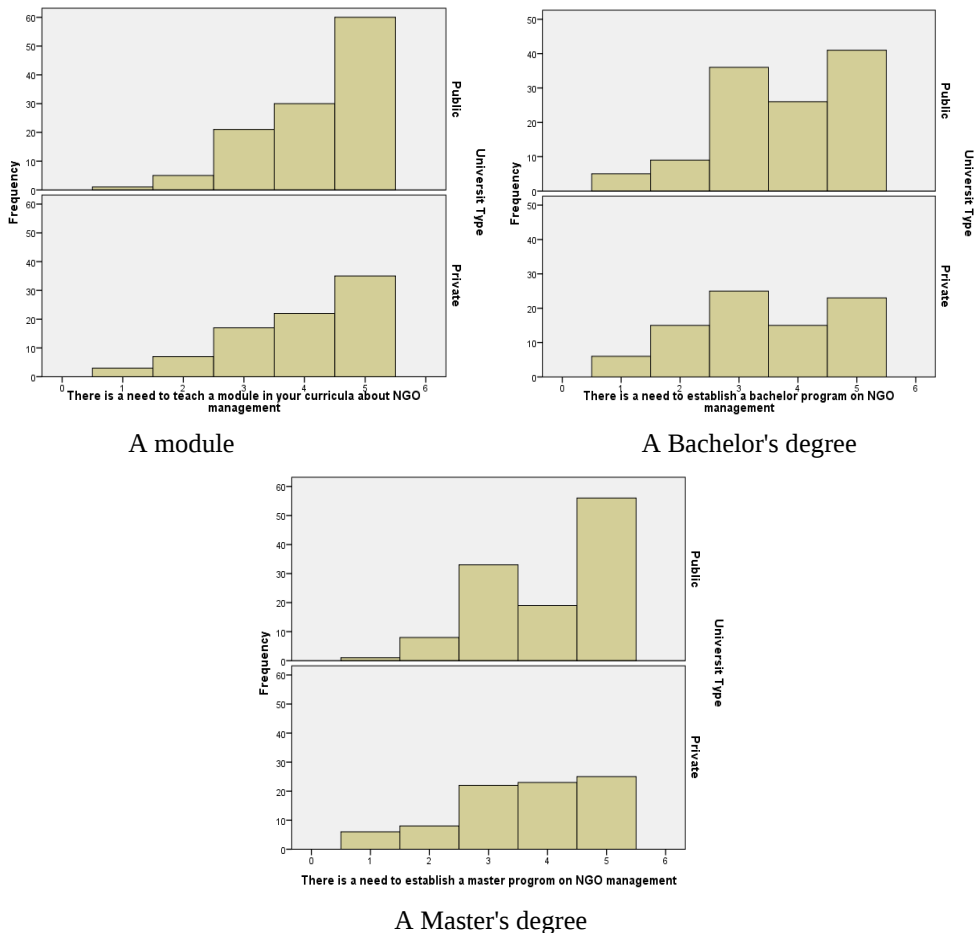


Fig. 1: Respondents' preferences by university type (created by the authors)

Table 4: Respondents' Preferences by University Type (created by the authors)

	University Type	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney Test	Z
NGO Module	Public	106.46	4275.500	-1.863 (0.092)
	Private	93.40		
Bachelor Program	Public	107.77	4122.000	-2.020 (0.043)
	Private	91.57		
Master Program	Public	108.70	4013.000	-2.238 (0.020)
	Private	90.28		

Note: P-values in brackets

However, although the range of distribution is generally similar, the central tendency is generally not the same. A Mann Whitney test (Table 4) shows that students from public universities are more interested in introducing Bachelor's and Master's degrees. This should not give the impression that students of private universities are not interested, as the distribution of their evaluation is heavily skewed in favor of introducing these degrees.

A clustered Bar chart relating respondents' evaluation of their knowledge on NGO versus their interest in attending NGO courses, should such courses be made available, is shown in Figure 2. Indeed, the higher the respondent is confident in his / her knowledge regarding NGO topics, the less he or she is interested in attending courses related to NGOs. However, the figure clearly shows that the majority of students have claimed a low to the modest level of knowledge. It also shows that the count of students showing average to high interest in NGO-related courses (that is, the count of those who stated that they agree plus the count of those who stated that they strongly agree) is sharply higher than the count of the less interested (disagree or strongly disagree). It is true that lacking a given skill does not directly translate into interest in getting training on that specific skill, but responses show that, on average, the lower the level of previous knowledge, the higher the interest in attending courses to fill the gap.

We move to the third part of the questionnaire, which is related to the respondent's level of interest in attending courses on each of the NGO-related skills. A histogram of the distribution of the level of interest in attending courses on each of the NGO-related skills shows that all distributions are heavily skewed in favor of attending each of the suggested courses. Even the skill that happened to receive the lowest level of attention (soft skills for society leaders) is still clearly in demand.

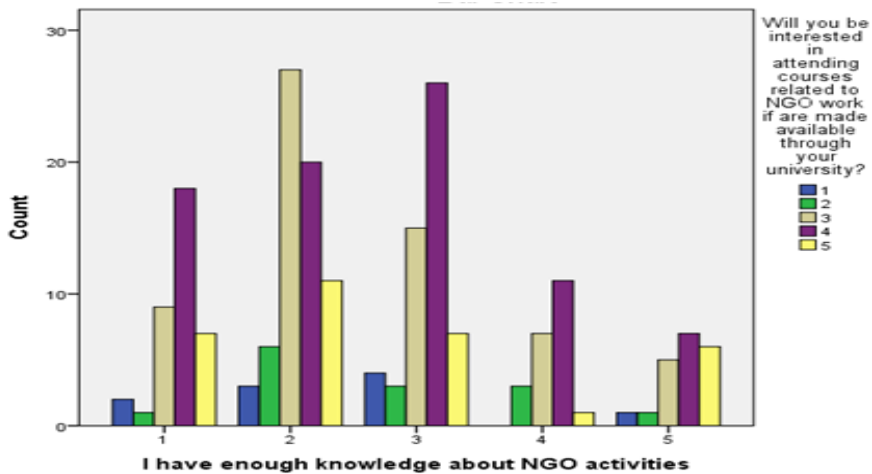


Fig. 2: Respondents' interest vs. knowledge

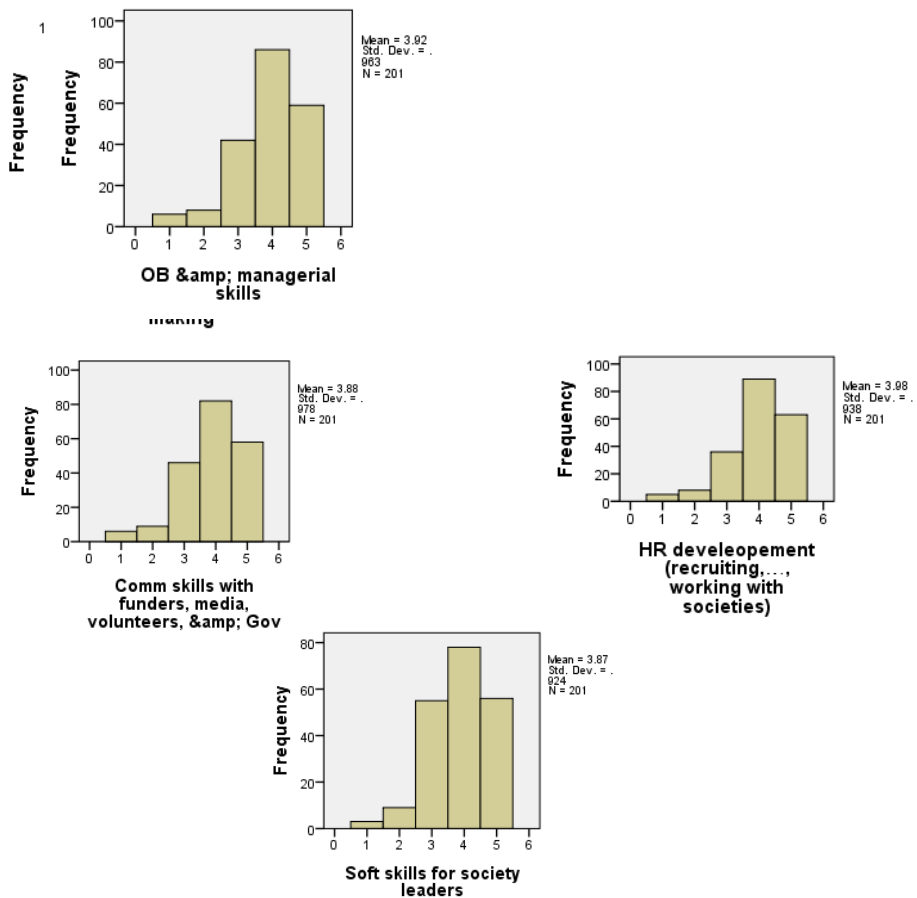


Fig. 3: Distribution of the level of interest in attending courses on NGO-related skills

The mean response indicating the level of interest in a given training course group is a good guide on how respondents prioritize their training needs. All suggested courses were evaluated significantly above average, but if one insists on drawing a conclusion on which courses are of the utmost interest for each group, we can deduce the following from Table 5, where dark/light cells indicate higher/lower interest in a given course group. Strategic planning and decision-making are at the top of priorities for almost all respondents, regardless of sex or university affiliation, with the exception of younger students. Younger students have shown more interest in basic managerial skills and human resource development topics. Soft skills are the last item on the list for most of the categories. Graduates and professionals seem to attach less importance to communication skills and human resource development topics. There are other differences among groups, but these differences are rather minor, and one hardly needs a statistical test to check for their insignificance.

Table 5: The Level of Interest in Suggested Courses (by Sex, Age, and Public vs. Private Universities)

group	Mean	Communication skills with funders, media, volunteers, & Government	HR development (recruiting, working with societies)	Organization behavior & managerial skills	Soft skills for Society leaders	Strategic planning & decision making
Sex	Female	3.97	4.02	4.02	3.91	4.03
	Male	3.75	3.93	3.77	3.82	4.04
University Type	Public	3.97	4.03	4.03	3.97	4.09
	Private	3.76	3.92	3.76	3.74	3.96
Age Stratum	less than 20	3.65	3.74	3.74	3.57	3.57
	20 to less 25	3.83	3.99	3.80	3.80	3.97
	25 and more	4.01	4.04	4.13	4.07	4.27
	Average	3.88	3.98	3.92	3.87	4.03

For better clarity, the prioritization expressed by respondents is summarized in Table 6 without numbers. It is clear that strategic planning and decision-making should receive a larger weight in the training package, while soft skills may have a smaller weight.

However, all courses have been graded above average, as mentioned earlier, so this description does not suggest that given courses should be omitted, but it does suggest that the weight of each course can be decently tuned to meet the priorities expressed by the respondents.

Table 6: A Summary of Respondents' Priority by Group (created by the authors)

Group	Highest Priority	Lower priority
Private university students	Strategic Planning	Soft skills
Public university students	Strategic Planning	Soft skills
Lower age groups	HR development & managerial skills	Soft skills, strategic planning
Upper age group	Strategic Planning	Communication skills.
Males	Strategic Planning	Communication skills.
Females	Strategic Planning	Soft Skills
All respondents, on average	Strategic Planning	Soft Skills

4. Conclusions

For universities to meet their global or local obligations and advance sustainable development objectives, they need to first pay attention to their own social-cultural and environmental context. Offering NGO-related programs and LLL on NGO requirements will help address both the needs of the economic marketplace as defined by economic capacity-building goals and the social-cultural context systems and consequently achieve sustainability performance goals.

This article explores the status quo of NGO education at two of the leading universities in Syria. It indicates that there is a big room for improvement in HE curricula to accommodate NGO-related topics. It rings the bell that spontaneous response to teaching NGO topics is not enough to enable students or trainees to acquire the needed skills. A modern, multidisciplinary and innovative curricula modernisation will allow better education and training of the next generation of NGOs professionals for the acquisition of the real competences needed to access the NGOs labour market and meet its evolving demands. In terms of LLL provision, the intervention of universities through LLL courses is vital. In general, strategic planning and decision-making are at the top of priorities for almost all respondents, regardless of sex or university affiliation. Younger students have shown more interest in basic managerial skills and human resource development topics.

We recommend that Syrian higher education institutions design master programs on NGO management that include key topics for the effective management and operation of NGOs with a strong multidisciplinary perspective. We also encourage Syrian universities to provide LLL courses to NGO staff so that graduates will have their follow-up by HEIs that will also provide continuous quality training to supply the NGO labour market with highly skilled professionals.

This study is a pioneer in demonstrating NGO education status in Syrian higher education. However, we only investigate and illustrate the results of two universities. Future studies may consider the inclusion of other universities, public and private. Moreover, this article did not evaluate the quality of training courses on NGO-related topics offered by private institutes or UN agencies. A careful screening of the quality of such courses may help in the design of future LLL courses.

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