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Latitudes: Sudan is the global higher-ed crisis no one is talking about

1 message

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Latitudes

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In yet another global hot spot, education is a casualty

Campuses destroyed or occupied. Students and professors displaced internally or forced to flee the country. Struggles to access student records or hold online classes.

Such descriptions have become chillingly commonplace amid conflict and upheaval around the globe, in Ukraine, Gaza, and Afghanistan. Add to that list Sudan, battered by a year-and-a-half-long civil war and a related humanitarian crisis.

A [report](#) from the Rift Valley Institute, an education-focused nonprofit organization that operates in eastern and central Africa, details the toll on Sudanese higher education. The ferocity of the fighting in Khartoum, the capital and Sudan's educational hub, has dislocated the "overwhelming majority" of the country's 700,000 students and

14,000 professors. Yet some institutions have managed to keep going in some capacity, allowing students to continue or even complete their studies.

And higher education will be “essential” to the future of a post-war Sudan, preparing graduates who can help rebuild the country.

The swiftness of the outbreak of fighting, in April 2023, initially hampered colleges’ response. Exams were underway at the University of Khartoum, the country’s oldest and largest public institution, trapping some test-taking students in the middle of a combat zone, said Rebecca Glade, a lecturer there who is now a visiting scholar at Makerere University, in Uganda. Glade wrote the report with Muna Mohamed Saied Elgadal, a Sudanese doctoral student at The School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, in Paris.

In Khartoum and elsewhere, classrooms and labs were looted and burned. Some campuses were repurposed as military barracks. A number of educational institutions, as well as the Sudanese Ministry of Education, relocated from Khartoum to the relative safety of neighboring Gezira state, only to have to move again when fighting erupted there in late 2023.

Students and faculty members were part of more than 10 million Sudanese who were forcibly displaced. The country’s internally displaced population is the [largest ever reported](#), according to UNCHR, the United Nations refugee agency.

In the midst of fighting, universities lost access to their servers. While some institutions had backups, others have been unable to secure their data. As a result, many students and graduates cannot get their transcripts, making it difficult for them to continue their studies even if they are in a safer place.

Loss of server access also hindered colleges’ ability to shift to remote instruction. Online learning has varied wildly, between and within institutions. Better-resourced public universities, colleges in regions removed from fighting, and departments whose faculty members have been more able to get online have been quicker to resume classes and even hold exams.

Estimates suggest that some 60 percent of Sudanese students have restarted their studies, though Elgadal and Glade note that course delivery, too, has been uneven: Some professors have been able to

hold live courses, while others have used social-media platforms to share recordings of lectures or just posted their slides online.

Frequent internet blackouts and ongoing fighting have made it difficult for students to keep up with their studies, leaving many “stuck in a limbo state,” Glade said. “It’s all really grim.”

While most students and academics remain in Sudan, some have been able to leave for nearby countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda. Even then, the situation has often been rough. Sudanese universities are typically Arabic-speaking, while in a number of neighboring countries, the language of instruction is English. Displaced Sudanese may be confined to refugee camps or limited or forbidden from working and studying. For those teaching at their home institutions online, salaries have been reduced and delayed.

What’s more, Sudan’s relative success in improving college-going rates over the last several decades has meant that it’s difficult for other countries to absorb its large numbers of students and lecturers, Glade said.

Glade and Elgadal fielded an online questionnaire, conducted interviews in cities where students and academics had been scattered, and spoke with higher-education officials in Sudan and in adjoining countries.

The researchers acknowledge that conditions in Sudan are bleak, particularly because of the “paralysis” of elementary and secondary education, where an estimated 19 million students are out of school.

Despite the instability, Elgadal and Glade offer recommendations for supporting Sudanese higher education, including for overseas colleges, governments, and aid organizations. Among them are: providing modest technical and material support to help Sudanese universities develop and maintain online-learning platforms; offering emergency grants so that academics can continue their research; and creating pathways for work and study at universities in neighboring countries.

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“It’s too much”

Sandra Elgizooli can tell when her boyfriend sees a disturbing post on social media about the conflict in Sudan. He'll shake his head or make a face. Sometimes she can hear unsettling audio from his phone.

Elgizooli's partner is Jamaican, but she grew up in Khartoum. He serves as her buffer, scrolling through feeds about the crisis in her home country when she cannot. At times, he'll carefully tell her the latest news. Often, Elgizooli, a student at Mercy University, in New York, doesn't want to know. “It's too much for me,” she said. “I sort of bottled it up a lot. I didn't deal with it.”

Compartmentalizing has been a key strategy for Elgizooli, who came to the United States as an international student but has since filed for temporary protected status, which allows people to stay in this country when it is unsafe to return home. The 21-year-old will graduate this spring, with a degree in behavioral science.

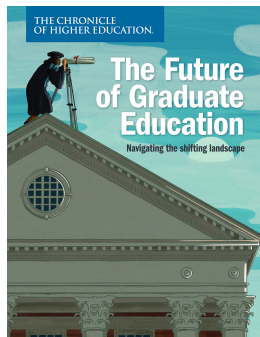
Focusing on her studies, however, has been difficult. For the first nine months of the war, Elgizooli's mother was trapped in Sudan. First she fled Khartoum, living with extended family in a single room. In January, after an "intense" journey, she managed to get to Egypt. "It was a big sigh of relief," Elgizooli said.

Neither Elgizooli nor her mother knows when they will be able to return. Elgizooli attended high school in America, but she has warm memories of her Sudanese childhood. "Vibrant, filled with laughter," she said.

Elgizooli wrestles with guilt at times, wondering why she, one of just 400 Sudanese students in the United States, has the privilege to be safe when so many others are displaced and in danger. But she's also frustrated that the tragedy there has captured so little outside attention. When Mercy's Muslim student association held a bake sale to raise money for refugees in conflict zones, one organizer talked about Gaza and Lebanon, but not Sudan, she said.

Elgizooli understands why many people shy away from the terrible images from her home country — she does, too. Still, she welcomes when friends and classmates ask her about the conflict or how she is doing. "Many people feel it's too touchy," she said, "but I appreciate it."

From the Chronicle Store



The Future of Graduate Education

Graduate education has enjoyed a jump in enrollment over the past five years, but it faces a host of challenges. [Order this report](#) for insights on the opportunities and pitfalls that graduate-program administrators must navigate.

Foreign student charged with voting illegally

Michigan officials have [filed charges](#) against a student from China accused of voter fraud.

The University of Michigan student was accused of perjury for falsely identifying himself as an American citizen on registration documents and for being an unauthorized elector who attempted to vote. The charges were filed by Michigan's secretary of state and the prosecutor in Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor is located.

The student, identified as a 19-year-old from China by [The Detroit News](#), was successful in casting a ballot. The student then contacted the local election clerk to see if he could get his ballot back, but the vote, cast during early voting, will count because it was already tabulated. There is no way to track a ballot back to a specific voter after it has been tabulated.

In their statement, the prosecutor and the secretary of state called noncitizen voting "an extremely isolated and rare event."

Trump, a foe of global education, is re-elected president

Donald J. Trump, who made [America First](#) a hallmark of his first term in office, has been returned to the presidency.

Among his earliest actions as president, Trump, a Republican, put in place a [travel ban](#), closing the border to students, researchers, and scholars from a half-dozen Muslim-majority countries. With the [China Initiative](#), his administration put global research ties under the microscope, [rolled back legal protections](#) for young immigrants, and attempted to use international students as pawns to [force a reopening](#) of the colleges during the pandemic. He also repeatedly threatened to [revoke visas to Chinese students](#) and to [overturn a popular work program](#) for foreign graduates of American colleges.

The announcement of Trump's win, in the early hours this morning, is too recent to compile a full wrap-up here of what Trump's reelection will mean for international education, but I'll have a rundown of the implications in the days to come. I'd very much like to hear from you: What do you see as the biggest stakes for global education? And how will you be talking about the election with international students,

DACA recipients, and other critical groups on campus? Share your thoughts with me at karin.fischer@chronicle.com.

In the meantime, here's my earlier piece on the [stakes of the election](#). Follow my *Chronicle* colleagues on [election takeaways across higher education](#).

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Around the globe

The State Department recognized 50 Hispanic-serving colleges for their work with the flagship Fulbright exchange program.

The chairman of a U.S. House special committee on China is calling on the [University of Michigan](#) to close a joint institute it runs with Shanghai Jiao Tong University because of the Chinese institution's military and intelligence ties. The committee previously [criticized](#) American academic ties to China.

A federal judge has given Charles M. Lieber, a former chairman of Harvard University's chemistry department convicted under the China Initiative, permission to [travel to Beijing](#) for a lecture and employment networking. Lieber, who was [found guilty](#) of lying to government officials about his ties to China, is on 18 months of supervised release after serving six months of house arrest.

Eric Darr, president of Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, which came under fire for its student-visa policies, has [resigned](#).

Imperial College London has opened a [hub in San Francisco](#) for supporting international science and technology partnerships, the first British institution to have such an American presence, the college said.

A Palestinian student whose British visa was revoked after she made comments about the Israel-Hamas war has won a [human-rights appeal](#).

An Iranian student stripped to her underwear to [protest harassment](#) by security officials.

A Chinese law professor and his family may have been [blocked from leaving the country](#) because of an article he wrote advocating term limits for the country's leaders.

The University of Buenos Aires is challenging an effort by the Argentinian government to [audit](#) the institution, saying it would violate the public university's autonomy.

Amid [tightening federal restrictions on foreign students](#), the Canadian province of Ontario has put in place some of its own, barring international students from attending [medical schools](#) there beginning in the fall of 2026. Less than one percent of Ontario's medical students — just 10 in the 2023 academic year — are from overseas.

Returning international students from low- to middle-income countries help to alleviate poverty in their home societies over time, according to new [research](#).

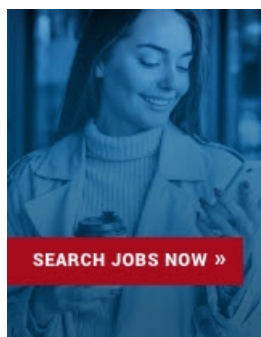
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