

ROUNDTABLE: DISPLACED SCHOLARS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

## Displaced Scholars as a Contribution to Academic Diversity

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Academic diversity has been an important consideration in hiring processes within academia since the late 2010s. The term diversity encompasses race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, geographical representation, and political beliefs. There are three significant considerations during the hiring process. To put it simply: “equity is the promotion of fairness and justice for each individual that considers historical, social, systemic, and structural issues that impact experience and individual needs; diversity is a measure of representation within a community or population that includes identity, background, lived experience, culture, and many more; and inclusion is the creation of an environment where everyone shares a sense of belonging, is treated with respect, and is able to fully participate.”<sup>1</sup>

The contradiction that appears in the practical application of these three principles presents a dilemma for universities and other academic institutions. The order of the terminology, which should be equity-diversity-inclusion, is replaced by vague definitions put in practice by some institutions. There are various issues related to this, but they are not the main topic of this essay. I will focus here on an important reality that North American and European academic institutions have increasingly encountered since the early 2010s because of civil wars, authoritarian regimes, and proxy wars in various home countries, that is, displaced scholars and their contribution to academic diversity. The exact number of displaced scholars worldwide at this moment is not clear. But, being a displaced scholar myself, I can easily say that there are at least 2,000 displaced scholars from Turkey scattered around Europe and North America. We are usually supported by various networks. After our usual initial appointment as a visiting scholar or researcher ends, we face various problems in the host countries. Given our demographic backgrounds, the persecution we often face because of our political beliefs back in our home countries, and our potential contributions to higher education institutions, we, as displaced scholars, should be a part of the academic definitions for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

There are various definitions of a scholar who is “at risk,” “threatened,” or “displaced.” The Scholars at Risk (SAR) website speaks to “professors, researchers, doctoral students, institutional leaders and other members of higher education communities who are threatened and/or attacked as a result of the content of their work, their status as academics or as a result of their peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression or freedom of association.”<sup>2</sup> Networks like SAR provide assistance to those scholars who are at risk or threatened, but the process usually ends with relocation of the scholar to a safe host

<sup>1</sup> University of Toronto, “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” <https://research.utoronto.ca/equity-diversity-inclusion/equity-diversity-inclusion> (accessed 31 August 2023); emphasis is mine.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars at Risk, “What is Academic Freedom?,” <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/faqs/#2> (accessed 31 August 2023).

country. This is a noble intervention and aims to protect the academic integrity of those scholars, boosting their academic careers and providing them a safe place where they can continue with their academic work.

But what happens to these scholars when their placement ends? None of the networks that facilitate the at-risk scholars' arrival can guarantee their permanent stay in the host countries; this is not the purpose of these programs. As a result of this, at-risk scholars get a new label after their initial placement with such networks end; we become "displaced scholars."

The definition of risk that displaced scholars face in their host countries has a different context. First of all, we need to take into account that many of the academics who left their countries within the scope of programs like SAR are PhD holders who have often held administrative positions at their home institutions prior to their departure, such as department heads or institute directors, but have now been declared undesirable by the power structures of their home countries because of what they write and say within the scope of academic freedom. The academic freedoms mentioned here relate predominantly to the academic work they carry out, which often challenge the power structures, and the public statements they make as members of academia that are not in line with government policies. A prominent example of this is the Academics for Peace in Turkey. In January 2016, a group of Turkish intellectuals and scholars signed a petition titled "We will not be a party to this crime!" in which they criticized the policies of the Turkish government toward the Kurdish population. As a result of this, "hundreds of them have been fired from their jobs, their passports have been cancelled and confiscated, they were prevented from finding jobs, several were physically and verbally threatened, others were taken into custody, four of them who read a press statement condemning these violations were imprisoned, hundreds have been robbed [of] the right to work in the public sector through governmental decrees and finally all of them are currently facing individualized court."<sup>3</sup>

After their initial placement in the countries they came from as part of the at-risk scholars programs, these academics are either directed to positions focused solely on teaching, often as part-time instructors, or sometimes they restart their education just to find a suitable position in their new setting. The competitive and unfortunately label-driven nature of the academic market, particularly in North America, poses new risk to displaced scholars. Academics who cannot complete the necessary procedures to stay or work continuously in the country they live in during their initial placement, which is usually limited to two years, often face the risk of deportation, which may result in return to the country from which they came. In addition, scholars who have a limited academic publication record because they are busy adapting to a new academic environment and preparing for the courses they teach (which are sometimes outside their field of expertise) are at a disadvantage in the competitive academic market. Many academic positions in North America and Europe, where the initial placements were made, depend on external grants, and many grant proposals depend on the research priorities and grant submission processes of government funding agencies of the host countries which are usually not relevant with the research of the displaced scholars, further increasing the risks facing displaced scholars.

However safe we may feel from the pressures back home that caused us to seek protection abroad, displaced scholars are subsequently faced with prospects of unemployment or the obligation to turn to professions unrelated to their qualifications. Although mentions of "diversity and equity," frequently cited in academic advertisements, seem promising, unfortunately displaced scholars are not included in the definitions or postulations made regarding underrepresented groups in North America and Europe. Displaced scholars usually hesitate to say in cover letters and résumés for job applications that they came to these countries as at-risk scholars and are now displaced scholars. Even if this is stated, hiring committees usually have little or no understanding of this process. We become even more

<sup>3</sup> Academics for Peace, "About Us," <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/1> (accessed 31 August 2023).

disadvantaged in an already competitive academic market because we are generally eliminated without anyone ever questioning the reasons for the employment gap many of us have experienced in our careers.

How might this problem be resolved? Preparation of an information package to assist hiring committees that evaluate the applications of candidates who define themselves as displaced scholars would be a good first step. This information package, which could be prepared by an accredited institution with a website link that the candidate can include in a cover letter or CV, should describe the academic environment in the candidate's country of origin, the systemic structure of the candidate's career, and the threats to the academy in that country. This lets hiring committee members understand where the candidate comes from, how the candidate can contribute to the diversity of their institution, and how the committee or department can fulfill equity, diversity, and inclusion requirements if they hire the displaced scholar.

I would like to briefly mention the academic system in Turkey and the stages in the career of a Turkish scholar to give an example of "where the candidate comes from." The higher education system in Turkey is multilayered and complex. The first step in an academic career in Turkey is a research assistantship, which is equivalent to a teaching assistantship in North America. In Turkey, research assistants help with research, examination, and experiments at higher education institutions and perform other related duties such as proctoring examinations, lecturing, maintaining the department's website, and administrative duties that include preparing exam schedules, scheduling classrooms, keeping personnel files, and helping with graduation ceremonies. The duties of a research assistant in Turkey are more extensive and time consuming when compared to the job descriptions of teaching assistants at North American universities.

After the research assistantship, the next step for academics who have completed their PhD is to become a doctor lecturer, which is the equivalent of an assistant professor in North America. Doctor lecturers are contracted staff. The job description includes teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as maintaining activity in one's field, such as participating in symposiums, congresses, and panels, conducting research, and publishing in peer-reviewed journals. Doctor lecturers go through a difficult process to attain the rank of associate professor, and then professor. In Turkey, associate professor evaluations are carried out by an overarching body, the Interuniversity Board Presidency (ÜAK). Even though there are separate criteria for each discipline, the candidate must have participated in a scientific activity for at least 100 points, 90 of which must have been carried out after receiving a PhD. In addition, to attain the rank of associate professor the candidate must score at least 55/100 on a foreign language exam. The most relevant foreign language exams include the Interuniversity Council Foreign Language Exam (ÜDS), Foreign Language Proficiency Examination for State Employees (KPDS), the Foreign Language Exam (YDS), and the Foreign Language Exam for Higher Education Institutions (YÖKDİL). The accepted languages for the associate professor rank are English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Greek, and Persian. Anyone, regardless of their institution's language of instruction, must attend one of these exams or provide a result certificate for any of the international tests (CPE, CAE, TOEFL iBT, PTE Academic, TestDAF, DSD II, TELC Deutsch, Goethe 2, DELF, DALF, CELI, DELE, TORFL) from the previous two years. To be appointed to the rank of professor it is necessary to have worked in a field related to the professorship for at least five years after receiving the title of associate professor, produced original works in their field at an international level, and carried out practical studies for the applied fields.

Having passed through all these stages and carrying any of the above titles, an academic may still be unemployed due to country-specific conditions, such as authoritarian regimes, statutory decrees, or pressures on academic freedom. For instance, 312 academics were discharged from their positions under Turkey's state of emergency in 2016–17. "[Forty-three] academics were discharged from public service by the Statutory Decree No. 672, issued on

September 1, 2016, along with 24 others, dismissed by the Statutory Decree No. 675 issued on October 25, 2016. [Fifteen] additional academics were discharged by the Statutory Decree No. 677, issued on November 22, 2016, as well as 43 others who were dismissed by the Statutory Decree No. 679, issued on January 6, 2017.”<sup>4</sup>

It also is important to add that most of these countries have some “red lines” in the fields of research. For instance, the Turkish academic environment is under the constant supervision of the Higher Education Council, especially in fields of study that include ethnic minorities in Turkey, the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, and so on. Research focused on the Kurds and Armenians must match “national security” sensitivities, and this puts most of the scholars in the field of humanities in a precarious position. For instance, when I had received my MA degree from King’s College, London, in 2000, I applied for the Higher Education Council to consider my degree as equivalent in Turkey. Because my dissertation title was “Kurds in Turkey,” my application was quickly rejected with an explanation that “the topic and content” were “not appropriate for scholarship in Turkey.” For these reasons, it is helpful for the hiring committee to have an understanding of the academic environment in the displaced scholar’s home country.

In addition to knowing where the candidate comes from, hiring committees also should have an understanding of the potential contribution of the scholar to academic diversity. Due to the multiethnic, multireligious culture in the regions from which a majority of the displaced scholars come, we can say that these scholars are a product of and contribution to diversity. The term diversity, as described, refers to “the demographic mix of the community, with a focus on the representation of equity-deserving groups.” Displaced scholars, coming from coercive academic systems with their associated physical and emotional risks, deserve equity because of the persecutions, unemployment, and limitations that have been imposed on their academic research, and therefore must be included any consideration of diversity.

In addition, when a displaced scholar experienced in social sciences such as political science, history, sociology, or anthropology teaches a class, discussions in the classroom become more diverse and inclusive because of the scholar’s own experiences. This provides the students in the classroom an opportunity to feel part of a more inclusive academic environment. As a displaced scholar who has been teaching students about sensitive topics, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the history of the Middle East, and 20th-century world history and the politics of the Middle East, I can say that students who were hesitant to talk about these issues or felt isolated become more interactive and feel more comfortable after learning about my background. The classical definition of diversity in North American and European academic settings makes both scholars and students more vulnerable and hesitant about in-class discussions. The diversity provided by displaced scholars, who have often been unable to share their stories due to academic restrictions or long-lasting unemployment in their home countries before their departure, can transform this hesitancy and vulnerability of students, enabling more engaging discussion and meaningful interactions. Because universities seek to provide a comfortable learning environment for the students with diverse backgrounds, displaced scholars become a valuable source for academic institutions when they encourage active communication and involvement in their students that may be lacking otherwise.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://m.bianet.org/kurdi/human-rights/183659-discharges-of-academics-by-statutory-decrees>.

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