

Neither here nor there

An outsider's perspective can spark innovation, but many refugee academics struggle to rekindle careers. **Matthew Reisz** shares the setbacks and successes of scholars set on rejoining their peers



Abdul Al Marsumi once enjoyed a successful career as an academic and television director in Baghdad. He combined his job as a specialist in media at the Al-Mustansiriya University with practical experience. By 1990, he was serving as a cameraman and the director of a popular 45-minute weekly programme called *Magazine of Culture*.

But that same year, when a student reported to the university authorities that Al Marsumi had told a class he did not support Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, he lost his academic post. A theatre and cinema that he ran were also shut down after a play was deemed to be critical of the government.

Al Marsumi picked himself up and carried on. Alongside part-time teaching at a university, he secured a position as duty manager with a company supplying broadcasting equipment to the United Nations until, with the US invasion of March 2003, "life stopped, the infrastructure was destroyed and the company looted".

Fortunately, it was not long before Al Marsumi was taken on by the BBC in Baghdad as a studio manager, responsible for directing a biweekly debate programme for the Arabic Service and supplying news items. He continued with an academic post as a "cover" because the Iraqi militias were hostile to anyone working for institutions seen as linked to the coalition forces. The cover did not work. On his return from a trip to London for a skills-development course, someone paid a visit to his house. He was told: "We know who you are, where you've been and where you work. Just tell us which VIPs are coming to the studio."

Al Marsumi decided to take his family to the UK for the summer to think things over. But the militia, assuming he had rejected them and fled, sacked his house, bombed the building and put up a sign saying it had

belonged to a traitor. Stranded in England with every reason to be afraid of returning to Iraq, Al Marsumi applied for asylum in September 2006 and was granted leave to remain for five years the following February.

With a wide range of practical as well as academic media skills, he assumed it would be easy to find work. Not so; the BBC did not want to know, and other employers insisted on British experience (work for the BBC abroad did not seem to count). Teaching jobs tended to founder on issues of comparability. So, alongside voluntary work as a video producer at a community centre, he became a driver for the Red Cross.

A recent grant from the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (Cara) has given hope, allowing Al Marsumi to study for a PGCE teaching qualification at the University of Huddersfield with a view to getting a full-time lecturer's post within further education – and perhaps, eventually, a job in a university equivalent to the one he held in Iraq.

A similar story is told by a former academic from Central Africa, who asks to remain anonymous. After eight years' experience as a lecturer in English, he came to Britain in 2002, sought work and soon hit problems around the recognition of qualifications and the difficulties of providing references. Funding from Cara enabled him to obtain a certificate in English-language teaching to adults, so he now gives evening classes to migrant workers in a college.

It would require an almost impossible-to-fund MA and PhD if he ever wanted to return to the university sector. "I have been here for nearly 10 years", he reflects, "and am still nowhere near a university qualification. I don't know how many more years I've got on this path."

As long as there are repressive regimes, academics – like artists, journalists and political activists – will always be among the first to be targeted. Although many find refuge in other countries on humanitarian grounds, they often face severe obstacles in restarting stalled careers. Some such barriers are no doubt inevitable, but are all of them necessary? Or do they just frustrate individual incoming academics while also depriving British higher education of vital new blood and ideas?

Some of the issues at stake are illuminated by going back to Cara's beginnings as the Academic Assistance Council, reconstructed in books such as Jeremy Seabrook's *The Refuge and the Fortress: Britain and the Flight from Tyranny* (2008).

The Nazis came to power in Germany at the end of January 1933. By May, Sir William Beveridge, director of the London School of Economics (and later the architect of the post-war welfare state), had enlisted 40 of the great and the good of the British university sector into his new council. It was specifically designed to bring to the UK the many academic stars of Germany who were being ousted from their jobs.

Registers of employment were drawn up and small maintenance grants made available. Although those were also times of funding

pressures on universities, which led to a degree of insecurity and even xenophobia, staff at the LSE all agreed to contribute between 1 and 3 per cent of their salaries to support the cause. By the time the Second World War started, a third of German academics had been dismissed and more than 2,100 had emigrated, about half of them to Britain.

In 1936, the AAC became the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning and extended its remit to persecuted academics in countries such as Spain, Italy and Czechoslovakia. Just as the organisation was about to be wound up in 1956, the suppression of the Hungarian uprising led to a new wave of refugee academics. They would be followed by Chileans, South Africans, Zimbabweans and Iraqis, to name but a few.



Talent spotter Sir William Beveridge led efforts to bring German academics to Britain in the 1930s

“The stress when the AAC was set up was on saving skills and expertise for the benefit of mankind. We now see an assault on academic freedom as an assault on our underlying values”

The first president of the AAC, somewhat ironically, was Lord Rutherford. Although one of Britain's greatest scientists, he was also a New Zealander and so part of what Tamson Pietsch, lecturer in imperial and colonial history at Brunel University, calls “the ‘British world’ networks”, which the newcomers would be “crucial in breaking down”.

“Academic appointments in Britain and the settler world – Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa – relied heavily on personal networks extending across the oceans,” she explains. “The arrival of the refugees upset this cosy appointment process because it forcibly inserted into British universities scholars from Europe – and their different academic traditions, connections and practices – who would not ordinarily have been selected.” Although the change was not absolute, and many scientists from the Dominions remained crucial to the war effort, it certainly marked a huge transformation in British intellectual and cultural life.

Over and above the humanitarian aspects, what was the impact of this influx? The headline figures are that those rescued by the AAC and its successors have included 18 Nobel laureates, 16 knights, 71 Fellows (or

foreign members) of the Royal Society and 50 Fellows of the British Academy. Most would undoubtedly have been killed if they had not left their home countries in time.

At the most basic level, Germans working in areas ranging from art history to the physical sciences brought different and sometimes more advanced methods with them. Cross-fertilisation between intellectual traditions spurred creativity. And some émigré academics chose to work on the frontiers between established disciplines so as to avoid open conflict with existing post-holders, and thereby laid the foundations for fields such as molecular biology and biotechnology.

Political science and research on Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and many other areas of the world have been invigorated by researchers with first-hand experience of diverse cultures and regimes. Even Britain itself started to seem different when viewed by outsiders. Sir Geoffrey Elton, who fled from Prague to Britain in 1939, became one of the great authorities on Tudor history – and such a staunch English patriot that he was furious with his nephew Ben Elton for his portrayal of the army in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, who arrived in Britain from Germany in 1933, created a definitive catalogue and interpretation of the nation's architecture in his Buildings of England series.

Despite the spectacular return on intellectual investment of bringing the émigré academics of the 1930s into Britain, things could have been even better. Constant government concerns about “the burden on the public purse” meant that many scholars were encouraged to treat the UK as a way station rather than a final destination, so that as a general rule – as one major book on the subject puts it – “Britain rescued the refugee scientists and the United States received them”. Those who went on to design the atomic bomb were just one notable example.

The early days of the AAC now seem like a lost world. At that time, Beveridge and his colleagues could set off to Central Europe like football managers looking to snap up the best talent. They inevitably tended to gravitate towards people they knew, who had established track records and were only too keen to continue their research in a safe environment. Some would arrive with bowler hats and what they imagined was the typical outfit of the “English gentleman”. Libraries were transported in their entirety across borders, and prominent academic dynasties were founded.

In today's climate, it would be far more difficult to justify a system for saving endangered academics based so firmly on elitism and personal contacts. “We had a major debate”, says Kate Robertson, Cara's deputy executive secretary, “on whether we should mainly support high-flying academics or academics in general, regardless of their status or potential. The stress when the AAC was set up was on saving skills and expertise for the benefit of mankind. We now see an assault on academic freedom as an assault on our underlying principles and values.”

A ferocious campaign against academics

LATEFA GUEMAR/PETER SEARLE



Starting again having fled from Algeria to the UK, scientist Latefa Guemar had to obtain a GCSE in maths before rebuilding her academic career

in Iraq after the 2003 invasion led those in charge at Cara, continues Robertson, to “realise it was wrong to restrict ourselves to people who had already arrived in the UK. So we set up a new programme for those looking to get out, who wanted to observe what was happening outside, with a view to returning. They would come to Britain as a temporary safe haven rather than on a longer-term basis.” A similar concern with “rebuilding collapsed higher education systems” has also led to a Zimbabwe programme that stresses capacity-building on the ground rather than helping individuals forge new lives in Britain.

Despite all this, however, Cara continues to offer grants to between 50 and 60 academics a year – such as those described above – who have reached the UK, acquired refugee status and usually can’t return home. “They have to arrive at Cara as academics”, explains Robertson, “and most aspire to continue as such, although sometimes we have to provide a reality check and encourage them to retrain for other careers. We can help with work placements and fellowships. There used to be a focus on requalifying, but now we often help them into work – brokering places in universities, coaching them for interviews and writing applications.”

Although Cara can sometimes provide living expenses, universities also have a crucial role to play in waiving fees and standing up for the values of academic freedom by supporting the refugees. Many refugees report a warm welcome by new colleagues, along with horror stories of the immigration services, “dispersal” to rough estates and a refusal of native Britons to acknowledge any responsibility for driving Iraqis and Afghans, for example, into exile in the first place.

So, although the humanitarian imperative remains the same, today’s refugee academics are in some ways very different from those of the 1930s. Many are torn between the desire to establish themselves in the UK and giving something back to their home country, often with a view to an eventual return. For those who remain within the academy, this can lead them to embrace new disciplines and undertake research that draws directly on their backgrounds and political commitments. It is these academics, perhaps, who will spur the kinds of important new thinking that “Hitler’s émigrés” provided in their day.

Take the case of Latefa Guemar. She studied electronics at the University of Science and Technology, Houari Boumediene in Algeria and then spent 17 years in what amounted to an academic position at a government-funded research institute, using ultrasonic scans for non-destructive testing. She was a committed unionist and, in 1997, helped to set up the National Committee for Women at Work, lobbying for legislation on sexual harassment. Her husband was a journalist who had worked on a newspaper that was banned after openly criticising the government.

In June 2002, after attending a seminar on women’s issues, Guemar returned home, found the door of her flat open and assumed it had been burgled. Yet she soon discovered that

none of the obvious things – electronic equipment, jewellery – had been touched. Only her room had been turned upside down.

This was presumably done to scare her and her family. However, it was not clear whether the main target was her or her husband; neither was it obvious, at a time of great tension between the military government and Islamic groups, who was responsible. Neither side was notably sympathetic to journalists, academics or female activists.

Although Guemar duly reported the break-in, when the police discovered that her husband was a journalist, they said they could not do anything about it and did not even have the materials to take fingerprints. It was also becoming obvious that the incident was part of a pattern. Her husband’s boss had been killed, as had another journalist who had surprised an intruder in his flat. Guemar’s own boss told her that many of those living in housing for researchers had been subject to threatening visits. The last straw was when her husband, returning to their flat, was attacked. Two days later, he fled to the UK and claimed asylum at Heathrow airport.

Within a few months, pregnant with her



Reinvented Guemar is doing a PhD in a new field

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third child, and with her mother and nanny both having received threatening telephone calls, Guemar decided to follow him. She arrived in Britain in June 2003, was housed in a hotel in Hounslow in west London that amounted to a detention centre and started to learn the language. She was asked where she wanted to be relocated but, because her knowledge of Britain was limited to the facts that the weather was awful and that Churchill had won the war, Guemar hardly knew what to say. After mentioning that she would like to be by the sea, she and her family were dispersed to a rough area of Swansea, where they were subjected to much abuse, egg-throwing and cries of “Paki!”

Refugee status came in July 2004 and Guemar began to think about how to rebuild her life. At first she considered returning to her original field of non-destructive testing, but an old academic contact from Algeria told her it would be impossible: “Algeria has

lost you [as a scientist], but this country will never have you.” She made contact with the Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group – where many of those involved were linked to Swansea University – began doing translation work for solicitors and in 2006 applied to Cara for funding to pursue legal training that would allow her to attend court with asylum seekers. In the meantime, she was rebuilding her educational qualifications from the bottom up and was even required to obtain a GCSE in maths before embarking on a general humanities BA, majoring in sociology.

A chance meeting pulled Guemar back into academic research. When organising an event for Refugee Week, she decided to invite as a speaker Heaven Crawley, who had examined how the government’s Every Child Matters policy affected migrant children. It turned out that Crawley had just taken up a position as professor of international migration at Swansea, and their discussions made Guemar realise that she wanted to pursue research rather than the law.

The first step was a master’s in international migration, which included “a dissertation written from the heart about the impact on the mental health of women of forced migration” – in that, she analysed why women often deal with such upheavals better than men, as had happened in her own family. In 2010, Guemar started a part-time PhD about the online social networks and political discourse of diaspora Algerian women, with a particular stress on professionals who had left during the 1990s. This obviously relates to her own experience and draws together the research skills and political concerns she had kept separate in Algeria. Her aim is to “map the Algerian diaspora not for its own sake but for a purpose – to see how it can add to human development there”.

Soon due to deliver a paper in India and to start giving courses at Swansea’s Centre for Migration Policy Research, which she helped to set up, Guemar has high hopes of pursuing a reinvented academic career in diaspora studies, bringing new perspectives to a field where much of the important work has been done by black and Jewish scholars.

In *The Refuge and the Fortress*, Seabrook quotes the late Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who spent almost the last 40 years of his life in Oxford, as saying that the role of the philosopher is “never to stop questioning what appears to be obvious and definitive, always to defy the seemingly intact resources of common sense, always to suspect that there might be ‘another side’ to what is taken for granted”. This is often easier for those who bring fresh perspectives to the “common sense” of their adoptive country.

Guemar very much agrees with this. “Migrants bring an outsider’s view,” she reflects, “and it’s always constructive. Diversity is always good.”

She remains slightly amazed by how her life has turned out. “I don’t know how I did it. I just closed my eyes and went for it. You need an identity. If you’ve been an academic, you can’t just go and work in a cafe.” ●