

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 23: Education		
Title of case study: Syrian Academia in Exile: Enhancing Well-Being and Identity, Building Research Capacity, and Improving Higher Education in Conditions of Conflict and Displacement		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken 2017-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Tom Parkinson	Senior Lecturer	2014-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Dr Parkinson's research has underpinned the academic development strategy, methods, and reach of the Council for At-Risk Academics' Syria Programme since March 2017, improving the academic capacity, connectedness, well-being, and professional identity of hundreds of Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey. Participants have gained research and teaching capacity, and built networks through a programme of research-informed activities. Since 2017, participants have submitted over 100 grant applications, published 30 peer-reviewed outputs, and established independent Syrian-led entities such as the Gaziantep-based CSO Academic Centre for Development and Peace Studies. Dozens of participating Syrian academics in exile who continue to teach inside Syria are improving their teaching skills and enhancing Syrian higher education for thousands of Syrian learners.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Since March 2017, Dr Tom Parkinson has led on a programme of action research with Syrian and UK academics participating in the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) Syria Programme. Cara launched its Syria Programme (Cara SP) in Turkey in late 2016 to provide support to Syrian academics in the Middle East region affected by the Syria crisis, and its capacity-building activities began in March 2017. Most Syrian academics forced into exile in Turkey, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region have a strong desire to play a vital role in the future rebuilding of Syria and its HE and research sectors, but for now they urgently need opportunities to work, connect, and develop professionally [R4, R5].</p> <p>Action research seeks not only to understand but also to address real-world problems and improve stakeholders' situations through cycles of planning, action, and reflective evaluation. At Cara's request, Parkinson and his colleagues have developed innovative participatory methods and action research frameworks to understand the academic development needs, priorities, and challenges of hundreds of Syrian academics living in exile in Turkey, and directly address these through the delivery of community development and capacity-building activities on the Syria Programme [R3, R4, R5].</p> <p>Through Cara-commissioned research reported in [R3], Parkinson and colleagues (McDonald and Quinlan) elicited five key priority areas for Syrian academics in exile:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Responsibility</i> towards Syria, the scientific community, their dependents, and themselves. Syrian exiled academics embody the country's intellectual heritage and expertise. Research participants felt a great sense of responsibility towards younger generations of Syrian learners, and wished to participate in Syria's rebuilding; 2. <i>Disciplinarity</i>: Working within and contributing to one's discipline; 3. <i>Teaching</i>: Skills and approaches relevant to teaching in the Syrian context, both inside the country and in refugee and diaspora communities; 		

4. *Research*: Skills, resources, and opportunities;
5. *Collaboration*: Finding opportunities to participate in international academia and develop collaborative projects.

These five priority areas [R3] were directly used to guide the agenda, strategy, and delivery of the Cara SP's academic development programme. Between 2017 and 2020, workshops, mentoring, and online activities have been designed to target the self-identified needs of participants. This programme of ongoing research [R3, R4, R5] has also generated rich insights into programme participants' experiences of displacement and conflict; the impact displacement and conflict have had on Syrian academics' work and community; and the implications for Syria's intellectual future. Playing a leading role in Cara SP planning and delivery as chair of the Academic Development steering group and a lead facilitator of residential workshops, Parkinson has worked with Syrian and UK-based colleagues to identify additional areas of concern that subsequent research has responded to directly. This research has included:

1. *Comparative experiences of higher education in (post-)conflict and refugee contexts*. Through analysis of group processes, focus groups, and interview data collected from Cara SP participants, in 2018-19, Parkinson established that Syrian academics had a desire to connect with and learn from international counterparts who had experienced similar circumstances. In response, Parkinson secured GCRF funding and organised (with Cara SP Director Kate Robertson) and co-chaired (with Dr Juliet Millican, ICS) a series of roundtables at the Swedish Consulate in Istanbul in **June 2019**. These roundtables brought together researchers from seven international contexts to explore how to sustain academic work and community under conditions of conflict, exile, or displacement. This dialogue revealed both commonalities and stark differences between international contexts that impact on academics' work and well-being. It also highlighted the affordances of international collectivism and solidarity in supporting beleaguered academic communities [R2].
2. *Reconnecting Syrian academics in exile with learners in Syria*. Parkinson and colleagues' (Abdullateef and Sarmini) 2018 evaluation of the use of blended technologies to teach emergency agricultural engineering methods [R1] led to a model for collaboration between NGOs, Syrian academics in exile, civil society, and community groups to support higher education delivery in Syria.
3. *Collaborative research and research writing in global North-South partnerships*. To build research capacity and international networks, Syrian researchers on the Cara SP have been paired with UK or international academics to conduct collaborative research since **June 2018**. Through analysis of research-group dynamics, and the role of different types of expertise in the research-writing process, Parkinson and colleagues (Heron, Alajaj, Khuder) identified effective strategies for collaborative research writing [R6], resulting in evidence-based models for writing support that have underpinned the design of several writing workshops, including a 2020 British Academy-funded GCRF Writing Workshop.

3. References to the research

University of Kent researchers in bold. All other researchers are Cara SP facilitators or participants.

[R1] Abdullateef, S., **Parkinson, T.**, and Sarmini, I. (2020). 'Cross-border connected learning in Northern Syria'. *International Journal of Education Research Open*.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100005>

[R2] Belluigi, D. and **Parkinson, T.** (2020). 'Building solidarity through comparative lived experiences of post/conflict: Reflections on two days of dialogue'. *Education and Conflict Review*, 3: 16-23. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/81782/>

[R3] Parkinson, T., McDonald, K. and Quinlan, K. M. (2020). 'Reconceptualising academic development as community development: Working with Syrian academics in exile'. *Higher Education*, 79(2): 183-201. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs10734-019-00404-5>

[R4] Parkinson, T. (2019). 'A trialectic framework for large group processes in educational action research: The case of academic development for Syrian academics in exile'. *Educational Action Research*, 27(5): 798-814. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1532803>

[R5] Parkinson, T., Zoubir, T., and Abdullateef, S., Abedtalas, M., Alyamani, G., Al Ibrahim, Z., Al Husni, M., Alhaj Omar, F., Iboor, F., Allito, H., Jenkins, M., Rashwani, A., Sennou, A., and Shaban, F. (2018). "'We are still here": The stories of Syrian academics in exile'. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 20(3): 132-147. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-06-2018-0013>

[R6] Heron, M., Parkinson, T., Alajaj, N., and Khuder, B. (2020). 'Interdisciplinary collaborative writing for publication with exiled academics: the nature of relational expertise'. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1845953>.

Grants and Awards

As PI, since 2017 Parkinson has secured £294,126 from the AHRC, British Academy, and the GCRF to support the ongoing research and impact activities detailed in sections 2 and 4.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Since its first academic development activities in **March 2017**, Parkinson and his colleagues' collaborative action research has directly underpinned the agenda, strategy, design, and delivery of the Cara SP, for which Parkinson chairs the Academic Development Steering Group. Parkinson and colleagues' research and engagement in this field have led to the development of multiple capacity-building, academic development, and community development practices. Below are identified some of the key benefits that have arisen as a result, and which have supported hundreds of Syrian academics to continue their academic work whilst improving their well-being and professional identity [a].

Advancing Cara SP's Strategy, Methods, and Reach

Between 2017 and 2020, the number of international academics contributing to the Cara SP's academic development activities has grown from eight to over 200, and the Cara SP cohort from 29 to over 400, with 160 regularly active participants [a, j]. Cara's Executive Director, Stephen Wordsworth, praised the 'transformative practices that have stemmed from Tom's research', asserting that 'the action research that Tom has led has been instrumental in helping Cara to develop a strategy for the Syria Programme, and indeed a model for future comparable programmes [and] has played a critical part in advancing our understanding of Syrian academic needs and challenges, and in the development of the Programme's methods and practice' [a]. Similarly, in reference to the needs analysis undertaken by Parkinson and colleagues reported in [R3] and [R4], the Cara SP's independent evaluator applauded the 'innovative processes [used] to identify [...] academic skills needs and participant priorities' [i], and confirmed that '[the Cara SP] has achieved significant results in terms of its intended outputs and towards outcomes. The programme improved skills and networks among Syrian academics and in particular succeeded in its intention to enable academic engagement by Syrian academics in exile in Turkey' [j].

Improving Syrian Academics' Well-Being and Professional Identity

Through a programme of activities targeted towards the priorities identified in Parkinson, McDonald, and Quinlan's research [R3], the Cara SP has contributed to exiled Syrian academics' greater sense of well-being, belonging, and identity. As highlighted by Wordsworth:

'participants attest to the transformative impact of the Syria Programme on their self-efficacy, research and teaching capacities, professional opportunities, community cohesion and overall well-being, enhancing their work as educators and researchers in both Turkish and non-regime-controlled universities in Northern Syria' [a]. Participants have described the Cara SP as 'a light in a very dark tunnel': 'I feel I am an academic again. I [now] have networks with other colleagues in the UK and even in Syria'; 'I have felt reborn. This programme helps me to work in a team and improve my academic skills, especially in [...] scientific writing so I can prepare my work for publication'; 'It encouraged me to work, to write something. To feel about myself as an academic. I had lost that feeling' [b].

Building Syrian Academics' International and Cross-Sectoral Networks

Since 2017, Parkinson and his colleagues' research has raised the profile of Syrian academia and the Cara SP, stimulating the growth of an international network of more than 200 academics, including experts and stakeholders in the fields of displacement and (post-)conflict higher education. Wordsworth confirmed that 'Tom's publications and research presentations to universities and professional bodies have contributed to the in-kind support from which the Programme has benefited [...] valued at well over £1 million', adding that 'Tom continues to apply the findings of his research to drive access to opportunity for marginalised Syrian academics' [a]. As an example, Wordsworth highlighted that, in 2019, Parkinson 'secured GCRF funding [...] to support a four-day roundtable held in June 2019 in Istanbul [bringing] academics together with academics from Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia, and South Africa. [...]. In his role as chair for the first two days, Tom contributed his research-led expertise to this unique forum for knowledge-sharing between international academics, joined by regional and international NGOs and UN agencies, an event and opportunity that was highly valued by participants informing attendees' organisational practice, helping to build solidarity and community for a growing international and cross-sectoral alliance in support of Syrian academics' [a].

Advancing the Syrian Academic Community, Partnerships, and Research Capacity

Independent evaluator Teresa Hanley asserted that the Cara SP has 'increased visibility of the Syrian participants to academia, policy makers and practitioners' [j], and that these encounters have catalysed a number of collaborations and initiatives that 'move beyond the Cara Syria Programme's direct activities to more sustainable academic engagement and indeed livelihoods' [j]. Hanley noted in particular that the roundtables in June 2019 had 'brought participants together with international and local humanitarian responders to the Syria Crisis and academics from other parts of the world', and that 'participants interviewed noted their appreciation, particularly of the chance to discuss higher education development and other conflict-affected countries' experience' [j]. Following advice and encouragement from delegates at the research-led round tables [c], several Cara SP academics established the Academic Centre for Development and Peace Studies (ACDP), a Syrian-led civil society organisation and academic consortium in Gaziantep, Turkey, in **December 2019**. ACDP Co-Director Shaher Abdullateef attested to the impact of the roundtables in creating the impetus for ACDP: '[At the round tables] we heard different cases [from] Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa. It was very useful to develop ideas about how to organise [...] and what to do as a first step. [...] we finally established [ACDP] as a space to collect [...] and to conduct research relative to Syria context. The idea of empowering Syrian academics [and] rais[ing] their voices is older than two years [but] I wasn't sure if this is the right way to do it. During the event we Syrian participants were more confident, and the way to connect [with] and involve [...] international academia was clearer, especially [with] great encouragement from the international participants.' [c] Co-Director Fateh Shaban meanwhile asserted that 'the invaluable support that the Cara Syria Programme has provided to Syrian academics in exile [...] has helped us to sustain a working academic network and establish formal organisations such as our Centre, which now serves as a hub through which Syrian academics can access professional and research opportunities and engage effectively with stakeholders in Syria and in diaspora. [...] The directors of ACDP began our collaboration on the Cara Syria Programme, and our network of affiliate members

comprises many Syrian Programme participants, as well as international experts whom we met at Cara's Roundtables funded by the University of Kent in 2019' [d].

Evidence-based capacity building and support models developed by Parkinson and colleagues (e.g. [R4, R6]) have been implemented at several residential retreats and regular online events in 2018, 2019, and 2020. These have supported Syrian academics in writing over 100 grant applications; publishing over 30 peer-reviewed outputs as authors or co-authors (2017-20) [a], and attaining internationally recognised teaching fellowships [e].

Supporting Syrian Higher Education

Parkinson's and colleagues' research to inform the Cara SP's academic development strategy [R3, R4] has enhanced Syrian teaching and learning through targeted CPD for academics teaching in Turkey and in northern Syria [a]. Abdullateef, Parkinson, and Sarmini's research [R1] has enabled and enhanced distance teaching for learners in conflict-affected regions of northern Syria, delivered by exiled academics. For example, Rahmet Relief Foundation (a regional NGO) noted that this research [R1] has directly 'enabled effective delivery of vital agricultural knowledge to learners in Syria, which has greatly benefitted [...] stakeholders [whilst also] providing vital insight for others offering similar interventions' [f]. Another NGO partner, Shafak, declared that this research had led to 'refinement of educational delivery models that now ensure sustainable knowledge and support to learners and professionals, online, offline and through physical learning tools' [g]. Furthermore, learners in northern Syria reported that the educational interventions developed through Parkinson's and colleagues' research provided an invaluable source of specialist training, and 'expressed their appreciation of this learning and its value to their education and livelihoods' [g]. One participant noted: '[It] helped me to review the knowledge on protected agriculture that I took during my studies which were cut off, and also increased my knowledge about methods and areas of use of aquaculture' [h]. Shafak's CEO, Omar Atik, stated that these interventions were 'building hope, community and solidarity' [g].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] Testimonial: Executive Director, Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara).

[b] Testimonials: Collection of key testimonials from Cara SP participants (Syrian academics in exile).

[c] Testimonials: Collection of roundtable participants' first-hand (at the time) and post-roundtable (fostering collaboration) reflections.

[d] Testimonial: Director, Academic Centre for Development and Peace. Detailing the benefit of the Kent June 2019 Roundtable and work of Cara SP to the NGO.

[e] Testimonial: Lecturer and Syria Programme Participant, Selcuk University, Turkey.

[f] Testimonial: Rahma Worldwide Aid and Development, Syria.

[g] Testimonial: Head of Programs, Shafak, Syria.

[h] Testimonials: Collection of key feedback from learners inside Syria.

[i] Hanley, T. (June 2018). Cara Syria Programme Phase 1 Mid-Term Independent Evaluation.

[j] Hanley, T (2019). Cara Syria Programme Phase 2 Independent Evaluation.