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Article in *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* · December 2018

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International Journal of Comparative Education and Development

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Tom Parkinson, Tarek Zoubir, Shaher Abdullateef, Musallam Abedtalas, Ghana Alyamani, Ziad Al Ibrahim, Majdi Al Husni, Fuad Alhaj Omar, Hamoud Hajhamoud, Fadi Iboor, Husam Allito, Michael Jenkins, Abdulkader Rashwani, Adnan Sennou, Fateh Shaban,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Tom Parkinson, Tarek Zoubir, Shaher Abdullateef, Musallam Abedtalas, Ghana Alyamani, Ziad Al Ibrahim, Majdi Al Husni, Fuad Alhaj Omar, Hamoud Hajhamoud, Fadi Iboor, Husam Allito, Michael Jenkins, Abdulkader Rashwani, Adnan Sennou, Fateh Shaban, (2018) "We are still here": the stories of Syrian academics in exile", International Journal of Comparative Education and Development, Vol. 20 Issue: 3/4, pp.132-147, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-06-2018-0013>

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“We are still here”: the stories of Syrian academics in exile

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to generate insight into the experiences of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey; and second, to explore approaches to collaboration and community building among academics in exile and with counterparts in the international academic community.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a hybrid visual-autobiographical narrative methodology, embedded within a large group process (LGP) design.

Findings – Findings are presented in two phases: the first phase presents a thematic analysis of narrative data, revealing the common and divergent experiences of 12 exiled academics. The second phase presents a reflective evaluation of undertaking the LGP and its implications for community building and sustaining Syrian academia in exile.

Research limitations/implications – While this is a qualitative study with a small participant group, and therefore does not provide a basis for statistical generalisation, it offers rich insight into Syrian academics' lived experiences of exile, and into strategies implemented to support the Syrian academic community in exile.

Practical implications – The study has practical implications for academic development in the contexts of conflict and exile; community building among dispersed academic communities; educational interventions by international NGOs and the international academic community; and group process design.

Originality/value – The study makes an original contribution to the limited literature on post-2011 Syrian higher education by giving voice to a community of exiled academics, and by critically evaluating a strategic initiative for supporting and sustaining Syrian academia. This represents significant, transferable insight for comparable contexts.

Keywords Syria, Higher education, Exile, Collaboration

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Of the 15 named authors of this paper, 12 are Syrian academics currently living in exile in Turkey, and the remaining 3 are UK-based academics. Our collaboration took place through the Council for At Risk Academics' (Cara) Syria Programme (hereafter SP), which supports Syrian academics in exile in countries within the Middle East region in sustaining their academic work in exile, and which is staffed on a voluntary basis by academics from universities in the UK, Turkey and Europe. Following an initial scoping exercise (Cara, 2016), the Cara SP was devised across three strategic strands: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Research Incubation (RI) and Academic Skills Development (ASD).

The Syrians among us share the experience of having seen our country decimated by conflict, and having left our homes, our jobs and in some cases our families behind to seek refuge in an unfamiliar new country. But our stories are not the same: we are a disparate group of individuals, each having experienced a different route to exile, from different starting points, and at different times. We now live in different cities across Turkey, experience different environments and host cultures, and do not all see each other regularly outside of SP events. Some of us are scientists, others are engineers and others historians. Some have found employment in Turkish universities, some even with permanent contracts, others are unemployed, others still cross the border regularly to teach inside Syria, others provide consultancy and technical support for local NGOs to address challenges faced by populations inside Syria, and others deliver lectures and promote new knowledge using e-learning environments. Yet we were brought together by circumstance and share a responsibility to stay active as scholars, in order to safeguard our nation's intellectual heritage for subsequent generations. Despite our diffuse and diverse nature, as a community of scholars we represent the past, present and future of Syrian higher education, and much of our work on the SP is geared towards strengthening our community and preparing ourselves for the challenges that lie ahead, with the support of colleagues from the international academic community. This work is the focus of this paper.

The three UK-based authors work in British universities and volunteer on the SP variously as facilitators, workshop leaders, mentors and English language teachers. We, the UK-based authors, believe that the responsibility to safeguard and protect higher education should not rest solely with those directly affected, but with the global higher education community.

Since February 2017, the SP community has convened at seven residential events in Istanbul. These events have been attended by 30–60 Syrian academics, and a typical cohort of 5–10 UK academics serving as facilitators. These events last several days, and comprise intensive workshops focussed around the strands of EAP and ASD. Beyond this, however, the agenda of the SP is not pre-determined: rather, it follows an inductive action research approach, and the residential events also serve as points to periodically evaluate participants' experiences, diagnose problems and identify needs and opportunities to inform the design and delivery of subsequent activities. Data to date have been collected via interview and focus group, but also through bespoke large group processes (LGPs), activities involving eight or more participants (Martin, 2005) working together to identify and address common issues. LGPs on the SP constitute vital learning experiences for all participants, fostering understanding, trust and rapport, and helping us to achieve areas of consensus, formulate strategic responses to challenges, and develop relational agency and relational expertise (Edwards, 2011). In this paper, we outline and present the findings of a two-day LGP, designed to address four principal objectives:

- (1) to generate understanding of Syrian academics' experiences of life in exile, both within and beyond our community;
- (2) to foster collaboration among and between Syrian and international academics;

- (3) to provide an authentic opportunity to investigate Syrian academia in exile systematically, using qualitative research techniques and approaches; and
- (4) to provide an opportunity to develop and activate core English language skills and vocabulary, in order to support awareness raising and engagement with the international community.

The Syrian authors adopted the dual role of participant–researcher, being at once the sources of data and those undertaking the intersubjective analysis. Visual and autobiographical methods were used to elicit and compare our individual narratives relating to academic life in exile. Graphic interim data were used as stimuli to facilitate the capture of reflective verbal data, which were then analysed collectively using thematic analysis techniques.

We begin by situating the study within the context of Syrian academia in exile, summarising the impact of conflict and war on Syrian higher education and its populations. This is followed by a summary of the work of Cara, and the action research model of its SP in particular. We then turn our attention to our primary research, outlining the rationale and methodology for the study, and our application of visual and autobiographical methods and thematic analysis. Our findings are then presented in two phases. The first presents the results of a thematic analysis of narrative data pertaining to the Syrian authors' experiences of exile. The second phase presents a reflective evaluation of the LGP in relation to the objectives set out above, and draws on qualitative evaluation survey data collected shortly after the LGP, and on the authors' subsequent reflections captured during an online discussion forum. In our concluding discussion, we synthesise the findings of these two phases within the frame of relational agency, highlighting challenges and opportunities in relation to collaboration, community building and capacity building in the context of exile, displacement and trauma, and offering suggestions for future higher education projects in conflict regions.

Syrian HE in the context of conflict

Syria's civil war first broke out in 2011. In the intervening seven years, all aspects of public life inside the country have been ravaged by violence and its fallout. Higher education has not been spared: university buildings, infrastructure and resources have been destroyed, and their populations have been subjected to violent attacks, intimidation and militarisation (Anonymous, 2016; Bakarar and Milton, 2015; Bariscil, 2017; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014; Young-Powell, 2017). Over the last seven years, over 2,000 academics have fled Syria (King, 2016; Sheikh, 2016), mostly to the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. Refugee academic communities in these countries can face hostility, and linguistic and bureaucratic obstacles to continuing their academic work (Al-Ibrahim, 2016; Sheikh, 2016); the Institute of International Education estimates that less than 10 per cent of displaced Syrian academics have continued their academic careers in exile (Sheikh, 2016). In Turkey, the country that has accepted the largest number of Syrian refugees, exiled academics can experience restrictions in relation to travelling beyond and within the country, or undertaking certain types of paid work, due to conditions associated with their temporary protection status (İçduygu and Millet, 2016), or to lacking necessary documentation (Ammar, 2016).

Research in comparable conflict contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan has highlighted legacies of psychological trauma among staff and students (Babury and Hayward, 2013; Bright and Mahdi, 2009). Inevitably, life for Syrian academics in exile can entail a dramatic shift in material circumstances and the loss of social status (Al-Ibrahim, 2016; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014), compounding high levels of psychological trauma resulting from violence and displacement (Avery and Said, 2017; Bakarar and Milton, 2015; King, 2016; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014; Young-Powell, 2016).

De Wit and Altbach (2016) noted that well-educated Syrians currently based in European and other developed countries are statistically unlikely to return home. This points to a profound, long-term skills deficit inside Syria, and the need for higher education solutions to educate and train the Syrian population to address future challenges. Syrian academics continue to engage in teaching and learning, among the rubble of destroyed campuses, in refugee camps, in temporary buildings and online. Implicit in these activities is a clear message: we, the Syrian academic community, are still here. Among academics who have fled the country, many have maintained contact with their students and are committed to working in exile to secure their country's future through education. Initiatives such as the Jamiya Project (Webster, 2016) have sought to connect Syrian academics and students, and support engagement in higher education among refugee communities. The impetus to teach, learn and research remains.

While we have no reason to doubt its veracity, it should be acknowledged that much of the literature referenced above might be considered grey literature. Notwithstanding recent exceptions, the plight of Syrian academia post-2011 has been neglected within scholarly research, and first-hand accounts from within the Syrian academic community are particularly scarce. A key aim in writing this paper therefore is to address this scarcity.

The 12 Syrian authors of this paper count ourselves among the Syrian academic community exiled within the region. In seeking to safeguard an academic future for our country, key challenges our community faces relate to promoting awareness internationally of the need to protect Syrian higher education, self-organisation, engaging with the international community and the establishment of appropriate models of collaboration in the absence of suitable infrastructure and resources, and in the context of trauma and difficult material circumstances.

Cara: supporting at risk academics since 1933

Cara is a UK-based non-profit NGO that has supported academics at risk from conflict and persecution since 1933. Cara's precursors the Academic Assistance Council and the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) were established in 1933 and 1936, respectively, in response to the expulsion of academics under Nazi Germany. During the Second World War, the SPSL provided support and financial assistance to some 2,000 academics and their families fleeing Europe to the UK and other countries, and connecting them with networks of international colleagues. This approach continued after the end of the War, with Cara supporting academics at risk in other global contexts, and is still the main basis for Cara's Fellowship Scheme, which assists individual academics by securing visiting academic positions at UK universities, and offering stipendiary support. In recent years, however, in response to the scale and duration of crises in the Middle East, Cara has also established regional programmes offering *in situ* support to academic communities still domiciled in the region.

The SP in Turkey was launched in 2016. Marketing of the programme to these communities has largely been through word of mouth, and recruitment relies on individual academics making contact with Cara, and formally asking to join the programme. Criteria for registration are that the applicant must hold, or previously held, an academic post, and a minimum of a master's degree. There are currently over 150 Syrian academics registered on the programme, the majority of whom are based in cities across Turkey. From the outset, the SP has been needs-driven and focussed on capacity building across the three key strands of EAP, ASD and RI. Regular reconnaissance, consultation and evaluation informs programme design and delivery, and ensures that needs are identified and addressed. The programme is overseen by strand steering groups comprising UK academics, Syrian academics (Cara fellows) and Cara staff. The EAP

strand of the programme is delivered via a combination of weekly one-to-one lessons with an assigned tutor via a dedicated portal, and intensive residential events. The ASD strand is delivered through a programme of fortnightly webinars, planned around emerging needs and issues, and intensive residential events. Where opportunities arise, RI is facilitated through individual peer mentorship by UK-based researchers with similar research interests, and three- to six-week long visits to UK universities to support collaboration.

In addition, a key holistic objective of the SP is to facilitate networking and collaboration among the Syrian academic community in exile. Cara activities, and the residential events in particular, provide opportunities for Syrian academics to come together to work on projects, share plans and ideas, and simply be in each other's company.

Rationale: telling our stories, and learning to work together

As noted earlier, this study sits within the wider action research context of the Cara SP, and as such has concomitant, mutually supporting research and applied (action) aims. Applied aims include building capacity in research methods, EAP and learning to work together as a diverse, multidisciplinary community. Learning to work together is our foremost applied aim here, alongside the research aim of generating insight relating to the experiences of Syrian academics in exile.

Edwards (2011) observed that in addition to specialist (disciplinary) expertise, collaboration between individuals with different backgrounds and expertise requires relational expertise, "an additional form of expertise which makes it possible to work with others to expand understandings of the work problem as [...] an object of activity" (p. 33). This arises from relational agency, a term that denotes the "capacity to work with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems" (p. 34). In contrast to hierarchical collaborations involving clear leadership by a single individual who is supported and resourced by others, in relational collaborations tasks are expanded and enriched by mutual recognition of others' values, motives and resources, and the realignment of one's own responses to the collective interpretations that arise from this mutual recognition. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) meanwhile examined leadership from a relational perspective, moving away from the dominant focus in leadership research on individual traits. In contrast, a relational approach assumes that leadership is co-constructed in relational interaction processes that support meaningful collaboration. While Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) focussed on hierarchical relationships, their understanding of relational leadership as shared, dynamic and potentially fluid is pertinent to flat leadership contexts, as is Brower *et al.*'s (2000) observation that effective relational leadership is characterised by trust. From a philosophical perspective, Buber's (1923/1970/2013) distinction between I-it (Ich-es) and I-thou (Ich-du) differentiates between experiential engagements with the object (Ich-es) which are utilitarian and distanced, and relational encounters in which the subject and object participate in something together and perceive the fullness of each other's humanity (Ich-du).

Common to these constructions is the view that meaningful relationships can be prepared for, enhanced and supported. Edwards (2011) suggested that time and resources should be allocated to drawing out and stimulating engagement with others' perspectives, with "the meta-level aim of developing mutual recognition" (p. 38). In order to facilitate this, a collaborative autobiographical approach was chosen. In collaborative autobiographical research, "both the substantive findings and the collaborative research process are designed to 'raise consciousness'" (Butt and Raymond, 1989, p. 404), and the process provides "a route to insight, a way to build community and a means of democratising research" (Lapadat *et al.*, 2010). In the following section, we outline the design and delivery of a LGP, centring on a collaborative autobiographical exercise.

Methodology: a hybrid visual-autobiographic methodology within a large group process (LGP) design

Data collection and analysis for this study took place within the format of a two-day LGP. LGPs have origins in social psychology and organisational management, and particularly within action research contexts (e.g. Lewin, 1946), where they are used to engage groups in learning and working together to address common issues and improve their conditions. Today, LGP work is a broad field comprising an array of approaches for convening groups to address important issues or problems. Despite this variety, most approaches, however, share the features of systematic design, inductive enquiry, qualitative sense-making (Tavistock Institute, nd) and an urgency to the issue at hand. Martin (2005) cautioned against off-the-shelf approaches to LGP design, and suggested that the structure of LGPs should be determined by the specific nature of the problem. A theoretical understanding of subjectivist ontology/epistemology and practical experience of group facilitation and qualitative social research methods support rigour and validity in design. A central principle of LGPs in action research is that they should work towards applied, as well as research aims: put simply, they are not simply an academic research exercise, but should promote learning and capacity building among the participant group. Validity in action research projects is gauged not only against academic research criteria, but also in terms of the extent to which these applied ends are achieved, termed catalytic validity (Lathar, 1986).

Accordingly, in addition to the research aim of understanding the experiences of individual Syrian academics in exile, we sought in our LGP design to address priorities that have arisen over the course of the SP thus far, namely, fostering successful collaboration among Syrian academics, and with their UK-based counterparts; improving the Syrian participants' ability to network and communicate internationally through the English language; and building research capacity through practical experience of collaborative qualitative research. Activities within the LGP were designed to address these priorities simultaneously and synergistically. Overall delivery of the LGP was facilitated by the UK-based authors, and supported by colleagues specialising in EAP, and a professional interpreter. Autobiographical and visual methods were used to elicit participants' stories of coming into, and life in, exile.

Autobiographical research

Although pure autobiography is primarily associated with the humanities, autobiographical approaches such as reflective writing and auto-ethnography are becoming established and well-theorised in the social sciences, especially in education. These approaches involve the researcher attending to their own experiences with the same degree of critical analysis as would be applied to those of external interlocutors in traditional qualitative research settings. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) warn that not all autobiography is scholarly, and that for autobiographical research to be valuable to others, personal experiences must be sufficiently related to public issues: "tipping too far towards the self-side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far the other way turns self-study into traditional research" (p. 14).

Autobiographical methods fall within the category of narrative approaches, which are rooted in the constructivist principle that we construct and make sense of the world through stories (narratives) – our own and those of others (Keats, 2009). In narrative research, stories might be analysed in various ways: syntactically, semantically, structurally or, as in this research, thematically.

Visual methods

Visual methods is a broad term used to describe a range of approaches in which images are a central component of the research process, whether as data, research instruments or outputs.

Visual methods are well established within some disciplines, notably anthropology and psychology, but are still comparatively uncommon within the social sciences at large. Prosser and Loxley (2008) remind us that images can signify values, culture, emotions and expectations; they therefore have the potential to support rich expression and stimulate deep reflection. When visual representation is incorporated into research interactions, “meanings [can] become tangible”, allowing the researcher to “literally see what participants are talking about” (Liebenberg, 2009, pp. 444-445). They can be particularly useful where there are language barriers, or where participants lack confidence in verbal expression. Visual materials can be “participant-generated”, “researcher-produced” or both, depending on the level of steer given by the researcher to the participant, though too much prescription might inhibit participants’ expressive thought (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). Images generated in data collection can be treated as narrative texts themselves, or as interim “go between” in the creation of verbal texts (Prosser and Loxley, 2008), with the participant and researcher working together intersubjectively to elicit meaning and insight from images. In this study, we adopted the latter approach, using graphic elicitation techniques (Bagnoli, 2009) to stimulate reflection and elicit verbal narrative texts intersubjectively. In the context of our study the participant–researcher distinction is blurred, but the epistemological principle of intersubjectivity still holds.

Timelines are used in everyday life to depict linear, chronological narratives, whether in the past or the future. This ubiquity and inherent linear temporality makes timelines an ideal and intuitive graphic format for representing autobiographical narratives. As a first task within the LGP, each of the Syrian authors worked alone to draw a timeline depicting their time in exile, from the point of their leaving Syria to the present day, and accounting for critical junctures. We were encouraged to use a meandering line rather than a straight one, for two reasons. First, this allowed for more detail to be included within the space of a single piece of A2 paper. Second, this evoked a road, a path or a river, and thus introduced a metaphorical aspect to the timeline, implicitly sanctioning the use of figurative imagery. Beyond this, no rules were prescribed: we were free to depict our experiences, whether professional or personal, using images or text annotation (English or Arabic) as we wished. An hour was allocated for this task. The resulting timelines were treated as interim visual data.

As a second task, the participants were arranged into pairs. Participants took it in turns to present their timeline verbally to their partner, explaining the significance of images where appropriate. The participant in the role of listener was tasked with prompting their partner to reflect deeply on the experiences depicted in the timeline, asking questions relating to emotional response, emerging needs, challenges, priorities and opportunities, and noting their responses on the timeline. When this process was completed for both participants, each pair then presented their timelines to the other pair sat at their table. This process lasted ninety minutes, and served to enrich the visual timelines with interim verbal data. At the same time, it provided an authentic opportunity to share experiences and perspectives with colleagues, establishing a collective frame of reference and bolstering relational understanding and trust.

The third and final stage of data generation involved writing up the annotated timelines as narrative prose. Participants were offered the choice of either writing in Arabic for subsequent translation into English, or writing directly in English with support from UK colleagues specialising in EAP. In the event, all chose the latter approach. The resulting written texts were collected at the end of the day by the facilitators, and constituted the final data set.

Coding and analysis of narrative data

The second day of the LGP was dedicated to coding, analysing and presenting the data. The facilitators shared the 12 anonymised individual narrative texts with the wider group. The purpose of this was manifold: to reveal the diversity of our individual interactions with

the Syrian crisis, to practise language skills through reading and summarising text and ultimately to look at how, through thematic analysis, we as participant–researchers could begin to consider communicating our experiences to an external audience. The second day’s activities can be categorised into three stages, as follows.

Stage 1: reading and coding

- (1) the Syrian participant–researchers were allocated into three groups of four;
- (2) 12 anonymised individual texts were placed on each table for participants to read;
- (3) participants were asked to pick three texts (none of which should be their own); and
- (4) participants read the texts, summarising each line of text with a few keywords.

This first stage allowed participants to practise their language skills through reading for meaning, and to build vocabulary through the use of keywords to summarise sentences. This was also the beginning phase of thematic analysis, as informed by inductive coding principles (Thomas, 2006). Indeed, for many of the participants this was a new approach to research, and as such was part of the facilitators’ overall aims for learning to take place in the LGP.

Stage 2: identifying high-level categories

- (1) each group discussed the keywords/codes identified by individual participants;
- (2) each group identified high-level themes; and
- (3) themes were shared, compared, discussed and refined with the wider group.

The process of discussing and refining the thematic codes served as a means of inter-rater validity checking, highlighting instances of consistency and divergence in interpretation.

Stage 3: preparing and delivering a presentation

- (1) introduction of a presentation structure (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (IMRAD));
- (2) groups to create a presentation following the structure;
- (3) groups to practise their presentation; and
- (4) groups to deliver their presentation to the wider SP cohort.

Participants were encouraged to structure their presentations following an IMRAD structure (e.g. Wu, 2011). This not only allowed us to allocate individuals to work on certain sections of the presentation, before bringing it together as one, but more importantly reinforced the notion of participants as researchers, by providing a tool through which we could reflect on the activities over the last two days to communicate our experiences to each other, and outwardly.

Write-up: a final stage of analysis

The process of writing up our presentations as narrative prose to reflect our collective experiences arguably constituted a final stage of intersubjective analysis in and of itself, in that it entailed sustained immersion in the data, through which further analytical insights arose after the LGP event had finished.

Findings

Displacement and upheaval

A profound sense of emotional distress and upheaval emerged from the narratives, particularly in relation to first leaving Syria. One participant recalled fleeing the country at short notice with their family, taking no belongings with them and with only the clothes they were wearing at the time. Others expressed sadness and difficulty in writing about this period of their lives:

In 2013 I left Syria. It was a sad experience to be forced to leave my country for the first time: nobody can imagine my emotional situation except for someone who has had the same experience.

And:

It's very sad to write about your educational journey during revolution and war, especially in Syria.

Almost all participants wrote in terms of "fleeing", or being "forced to leave", with varying degrees of urgency; just one participant left for reasons other than safety concerns (work) in 2013. With the exception of one participant who had fled in 2011 at the outbreak of war, participants had stayed in Syria for a number of years during the crisis. Some participants wrote of enduring air strikes, or harassment by intelligence authorities. Most left between 2013 and 2016 and one in 2017. As one participant noted, they had remained until "leaving Syria was the only choice".

Some described difficulties in adjusting to "a new society, culture and way of life" since arriving in Turkey. For one participant, who had spent some years in Jordan in between leaving Syria and arriving in Turkey, the scale and population density in particular were a shock:

Turkey is a very big country, and too busy. It is like a vast continent, with about 70 million people in comparison with only 7 million in Jordan. With that you find a lot of pitfalls. Daily life is a drama.

Others, however, found Turkish culture to be similar to their own, and felt able to settle into their new way of life easily:

I came to Turkey towards the end of 2013. I felt as though I had been freed from a prison, as Turkey is similar to Syria.

Common across the narratives were difficulties relating to language. None of the participants could speak Turkish at the time of their arrival in Turkey, and they had had to learn alongside trying to find work and put down roots. One participant reported feeling exhausted from speaking Arabic at home, Turkish at work and trying to learn English in the evenings, while another, who had secured an academic post in a university with a high proportion of Arab and Kurdish speaking students, had to "mix three languages in Teaching".

Frustration and despondency

Several of the narratives depicted periods of intense despondency, particularly in the early stages of exile:

I fled in August 2014, and had to live with my sister's family for four months without work. I was upset and disappointed, but I had to seek any job I could to keep my self-respect.

And:

In the beginning, this new life was so challenging and exhausting. [...] I felt that my general situation got worse and worse.

Some participants wrote of their frustration at having their academic careers interrupted, with one noting that "achievement is a source of pleasure, and when you

have barriers to your achievement you will be frustrated". Two participants had had to stop their doctoral studies:

I finished my master's degree in 2010, and published two articles in a scientific research magazine in 2010 and 2011. I began my PhD in 2011, and worked on it for one year, but I was forced to stop because of the troubles in Syria.

And:

In 2011, after four years of PhD research, the university said "you are expelled, and you can no longer finalise your dissertation". [...] As a result, I left for Jordan, without my PhD, only with my heartbreak, so I was very frustrated.

The majority of participants had encountered bureaucratic or legislative hurdles of some form or another in their attempts to reengage in academic life. Many lacked official documentation, which prevented them from applying for academic posts, while others were unable to work in public universities or for public companies due to the conditions of their work permits. The long bureaucratic process associated with issuing a formal contract had forced one participant to leave Turkey for a period:

I came to Turkey and had an interview in the faculty of tourism at [Name] University. I had to wait about three months for the higher education ministry to approve my contract with the university. During the waiting period, I went to Iraqi Kurdistan and taught at [Name] University, [but] complexities of working and residency meant I could not cope with living and teaching there. Fortunately, [Name] University eventually contacted me and told me that my contract was approved.

Another participant lost their job following the closure of their research laboratory:

I was lucky to find a job in my field, and I worked as a lab technician in a medical centre for 18 months. But this centre was closed by the Turkish government because it was unlicensed.

Continuing with academic life

Employment status varied widely across the group. Some were now employed on stable contracts at Turkish universities, while others were employed on rolling, fixed-term contracts that left them feeling precarious. Others were engaged in volunteer work, others had found project work with NGOs, and others still were currently unemployed. Many found it frustrating to work in areas outside of academia, and outside their area of disciplinary expertise. For example:

When we moved to Turkey I found it hard to find work in education, particularly in my discipline. [so] I worked in a retail company as an admin officer and accountant. [This] made me feel unsatisfied because it kept me away from my disciplinary domain for more than one year.

And:

It was a big challenge for me to teach in a new language, new educational system and different faculty, as in Syria I was teaching in the Arabic language and in the economics faculty.

Those who had found work in education noted its impact on their emotional well-being:

I applied to [Name] University to be a teacher in Business administration. Although I did not earn much money, I felt so happy to stand in front of students again and teach.

And:

After two years in NGOs I returned to the academic domain in [Name] University as a business and economics lecturer, which brought the joy of teaching and standing in front of the students back into my life.

[...] while others who had found work with NGOs that utilised their expertise for relief work felt a similar sense of relief and fulfilment:

In August 2016 I was interviewed and accepted for a job in an INGO [relating to] livelihoods and agriculture in particular. At that moment I felt that a door had been opened.

And:

In September 2013 [...] I left Syria to go and work for an organization in the field of charity and humanitarian aid for Syrian people in Turkey. During that time I had warm feelings.

Some participants had crossed the border back into Syria since taking residence in Turkey in order to teach in universities. One participant, who had initially fled to Turkey in 2013, had returned to Syria in 2015 to take on a teaching role for two years. They described feelings of duty and pride:

One reason for returning to Syria was to teach in [Name] University. I felt it was very important for me to teach [there], because I have a PhD degree [and] my students can benefit from my knowledge. [During] that time I was very proud of myself, and thought I was doing my duty.

Another recounted their experiences of setting up a new university with colleagues prior to fleeing Syria, in order to deliver higher education to students whose formal studies had been interrupted:

At that time there was less money, but good relationships between colleagues, and between teachers and students, because we were working as volunteers and our students appreciated highly the knowledge and treatment they received.

Others wrote about other areas of academic life, such as publishing research articles or monographs. For one participant, this evoked feelings of happiness, but was tempered with sadness due to other aspects of their identity being suppressed:

In 2015 I published my first article in English in an international journal, and at the start of 2018 I published my first book in the Turkish language, with a Turkish co-author. I was both very happy, and very sad. To publish a book is a good achievement for an academic, but it was not in my mother tongue (Kurdish) as this was prevented by law. Nor was it in my second mother tongue (Arabic), the language that I have always studied in.

Another participant recounted his efforts to get his academic career back on track “from zero”:

I decided to be optimistic and forget the past, and made the critical decision to start a new PhD from zero at Jordanian university, despite the high cost. I got funding and started the PhD in parallel with an MBA. It was very three hard and challenging years [during which] I had to write a thesis in Islamic law and a dissertation in administration simultaneously. It is very rare, but incredibly, I completed successfully in 2016.

The majority of participants marked their joining the Cara SP on their timelines of their time in exile. Some, particularly those who had only recently joined the SP (and for whom this was their first residential event), wrote in terms of anticipated benefits, while others wrote of the benefit they had already gained from the programme. For example:

At a critical moment I heard about the Cara Programme from colleagues, and applied and was accepted. [Since joining] I have felt reborn. This programme helps me to work in a team and improve my English and academic skills, especially in scientific writing so I can prepare my work for publication.

And:

My improvement was not too noticeable for the first three months, between February and May 2017 when the tutor started to help me [with] English language by through the weekly online sessions. [But] my English language has improved well in the last ten months, and now I believe I can speak more

easily and confidently than before my involvement in the CARA programme. As a consequence of participation in this programme (the online sessions, the webinars and the workshops) some essential things have progressively improved, such as English language [and] academic writing skills.

Hope for the future

Participants wrote of their hopes and aspirations for the future. Two of the participants planned to leave Turkey and continue their academic careers abroad, whether in the UK, Canada, “or any country”. Of these participants, one believed it was necessary to move if they were “to find a role in [their] disciplinary domain in research and teaching”. Others were more committed to continuing their academic development in Turkey:

Carrying out a PhD in one of the Turkish universities [...] would be a good option [for me].

And:

I have changed my priorities. I am planning to do a PhD [here] because it seems to me that it will open many doors in Turkey in particular. It would mean I could access the Turkish [job] market. I see myself teaching in future.

Two participants who had only recently joined the Cara SP wrote of their expectations of the programme, based on the recommendations of peers. One participant wrote that they had “got involved with the hope of keeping in touch with colleagues, whether Syrian or international”. Others discussed their future plans in terms of making the most of a difficult situation:

Overall, it is not easy time in life. However with some support from CARA I’m managing to survive and stay alive.

And:

The point is how can you organise your life, and make it easy.

Despite its having arisen as a major concern at other Cara events, and perhaps because of the focus on personal experiences in this particular LGP, only one participant addressed the issue of Syria’s future directly in their narrative. They wrote of their Syrian students’ being a source of inspiration, and a reason to be optimistic about the future:

I was happy and full of hope, especially when looking into my students’ eyes. I believe we can recover Syria, and rebuild our institutions.

Reflective evaluation of the large group process

Reflective evaluation was conducted via an online video conference, lasting 90 min, during which the Syrian and UK-based authors shared thoughts regarding the outcomes of the LGP and needs going forward. Notes were taken and circulated for checking and further elaboration.

The Syrian authors’ reflective evaluations of the LGP centred around the interrelated themes of collaboration, time constraints and skills development. With regard to the former, many noted that collaboration of this kind was a new experience; there was no culture of collaborative research in Syrian academia, particularly not with colleagues of different status or disciplinary background, and we were generally accustomed to solitary scholarship. Handling and negotiating different ideas and perspectives, and working towards consensus in depicting our collective circumstances, was thus an unfamiliar and challenging experience for many of us, but ultimately a valuable one. Having time to share and learn about each other’s experiences of coming into and living in exile led us to mutual understanding and recognition.

Related to this, we discussed the issue of a broader lack of trust among Syrians, which presented barriers to collaboration between individuals and communities. Working with non-Syrians, who can adopt a neutral status (which is declared explicitly by Cara), can help to broker and foster collaborations that might not otherwise occur, or which might break down due to mistrust. However, it was noted that mistrust of foreigners can also be an issue following the crisis, and that this might present its own obstacles in some circumstances. It is important therefore to make concerted efforts to build trust both within the Syrian academic community and between Syrian academics and non-Syrian counterparts, but also to be realistic about what can be achieved, and at what pace: building trust and mutual understanding takes time.

From the perspective of the UK-based authors, bearing witness to our colleagues' stories has afforded us a more nuanced understanding of their needs, challenges and aspirations, which, in turn, has led to a clearer understanding of the roles we can play in supporting them. It has thrown our comparatively comfortable experiences as academics working in resource-rich UK universities in peacetime, into stark relief. We believe it is vital that academics in exile lead in setting their academic development agenda in line with their lived experiences, and that international partners act responsively and supportively. Group processes that involve all stakeholders and work inductively to elicit relational understanding can ward against top-down intervention and promote needs-driven collaboration.

There was a shared frustration among Syrian and UK-based authors about the time constraints of the SP, and a feeling that the residential events were not long enough to fully develop collaborative project ideas. After each residential event ends and the community disperses, the challenges of daily life inevitably consume our time, and projects are set aside and often not seen through. For one female participant in particular, childcare and other domestic responsibilities are all-consuming and leave her with little time and energy to devote to academic work. Without a team within which to share tasks and responsibilities, undertaking research was simply not feasible in her current circumstances.

For the UK-based authors who work on the Cara SP on a voluntary basis, time spent on the programme needs to be made up elsewhere. There is little slack in our schedules, particularly at certain points of the year, and as with our Syrian colleagues sustaining momentum after residential events can be difficult. Cara's role as a coordinator is crucial in ensuring that deadlines are met and communication is maintained. Some Syrian authors were less concerned about completing specific projects, and instead spoke in terms of longitudinal benefit. One spoke metaphorically of planting seeds at residential events, which would grow and bear fruit later on. Others saw the activities undertaken on the SP as opportunities to acquire new skills and ways of working. On this occasion, many saw value in gaining practical experience of qualitative research and analysis, which for some was directly applicable to our existing work. For others it has provided an insight into colleagues' ways of working, helping us to understand research practice across disciplinary boundaries, and even to consider where different research traditions might converge and compliment each other.

Building research capacity was a stated objective of the LGP, based on earlier needs analyses (see Cara, 2016; Parkinson, forthcoming). From the perspective of the UK-based authors, who designed and facilitated the LGP, our colleagues engaged intuitively in authentic qualitative research, and in some cases were considering applying the techniques learned in their own research, confirms to us the value of the activities and assured us that this objective was being addressed. We are mindful, however, that for some this type of research sits outside of their expertise and research interests, and that if we are to address anxieties surrounding deskilling we must identify and develop opportunities for engaging in disciplinary research. This is no small task given the

resource needs of, for example, experimental scientific research, and will require coordination between a range of regional and international stakeholders. Yet this highlights again the value of nurturing relational agency and expertise on the SP, to support effective collaboration across diverse actors.

Developing relational understanding

While the data generated in this study pertain to the past experiences of the Syrian authors, the study's objectives are future oriented. The theme of this special issue has focussed our thinking towards the future of Syrian higher education – both short term and long term, both inside Syria and in exile – and the challenges it will entail. In the short term, it is vital that the Syrian academic community in exile remains cohesive despite being geographically dispersed. Syrian academics and their international partners must develop ways of working together to sustain academic activity and develop strategies and resources for the present and future.

The professional contexts from which Edwards' (2011) concepts of relational agency and relational expertise were originally developed differ significantly from the SP. Nonetheless, there are clear points of analogy that support the conceptual utility of relational approaches here. First, the diverse SP community comprises individuals with different disciplinary expertise and professional norms. Second, the problems and issues at hand are highly complex and thus prone to interpretation from different disciplinary perspectives.

The need for mutual recognition and “common knowledge” developed in “boundary spaces” (Edwards, 2011, p. 37) between different stakeholders' understandings is therefore crucial. The LGP depicted in this study provided a framework for facilitating authentic collaboration among a diverse group of Syrian academics in exile. Incorporating collaborative autobiographical research had the threefold advantages of eliciting common knowledge from individuals' experiences, building capacity in qualitative research and analysis techniques, and stimulating sustained engagement across disciplinary and other boundaries. Collectively, these features helped the Syrian authors to overcome cultural and situational barriers to collaboration and build relational agency and expertise.

The concepts of relational agency and expertise are also pertinent to the transcultural dimension of the SP. Syrian higher education was comparatively isolationist prior to the crisis, and international collaboration was uncommon. As a result, there can be a disconnect in understandings of academic practice between Syrian academics on the SP and their UK colleagues, whose experience is rooted in the resource-rich and heavily internationalised context of UK higher education. Furthermore, linguistic and cultural differences constitute “boundary spaces” where common knowledge is needed to support effective collaboration between Syrian and UK colleagues on the SP, and, looking beyond the immediate context, to support international collaboration in the future. Although the UK-based authors served primarily as facilitators during the LGP itself, this gave way to less role-bound engagement in the subsequent reflective evaluation and write-up stages, further developing common knowledge and fostering relational understanding.

Based on our experiences of the SP, in order to sustain academic communities in exile we recommend that time and resources be devoted to the development of relational agency and expertise. It would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge that the resource requirements for activities of the kind documented in this paper are considerable, and likely far beyond the reach of exiled communities without outside support. It is therefore essential that the international academic community recognises and acts upon its responsibility to support those in crisis. NGOs such as Cara provide nodes at which strategies can be formulated relationally by those in need and their collaborators, and through which external support can be coordinated and allocated.

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