

Lessons from an evolving model to support higher education in countries affected by conflict

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Abstract

This article draws lessons from two programmes designed to support Higher Education (HE) in Iraq and Syria, two countries severely affected by violent conflict. The programmes focus on support to Iraqi and Syrian academics through capacity development and collaborative research, involving international partnerships.

Key Words

Higher education partnerships

Conflict

Syria

Iraq

Academics

Introduction

Interventions to support Higher Education (HE) in countries affected by conflict broadly tend to focus on how to support students. One of the very few organisations that support academics who are affected by conflict or political persecution is Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), a UK-based non-governmental organisation, which designs and implements programmes with financial support from international trusts and foundations. In contrast to most other interventions that support HE in the conflict-affected region, the focus of the Cara programmes has been on the needs of academics rather than students.

This article is largely based on three independent evaluations carried out by the author in 2011 (for the Iraq programme) and 2017 and 2019 (for the Syria programme). In each case the evaluation took a mixed-method approach and the evaluator had access to internal documentation and data. The evaluation drew on programme monitoring and other data including needs assessments, English language test scores, online platform participation rates and financial data in combination with data drawn from interviews, focus group discussions and observation of workshops in action in Istanbul (for the Syria programme) and roundtable in Beirut (for the Iraq programme) to enable quantitative and qualitative analysis. A total of 112 interviews were conducted across the three evaluations, which included Iraqi and Syrian academics participating in the programmes, international academics taking part in research projects and as workshop facilitators, tutors of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and members of the Cara team.

To cite this article: Hanley, T. (2020) Lessons from an evolving model to support higher education in countries affected by conflict, *Education and Conflict Review*, 3, 45–51.

The crises in Iraq and Syria

Following two decades of sanctions, in 2003, the US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein government. Prior to the war, the quality and standard of HE was a source of pride in Iraq (Jawad, 2014). After the invasion, Iraqi higher education suffered significant infrastructure damage with buildings burned, looted or destroyed, and Iraqi academics were among the groups targeted by a range of factions involved in the conflict (AAAS, 2013; UNESCO, 2004). Security concerns remained a key priority for Iraqi academics throughout the decade following the invasion, both for those outside of Iraq considering a return and for those who had chosen to stay despite the ongoing violent conflict.

The uprising in Syria began in 2011 and rapidly escalated to an intense conflict with a proliferation of factions fighting both Assad government forces and each other, supported by a range of regional and international actors. By 2016 when the Cara Syria programme was being developed, over 6.3 million of Syria's 23 million population had fled Syria, mainly to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, with a further six million internally displaced (UNHCR, 2017). Since the start of the uprising, Syrian academics have suffered widespread persecution, including arbitrary arrest and detention, and disappearance, and in 2013 both Aleppo and Damascus universities were bombed with resulting fatalities (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019). As had been the case in Iraq, relatively higher economic status of academics in the Syrian society made them a target of kidnappers (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019; see Pherali in this issue). By 2014, staff and student levels in HE had fallen considerably.

In response to these situations in both countries and rising requests from academics for assistance, Cara developed programmes of support which are discussed below.

The Cara response

Since 1933, Cara has provided support to academics at risk in the form of practical and financial aid aiming to enable them to continue their work in safety. Since 2015, Cara's work has been supported by a growing network of UK universities that now number 121 and make up 'the Cara Scholars at Risk UK Universities Network'. They form a crucial component in the provision of what are now primarily post-doctoral and doctoral Fellowship opportunities framed as

'temporary sanctuary' for academics at risk pending return to their countries of origin when security allows (Cara, 2020). Since 2006 and beginning with the Iraq programme later followed by the Syria programme, given the scale of targeted attacks on academics, Cara introduced Country Programmes to allow affected academics to be supported in their own countries or within countries of their exile. It is this latter evolving model of support that is discussed here in terms of its results and the factors that enabled and constrained opportunities for continuation or development of their academic lives.

In the case of both Iraq and Syria, the respective conflicts and resulting geographic dispersal led to isolation for many displaced academics and the loss of their academic identities and endeavours. The CARA Iraq Programme was launched in late 2006, offering UK Fellowships, extending to the region to support those in exile in Amman, Jordan, in 2008. Initially, playing a brokering and connecting role and then rolling out a broader programme in 2009 which ran for three years (based on a personal interview with a Cara official).

The broader programme aimed to connect Iraqi academics to international academia as well as to connect Iraqi academics outside of Iraq with those within Iraq. In particular, it aimed to engage Iraqi academics in meaningful academic work, to produce innovative research of immediate relevance to Iraq, as well as to enhance Iraq's research capacities and lastly, to nurture lasting international research collaboration. At the core of the Iraq programme was the Iraq Research Fellowship Scheme, which used an innovative research partnership model combining Iraqi academics in exile, Iraqi academics still active in Iraq and international, mainly UK-based, academics in research projects with the international academics in the role of Principal Investigators (PIs). PIs provided their services on a pro bono basis. The programme aimed to facilitate collaborative research with projects selected through a competitive process. Successful research project proposals were awarded grants of up to UK£25,000. The Iraq programme was run out of Amman, Jordan, where Cara facilitated the gathering of research teams, provided capacity-building workshops and opportunities for collaboration. Cara also organised regional roundtables to engage regional experts, for dissemination, for cross fertilisation of ideas, to encourage the development of regional networks and

enable links to future funders and wider initiatives. A total of 58 Iraqi academics directly participated in the programme as part of international research teams. Results of the programme are discussed below. The programme ended in 2012 when funding came to an end which coincided with the international community's attention moving to the new conflict in Syria and thus meant that Cara did not have the resources to continue its Iraq programme.

Cara launched its Syria programme in 2012 through its core Fellowship Programme offering temporary sanctuary placement, in partnership with UK universities, to Syrian academics at risk. Cara extended the programme to the region following a process of consultation and programme design. The country programme was established in Turkey where the greatest number of Syrian academics had fled to safety. The Syria programme shared some objectives to those of the Iraq programme intending to enable Syrian academics in the region to continue academic engagement and contribution, to facilitate their professional development and to produce research relevant to Syria or Syrian communities in exile in receiving countries in the region. The programme aims to sustain and invest in this group given their potentially important role in rebuilding Syria's HE sector and in broader post-conflict reconstruction in the future. The Syria Programme in the region entered its third year in 2020.

The Syria Programme builds on the Iraqi Programme model with added provision of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a blended learning element facilitated by primarily UK university EAP specialists on a voluntary basis encompassing weekly one-to-one online sessions and workshops in Istanbul. It also included a more structured academic skills development component provided through quarterly workshops in Istanbul and various online methods and platforms; 3–8 week long research incubation visits (RIVs) to the UK universities to enable networking, training and the development of research ideas and collaborations between Syrian and UK-based academics; and funding for research on issues relevant to Syria, including Syrian HE and its role in addressing Syrian societal challenges and immediate and future challenges. The programme also included the Iraq equivalent, Syria Research Fellowship Scheme through which grants were awarded on a competitive basis but was modified with the

introduction of a larger number of smaller grants. The small grants (UK£3,000) and larger (UK£15,000) research grants were awarded through a Cara-run grant selection process, involving independent experts in the Selection Committee. In the Syria programme, successful research grants are subject to successful ethics processes facilitated by the mentors and PIs' institutions. Activities in the Syria Programme, like those of the Iraq Programme encompass the full spectrum of disciplines from the arts and humanities, the social sciences and the physical sciences.

A significant difference in the Syria programme is that it has also allowed participation of individuals beyond the research teams who have attended workshops that were organised in Istanbul and participated in online initiatives such as the weekly webinar series or short courses delivered through dedicated programme platforms. By 2019, over 149 Syrian academics had been participating in one or more of the programme activities, of which 53 participated in research collaborations with international counterparts, including those from Turkey.

The results

The evaluations found that both the Syria and Iraq Programmes produced a range of positive results, which can be divided into: a) outcomes for individual participants; b) HE development in Iraq and Syria; and c) wider HE developments beyond Iraq and Syria.

Outcomes for individuals

Programme participants reported results relating to their professional development and also to their improved well-being. These results are interconnected.

Evaluations of both programmes found evidence of enhanced academic skills including in research methodology and methods, academic writing and teamwork, and in subject-specific technical areas such as laboratory techniques and management. Participants also increased their awareness and understanding of international research standards and improved their English language skills. These were identified through participant self-reporting, facilitator observations and through tests such as English language skills. Participants demonstrated and reported new and enhanced academic skills in general.

A significant addition to the Syria programme – introduced due to the experience of the Iraq programme – was the inclusion of a dedicated component focused on EAP. Participants also reported that their increased EAP skills were useful in accessing critical international literature in their subject areas for research and teaching and being able to share their research findings internationally through conference presentations and academic publications. EAP also enabled improved communication with potential research funders and with those who may draw on their expertise as researchers or as advisers (e.g. policymakers from international organisations or humanitarian practitioners responding to the crisis). It was found that younger participants tended to progress faster with language skills. Some participants were challenged by limited time, lack of motivation and internet connectivity for the online initiatives, which slowed their progress. However, the one-to-one relationship with online tutors for EAP has proved to be important to both participant and tutor alike.

In terms of individual well-being, participants' own observations of the results are striking. Iraqi and Syrian participants consistently emphasised the sense of self-respect and dignity that re-engagement with the academic community and acknowledgement of their professional academic identity provided, as the following quotes illustrate:

Cara preserved my academic place... I've remained an academic, which is a great thing for my self-respect. (Iraqi participant)

When I came to Turkey in 2015, I was discouraged and frustrated. I didn't find work. I was outside the academic environment. I love academic work. When I started to meet with Cara and other colleagues it was very good for me. It encouraged me to work, to write something, to feel about myself as an academic. I had lost that feeling. (Syrian participant)

This programme was very beneficial for us, after the circumstances we have been living, after all routes were cut off around us, the roads towards research were closed in our faces. This programme is like a candle that is a light in a very dark tunnel. (Syrian participant)

Some of the benefits for these conflict-affected academics derive from their contact with other academics from their own country. This was a noticeable benefit for Iraqi academics in exile who were often dispersed geographically. In the longer-term Syria Programme, participants have created informal networks among themselves using WhatsApp and other platforms to share information and maintain contact among themselves inbetween the regular Istanbul-based workshops. They remarked on the emotional support this provides and their strategic use of the networks in planning their own activities to support Syrian HE in non-regime areas in the North. Some participants and their UK-based academic colleagues have been working collaboratively on grant supported research and have also developed plans for cooperation beyond the lifetime of the Cara programmes.

Benefits for HE development in Iraq and Syria

Benefits of the programme for HE include the development of a group of academics with enhanced skills, some of whom already and, in the future, will support teaching and research in their countries of origin. In the Iraq Programme, institutional relationships were established with some UK universities which went beyond the individual academics' connections to an institutional level as evidenced, for instance, by the establishment of two memoranda of understanding for cooperation between some Iraq and UK universities including between Liverpool and Mosul as well as Leicester and Kerbala universities.

In relation to Syria, the programme has contributed to the development of a cadre of approximately 150 academics with enhanced research and teaching skills. Their sustained academic engagement will potentially benefit Syrian HE in the future, if and when conflict ends, and the post-war recovery and reconstruction begins. Indeed, the programme already contributes through those who hold teaching posts in Turkish universities with Syrian student cohorts as well as in non-regime areas of Syria. The participants report using new teaching techniques they have learned on the programme and their vice chancellors have reported their observations of improved skills.

Furthermore, the programme has funded research that focuses directly on the challenges facing Syrian HE both before and since the war began, as well as research on what role HE can play in the future of Syria. These will form valuable resources to the development of policy and strategy in support of Syrian HE into the future. These direct inputs to Syrian HE and previously to Iraqi HE have been complemented by Cara's advocacy with donors, policy makers and the international university community for attention to HE in countries affected by conflict. This has been achieved through its publications, direct communication and facilitation of contact between the academics and these decisionmakers through roundtables (see Millican in this issue).

Wider benefits beyond HE in Syria and Iraq

A criterion of Cara-supported research is its potential contribution to the future of the conflict-affected countries, in this case, Iraq and Syria. This has been evident in both programmes, with benefits in other areas of life affected by the conflicts, beyond the direct impacts for HE. In Iraq, for example, the programme contributed to the work of the then newly formed Ministry for Women, to the Ministry of Education with analysis and evidence of the ethnic, religious and gender bias of teaching materials, and in health with research on the use of evolving communication technologies to improve health outcomes linked to vaccination programmes and the treatment of diabetes.

Research outputs relevant to Syria's future include the documentation and mapping of the impact of the Syria crisis on key areas such as deforestation, archaeology (see Abdullah *et al.* in this issue) and agriculture (see Abdullateef *et al.* in this issue). The Syria Programme supported research is also looking at the development of techniques and innovative approaches to support Syria in the future, such as the recycling of concrete rubble from destroyed buildings as reconstruction materials and the conservation of genetic materials and seeds from often unique habitats. New professional collaborations born from the Syria Programme research and Syrian academics' RIVs to UK institutions may also have longer-term research benefits in the areas such as, seed conservation.

The Syrian academics are also contributing to UK-funded research initiatives in and around Syria through partnerships facilitated by Cara but funded by UK universities and research councils. These emerging relationships may also be useful in the future reconstruction of Syrian HE.

The programme has in effect nurtured a significant proportion of the Syrian academic community that intends to play an active role in Syria's future in their relevant disciplines. This role is one that academics did not play to such a large extent in the past but one that is being shaped by the research on the role of HE in Syria; exposure to the practices in the UK; collaborations with other academics; and how these processes influence policies.

Factors constraining and enabling positive results for and by HE in times of conflict

Constraints

The unstable political and security environment has been one of the key challenges to the programmes. In Iraq, ongoing instability and frequent political changes in the government meant that relationships established during research processes tend to hinder recommendations and outcomes relevant for policies and practice.

In the Syria Programme, the attempted coup in Turkey and following clampdown by the Turkish government made universities cautious about cooperation with a UK-based NGO in support of Syrian academics. This disrupted some of the original plans of the programme for greater engagement with Turkish universities at the institutional level. Also, the ongoing stresses and unpredictability of life of Syrian academics in Turkey with, among others, concerns about their families and friends who are still in Syria. Constraints on employment and movement within Turkey, as well as the demand to learn another language to operate in Turkey limit the individual level engagement in and contribution to the programme.

Issues external to the region also present challenges. For example, restrictive visa regimes affect Syrian academics' possibility to travel to the UK, disrupting plans for RIVs to UK universities.

Funding is always a challenge and while the programmes enjoyed support from a number of foundations, the limited scale, continuity and predictability of funds have at times made programme planning and scheduling difficult, which is an issue when so many activities and their success depend on the voluntary contributions of many actors.

An additional challenge within the programmes is that participants do not always recognise some of their capacity building needs identified by the academics facilitating the programme. There had been a trend in both countries to attribute lower value or priority to independent research than teaching, and methods for teaching were found to be out dated. The programme has also found this difference in perspectives regarding skill levels and capacity development. These aspects are sensitive issues among older participants who may have been in more senior positions in their home universities and so the programme facilitators have taken a cautious approach to capacity building, being mindful and respectful about participants' longstanding experience in HE.

Enabling factors

A key component of both programmes which has proven highly effective is the research partnership between academics from the conflict-affected countries and experienced colleagues from the wider international academic community, usually the UK-based given Cara's base and its existing network universities. The collaborative approach to research, including that supported through competitively awarded grants contributed to a range of results including capacity building within the team; the production of quality research; and the establishment of sustainable international partnerships. Smaller grants of UK£3,000 were introduced for Syrian academics to apply for projects which did not necessarily include an international PI but were an opportunity for the Syrian academics to develop new independent projects based on the learning and areas covered in the academic skills development seminars. The programme found that including international academics as mentors was important to support the capacity development process as well as the quality of outputs.

A second key factor enabling impact in professional development is the multi-pronged approach to capacity development. Both programmes found that most of the academics from these two conflict-affected countries had had very limited contact, if any, with academia outside their own countries and so little familiarity with some of the international standards and good practice in research or teaching. Their publications were often limited, primarily to in-house university journals published in Arabic. A multi-pronged approach has been shown to be necessary to address the challenges that largely stem from the lack of experience and exposure in the international arena. As noticed by international academic facilitators and selection committee members, participants' limited understanding of key concepts has been apparent across the research process from design to write up. These include processes for ethics, risk assessment and informed consent or experience of data management and the presentation of a literature review in terms of locating research within the wider literature. Most participants have had little or no experience of qualitative research methodologies and methods. They also often displayed limitations in skills for research data collection, data analysis and academic writing.

A key lesson emerging from the programme is that a multi-faceted or a blended learning approach is required to enhance academic development among the participants. Through the Cara-funded research, this approach involved in-person workshops, online webinars and other e-learning initiatives allied to the 'learning-through-doing' opportunities. It was found that a range of combined inputs enables the reinforcement of learning. Initial programme plans under-estimated the time and the range of ways that would be needed to build these skills, however, flexibility in the programme has enabled new approaches to be added for a multi-faceted approach responding to a range of skill levels and learning styles.

A third important characteristic of the programme has been its flexibility and in particular, its customised approach to support participants, most notable in the Syrian Programme. Certain activities are available to all participants such as workshops for academic skills development and participants manage their own levels of involvement.

Activities such as the EAP support is designed on a one-to-one basis. Support for UK-visits for research and development purposes and the matching of Syrian with UK academics is tailored to individual participant needs and interests. This approach is time intensive and relies on a proactive and committed approach by the Cara team with valuable support from academics involved in the programme. A fourth significant enabling feature of the programme has been the volunteer nature of many of the people involved in both the development and delivery of the Syria programme, including EAP tutors and coordinators, academic skills development workshop facilitators, research team mentors and PIs, independent experts and readers and editors. The stability of the network of volunteer contributors who have remained with the programme for as long as three years has been key. They reported the satisfaction they gained in their roles, particularly from the creative space they have had to contribute to the evolution of an innovative programme and to support colleagues experiencing hardship due to conflict. Some UK academics have also gained academic benefits through collaborations with Syrian and Iraqi colleagues as research implementation without strong local networks and connections would have been impossible. Also, UK universities have contributed in-kind support by providing accommodation and bursaries, as well as covering consumable costs, providing affiliation and some direct sponsorship of UK research visits by the Syrian and Iraqi academics. The most recent evaluation estimated that the level of resources leveraged by the Syria Programme was well over UK £350,000 per year, enhancing its budget by over 30 percent (Hanley, 2020).

Finally, the shared principles of all those involved in the programme have been another contributing factor to the positive impact. These evolved organically and can be characterised as a mutual professional respect, a sense of equality between all academics on the programme – Syrian, Iraqi or UK-based, a willingness to be flexible, an interest to innovate and responsiveness to opportunities. This has enabled the growth of a collegiate network and responsive, relevant programme.

Conclusion

The two programmes' approach to enable ongoing academic engagement of Iraqi and Syrian academics affected by conflict demonstrate the possibility to achieve positive results for academics themselves, for HE development generally and for wider societal benefits in countries affected by conflict. Ongoing instability makes the long-term impact difficult to guarantee, however, it seems clear that the creation of a committed, high quality and engaged academics is a way forward for rebuilding HE in Iraq and Syria. The production of new research which is relevant to those countries and the creation of national and international networks can serve for the future recovery of HE and wider development in countries affected by conflict. The programmes demonstrate the importance of supporting academics as well as students affected by conflict to avoid the loss of the current generation of academics and teachers as well as that of the future.

Author Bio

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