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Protecting higher education from attack

While there is a growing body of work investigating the scale, nature and impact of attacks on children and schools, far less attention has been placed on attacks on higher education, and still less on the protection and prevention measures that are being or could be taken. The lack of research and the limited attention given to developing and implementing such measures represent a serious omission on the part of the international community, as the higher education sector has a vital role to play not only in scientific progress but in political, economic, social and cultural progress too, including in the development and provision of primary and secondary education. This chapter explores why attacks on higher education occur and how they might be prevented or their impact reduced. A starting point would be to invest in evidence-gathering and advocacy aimed at increasing accountability, as well as in strengthening emergency protection and prevention measures

Higher education is a public good. The university sector throughout the world has a complex and multi-faceted role in developing human capital vital for scientific, political, economic, social and cultural progress. This includes developing pedagogy and providing future teachers for schools; acting as a point of critical reflection on national development; preparing young adults to become active citizens and future leaders; and offering a potentially autonomous space, independent of state, capital, religion and society, where key issues can be debated and solutions developed through evidence-based discourse. Attacks on this sector amount to attacks on all levels of education, as well as on intellectual, cultural and economic heritage, political stability and

social cohesion. Consequently, such attacks must be challenged with greater rigour and resources.

For the purpose of this essay, an attack on higher education, as with attacks on other levels of education, is defined as any threat or deliberate use of force, carried out for political, military, ideological, sectarian, ethnic or religious reasons, against higher education institutions, administrators, academic and other staff, or students. These include acts of intentional violence resulting in damage or destruction of institutions or facilities, or physical harm or death to individuals. They also include deliberate acts of coercion, intimidation or threats of physical force that create a climate of fear and repression that undermines academic freedom and educational functions. The definition, however, does not include non-violent infringement of academic freedom or discrimination in hiring, promotion or admission.³⁰³

Attacks on higher education communities have been documented in armed conflicts, but many also occur under repressive regimes where armed conflict may not be present.³⁰⁴ Indeed, some of the most damaging attacks on higher education happen in situations where universities and their academics and students are perceived by repressive authorities as a ‘threat’ in a way that schools, teachers and pupils typically are not. As a result, they may be at heightened risk of individual attacks or campaigns comprising multiple attacks over an extended period, whether aimed at the isolation and persecution of a single target or the intimidation of the higher education community as a whole.

In this essay, we look at why attacks on higher education occur and the impact of such attacks before considering how they might be deterred or prevented and how, once they occur, they might be addressed. The chapter concludes with a brief synopsis of the core arguments and their implications, highlighting knowledge gaps and pointing towards areas for future research and policy development.

Motives for attacks on higher education

The motives for attacks on higher education are multiple and they vary within and across contexts. Academics and higher education students can be

both supporters of, and threats to, the power and legitimacy of state and non-state actors. Thus they can be targeted for a number of reasons, falling under three main categories, each of which is broadly ‘political’ in character:

- The subject and nature of teaching, research, writing and publication;
- Identity, religious, sectarian and gender issues;
- Factors relating to armed conflict or high levels of violence or coercion in society (including, in the context of an armed conflict, strategic and tactical considerations related to destroying state symbols and defeating the enemy; proximity of university campuses to government buildings; a desire to convert university facilities to military use; terrorism, insurgency or counter-insurgency strategies; weakening of the state and the rule of law; and the militarization of opposition groups).

Any particular attack may involve more than one motive within one or more of these categories, especially where multiple perpetrators or targets may be involved.

Impact of attacks on higher education

Attacks on universities, students and academics may constitute violations of the right to education and other human rights, including freedom of expression. The most serious attacks on higher education are those that violate the right to life and the personal liberties of members of the higher education community, including abduction, disappearance, torture, extra-judicial killing, indirectly induced or forced exile, arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, trial and arbitrary imprisonment, threats and harassment.³⁰⁵ Apart from their grave consequences for the individuals directly targeted and their families, these attacks can undermine local research and teaching by triggering self-censorship, retreat, fear and flight or ‘brain drain’³⁰⁶ that can silence a whole academic community.³⁰⁷ They may also have a serious impact on wider issues of access to, and quality of, education at all levels, in both the short and long term, given the interdependence of the different levels of an

education system, wherein higher education institutions and personnel develop instructional methods and content, and train teachers, administrators and other education professionals. Furthermore, they may adversely impact the wider society, curtailing the contributions of higher education to the development of human capital and knowledge that foster economic and social progress.

How can attacks on higher education be prevented?

UN agencies, national and international civil society organizations and national governments have developed measures to protect education in situations of fragility, violence, repression, humanitarian emergency and armed conflict.³⁰⁸ These range from local initiatives to governmental and transnational projects and reforms, and aim variously at protecting civilian lives and education infrastructures, promoting the right to education and academic freedom, and preventing attacks from taking place. A 2011 GCPEA study categorizes such measures as falling under four groups: 1) protection; 2) prevention; 3) advocacy; and 4) monitoring.³⁰⁹ The focus of the study, and of the majority of measures developed to date, has been on situations affecting primary and secondary education, but it may be possible to apply these to the protection of higher education, while keeping in mind that many attacks on higher education occur outside of conflict situations and may therefore warrant specific responses tailored to the sector.

Measures to protect higher education should focus on increasing protection, prevention and accountability through greater application of existing domestic and international laws, and enhanced monitoring, reporting, and domestic and international advocacy.

Protection and prevention measures

Restricting military use of university facilities

In countries such as Côte d’Ivoire,³¹⁰ Somalia³¹¹ and Yemen,³¹² state forces or armed non-state groups have used universities for military purposes such as weapons caches, strategic bases or training camps. This increases the risk that attacks aimed at such forces or groups might result in intentional or

collateral damage to facilities; and, if the university continues to function despite being used for military purposes, it increases the risk of harm to members of higher education communities.³¹³ This also undermines the autonomy of higher education institutions and risks creating a perception that the institution and its personnel are aligned with combatants, increasing their vulnerability (discussed below). Protection against such military use of universities and other educational buildings is extensively covered later in this report in the essay: ‘Military use of schools and universities: changing behaviour’.³¹⁴

Strengthening university autonomy

While there is extensive literature on the topic of university autonomy, it is not often linked explicitly to the issue of security from violent or coercive attacks. However, recent work commissioned by GCPEA³¹⁵ examines the relationship between autonomy and security, and reflects on the security-enhancing potential of university autonomy around the world. The work lays out some of the ways in which enhancing university autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state can provide a possible model for reducing attacks on higher education systems, particularly when coupled with university-controlled internal security provision. These ideas include developing and extending the notion of the university as a space outside direct state control (even when funding is largely state-provided), including control of recruitment, financial and administrative management, curriculum and freedom of research. It also extends to the prohibition of state forces entering university campuses (unless invited in by the institutional leadership or in extremely rare circumstances). The authors argue that: ‘The ultimate goal of all of these efforts should be to establish a culture of autonomy and security, recognized not only within the higher education sector but in the wider society, in which higher education spaces are “off limits” to attacks, freeing them to develop their research and educational functions to their fullest and to the maximum benefit of all.’³¹⁶

The case of Colombia provides an illustrative example. In response to campus demonstrations against higher education reforms, successive Colombian governments have challenged the autonomy of university

space, arguing that the state has the right to intervene in all national territory to protect its citizens. Similarly, they have argued that armed non-state actors, particularly the guerrilla movements, are using the university as a space for recruitment and incitement.³¹⁷ Many infringements of higher education space have occurred over the past two decades, resulting in violent clashes between students and state forces and the deaths of several students.³¹⁸

The authors of the GCPEA study note that to have full protective effect, a culture of respect for institutional autonomy must include not only the state but also non-state actors and the academic community itself. In Colombia, this broad culture has been undermined by decades of violence, leaving the Colombian academic community vulnerable to threats and attacks by illegal paramilitary forces and their successor groups, such as the Black Eagles.³¹⁹ Meanwhile, the state, which has failed to provide universities with full security from such attacks, responds to them by limiting the universities’ autonomy. As the study notes, full respect for autonomy requires more than the state refraining from committing attacks. States also have a responsibility to protect higher education communities from attack – especially from para-state forces, insurgencies or criminal gangs which are less likely to be subject to the same pressures as states to comply with legal norms and policies – but in ways that respect and promote autonomy.

Physical protection of higher education

Increasing protection through defensive, physical measures has been one of the traditional responses to attacks on primary and secondary education, as cases across a number of contexts show.³²⁰ Physical protection strategies for higher education could similarly include defensive reinforcement of infrastructure, such as installing bullet-proof windows and blast-proof walls; installing security ramps and other anti-suicide bombing measures (e.g. metal detectors, security cameras and checkpoints);³²¹ changing lecture times to fit with arrival and departure in daylight hours; escorting higher education professionals, students and education trade unionists en route to and from university; and providing

bodyguards and blast-proof vehicles for high-profile staff and trade unionists. These strategies could also include providing armed or unarmed security forces around or within universities, although these should be provided in ways that recognize and enhance the autonomy concerns unique to higher education, whenever practical (see above).

There are a number of country-specific examples of physical protection strategies involving university campuses and communities. In Colombia, a Working Group on the Human Rights of Teachers composed of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)³²² and representatives from the Colombian government and the trade union movement provided threatened or targeted teachers, university academics and trade union representatives with administrative and financial support for protection measures. Special committees were set up that studied on a case-by-case basis the type and degree of risk and the type of ensuing protection, including armed escorts/guards, mobile phones, bulletproof vehicles and temporary relocation.³²³

It is not clear to what extent the securitization and militarization of educational staff and buildings may mitigate or exacerbate attacks, and if, and in which ways, such measures may affect learning. While a high risk of attacks may necessitate increasing security at and around universities, physical protection strategies present a number of dilemmas: first, escorting large groups of students and university professors collectively may render these groups and the respective guards more exposed to attacks; second, concentrating security forces around universities may turn students or scholars into individual targets outside the university campus; third, enhancing infrastructure security may protect university buildings but equally it may turn them into ‘attractive’ locations for military use by armed forces; fourth, there is a risk that the use of self-defensive force by education staff could be seen or interpreted as taking an active part in the hostilities, thus turning them into potential targets.³²⁴

Moreover, effective implementation of such strategies in the higher education context may be difficult for several reasons: first, attacks on students and

academics often occur off-campus; second, attacks that take place inside higher education buildings have in some cases been carried out through suicide attacks or using remotely detonated bombs, which may make external security measures ineffective; and third, security measures and armed responses risk limiting or restraining the autonomy of universities, especially when the perpetrator of aggression and violence is the state through its security forces.³²⁵ Increasing use of university-controlled private security guards might be a partial solution to these challenges, at least as far as respecting autonomy concerns, but not in all cases. Furthermore, even the best trained private security forces will be of little use in situations where the state itself is the source of the threat to universities and to the perceived ‘enemies’ within their walls.³²⁶

Promoting resilience: alternative sites and modes of higher education provision

Flexible education provision has been tested in places such as Belarus, Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Zimbabwe. It implies reducing the risk of students and staff as visible targets by removing them from the context of traditional learning places, reducing the time they spend in class by rescheduling lectures and providing them with alternative learning modalities (e.g. home-schooling, community-based learning or distance learning).

In 2007, a year rife with attacks on Iraqi academics and scholars, the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education allowed academics and researchers to work from home for part of the week in order to minimize movement around university buildings.³²⁷ While similar measures may prove efficient in reducing the number of fatalities, they do little to reduce death threats or to prevent the ensuing exodus. In this regard, more can be done with exiled academics either to find ways through which they can still contribute to the national education system, or to better integrate them in the new host country, giving them the chance to continue their work throughout the period abroad.

For example, distance learning programmes have been developed by a number of organizations,³²⁸ enabling exiled Iraqi scholars to record lectures that

are screened at universities within Iraq and to connect in ‘real time’ with students and faculty at Iraqi universities,³²⁹ and fostering exchange between Iraqi universities and universities abroad to improve access and quality of higher education within Iraq.³³⁰ In Israel/Palestine, distance learning has been used to mitigate problems associated with university closures and travel risks for students and academics at Palestinian universities.³³¹ In Zimbabwe, virtual classrooms have enabled academics in the diaspora as well as non-Zimbabwean lecturers to deliver lectures in areas such as health science and veterinary science to students at the University of Zimbabwe.³³² These are fields of study in which there are staffing and teaching capacity gaps at the university,³³³ as many higher education staff have felt compelled to leave the country.³³⁴

Other alternative sites or modes of education provision include home schooling or community-based learning. Following the removal of autonomy and the repression by the Serbian state throughout the 1990s and until the 1999 war, the education of Kosovo Albanian children and youth was based on a parallel schooling system that operated from the primary to the tertiary level.³³⁵ As a political response to increasing pressure placed by Belgrade on Kosovo Albanian scholars and activists, the parallel ‘Albanian University of Prishtina’ was reorganized into a diaspora-funded system whose classes were offered in the basements of private apartment buildings;³³⁶ such a political choice had protective implications. There exists little comparative research on the topic of flexible education, however, and there is little substantive evidence on whether such a system could work for urban-based higher education in larger settings and in conflict areas.

Alternative learning programmes, when and where implemented, also raise questions about the quality, feasibility and sustainability of the education provided as well as about relations with the formal education system. With regard to higher education, the lack of empirical research renders it unclear to what extent and for how long such alternative learning programmes can prove to be useful, how they can be certified and what their overall impact is on the quality of education.

Recovery measures for academics in exile: fellowships and multiple relocations

Many of the international networks and organizations that engage in advocacy on behalf of threatened academics provide support for relocation to other countries, including offering, finding or funding temporary academic positions, as well as professional capacity development programmes and research fellowships.³³⁷ Clearly, much of this work provides a vital lifeline for vulnerable and threatened academics. But it also raises important issues related to brain drain and the well-being of those academic communities left behind.

For any academic or scholar, the decision whether to stay or leave is a very personal one. It reflects calculations about physical safety of the individual and her or his family; about work prospects; and about the future of the country in which she or he is working. The decision to leave is rarely taken lightly, and it is often not intended to be a ‘forever’ decision. However, exiled academics may be more effective when safely outside of their home countries, living in conditions that allow them to produce academic works – and often send them home – in a way that would otherwise not have been possible under conditions of attack and life-threatening insecurity.

Reversing brain drain is not impossible and a multi-faceted response towards ending impunity and increasing resources and protection for higher education personnel would, in many cases, further promote returns. More specifically, the risk of brain drain could be reduced by: increasing support and protection measures for scholars and academics before they feel compelled to flee the country; developing particular programmes that would ease and support their eventual reintegration while still in exile and after they return to their home country; facilitating increased security provision; and increasing support from colleagues in the region and beyond to prevent feelings of isolation.

Underground and in-exile universities

One of the few cases of entire universities relocated in exile is the European Humanities University (EHU) in Belarus³³⁸ which, following government efforts to assert control over the university, relocated to

Lithuania with support from over a dozen governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, foundations, corporations and individuals.³³⁹ Many of the staff and students still live in Belarus and endure regular harassment from the Belarus authorities when travelling between university and home. A similar example was the establishment in Syria of the private International University for Science and Technology in 2005.³⁴⁰ The institution was founded by a group of Iraqi professors who, having fled Iraq following targeted assassinations of academics, pooled their savings, opened the first English-language university (with both Iraqi and Syrian students enrolled) and recruited other Iraqi professors from Iraq.³⁴¹ The university was still operational in 2013, although it had had to adapt to conditions of insecurity resulting from the Syrian conflict.³⁴²

A further example of alternative, though widely known, higher education provision is the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran. It was founded in 1987 as a result of systematic discrimination and exclusion from universities of the religious minority group Baha'i.³⁴³ Characterized by an innovative teaching-learning environment, courses that were initially delivered by correspondence are now provided through on-line communication technologies. In addition to the on-line platform, an affiliated global faculty that involves hundreds of accredited professors from universities outside Iran assists BIHE as researchers, teachers and consultants.³⁴⁴ However, in 2012 the Special Rapporteur on Iran reported that in June 2011 the Ministry of Science and Technology had declared the activities of the institute illegal and that all diplomas and degrees issued by it had no legal validity; and noted that some individuals affiliated to the university had since been arrested.³⁴⁵

Community protection

Mechanisms of protecting education from attack based on community engagement have been tested in rural settings and for primary and secondary education, while to date there have been no examples of their effectiveness for higher education. For higher education institutions and academic communities, mainly located in urban areas, the potential of using

local community leaders and links to offer protection is much weaker. Local people may not identify with a university, which likely draws its student population from a wide area, in the same way that they do with the schools their own children attend.

Furthermore, community-based protection often implies negotiation and bargaining with religious leaders or ideology-driven armed groups. But such people may not see higher education students and academics – who are often viewed as sources of power or threats to power – as 'neutral' in the way that younger schoolchildren and their teachers are generally perceived. Negotiating security would therefore probably require a much greater degree of trade-off and compromise, which might in turn be detrimental to academic freedom or the rights of specific groups within the university, such as female students. Moreover, community-based measures are likely to offer little protection against violence or coercion by the institutions of the state itself.

Negotiated codes of conduct as protective/preventive measures

Initiatives of negotiation to turn schools into safe sanctuaries, such as the *Schools as Zones of Peace* programme carried out in Nepal, have not yet been applied to protecting higher education communities from attack. It is thus not clear whether, to what extent and how they would work at this level. The university, unlike the school, is often a setting for intense political debate. Higher education communities often seek greater autonomy and academic freedom to engage in teaching, research and debates on pressing societal issues; consequently, they might be resistant to strategies that could be perceived as requiring a trade-off between unfettered academic activity and security. At the same time, the rapid expansion of international higher education partnerships and exchanges, ranging from higher education ministries to institutions and administrators, academics and students, may create opportunities for negotiating standards of behaviour, including increased protection. Large, influential higher education networks and associations in particular, with increasingly global memberships where participation and good standing are prerequisites for international

recognition and prestige, may provide platforms for norm-setting.³⁴⁶ Pilot studies, research and consultation with stakeholders are needed to better understand under what conditions such participatory processes might lead to agreements, codes of conduct and the standards which strengthen the status of universities as zones of peace.

Accountability measures

Reducing impunity for perpetrators of attacks on higher education communities is essential to providing justice to victims, deterring future attacks and combating some of the most harmful negative impacts of attacks on higher education, including self-censorship, isolation, involuntary exile and brain drain.

While non-state actors are often implicated in attacks, states and state-entities bear primary responsibility for protecting higher education communities. Yet too often states and state-entities are themselves implicated in attacks on higher education communities, directly or indirectly, or they fail to investigate incidents and hold perpetrators accountable. UN agencies, governments and international civil society organizations, including both human rights organizations and international higher education networks and associations, must do more to pressure states to recognize and adhere to their responsibilities.

Campaigns aimed at raising awareness of attacks on higher education should emphasize state action and responsibilities and might include positive, negotiated approaches to encouraging more effective protection and prevention measures by states, as well as more adversarial efforts to improve protection, including highlighting state involvement, complicity or failures to protect in reporting and inter-state mechanisms and bringing formal legal complaints under existing legal standards.

As to the latter, international humanitarian, human rights and criminal law provides general rights and protections which higher education and members of higher education communities enjoy to the same extent as other institutions and citizens, such as the protection regarding the physical integrity of civilians and infrastructure not used for military purposes, the

right to freedom of expression, and so forth.³⁴⁷ In addition, certain international instruments offer specific protections to higher education, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) core Conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel defining autonomy and academic freedom. Efforts should be made to encourage and reinforce local and international legal practitioners in using the laws at their disposal to advocate for the protection of higher education communities and their members.

Reporting and advocacy measures

Monitoring and reporting

Monitoring means the systematic collection and analysis of information. Accurate information about individual attacks or national patterns is crucial for enhancing prevention and providing protection. However, information is often lacking as to ‘who’ and ‘what’ is targeted, the reasons behind attacks, and the effects and trends over time.³⁴⁸

Several actors have an explicit or implicit mandate to monitor and respond to attacks on education. Theoretically, governments are in the best position to monitor attacks on higher education but this monitoring is often inadequate and where state security or armed forces are the perpetrator of attacks, they may not be trusted or appropriate. Efforts at collecting data should be complemented by the work of police, prosecutors and criminal courts for investigating and prosecuting attacks that constitute criminal violations under domestic and international law. UN bodies can also play a monitoring role, while international and local NGOs may help to fill the gaps of UN monitoring systems or to compensate for the lack of will or capacity of government authorities. The UN and NGOs may have to take the lead where the government is itself the source of the abuse.³⁴⁹

In Colombia, the Ombudsman’s office monitors human rights situations in many areas, working as an early warning system for preventing abuses. It has played a pivotal role in reporting threats to, and attacks on, communities, trade unionists and

teachers. However, government authorities have not always taken into consideration or reacted through protection measures to risk reports from the Ombudsman's office reporting human rights violations in the country.³⁵⁰ Elsewhere, government actions can actually endanger higher education. In India, government troops and paramilitary police have been based in schools and on at least one college campus as part of their counter-insurgency strategy against the Naxalites, a practice that has increased the risk that these facilities may be attacked or that students and staff may be caught in the crossfire.³⁵¹

More generally, governments may lack the capacity or the will to monitor attacks on education. In particular, this is often the case in conflict-affected areas. Governments may not be operative in, exert control over, or be in communication with many areas within the country's territory. In other cases, governments may be implicated in the attacks, so they have an interest in obstructing or diverting the whole process of data monitoring and collection.

UN human rights mechanisms, such as the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and its Special Procedures, treaty bodies, and fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry are well positioned to monitor, report and hold states accountable for their human rights violations related to the higher education community. Through the UPR, the human rights records of all UN member states are reviewed, allowing for an opportunity to inject attention to higher education through that process. The Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights are treaty bodies that monitor a number of human rights obligations relevant to the protection of higher education; more information relating to any violations of these obligations should be presented to the treaty bodies. Similarly, the joint ILO/UNESCO Committee of Experts is charged with monitoring and promoting adherence to the 1997 Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel; the committee may provide another avenue for presenting evidence of state failure to protect higher education from attack. UN fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry should also be encouraged to specifically investigate violations of humanitarian law and human rights

committed against the higher education community. For example, the first Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,³⁵² which investigated alleged violations of human rights between March 2011 and November 2011, did not report on the raid by security forces on the dormitories of students at Damascus University in June 2011, when three students were killed, 21 injured and 130 arrested after students refused to participate in pro-government rallies.³⁵³ Similarly, in its later report of 16 August 2012,³⁵⁴ the commission did not report on a raid by security forces at Aleppo University in May 2012, when four students were killed, 28 injured and 200 arrested.³⁵⁵

Other UN bodies that have mandates related to human rights, education and conflict are in a good position to monitor and report attacks on education. Several of them are better positioned to monitor attacks on primary and secondary levels of education, and thus attacks on higher education are monitored less. To be explored is whether such agencies as OHCHR, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection and Education Clusters, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) might contribute to efforts to promote and improve assessment and monitoring of attacks on higher education. The monitoring work of some of these agencies is activated only to the extent that attacks on higher education affect humanitarian access, thus leaving large gaps in reporting. The UN MRM has the most explicit mandate to monitor attacks on education at the levels of schools, students and teachers, but higher education is not within its purview.

Local and international NGOs may play an important role in monitoring and reporting attacks on higher education, especially in those cases where government or state-backed forces have been implicated in attacks. Scholars at Risk has recently launched such an initiative to track and report on five defined types of attacks on higher education communities and their members: improper travel restrictions; retaliatory discharge or dismissal; wrongful detention; wrongful prosecution; and killings, violence or disappearances. An 'other' category is used to track incidents outside the defined categories which may

significantly impair academic freedom or the human rights of members of higher education communities, such as violent student unrest, systemic discrimination or intimidation, university closures, military use of higher education facilities and direct attacks on university facilities or materials.³⁵⁶ Dissemination of monitoring data by email, a website and in periodic reports will help raise awareness and support future advocacy for greater protection.

Documenting and reporting attacks are important for holding perpetrators accountable, prosecuting them at different levels and deterring future attacks. However, collecting data that seek to map and document responsibility for attacks is far more difficult than reporting attacks. Current monitoring efforts reflect some progress but also significant gaps.

National and transnational advocacy campaigns

Linked to the need for monitoring and reporting mechanisms is the crucial role that national and international civil society advocacy – as a mechanism of reporting, accountability, protection and prevention – can play in addressing the issue of attacks on higher education and academic freedom, particularly if the perpetrator is a national government in a ‘non-conflict’ situation, which is often the case in the higher education sector. Transnational networks, linked through a myriad of organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Education International and activated by national civil society and human rights organizations, can be – when successfully mobilized and coordinated – a powerful force for protection of higher education communities.

Letters of protest and ‘urgent actions’ sent to international organizations, solidarity networks, and pressure on government embassies can raise the international profile of violations, making them visible and increasing the costs of politically-motivated violence or coercion. All of this pressure relies on national civil society and human rights organizations providing regular and well-documented evidence upon which campaigns can be based.

The effectiveness of this type of protection measure relies on the perpetrator’s sensitivity and need to maintain international respectability. This appears intimately related to the need of nation states to be

legitimated both domestically and internationally and to be seen as accepted members of the international community. This is reflected in the increase in state signatories to human rights agreements over the past four decades, which appear important not just on the international stage but also for national public consumption.³⁵⁷ Similar reputational pressures may be an avenue for increasing protection for higher education communities, insofar as the higher education sector is highly reputation-sensitive: academic personnel, students, institutions and national systems are themselves increasingly integrated, and eager to partner with international counterparts who could be mobilized to demand greater security, autonomy and accountability.

In research on transnational advocacy movements, Keck and Sikkink³⁵⁸ talk about the ‘boomerang effect’ whereby channels for change are blocked at the national level and processes of transnational advocacy assist in mobilizing external actors to pressure the state and therefore change its behaviour. Such transnational civil society pressure appears to be an important variable in encouraging human rights compliance and this is where global civil society activism has the potential to make a real difference. This can provide a solid rationale for an international advocacy strategy on higher education attacks. The recent campaign to free Miguel Ángel Beltrán, the Colombian sociologist, is an illustrative example. From the time of his detention in May 2009 to his release in June 2011, a powerful global campaign gathered petitions signed by thousands of teachers and academics and activists,³⁵⁹ and lobbied the Colombian government and their own respective national governments to raise Dr Beltrán’s case.³⁶⁰ One caveat concerning this mechanism of protection is that its power rests on the need of the perpetrators for legitimacy. Similar to respect for university autonomy, such pressure is less likely to work on armed non-state actors, unless they are at a stage where they are seeking legitimacy, and even less so on criminal gangs.

Conclusions and ways forward

As the above analysis demonstrates, possible measures for the protection of higher education and prevention of future attacks are wide-ranging and each has strengths and limitations. Success is likely to be highly context-sensitive and case-specific. More research is clearly needed to improve knowledge and awareness and further develop strategies on this issue. This review suggests the need for caution in generalizing findings and positing global solutions, particularly when so little rigorous research is available that maps the dynamics of attacks on higher education in relation to mechanisms of protection, prevention and accountability.

Nevertheless, immediate short-term steps can be taken to increase protection and help prevent future attacks. These could include increased support for the monitoring of attacks on higher education. Analysis of the problem of attacks on higher education points to the lack of systematic documentation, and an absence of a mechanism that specifically and exclusively monitors and reports on attacks (nature, scope, motives, patterns, frequency) and of international and national protection responses. One important aspect of this would be to gather data on attacks on university students more systematically. Such data are worryingly absent from what little documentation exists. Students unions and their collective organizations, unlike academic staff organizations, often lack the institutional infrastructure and resources to gather data on attacks on members of their community. These efforts could also be linked to awareness and advocacy campaigns on attacks against students, and lend support for the setting up of protection measures for targeted or at-risk students similar to those available to at-risk academics (temporary exile strategies, etc.).

Mechanisms could also be developed to improve emergency protection measures available to higher education institutions and communities. In countries with a high prevalence of attacks on higher education institutions, efforts could be undertaken to raise security awareness among students, academics and administrators and other staff, for example, through training workshops, and to develop a tailored security

strategy. These could be developed as part of a broader strategy of reducing overall violence that would turn higher education communities into less vulnerable or soft targets, while simultaneously recognizing the dilemmas of securitization/militarization, especially when the state is the only or main perpetrator of attacks.

Lobbying and advocacy could also be fruitfully targeted at national governments to emphasize their responsibilities for protecting higher education from attack and the potential legal sanctions if they fail to do so. Linked to this, there is a need to increase awareness and understanding of attacks on higher education as part of the problem of attacks on education more generally. While there have been great strides made over recent years in raising awareness of attacks on education around the world, evidence and advocacy on the higher education sector have been noticeably lagging.