

Open Centre for Languages and Cultures

Distinguished Speaker Series: 22-Feb-2024



[Edited transcript]

Mirjam Hauck

Hello everybody. My name is Mirjam Hauck. I'm the Director of the [Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#) at the Open University. It is a huge honour to have Stephen Wordsworth here with us today on the occasion of the launch of our latest short course: *A short course in Arabic Language and Culture*. Stephen has been Executive Director of Cara (the Council for at Risk Academics) since 2012, and the Open University has been working with Cara for several years, but recent events in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere have led to a sharp increase in the number of those in difficult and dangerous situations who are urgently seeking CARA's help. Cara is giving them opportunities to carry on with their work in places where they and their families are safe. Before joining CARA, Stephen was a career member of the UK Diplomatic Service, working mainly on Russia and the Western Balkans. He was Deputy Head of Mission in Moscow and Ambassador in Belgrade. In March 2022, he was appointed as Chancellor of [Cardiff Metropolitan University](#). I am now going to share your slide deck and hand over to you, Stephen.

Stephen Wordsworth

Well, thank you, Mirjam, and thank you everybody else who's given up their lunch break to join this session. Very happy to have a chance to talk to you all.

Firstly, just to start with the beginnings as it says on that slide, founded in 1933. The chap on the left is [William Beveridge](#) later of the [Beveridge Report](#), but at that time he was the Director of the [London School of Economics](#) and he was travelling in Austria when he heard what was sudden happening in Germany next door where the Nazis had just taken over. One of their first actions was to pass a new law, rather boringly called [Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service](#). It sounds a pretty boring title, but actually what it was about was excluding what they called 'non-Aryans' from the public service, which included university and school teaching. Non-Aryans, of course, was aimed primarily at Jews

and Beveridge was appalled that what he was hearing about people being kicked out of their jobs: these were, after all people who in many cases he knew - the academic world was relatively small then. They were people in senior positions of great academic distinction. So, he came back to London and within about a month he'd got together a group of 41 other Vice Chancellors, Directors of colleges, and other prominent public figures to set up what was really a rescue mission for those who were being expelled and forced out of their posts. The aim was to raise money to support them here in the UK, as they either settled here or passed on through to somewhere else where they could continue their careers. So, Cara began as a rescue mission, what does Cara do now?

Cara now has two programmes. The first is the [Fellowship Programme](#), which is essentially the continuation of the original rescue mission, although our role has changed over time, we're now back to doing more of what we were doing originally in the 1930s. People approach us seeking help, we check their background, we help them to reach - as it says here, 'a place of safety' - one of our partner universities, of which we have 135, including the Open University. We also, since 2006, have been running *regional programmes*, we're currently on our third. The basis for this was that people very often cannot get away from their home region or just don't want to leave their home region - they have ties there - and so it's a way of helping them also to continue their academic careers, develop new skills, all with the aim, ultimately of both our programmes, that people should one day be able to return home, as most of them want, and help rebuild higher education in their own countries when it is safe for them to do so.

So, the *Fellowship Programme*. As I say, we have 135 partner universities. When the institution joins the network, they commit essentially in principle to hosting a 'Cara Fellow'. We define an 'academic' very broadly. We consider an academic to be somebody who's held a teaching or research post at a university, a research Institute or equivalent institution. That's a very broad definition, but what it means is that many of our Fellows are actually postgraduate students. They're not all Postdoctoral Fellows, as you might otherwise think, in a western structure. There are many countries where people get their first academic job on the strength of a Master's degree, even a Bachelor's degree. It was certainly true in Syria when we began to get requests for help from Syrian academics and people who got their first job and were quite early on in their careers but haven't didn't have a PhD. So, when they came out to the UK or to another western country, they really needed to get a PhD to continue an academic career. Also true in Afghanistan, but there there were more people who had been in careers for 10 or 15 years and in some cases were Heads of departments. had great standing in their own institutions, but again didn't have a PhD, so we had we support people to do PhDs for three to four years, or we support people if they're at post-doctoral level to do a two -year post-doctoral placement: 2 years being the maximum allowed by the standard visa they can come here on. As you see, they are identified as people who are academics, they have to be at immediate risk, they contact us, we check the background, we enter into discussion with them about where they want to go, what they want to do. Some people know the UK educational system quite well from earlier in their careers. They may have done a Master's degree here, for example, or a PhD, and will know very precisely that they want to go to a certain university and work with a certain professor. Others, at the opposite end of the scale, never expected to be in a situation they find themselves in now. They have no idea how the ecosystem works. They don't know anything about any of the universities, and we have put some time into working with them to help

them identify the right match for them. It's very important that they are the ones that choose; we don't to push them into an institution which doesn't fit. As I say, we're always very keen that people should be able to return eventually and that's the focus. We don't want to be in a brain-drain business. This is very important also for some of the countries people are coming away from, and quite recently, for example, with Ukraine, one of the concerns they have is that they may lose their academics altogether. Again, that's not what we want to happen and actually in practice, many of the Ukrainians who are over here now as Cara Fellows do keep in quite close touch with the host universities, some of them actually still delivering classes back to their fellow students online. So we can go back from time to time for short visits, so keeping that link is important.

In terms of numbers, we've seen a significant increase over the last 24 to 12 months really with events in Afghanistan in 2021, then Ukraine, 2022 Sudan last year, all adding to numbers of people who badly need help for different reasons to get away, to get to a safe place, but then carry on their academic work, with their families ideally, if they have families. And so the numbers have gone up in in one year: 115 at the beginning of last year, 115 active Fellows, at the end of the year 175, and it's really a tribute to the host universities that the numbers have been able to expand that way because they essentially bear much of the cost, much of the work of looking after and helping these people and helping them settle in and so on. Alongside those who were actually in post already, at any given time we're working with people at the first stages of the inquiry process - again 80 or 90 - or people who are a bit further along in the process of being helped to identify a host university and who are doing all the work involved and actually finalising the placement. So, at any given time we have got, say, 200 - well 350 or so - people in in the process.

The next slide is just an example of the sort of thing which people are getting away from. That's the [Kharkiv University of Civil Engineering and Architecture](#) - ironically, given the state it's in now, but I hope we'll do a good job rebuilding it when they can. In terms of where they come from, it's currently about 17 countries, but that varies; it's been up as far as 25 at different times. A great number of applications from Afghanistan in the first few months. Very sadly, many of the people concerned were just not able to follow through. In some cases, they didn't have the right documents, didn't have passports or family members didn't have the right passports, and they were anxious about going to a Taliban-controlled office, as it would have been by then, to apply for a new passport. Or of course, just the process of actually leaving the country because there's no UK visa office in Afghanistan, so to apply for a visa they have to cross either to Pakistan or to Iran. In fact, in practice most prefer to go to Iran. You're rather nervous about going to Pakistan because they feel the Taliban's reach extends into Pakistan rather further than it does into Iran. But nonetheless, we have currently over 40 Afghan Fellows now here, mostly with families, and it has been said that once people actually do take the risk, if you like, of going out, getting documents going to the border, going across, we haven't yet had a case among our Fellows of somebody who's been stopped, detained or otherwise come to harm as part of that process. It does seem to work, but of course it does always carry an element of risk, and people do tend to avoid going to the airport. They prefer to travel over land, I think because the sense is that the scrutiny is a little bit less at the land border than at the airport. But then of course, after Afghans, we have Ukrainians some Russians now also, Sudanese and a considerable number also still from the Middle East that for a long time was one of the main sources of our Fellows. Syria, Iraq, Yemen more recently. and of course, we're now very closely watching

what's going on in in Gaza and on the West Bank, which is absolutely tragic. We have had, very sadly, one Cara alumnus who finished a placement here and gone back to Gaza for a visit, just at the wrong time, while we were fixing him up with another placement and they couldn't get out again. He was killed in a bombing raid. We have another fellow who's there at the moment, who, the last we heard, is still safe, but contact is clearly very difficult; just to get a signal from a mobile phone often involves going out into the open, even to a high point, which is not where you want to be in Gaza at the moment. It is really quite risky. We are getting some enquiries from Gaza, but at the moment, when people aren't able to leave, there's not an awful lot we can do beyond getting the details and being ready to act as and when things change.

We are of course involved with the [British Academy's Researchers at Risk](#) programmes; this programme is specifically for Ukraine-based researchers. We worked with the British Academy to set that up in a matter of about six weeks in the first half of 2022. It has primarily government funding £12.8 million altogether for the first two years, and there's funding for 3rd year on the way, we believe. That's for about 175 grantees and we are the main channel for the payments to those people.

That's another example of what people need to get away from: that's 2017 in Turkey. As you will probably remember, 2016 was a difficult year in Turkey: with the beginning of the year, there was the petition signed by about 1000 academics, 'We will not be a party to this crime', criticising the government's policy in the Kurdish regions of Turkey. They were denounced by President Erdogan as essentially terrorist sympathisers. About another thousand people have signed the same petition, many of them have lost their jobs and in some cases criminal action was begun against them. They even got the point of sentencing before, in 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled that what they'd been doing was actually simply the freedom of expression, and therefore all action had to stop. But very few of them got their jobs back, and many did leave the country. And then, of course, also in 2016, in July, there was the failed coup attempt, as a result of which over 100,000 public servants were expelled from their jobs, including a good number of academics with no real chance of address or appeal. There was a process, but it is small and complicated. Difficult, difficult times.

Then we move on to regional programmes, as I say, not everyone can or wants to leave their home, so we've had three programmes, as set out there, it began with Iraq, then Zimbabwe, and since 2016, Syria. The aim is to find activities or develop activities that people can join in with Iraq. The Iraq programme was working with people who are still in Iraq, but also some outside. It's run through an office in Amman in Jordan. Zimbabwe was more about connecting people who had left through what was then quite advanced technology, it seems pretty simple now, but it's essentially what we're using today, or something like it, which meant that they can do live-time broadcasts back to their former students at the University of Zimbabwe. The Syria programme builds on the experience of the Iraq programme but doesn't operate in the regime-controlled parts of Syria and began at least with Syrian academics who are in exile in Turkey, as that was the main gathering point for those who have fled. That's where the largest single community was. We have about 200 exiled Syrian academics involved and it has enormous support from UK-based academics, up to 500 or so in the whole range of activities, and this is what they all are: English academic research skills; there's various sorts of short-term short research programmes; research incubation visits; larger research programmes building up, all designed to help people develop skills

and use those skills working in collaboration with their colleagues in the UK and elsewhere. You'll hear more about that from Ahmed Halil, who's with our Syria programme, when he's speaking after this.

More recently as it says there, we've gone away to some degree from working with individuals - although we still are - looking at how we can help build capacity in the very small independent universities that are developing in the non-regime-controlled parts of northwest Syria in particular at Sham University in Azaz, right up in the northwest. The problem they have is that they aren't accredited to anything, and they aren't part of the Syrian state system, they have no overseas accreditation, and so it's a question of working with them to show that they are actually developing in a way which means they can be compared with the standards that European universities, because that means that their qualifications are worth something, otherwise, they're simply bits of papers. It's really important to do that and we're very happy to support that. And some of the programme participants cross the border on regular basis back into northwest Syria to work at that university and help it take it forward.

And that's a shot of [Sham University](#). It's obviously very small and we're not talking about a big place, but everything starts small, and it's doing very good work, and we've been very happy to help them with that and to work with the Director and his colleagues to help develop their capacity to teach and to train students and academics.

Then we do other things. We are part of the [Inspire Europe](#) programme. This one was launched by the EU in 1999 to support at risk academics in exile in European countries. We were originally going to be involved in the first phase, but 1999 [*sic.* 2019?] was a difficult year because of Brexit. It was a competitive bid to the European Commission and some of the other people in the consortium were a bit worried that having somebody from an organisation from the UK in the group might cause problems, even though we got assurances from the Commission that that would not be an issue. Nonetheless, we felt that we couldn't continue so we dropped out. In 2022 we came back into the second phase and we're now leading one of the work packages. That caused a little bit of sucking of teeth because we're technically an associate partner rather than the full participant, but there was some questions of whether we could actually lead a work programme, but they decided that we could, so that's what we're doing and it's going very well and we'll see if there's a third phase going forward and after 2025.

And that's what we're doing: a series of webinars and workshops, and we're halfway through now. We've also been very much involved since 2016 with the programme in Germany, we're a member of the [Humboldt Foundation](#), working through the [Philipp Schwartz initiative](#), which again works with universities in particular who want to host a particular academic it's a competitive bidding process and universities put forward their proposals to support a particular academic who has been at risk, and then there's a series of meetings to decide who gets the award. That formed the basis, really, for the *Researchers at Risk* programme that I mentioned the British Academy are running. And it's the fact that we've been involved with that German programme - we knew how that worked - that we were able to transport key parts of that model to help us put together the British Academy-run programme very quickly, in just a very short period of six weeks or so.

The key challenges? Yeah, well, it has been extremely busy and busy means lots of people needing help, lots of people we can help, which is great. But to do that, we've had to take

on more staff and all that costs money, and so we have to try and raise funds from wherever we can. We've been very fortunate with some of our donors; we get support now from some of the big foundations, [Wolfson](#), [Wellcome](#), [Garfield Weston](#) have been supporters for some time, but also lots of individual donations and funding from universities who pay, on a voluntary basis, an annual subscription to support our work and that covers a large part of our running costs. The programme's work is very complicated: it takes time, every case is different, even people coming from the same country, different circumstances, different background, different needs. But clearly, once it's all in place, it's very rewarding, and one of the particular pleasures which we're now able to do again now that COVID has been pushed back a bit, is the people - when they arrive in the UK, once they've settled in - will often come down and meet us for the first time face-to-face with their families. Fantastic to meet them like that and see the sort of difference it's made to their lives.

The Syria programme: essentially, it's been working very well and then, beginning in 2023, we had the earthquakes on the Turkey-Syria border, which caused utter devastation; many houses demolished - you can have seen pictures in the news at the time - and that meant that many of our Syria programme participants there were left either homeless or at least with homes that they didn't dare go back into because there were big cracks in the walls and strange noises coming from the structures, and in the early weeks, really nothing else was available, and it was also a very cold time of year. We were able to raise from our partners £145 000 in institutional donations, individual donations, we put in some money from our reserves as well, and with that we were able to organise 4 rounds of immediate aid to those who were in greatest need to help them just survive essentially until the wider aid efforts and the state efforts could kick in. But otherwise, as I said, the programme is going very well. We are putting together the experience of our three programmes, and so we have that all saved and available and we're looking now, for example, at the situation in Gaza and things will ... whatever happens there we will have to see, but it will at some point be possible to use the experience we have with our regional programmes to do something for people in Gaza and Palestine. We don't know the answer yet, but we're keeping an eye on that and hoping at some point we can step in.

That is just the final slide and that is the website address there and little QR code which will take you to our donations page. If anybody wants to use that, you're very welcome. That would be much appreciated.

And if with that, if we can go on to the video, this is our most recent 'finish of programme' video from 2023, and I'll let people in that film tell their own stories.



Voiceovers on video

Anonymous Cara Fellow

Cara rescued me and my family from a very perilous situation and we are all alive as a result of that support. I was at a very severe risk in the brutal terrorist regime of the Taliban that came to power in Afghanistan, in my home country. The risk of being persecuted, tortured, punished, imprisoned and even barbarically killed.

It was all because of my professional knowledge, academic experiences, my skills, expertise, my ethnicity, my thought, as well as my past political engagement as well.

Natalia Ischenko – Cara Fellow

Before the war, I was the vice Director on education at my domestic university and a lecturer in the Faculty of Economic Sciences. According to the experience of Russian invasion in 2014 to Luhansk, Donetsk, we definitely knew that Rectors and top management, together with lecturers in Ukraine history, Ukrainian linguistics, are always on the top list of those to be repressed. My native university was shelled several times and we have destroyed buildings and heavily damaged roof, hundreds of windows totally crashed. Cara helped my family to move to Durham and together with specialists in Durham University, we were provided with residence, we were provided with school for my child, I have the possibility to work here in Durham University and - which is very important for me - I could continue with doing projects with my domestic universities and also to be involved in projects which are held here in Durham.

Jemima Lloyd – Cara Network Representative

Our commitments to Cara are part of Durham's humanitarian response, but it goes beyond that. It's really about the people. It's about their families and it's about the university being able to play a part in changing people's lives. And it really does. Since 2017 or so, we were able to fund a core number of fellows, and that really changed the programme. Having a regular financial commitment enabled us to plan enabled us to ensure we had adequate support fellows and families, and we could regularise how we worked across the institution and I'm really proud to say we now host 6 fellows and their families, and we help them with a range of things to ensure they're settled into not just the university, but the local community.

Alan Mackay – Cara Network Representative

So, over the last 10 years, what we've been working to do with Cara at the University of Edinburgh in a partnership, there's a number of things. One has been to work to increase the number of fellows that we're supporting each year through Cara and their partners and families that we bring here and provide temporary sanctuary. The second thing that we've done is tried to rethink how we do things and how that partnership works with Cara and can we think outside the box. One of the things that we've done there is to repurpose one of our colleagues within our international division who is 'Cara Scotland Manager' and we've done that in order to help Cara's small team in London to be able to really increase their reach and profile. Cara is unrivalled in the UK and probably across Western Europe, is a tried and trusted partner for the university. By doing more together as a sector with Cara and institutionally this should be a core part of what we do as universities in the UK, when we reflect on our mission, our values, and our internationalisation. Global universities equal global responsibilities.

Noor Al Kahri – Cara PhD Fellow

When I first joined Cara, my plan was to finish my PhD and go back and help in rebuild my country. Unfortunately, the war lasted more than I expected, and after

the 11-years' war, followed by two years' pandemic, and recently an earthquake, so it was very difficult for me to go back. I am a Cara alumna, working now in University College London – UCL. My role is a research networks and partnerships manager. The assistance that Cara provided wasn't only financial, or immediate financial support, it also empowered me to successfully complete my PhD at the University of Portsmouth. A continuous support provided me with an opportunity to work after my PhD in Swansea University as a research fellow, they secured that placement and this grant in like a very crucial juncture in my journey.

Zeid Al-Bayaty – Cara Deputy Director

Shortly after I started at Cara, we marked the 18th anniversary and now, 10 years later, Cara is a very different organisation. We are experiencing an extremely busy period, perhaps the busiest since the 1930s and Second World War. Following Afghanistan and Ukraine, but also the continuation of other conflicts around the world and the targeted persecution of academics, we have witnessed a significant increase in demand. Before Afghanistan we had 160 applications, the following year it increased to 1 200 applications.

Jemima Lloyd

Oh, I just think they should. I think everyone should support Cara. I am enormously passionate about what Cara can bring to universities and not just about what Cara can bring to universities, but what universities can bring to this community of academics who are just like us, but in situations that we just can't understand. We do have as universities the ability to change people's lives and I'm really proud that we do here.

Anonymous

It's tragic for our country at the moment, but I'm hopeful. I believe that this is for a short period of time, hopefully that in a couple of years I would be able to return back to my home country to do my commitment towards my homelands, towards my people, that they really need me as an academic.

[End of video]

Mirjam Hauck

Thank you for sharing this with us, Stephen.

Before I now hand over to Ahmed, Doctor Ahmed Halil, to introduce the Arabic short course. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Kate Robertson. I know you are here, Kate, please do show your face. You are the Cara Middle East advisor and coordinator for the Kara Syria programme. And you are the one who put us in touch with Ahmed almost two years ago now. Thank you for the journey. Thank you.

Stephen Wordsworth

Can I just add to that saying Kate has actually been with Cara longer than anybody and long before me - 2006 you joined Kate? I can't remember, a long time ago anyway. She was the Deputy Director of Cara for many years, so I think until about 2015 before she stepped to one side to take on the regional programme for Syria and develop that and get that launched. So, she has essentially made Cara what it is today.

Mirjam Hauck

We do count ourselves very lucky. Thank you, Kate.

Kate Robertson

If anybody wanted to volunteer for the [Syria programme](#), please visit the website. There is a dedicated Syria programme area and a very clear area where you can actually apply to volunteer and we've collected a series of stories, both from mentors and EAP tutors, as well as from our Syrian colleagues, so you really can understand the story and how people are helping us, and it is an extraordinary number of individuals as well as the universities themselves that have risen to the occasion and supported their Syrian colleagues in an act of solidarity. So, we are really most grateful to everybody.

Mirjam Hauck

And now I'm handing over to Ahmed, where are you? Over to you!

Ahmed Halil – Cara Scholar and author of the OU Arabic short course

Thank you. Thank you very, very much, Mirjam. Hello, everybody. My name is Ahmed Halil. I am a Cara scholar since 2018. I hold a PhD in Arabic language and literature and am based in Turkey. Now, I am working with the Open University and collaboration with Cara as a consultant author to produce Arabic language and culture courses. There will be 3 courses, 3 short courses, and at the same time I'm doing research. I am a part of a joint research project with two of the colleagues in the Open University. It's about interpretation in crisis contexts, so I would like to thank Cara at the beginning, not leaving that to the end. Thank you to Cara. Thanks to Cara for being a bridge between us Syrian academics and the academic world, and I would love to thank also the Open University team, especially Mirjam, for being very supportive.

So, coming to our short course, you can see [on the slide] where the course exists here on the [Open University website](#). But before that I would like to give you a very short idea about why people would like to learn Arabic.

So, why Arabic? In addition to being the language of the Holy Quran, so being holy for the Muslims in the world, Arabic is also one of the six official languages in the United Nations and it's the mother tongue for more than 400 million people in twenty-two Arab countries, and it is the second tongue in several places in in the world. The Middle East and this area have a lot of opportunities so, by learning Arabic people can - or learners can - find better job opportunities also. One of things that Arabs feel most proud about is the literature; they really have a rich literature, especially poetry, so by learning Arabic you can reach that diversity of the culture and literature.

Our course: we have two parts to the course. One is free, you can reach it from [here](#): It contains two units. In these two units we teach most basic topics in Arabic, like the alphabet and joining letters and vowels. Unlike several languages, without learning these issues - I mean joining letters for example, or vowels - you can't read or understand Arabic. So, we started with this and in the cultural parts of these two units we talked about the influence of the Arabic language on the other languages in the world.

In the main course there are ten units. Each unit contain three main topics: language grammar, verbs, the basic sentence structure. The grammar in Arabic, compared with other

languages I know like English and Turkish, is more complicated. We did our best to make it easier and to make it understandable at the most basic level. So, we started with the basic verbs and pronouns in terms of grammar in this unit.

There is a part on speaking in each unit. Again, we started with the basic issues and subjects such as talking about yourself, introducing yourself and others, hobbies, talking about family, and about food - you know, the main the main topics.

The cultural part was the hardest part in terms of choosing the topics because when we talk about culture that's very diverse in Arabic countries; we are talking about twenty-two different countries in two different continents, so. At the same time, it needs to be focusing on the learners also and needs to get the learners involved in these topics. So, these are the most important topics we talked about in this part of the course: popular sports, the history calendar, different marriage customs in the Arab countries, and food and drinks, such as coffee, which is very special in Arab culture.

So, this was a brief overview of the topics covered in the ten units in the course. Also, in each unit we have dialogues, we have reading texts to help learners to see the language in context, to see the words they are learning in context. These are the main points about the Arabic language and culture course. I'm happy to have your questions, if there are any, and thank you for listening.

Mirjam Hauck

Thank you, Ahmed.

Ahmed Halil

May I add that we have another two short courses. We are working on the second now and approximately I think it will be launched in August 2024.

Mirjam Hauck

Yes, we are. We continue to be ambitious, and we are very grateful that we can continue to work with you, Ahmed.

Ahmed Halil

Thank you very much.

Mirjam Hauck

I would like to draw everybody's attention to the next talk in our [Distinguished Speakers Series](#). It is associated yet again with the launch of a short course, on this occasion a short course on *Crime fiction, past, present and future*. It will be a slightly different format. We will have a dialogue between the author of the short course, Bill Alder, one of our associate lecturers in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, and Simon, Brett, the renowned crime fiction author in the UK. So please come and join us on Wednesday, April the 17th at one o'clock.

And with this, I would like to say 'shukran', thank you everybody, thank you Stephen, thank you Kate, thank you Neil, thank you, Ahmed. Thank you those who have helped pull this off the ground, Rhonda, Lucy. Thank you everybody and be well. Bye bye.

Stephen Wordsworth

Thank you! Goodbye.

[End of transcript]

