

The Cara Syria Programme - 'Investing in Syria's Intellectual Capital: Creating pathways to the future, academics as agents for change.'

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A Proud Heritage

While travelling in Austria in the spring of 1933, William Beveridge, then Director of the London School of Economics and later to gain fame for writing a report which laid the foundations of the United Kingdom's National Health Service, became aware of how the Nazi government in Germany was persecuting academics on political and racial grounds. Returning to London, Beveridge established the Academic Assistance Council (AAC) with the objective, as stated in its founding statement of May 22, 1933, of providing for 'the relief of suffering



a lifeline to academics at risk

Figure 1: Cara's logo and strapline

and the defence of learning and science.' Between 1933 and 1939, the AAC and its permanent successor organisation, the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), raised £100,000 from donors and universities (equivalent to £4 million today) and used these funds to support individual academics and their families fleeing Nazi persecution, with grants and advice while they sought new positions in the UK and other safe countries. Among the two thousand or so assisted during the 1930s were sixteen who would go on to win Nobel prizes. Notable beneficiaries of AAC/ SPSL support include the philosopher Karl Popper and the founder of the Paralympics Ludwig Guttman (Cara, 2019a).

The work of the SPSL continued into the post-World War Two period, with sustained support being offered to successive waves of academics driven into exile from the USSR and Eastern Europe, and later to scholars escaping military dictatorships in Latin America and the apartheid regime in South Africa. In more recent years, the focus has shifted to the Middle East. In 1999, SPSL changed its name to the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (Cara) which in turn became the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) in 2014 to reflect the fact that support is now offered to many who do not regard themselves as 'refugees', but who are nonetheless at risk (Cara, 2019a). Today, Cara provides support in two principal forms: its long running Fellowship Programme and its more recent regional programmes.

Selected countries of origin of academics Cara has worked with since 1933
Algeria
Argentina
Austria
Chile
Germany
Hungary
Iraq
Malawi
Somalia
South Africa
Sudan
Syria
The Soviet Union
Yemen
Zimbabwe

Cara's work supporting academics at risk

Developed in partnership with a network of more than 115 UK universities, Cara's Fellowship Programme enables academics to escape to a place of safety where they can continue their scholarship through the provision of financial support and fee waivers. Most Cara Fellows intend to return home when conditions allow; in the meantime, The Cara Fellowship Programme allows Cara Fellows to maintain and develop their skills and build networks for the future.

In 2006, in the wake of the Iraq War, Cara established its first regional programme, the Iraq Programme (2006-2012), with the intention of providing innovative and effective support to academics who are working in their own country despite the risks, or who are living in exile in a neighbouring country. Run from Cara's office in Amman, Jordan, the goal of the Iraq Programme was to reconstruct Iraqi research and teaching capacities by establishing a wide range of co-operation activities that brought academics in Iraq and in exile in Jordan and elsewhere into contact with UK-based scholars. Arising from this was the Iraq Research Fellowship Programme (2009-2012), which enabled UK and Iraqi academics to work together to produce high-quality research outcomes that had an influence on policy. Cara's second regional programme, the Zimbabwe Programme, was launched in 2009 and focused on the virtual connection in real time between academics in exile and others with colleges and faculties of health and veterinary science (Cara, 2019b).

The Cara Syria Programme

In September 2016, Cara established its most recent programme to provide support for academics whose lives have been impacted by the ongoing Syrian Crisis. Since 2011, Syria has been devastated by war, which the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) estimates has forced 5.6



Figure 2: Aftermath of an explosion on the campus of the University of Aleppo in January 2013 (Sands, 2013)

million into exile, with a further 6.6 million people displaced within Syria itself (UNHCR, 2019). The Cara Syria Programme's full title is 'Investing in Syria's Intellectual Capital: Creating pathways to the future, academics as agents for change' and this provides a clear sense of both its ambitions and approach. Connecting and strengthening Syria's academic community in exile so that they are well positioned to contribute to the rebuilding of Syria's higher education and research sectors when security allows is the overriding objective. This is achieved through the provision of a range of online and face-to-face activities known as Strands. The Cara Syria Programme is coordinated by Kate Robertson, the Cara Middle East Programme Adviser, who has been able to draw on the expertise and goodwill of a wide range of colleagues from across the UK Higher Education (HE) sector to help to meet the intended outcomes for individual Syrian academics, together with the system level outcomes (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018).

Programme outcomes for individual Syrian academics (who are referred to as participants once on the Programme) are intended to enhance basic academic and professional skills,



Figure 3: Cara Syria Programme Participants in discussion at a workshop in Istanbul (Cara, 2018a, p.11)

enhance knowledge and understanding of international standards in research and teaching, as well as to improve English language skills to facilitate international connections. Other outcomes for the individuals include developing experience and understanding of alternative HE models and enhancing professional connections and opportunities. The Programme also aims to provide participants with the opportunity to design quality research proposals and implement rigorous evidence-based research. Participants

are encouraged through their research activity as part of The Cara Syria Programme to contribute to addressing some of the key challenges facing Syria. The establishment of international professional connections and networks is a further outcome for the individual participant.

At the system level, The Cara Syria Programme's outcomes include strengthening Syrian academic capital and enhancing research capacities for the use of Syrian HE institutions in the future; the production of innovative rigorous quality research of direct relevance to Syria and the establishment of international research networks. Additionally, the Programme seeks to establish effective dissemination plans for research findings to inform policy and strategic planning amongst those involved in post-war reconstruction and to strengthen regional ties that can support the future reconstruction of Syria's higher education and research sectors.

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees and The Syrian Union of Academics estimates that there are between four hundred and five hundred Syrian academics residing in Turkey. This figure is very conservative, and it is likely that the real figure is in excess of a thousand. The Cara Syria Programme has a register of four hundred Syrian academics in exile, of which around a hundred are actively engaged with one or more of the Programme's six Strands as Cara Syria Programme participants. The Programme continues to grow and in September 2018 secured funding from the Mellon Foundation for a sixth Strand, which will have an Arts and Humanities focus (Hanley, 2018). This was formally launched in January 2019.

Developing English for Academic Purposes on the Cara Syria Programme

Support for Cara Syria Programme participants is delivered across six Strands: Strand 1 - English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Strand 2 - Academic Skills Development (ASD), Strand 3 - Research Incubation Visits (RIV), Strand 4 - Cara-Commissioned Research (CCR) and Strand 5 - the Syria Research Fellowship Scheme (SRPS) which offers small and medium research grants to support research of relevance to Syria and Syrian populations in exile, and Strand 6 – encompassing the other Strands with a dedicated focus on the Arts and Humanities. English

is both the operating language for the Programme and of crucial importance to all participants interested in developing international connections and networks. Consequently, and not surprisingly, the development of English language skills in general cuts across all aspects of the Programme and there are fundamental connections and synergies between the EAP Strand and all other Strands on the Programme (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018).

The Learning Approach

The Cara Syria Programme is delivered through a blended-learning approach and participants have their most sustained and regular contact with The Cara Syria Programme through their weekly one-to-one English lessons with their volunteer EAP teachers, the majority of whom are based in the UK and working in university language centres. These lessons are delivered using the Adobe Connect platform. Participants are divided into three levels according to their language level and the EAP provision is managed by a team of coordinators from the Universities of Edinburgh, Reading, Sheffield, and Queen Mary University of London. They form an EAP steering group which meets virtually on a weekly basis. Weekly webinars which are delivered in English by volunteer experts from across UK HE (and which are simultaneously translated into Arabic to promote inclusion) bring together participants as a group and focus on different aspects of ASD. Recent webinar topics have included ethical issues in social research and developments in 21st century higher education. There is also a dedicated online portal which acts as a virtual library of resources for the Programme as well as an interactive space for participants to build connections as a cohort (Hanley, 2018).

This online synchronous provision is combined with intensive residential workshops which take place in Istanbul with increasing frequency and as often as once a month. These workshops bring UK-based EAP and ASD volunteer experts and subject specialists together with Syrian participants who are spread across Turkey. One recent workshop (December 2018) brought together sixty-three Syrian participants to work with eighteen UK-based colleagues for an intensive and rich series of activities culminating in a conference that included panel discussions and poster sessions, as well as presentations from participants who were recipients of Cara research funding as part of Strand 5. The face-to-face workshops actively promote networking and collaboration as well as the development of discipline clusters amongst the Syrians in exile.

The team of UK-based colleagues who have been working on The Cara Syria Programme has grown steadily since the first Istanbul programme workshop in February 2017. A core team of EAP specialists working closely with ASD colleagues and subject specialists has worked creatively and with considerable dedication to develop the EAP Strand, so that it meets the needs and expectations of the Syrian participants and the intended outcomes of the Programme. Opportunities have emerged that enable the UK-based team to cut through the silos that can exist between EAP, ASD and the disciplines in home institutions in the UK. This synergy has had a significant impact on both the development of materials and fruitful reflection on how academic literacies in the English language can be most effectively developed in this challenging context (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018).

For the volunteer EAP online tutors, who provide the overwhelming bulk of the English teaching via weekly lessons on Adobe Connect, working with the Syrian participants has been rewarding in a number of ways. Their level of English varies quite widely and in many cases is lower overall than would normally be the case among international students in the UK. In particular, participants have tended to have to work hard with their volunteer EAP online

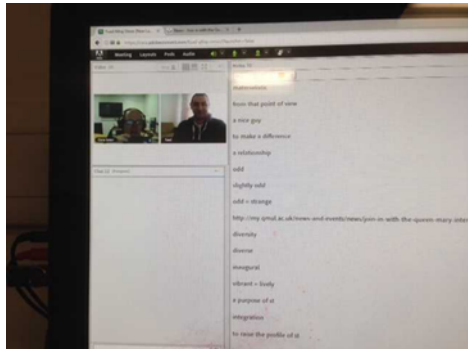


Figure 4: An online Cara Syria Programme EAP lesson using Adobe Connect

tutors in order to develop their productive skills in English. Consequently, providing practice in producing as much oral and written output as possible has generally been the priority for tutors. In order to take part in The Cara Syria Programme, participants need to satisfy Cara's eligibility criteria and demonstrate that they are genuine academics with a verifiable academic track record. Working with mature academics who not infrequently have decades of experience behind them has often been hugely stimulating. Further, the connections between the different Strands of the

Programme have over time become clearer as participants report back to their online tutors after the face-to-face workshops in Istanbul and, for instance, seek linguistic advice and guidance to help to apply for the small and large grant opportunities offered by Strand 5 of the Programme, and look for ways to establish and maintain productive international academic relationships through English with colleagues in the UK and elsewhere (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018). A typical reflection from a volunteer EAP online tutor points out that initially the tutor was unsure how relevant or useful the online lessons would be to their Syrian participant, but over time as the relationship deepened and the EAP tutors' understanding of the Programme increased, they came to the realisation that the Programme 'will benefit both him as an individual and the future development of Syria'(Hanley, 2018, p.13).

Trust, responsiveness, innovation and voluntarism

An independent evaluation of the Cara Syria Programme in July 2018 concluded that the success of the Programme rested on the underlying principles of trust, responsiveness, innovation and voluntarism and these principles remain important as the Programme continues to grow in 2019. Increasing levels of trust built by Cara, its partners and tutors, and the emergence of trust between the participants themselves contributes to the creation of an environment within which the intended outcomes of the Programme can be achieved. Responsiveness refers to the fact that the Programme seeks to evolve and has developed new activities and approaches in response to feedback from participants and tutors; it is also in evidence in the numerous online one-to-one lessons that take place throughout the week. Innovation is encouraged among all partners and many of the volunteer EAP online tutors have found the freedom to try new approaches in their tutorials liberating. The Programme is largely being delivered by Cara with volunteer partners and, while voluntarism can sometimes cause delays and there is sometimes the possibility of overstretch, the Programme has clearly benefitted from the very considerable commitment of partners from a wide range

of UK HEIs in achieving the intended outcomes both for the individual Syrian participants and for Syrian higher education in the longer term (Hanley, 2018).

Clearly, there are inherent challenges and inevitable compromises in delivering such a complex, multi-modal and multi-faceted programme with a large number of partners from a wide variety of institutions. There is seldom enough time to do all that could be done. There are quite frequent frustrations with the use of technology which can disrupt and even prevent online EAP lessons. Finding appropriate materials, particularly for participants who are at the lower end of the proficiency range, can be challenging. Similarly, designing materials and activities for the face-to-face workshops in Istanbul that are accessible to participants with comparatively low language levels can be difficult. The number of female Syrian academics taking part in the Programme as participants is disappointingly low. Moreover, processes to effectively and systematically monitor individual skills development in English and academic skills need to be developed further. In some cases, Syrian participants have expressed frustration at the pace of the Programme and their own linguistic and academic development (Hanley, 2018).

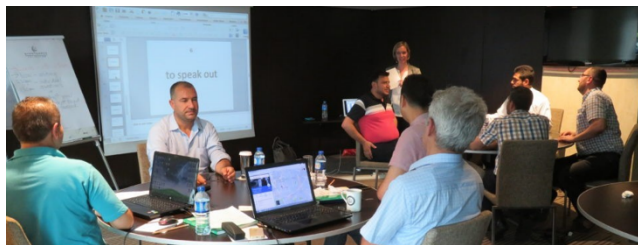


Figure 6: A Cara Syria Programme Face-to-Face Workshop in Istanbul (Cara, 2018b)

Nonetheless, it also seems clear that the Cara Syria Programme is providing an innovative response to a clearly identified need, which is wholly consistent with Cara's previous work over many decades in supporting at-risk academics. My own participant, Dr Fuad Alhaj Omar, identifies three ways in which the Programme has benefitted him as an individual. Firstly, the networking opportunities opened up through the Programme build resilience for the Syrian academics in exile, both now and for the future. Secondly, participants are actively supported by Cara to maintain and develop their academic profile. The third benefit is in terms of the sustained development of skills, whether they be EAP or ASD or other skills, to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow (Personal Communication). This assessment is echoed in testimony gathered for the independent evaluation of the Programme from another participant:



Figure 5: Cara Syria Programme participant Dr Fuad Alhaj Omar

I feel I am an academic again. I lost this sense for some years. I wasn't involved in any programme for academics. This is very good. It is a big opportunity to meet people in this environment; education and so on. It has given me a really good chance, e.g. I have networks with other colleagues in the UK and even in Syria. It is a kind of virtual university atmosphere to work in. It gives me an opportunity to refresh my English. I used to write in English, but it gives me an opportunity. To meet other Syrian academics

was important - to discuss together, to know the opinion of other colleagues. (Hanley, 2018, p. 11)

Through The Cara Syria Programme, Cara and its partners continue to work towards the goal first articulated in the founding statement of 1933: ‘the relief of suffering and the defence of learning and science’ (Academic Assistance Council, 1933).

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