

Submission to the House of Commons
International Development Committee

Future of UK Aid Inquiry

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Contents

1. About Cara
2. Strategy
3. Administration
4. Process
5. Impact of the changes

1. About Cara

1.1 Cara (the Council for at-Risk Academics) is a specialist charity¹ that protects academic freedom by supporting academics and researchers at risk of violence or persecution around the world, helping them to escape to continue their academic careers in the UK and elsewhere until they can eventually return home.

1.2 Cara was founded in 1933 by some of Britain's foremost academics and scientists, led by William Beveridge, at the time Director of the LSE, as a rescue mission for their colleagues in Nazi Germany who were being driven out of their jobs on racial grounds. It was supported in its early days by Albert Einstein, who helped to raise funds.

1.3 Almost 90 years later, Cara is one of only three organisations of its type in the world (the other two are both based in the USA), and works closely with a Network of 124 UK universities and with others abroad. The academics we rescue today through our Fellowship Programme, often together with their families, are facing immediate danger, with the risk of arrest, violence, even murder. This [video](#) gives more of a flavour of our work, featuring commentary from three Fellows. Our [2020-21 Annual Report](#) outlines our most recent activities.

1.4 As of September 2021 some 350 academics are engaged with our Fellowship Programme, with new appeals for help reaching us almost every day. We do not characterise our Fellows – and nor do they usually see themselves – as refugees. Most are very keen to return to help rebuild their countries, once conditions allow. They come to the UK with the appropriate visas, sponsored by their host universities.

1.5 In addition to the Fellowship Programme, we also run Programmes to assist academics in exile in countries around their own, or who are struggling to work on in their own country despite considerable risks. Our first regional programme was established in 2006 to address the dire situation facing the academic community in Iraq following the 2003 invasion, in the aftermath of which several hundred Iraqi academics were murdered. The second supported threatened Zimbabwean academics and academic institutions and ran from 2009-2013. Our third such Programme, launched in 2016, is now helping over 200 exiled Syrian academics, mostly in Turkey, pairing them with hundreds of academic volunteers at UK universities who run workshops / webinars and perform a mentoring role to help them to continue their research careers and to publish their work. We work with a range of partner organisations, including the British Council, to make an ever-widening range of training and research opportunities available to the academics on our programme.

1.6 Cara receives no Government financial support, and we are not seeking it now. Indeed, direct Government funding could undermine perceptions of our independence and hamper

¹ <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/207471>

our operational effectiveness. Instead, much of our funding comes from our support network of over 120 UK universities, many of whom provide partly or fully-funded placements enabling our rescued academics to rebuild their lives and continue their research until it is safe for them to return home. We also regularly receive funding from major international philanthropic foundations – such as the Wolfson Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, Andrew W Mellon Foundation and the Open Society Foundations – as well as from many other institutional and individual donors.

1.7 Through our two Programmes, we are now directly helping over 500 previously at-risk academics. Cara is a British success story, unique in Europe, and a global leader in its field.

Why we are making this submission

1.8 Cara's long experience gives us a very specific perspective on the question of the future of UK aid. Academic freedom is a foundation stone of free societies, but it is also an international human rights challenge that tends to attract considerably less attention from the media and governments than it deserves – which unfortunately includes the FCDO's recently-published *Integrated Review*. We would like to take the opportunity presented by the Committee's inquiry to propose a mechanism by which the UK Government could address this anomaly in a manner that would allow a significant expansion of our ability to help at-risk academics and researchers, whilst also bringing huge benefits to the UK's universities and research capability. We believe the approach we propose, which we have sent out in more detail in Section 2, should also prove highly cost-effective.

1.9 More broadly, Cara wholeheartedly supports the Committee's inquiry on the Future of UK Aid and hopes that it may help add to the pressure on the Government to take necessary measures to fully restore the UK's hard-won reputation as a champion of international development and global human rights, which has unquestionably been weakened by the – hopefully temporary – reduction in the level of ODA spending from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%. As with any other organisation working in the intertwined spheres of international development and human rights, we very much hope to see the UK's ODA spending return to its previous level at the earliest opportunity. We note that the FCDO has recently launched its own call for evidence on its International Development Strategy, to which we have contributed, and which we strongly hope will lead to a reassessment of the UK's priorities and its funding approach towards achieving them.

For further details of Cara, please see: <https://cara.ngo>

2. Strategy

- *The strategic targeting of UK aid spending, including the focus areas set out by the FCDO's seven global challenges and their alignment with the conclusions of the Integrated Review*
- *Whether these focus areas address the most pressing global development challenges*

2.1 One area of focus that is notably absent from the focus areas for UK aid spending listed under the seven global challenges is academic freedom and the protection of at-risk academics. But this is an important subject, and one on which the UK is well placed to lead, given Cara's almost 90 years of experience and the high global reputation of the dynamic UK Higher Education sector.

2.2 There is much to do. In many countries around the world today, extremists and despots are trying to silence academics, often brutally, understanding the threat that highly-educated and free-thinking minds pose to their totalitarian ambitions. Elsewhere, brilliant university teachers and researchers are caught up in violent conflicts. Others face persecution by the ignorant and intolerant because they are 'different' in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or just because they are women.

2.3 What happens to them matters. The skills and the knowledge in their heads are the intellectual capital of their countries, and an important force for good. While they are in exile, they share their skills with us. When they can go back, they take their skills with them, developed further during their time here, to help rebuild safer, better, societies. If that capital is lost or scattered to the four corners of the earth, rebuilding will be much harder. We will all be the losers.

2.4 2021 has been an exceptionally challenging year. At the beginning of the year our Fellowship Programme took on our first three Fellows fleeing persecution in Myanmar. Most recently of all, the crisis in Afghanistan has given a new and urgent impulse to our work. 20 years of progress, particularly with respect to women's education, risks being reversed. We are already in contact with around 100 Afghan academics who have approached us for help, including some who have made it across the border to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran. We expect many more to contact us in the months ahead. We worked in recent weeks with UK Government Departments to compile a short list of threatened Afghan academics, and their close family members, who were offered the prospect of evacuation by

the UK from Kabul airport. Regrettably, not one secured a place on a UK aircraft. One only just escaped the airport bomb blast. Almost all are now in hiding in Kabul, fearing for their lives.

2.5 The natural place in the *Integrated Review* for reference to the (in our view) urgent policy imperative to address this worsening situation would have been in section 2.1 under the Strategic Framework, *A force for good: supporting open societies and defending human rights*, but sadly, it was nowhere to be seen. This seems to be a glaring omission in UK development policy, especially given that it is also applicable to Section 1.1: *Growing the UK's science and technology power* (many of our Cara Fellows and Syria Programme participants are engaged in cutting-edge scientific research, including in the fight against Covid and climate change and also promoting food security), Section 2.3: *Extending an open international order in future frontiers*, Section 3.2: *Conflict and instability*, together with all three headings under Section 4, especially 4.1: *Building the UK's national resilience*.

2.6 Much is made in the *Integrated Review* of the UK's status as a top 3 nation for perceived 'soft power'. Education was highlighted as a key aspect of that soft power, with the UK identified as one of the largest bilateral and multilateral donors to global education². Furthermore, the establishment of the new Office for Talent, (to '*make it easier for those with the most talent, potential energy and creativity, to come to the UK from around the world*') seems also to dovetail very strongly with Cara's role in rescuing some of the world's most talented – and also most at-risk – academics, enabling them to become a part of, and thereby to enrich, the UK's academic community for the duration of their stay here.

2.7 Against this background, one has to ask why, as a country, we are not making this undeniably humanitarian, yet mutually beneficial process, more of a priority. In his foreword to the *Integrated Review*, the Prime Minister stated that, "*we will maintain the other vital instruments of our influence overseas, such as our global diplomatic network and the British Council, driving forward campaigns for girls' education and religious and media freedom.*" Indeed, with respect to the latter, the UK co-founded the Global Media Defence Fund with Canada. Press and media freedom are undoubtedly important; but are not academic freedom and the freedom of academics equally deserving of our collective attention? Is this not an area where the UK should be leading – rather than mute?

2.8 During the last decade, both Germany and France - neither of which has a Cara equivalent – have launched national funding schemes to enable their universities to offer temporary placement to at-risk scholars and researchers. For Germany, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI) enjoys government funding through the Federal Foreign Ministry but is administered by the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation³, whereas the French PAUSE scheme - *Programme*

² P8, 9 & 48: [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#)

³ <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/philipp-schwartz-initiative-en.html>

*National d'Accueil en Urgence des Scientifiques en Exil*⁴ is funded by several French government departments. Both are growing rapidly, with at least two funding rounds per year. The exiled academic applies to the university for a position and the university then puts their name forward for funding support. Cara is a formal partner to both schemes, but in practice works much more closely with PSI, which relies on Cara – together with one of our US counterparts, Scholars at Risk – to confirm the 'at risk' status of their applicants.

2.9 While, as noted above, many UK universities already provide partly- or fully-funded places for at-risk academics, they face many uncertainties at the present time, and many other demands on their resources. The creation of a UK counterpart to PSI/PAUSE to complement their current efforts, drawing on Cara's experience and developed with the cooperation and adapted to the specific circumstances of the UK Higher Education sector, would enable the UK to make an even more positive and far-sighted contribution in this field. It would contribute greatly to the future resilience of countries – such as Afghanistan – that are riven by civil war or political repression, preventing the permanent loss of their intellectual capital and promoting the eventual development of democratic, pluralistic societies, and the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It would also demonstrate the UK's commitment to support all those at universities around the world who speak out boldly against tyranny and bigotry and teach their students the value of honesty and truth.

2.10 The investment involved in launching a possible programme on the lines we have suggested would cost relatively little. A very rough calculation, based on the awards provided by the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, suggests that around £2 million per year could sustain a rolling total of 40 scholars, in addition to those already being supported by UK universities under our existing arrangements. The eventual return, when those scholars can return home again to help re-build, could be enormous.

⁴ <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/en-program-pause/PAUSE-Presentation.htm>

3. Administration

- *Changes to the administration of UK ODA, including the FCDO assuming responsibility for deciding the final departmental allocation of ODA and administering the majority of UK ODA*
- *The split between bilateral and multilateral ODA spending on countries where UK economic, security and development interests align*

3.1 Since Cara does not receive funding from HMG, our work is not currently directly affected by this.

4. Process

- *The FCDO's approach to the process of implementing in-year changes to the aid budget during the 2020-21 financial year, including its communication with stakeholders*
- *The FCDO's approach to setting ODA budget allocations for the 2020-21 financial year, including its communication with stakeholders*

4.1 While Cara does not receive funding from Government directly, UK universities who work with us in our Syria Programme have increasingly come to value the expertise of the Syrian academics who are engaged with it and have involved them in their own 'spin-off' projects, funded by grants from various research bodies and in particular from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). Such funding has enabled important research into regional agriculture, in particular.

4.2 Two additional Syria Programme projects had recently been granted GCPF funding in principle (both study Principal Investigators had received informal notification of their submission successes, subject to formal award letters), but were then abruptly cancelled on the grounds that their grant funding was no longer available due to the UK's ODA cuts. There was no prior warning; the decision came out of the blue.

5. Impact of the changes

- *Impact upon communities in lower-income countries*
- *Impact upon organisations implementing UK ODA programmes*

5.1 The sudden cuts to grants set out in Section 4 was a major blow, particularly to individuals for whom paid involvement as researchers was part of their survival strategies. It also served to undermine the wider credibility of UK university-led projects, as well as of Cara.