Lifeline for refugee scholars

The global refugee crisis now stands at 65 million forcibly displaced people, according to the United Nations. Could the world ever have imagined a number exceeding that produced by the Nazis and World War II? The conflict over Syria alone, raging since 2011, has so far resulted in more than 11 million refugees and internally displaced persons. Over the past year, international summits have convened to address this global crisis, including the United Nations Summit in September. There is a growing view that the world must recognize these individuals not as part of a temporary emergency, but as a long-term challenge, and one where higher education can play a major role.

The immediate challenges of refugee management can, understandably, overshadow taking stock of the vast scope of people who are displaced. Among those who have had their education, or their career in academia, interrupted are the many scholars and scientists whose lives and work serve thousands more. If you consider the decades of study and training, the ripple effect of published work, and the numbers of students taught, each scholar represents the compounded potential to deliver life-saving innovations and ground-breaking scientific discovery that could reach countless others. Many of these scholars will have no safe home to return to in the foreseeable future.

During and after World War II, efforts were made to help scholars who were dismissed from German universities on racial and political grounds. Initiatives such as the Academic Assistance Council [now known as the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA)] and the Emergency Committee for Displaced German and European Scholars of the Institute of International Education (IIE) helped scholars who were forced out of Germany. Today, organizations including CARA, IIE, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation’s Philipp Schwartz Initiative, and the Scholars at Risk network continue to build lifelines for academics at risk. For example, the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund has provided fellowships to nearly 700 professors and senior researchers from 56 countries, including Syria and other war-torn countries such as Iraq and Yemen—nearly twice as many academics as the organization helped during World War II. These rescued scholars have joined universities, teaching hospitals, research institutions, and laboratories around the world that have not only accepted them as their own, but have gained in return. One scholar, who was forced out of Belarus, now leads research in nanotechnology in the United States where he continues to pioneer diagnostic techniques for chronic diseases. Another refugee scholar from Nigeria, well known in the field of immunology, continued her research on infectious diseases in South Africa and Kenya before returning home to an improved security situation. Recognizing such outcomes, students at Rockefeller University in New York, along with postdoc-led organizations such as Inet NYC, have committed to help displaced scientists adapt to a new academic culture and a long-term career path in the United States.

Displaced scholars, whether refugees or in exile, need the support of institutions large and small, in countries large and small, to break through the barriers that prevent them from academic engagement and employment—fears that they will take jobs away, require more help than they give, or not make the transition to teaching students in the host country. In succumbing to this backlash, we forget that the world’s great universities became great because they welcomed refugees, exiles, and thinkers in distress. With support from the international academic community, threatened scholars and scientists can be saved. Let us all ensure that academic training is not wasted, knowledge for present and future generations is preserved, and that the next Albert Einstein or Felix Bloch is not lost in the painful currents of forced emigration.

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