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Academic Statelessness: At-Risk Academics in the UK Navigating the Transition to Post-Fellowship Positions

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Academic Statelessness: At-Risk Academics in the UK Navigating the Transition to Post-Fellowship Positions

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Abstract

This study advances understanding of forced academic displacement through interviews with 11 at-risk academics and 4 support network members navigating UK Higher Education. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory and Beaney's four-zone framework, we reveal how institutional practices fail to recognise displaced scholars' cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital. The analysis introduces the concept of *academic statelessness*, a liminal condition between fields, and begins to explore an emerging concept of *displacement capital* as a form of collective resistance to individualised precarity, which we identify as a promising area for further research. Our findings demonstrate how at-risk academics experience profound internal contradictions when positioned as temporary humanitarian subjects rather than potential colleagues. Support structures reproduce marginalization through visa restrictions, temporal limitations, and exclusion from professional development opportunities. The study reveals how forced displacement creates distinctive educational exclusions beyond traditional stratification. These findings challenge inclusion frameworks that position diversity as additive rather than transformative, demonstrating how educational fields require structural transformation to recognise displaced scholars' trajectories as producing legitimate academic contributions.

Keywords: at-risk academics, academic displacement, academic precarity, UK higher education

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of global academic mobility is increasingly complex, with particular challenges for at-risk academics who are forcibly displaced. At-risk academics are scholars who are forced into exile due to political persecution, threats to personal safety, or restrictions on academic freedom in their home countries (Parkinson et al., 2019). Charitable organisations such as the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) in the UK (Seabrook, 2009), or the Institute of International Education Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) in the US, provide support to at-risk academics who are 'under immediate threat' in their home countries (Yarar, 2024, p.32). Grants and fellowships enable them to seek sanctuary within the international academic community.

This paper explores the experiences and challenges of Cara-supported at-risk academics within the UK higher education system. Cara collaborates with 135 UK institutions through their Universities and Research Network, positioning itself as a mechanism to prevent 'the waste of exceptional abilities exceptionally trained' (Cara, 2020, p.15). Within this support ecosystem, organisations like Cara function as 'gatekeepers/brokers between scholars and HE institutions' and 'frame their assistance to displaced scholars around a twofold criterion of risk and scientific merit' (Gallo, 2024, p.2191). Unlike economic migrants or those seeking international academic profile, at-risk scholars experience what Bauman (2004) describes as being 'out of place everywhere' (p.11), occupying a precarious position within global higher education. This precarity stems from challenges that are different from those encountered by other international exchange academics who may choose to move freely between home and host universities or countries. At-risk academics often experience 'civic death' (Özdemir & Özyürek, 2019b, p.708) and fall into a limbo between policies governing 'regular academic mobility and exchange, and policies for asylum-seeking non-academics' (Gusejnova et al., 2024, p.2). This structural ambiguity affects professional identities, as scholars undergo a profound transformation of status from respected professionals to individuals defined primarily by their displacement (Gallo, 2024). Scholars report that returning to familiar academic environments fundamentally changes how they are perceived, with their refugee narrative overshadowing their academic credentials and professional identity (p.2196).

Recent work on academic sanctuary has highlighted a range of wider structural challenges including complex (and sometimes hostile) academic visa and immigration policies (Murray, 2022; Gusejnova et al., 2024); competition and elitism (Gill, 2016); cultural adaptation and dissonance between UK and international HE contexts (Parkinson et al., 2018; Parkinson et al., 2020); and limited employment capacity in academia, arising both from sectoral pressures on HE and the situated factors described here (Özatalay, 2020). These challenges reflect broader patterns identified in research on international academic mobility, where scholars face systematic barriers to capital conversion regardless of prior achievement (Cantwell & Lee, 2010).The intersection of these challenges with the already tenuous nature of postdoctoral positions creates distinctive pressures for at-risk academics. While policy discourses construct early career researchers as 'global, mobile academic citizens' (Kim, 2017; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021), this framing ignores personal circumstances and family considerations for those in forced rather than voluntary mobility. These personal circumstances may include trauma, family separation, and safety concerns; factors outside the normal remit of university staff or student wellbeing support systems (Gusejnova et al., 2024). In the longer term, even when scholars exceed expectations, 'the possibility that this transforms scholars from guests into long-term members is rarely contemplated' (Gallo, 2024, p.2194). This reluctance to consider integration is problematic given that today 'displacement is usually a question of five, maybe 10 years' (Yarar, 2024, p.38).

Gallo (2024) further suggests that universities often support organisations such as Cara primarily for reputational positioning rather than humanitarian commitment, while university staff find themselves caught between institutional pressure for visible humanitarian gestures and the unacknowledged administrative burden of addressing at-risk scholars' complex needs (p.2194). This gap between institutional rhetoric and practice reflects what Ahmed (2012) identifies as 'diversity work that manages rather than transforms exclusion'. Research by Özdemir (2019a) on exiled academics in German and French universities reveals a complex dynamic of 'humanitarian othering,' where host institutions, despite good intentions, often create a problematic 'victim-saviour narrative' where displaced scholars are primarily viewed as victims of authoritarianism rather than as fellow academics. This dynamic manifests as 'a form of anonymization and marginalization which demands that they acquiesce to their normatively assigned roles as victims to be saved' (p.2). The consequences are significant: rather than being recognised as critical scholars, these academics are primarily labelled as 'at-risk' or as refugees, creating a persistent sense of 'unbelonging'.

Despite and because of these structural challenges, there are compelling reasons to study and improve transitions for at-risk academics. These scholars demonstrate remarkable resilience and academic success (Murray, 2022), and their diverse perspectives enhance educational environments (Parkinson et al., 2018). Currently, there exists 'no formal mechanism for taking the lessons learned from one successful [support] initiative and replicating them more broadly' (McGrath & Lempinen, 2020, p.22). While existing research has examined initial displacement (Özdemir & Özyürek, 2019b; Parkinson et al., 2020) and support program establishment (Murray, 2022), limited attention has been paid to the critical period between fellowship conclusion and secure employment. As Beaney (2024) notes, support organisations like Cara acknowledge having "limited information about their fellows' situations after placement completion," creating a knowledge gap regarding long-term outcomes.

This study addresses these knowledge gaps by examining post-award transition experiences of 11 at-risk academics in the UK, exploring existing structures that support or hinder their progression to academic positions following completion of their Cara fellowships. This research focuses particularly on how at-risk academics navigate what Beaney (2024) identifies as the 'Zone of Disaffiliation': the critical period when fellowship support ends but secure employment has not yet been obtained. The study aims to examine the effectiveness of existing support initiatives and identify priority areas for improvement. post-fellowship positions Theoretically, we apply Bourdieu's conceptual framework to academic transitions, examining how forced displacement creates distinctive challenges in capital conversion and field navigation. Empirical evidence of how at-risk academics experience movement within Beaney's (2024) four-zone model of academic transitions (see Theoretical Framework) supports a set of actionable recommendations for universities, funding bodies, and support organisations seeking to enhance their provision for at-risk academics. By identifying both effective practices and persistent gaps, we provide a base for policy development that acknowledges the distinctive positioning of at-risk academics within UK higher education. The significance of this work lies in its potential to inform the transformation of support mechanisms for an increasingly important yet vulnerable academic population, contributing to the preservation of intellectual capital and the enhancement of diversity within UK higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is guided by two questions: (1) What challenges and barriers do at-risk academics face during their transition from fellowship support to post-fellowship positions in UK universities? (2) How effectively do existing institutional support structures address the needs of at-risk academics during this post-fellowship transition phase?

To address these, the study employs Bourdieu's conceptual framework which centres on three interconnected concepts: habitus, capital(s), and field, expressed schematically as [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101). *Habitus* refers to the internalized dispositions and ways of being that individuals develop through their social experiences. *Capital* encompasses the various resources individuals possess cultural (knowledge, skills, educational credentials), social (networks and relationships), economic (financial resources), and symbolic (prestige and recognition). *Field* represents the structured social spaces where individuals compete for positions and resources. These concepts have 'proven particularly useful in migration and transnational studies' (Carlson and Schneickert, 2021). For at-risk academics, displacement has the potential to devalue their cultural capital (knowledge and skills), disrupt their social capital (professional networks), and challenge their symbolic capital (replacing prestige and recognition with precarity and invisibility). For example, habitus transformation might occur when scholars accustomed to hierarchical supervisory relationships in home institutions encounter UK contexts expecting autonomous research initiative and direct communication. Capital conversion challenges are evident for all international academics, including at-risk scholars, when publications in regional journals carry minimal weight in UK academic job markets, or when extensive teaching experience from home universities translates into mere observation opportunities rather than employment. Field dynamics manifest when scholars move from institutions with different promotion criteria, funding structures, and institutional norms into UK higher education contexts where success depends on social networks they cannot access and immigration status that excludes them from opportunities before merit evaluation.

Beaney (2024) conducted a detailed investigation of the experiences of Cara fellows from initial contact from a position of risk through award of funding, transition to the UK and completion of a Fellowship. Modifying previous work by Özatalay (2020), Beaney describes four distinct zones of experience (Figure 1): *Vulnerability* (condition of being at-risk), *Assistance* (migration pathways for those with academic capital), *Affiliation* (academic

relationships during fellowships), and *Disaffiliation* (post-fellowship challenges characterised by 'increasingly shrinking employment capacity' (Özatalay, 2020, p.37)).

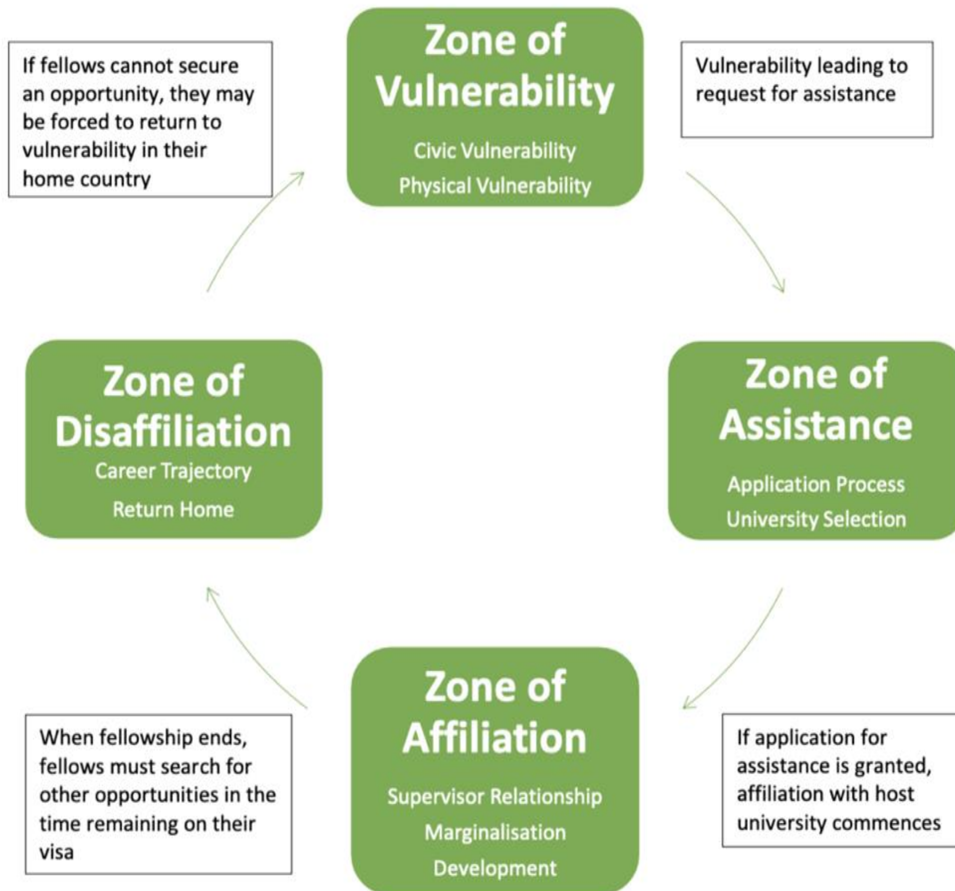

Figure 1: Beaney's (2024) Four-Zone Framework. In this original model, Disaffiliation is associated with the necessity of return to a home country, with the Zone of Vulnerability implicitly located elsewhere (i.e. home conditions creating 'at-risk' status).

By integrating Bourdieu's analytical tools within Beaney's modified zone framework, we examine how at-risk academics navigate these critical transitions, how their capitals are recognised or misrecognised within UK academic fields, and what mechanisms might prevent their return to precarity. This integrative approach follows established practice in migration studies of combining Bourdieusian analysis with context-specific frameworks to illuminate

field-specific dynamics (Erel, 2010).This dual framework enables analysis of both individual experiences of capital disruption and systemic patterns of institutional exclusion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Researcher Positionality

This research is informed by one of the authors' status as an at-risk academic and Cara-supported fellow who has experienced the transition from PhD to seeking post-fellowship positions within UK higher education, creating an "insider researcher" perspective (Fleming, 2018; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). This positionality provided unique insights and facilitated rapport during interviews, as participants often expressed comfort speaking with someone who understood their circumstances. Systematic coding of interview transcripts and team verification ensured analytical rigor while acknowledging the value of situated knowledge. The research team included three co-authors who served as critical friends, challenging assumptions and providing alternative perspectives during data analysis to balance insider knowledge with broader academic perspectives.

Study Design and Data Collection

A qualitative methodology used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, following Bryman's (2016) emphasis on qualitative research enabling in-depth exploration of participants' complex lived experiences and perspectives. Purposive sampling ensured participants could offer insights directly relevant to the research questions. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) current or former Cara fellowship recipients who had experienced or were experiencing post-fellowship transitions; (2) completion of or nearing completion of their fellowship period; and (3) willingness to discuss their transition experiences. For support network members, criteria included direct experience mentoring or supporting at-risk academics within UK HE institutions. The sample comprised 15 participants at various stages of their transition experiences: 11 at-risk academics and 4 members of their support networks (academic mentors and institutional representatives). Recruitment occurred primarily through a Cara professional development workshop co-organized by Global Young Academy, Cara, and Scholars at Risk, attended by approximately 25 scholars from Turkey,

Afghanistan, Iraq, Middle East regions, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, with workshop attendees referring colleagues facing similar circumstances. Of 18 at-risk academics approached for participation, seven did not respond or declined involvement. Non-participants represented diverse backgrounds including Ukraine, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Middle Eastern countries. Informal reasons given for declining participation highlighted the precariousness characterizing at-risk academics' positions as scholars who, while needing support, simultaneously fear consequences of visibility. Tables 1 and 2 provide anonymized demographic and contextual information for all participants.

All 15 interviews were conducted remotely via video conferencing, averaging 42 minutes in duration (range: 30-77 minutes). Most participants continued conversations extensively after formal recording ceased, explicitly requesting these subsequent discussions remain off-record. This reluctance to have all experiences documented, despite occurring with a researcher sharing their at-risk academic identity, underscores the precarious positioning of scholars who require institutional support while simultaneously fearing professional repercussions from candour. The off-record material, while not directly quotable, significantly informed analytical understanding of the power dynamics and institutional barriers described in participants' formal testimonies.

Interviews focused on seven key themes: academic background; Cara program experiences; transition challenges; support mechanisms; effectiveness of existing support; recommendations for improvement; and future outlook. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and professionally transcribed. The analytical approach employed deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) guided by Bourdieu's theoretical framework and Beaney's four-zone model. Initial coding identified patterns related to challenges, support mechanisms, and recommendations, organized into themes corresponding to Beaney's zones. NVivo software was used to organize data, with systematic coding examining how participants' experiences reflected Bourdieusian concepts of capital, field dynamics, and habitus transformation. Ethical considerations were paramount given participants' vulnerable status. All identities were protected through anonymization, and participants provided informed consent with full briefing on data handling procedures. The research received institutional ethical approval prior to data collection.

Table 1: At-Risk Academic Participant Demographics and Contextual Information

PARTICIPANT ID	REGION / COUNTRY	BROAD ACADEMIC FIELD	FELLOWSHIP STAGE (AT INTERVIEW)	CURRENT / MOST-RECENT STATUS
P1	Middle East (country withheld)	Polymer & Pharmaceutical Chemistry	Cara PhD fellow – final year (write-up)	Writing up thesis; preparing CV, networking for post-doc or industry roles.
P2	Middle East (country withheld)	Business, Marketing & AI	Cara PhD fellow – final year	PhD candidate & associate lecturer; scoping post-doctoral options.
P4	Middle East (Syria)	Pharmacognosy / Natural-products Pharmacy	Cara PhD fellow – final months	Completing thesis; exploring post-doc versus industry paths.
P5	Middle East (Syria)	Drug-delivery Pharmacy	Cara alumnus – PhD completed 2021	R&D scientist in pharma industry; would prefer academic role.
P7	Middle East (Iraq)	Earth Sciences / Tectonics	Cara post-doc finished (2 years)	Job-searching after >50 applications; on Global Talent Visa.
P8	Anatolia (Turkey)	Education & Social Sciences	Cara visiting fellow (2 years) ended	Self-funded visiting scholar; applying for lectureships / research posts.
P9	Middle East (country withheld)	Pharmaceutical Chemistry (3-D printing)	Cara PhD just completed	Seeking short post-doc or industry R&D position.
P10	Middle East (Syria)	Translation Studies & Language Teaching	Cara PhD fellow – write-up	Focused on finishing thesis; early career-search online.
P11	Middle East (country withheld)	Radiology & Breast-imaging AI	Cara post-doc ended; small bridge grant	Part-time research associate (£500 p.m. stipend); job & visa hunt.
P13	Eastern Europe (Ukraine)	Foreign-Languages & Media-Law	Yr-1 British Academy / Cara post-doc	Remote teaching for home university; UK-based media-literacy project.
P14	Horn of Africa (Ethiopia)	Multilingual Literature & Oral Arts	Cara visiting fellow (Yr 2)	Conducting post-doc research; occasional guest-lectures.

Note: Specific details have been generalized to protect participant confidentiality

Table 2: Mentors and Institutional Representatives Participants demographics

PARTICIPANT ID	ROLE	FIELD	ROLE / STATUS	CURRENT POSITION
P3	Cara mentor (origin: Ukraine)	Education	Not a fellow	Lecturer; volunteered mentor.
P6	Doctoral tutor	Education	Host academic	PGR lead; occasional Cara supervisor.
P12	University Cara liaison (academic)	Geography and Environment	Host liaison / fellow advocacy	Associate Professor; University Cara lead.
P15	External mentor	Education & Sustainability	Mentor	Associate Professor; Cara supporter.

Methodological Limitations and Sample Considerations

This study acknowledges several limitations inherent to researching vulnerable populations. The sample (n=11 at-risk academics, n=4 support network members) is small and demographically concentrated, with most participants originating from Middle Eastern countries. This reflects regional crises but limits generalizability. The sample size is appropriate given: the limited population of at-risk academics actively transitioning through UK post-fellowship positions; the sensitive topic necessitating extensive trust-building; and recruitment challenges arising from scholars' justifiable caution given their precarious institutional positions. The gender distribution (7 female, 4 male) prevented systematic subgroup analysis. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could illuminate how intersecting identities shape transition experiences differentially.

FINDINGS

Capital Disruption: Systemic Barriers and Identity Challenges

At-risk academics' transitions into UK higher education reveal how forced displacement fundamentally disrupts multiple forms of capital and professional identity. These disruptions represent the intersection of social and symbolic spaces where objective conditions create subjective experiences of exclusion (Bourdieu, 1990a).

Most of participants (9 of 11) described experiencing what Bourdieu (2000) terms a ‘cleft habitus’: contradictory dispositions arising when established academic identities confront unfamiliar institutional fields. This manifests most acutely in participants’ sense of professional devaluation. As one scholar reflected, they felt *“not very strong as a researcher”* upon arrival, having never presented at conferences or *“published in a great journal”* during their home country PhD (P11). This represents a ‘dialectical confrontation’ between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 2000). The psychological impact extends beyond capability, with several participants reporting unprecedented feelings of inferiority: “*I've never felt this inferior throughout my academic career... I developed the imposter syndrome”* (P8). These accounts reveal how structural inequalities may inflict ‘hidden injuries through institutional violence’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Cultural capital devaluation emerged consistently across interviews, with most participants expressing profound disillusionment. Seven of eleven scholars characterised their previous academic achievements as “*a waste of time”*, feeling perpetually *“disadvantaged”* compared to peers (P10). This perception often took geopolitical dimensions, with participants internalizing narratives about *“weak countries”* with *“a gap in science”* (P9). Such self-perceptions align with Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of how embodied cultural capital becomes a marker of (un)belonging, creating a victim-saviour narrative that overshadows academic credentials (Gallo, 2024).

Capital devaluation manifested in concrete, daily experiences of institutional marginalization. One participant with extensive teaching experience in their home country described the shock of having their expertise dismissed:

> *I taught at universities for years. Here, when I asked about teaching opportunities, they said I could ‘follow the course, follow the module’, not actual teaching. Just observe, like a student. All those years teaching disappeared* (P10).

Another scholar, a former lecturer and institute director who had supervised over 40 postgraduate students, recounted:

> *Back home, I supervised many master's and PhD students. I had administrative leadership roles. When I came here, nothing. No one acknowledged that experience.*

> *It's as if those 15 years teaching and leading research programmes never existed. I had to start from zero, as if I'd never been an academic.* (P7)

This erasure of prior academic identities forces scholars to rebuild professional credibility from a subordinate starting position, even when their experience significantly exceeds that of peers occupying more secure positions within UK academia.

Immigration status emerged as the most concrete barrier, creating cascading professional consequences that distinguished at-risk academics from other international scholars. The sponsorship requirement eliminated opportunities before applications could be evaluated on merit. One participant recounted: *"I was shortlisted for interviews twice. Both times, when they realized I needed sponsorship, suddenly the position was 'no longer available.' Not officially rejected—just disappeared"* (P2). Another described the application dilemma:

> *Every form asks: 'Do you need visa sponsorship?' When I tick 'yes,' I know I'm already out. Why would they choose me when they have 100 other applicants who don't need it? I started lying, ticking 'no,' just to get to interview stage. Then having that awkward conversation* (P1).

The financial burden compounds employment barriers. The graduate route visa, while technically available post-PhD, is expensive yet provides no pathway to settlement, forcing scholars into expensive renewal cycles their competitors avoid. One participant explained the sense of inequality:

> *British students finish PhD, apply for jobs, done. EU students had advantages before Brexit. But me? I need more than £2,500 for a three-year visa that doesn't even count toward residency. Then I need employer sponsorship, which costs them thousands more. I'm competing with one hand tied* (P5).

This exemplifies Gusejnova et al.'s (2024) 'Catch-22' where work visa routes undermine asylum eligibility while asylum status closes professional pathways. Beyond employment, visa precarity affects daily survival: *"Landlords reject you without permanent residency proof. I had to pay six months' rent upfront, my entire savings, just to secure housing while job searching"* (P1). The result is an impossible bind wherein scholars must secure employment to maintain legal status, yet their legal status prevents employment access.

Structural constraints intersect with existential challenges that distinguish at-risk academics from voluntary mobile scholars. Unlike those who choose to pursue international careers, participants framed their situation in survival terms: *"The first challenge is how to survive, because afterwards the Cara fund ends"* (P2). The involuntary nature fundamentally shapes experience, with participants expressing disbelief at being "*forced ... to come"* to a country they *"never thought"* they would inhabit (P13). This creates ongoing psychological burden, with the majority reporting chronic stress, feeling *"overwhelmed"* and struggling to balance survival with academic productivity. As one participant poignantly stated: *"I couldn't publish anything because I'm focusing on how to reside, how to save my family, how to save my future"* (P7).

Temporal constraints intensify these challenges. All participants emphasized time pressure, with fellowship periods passing rapidly while visa requirements create artificial urgency. Participants described *"fighting with time"* daily, knowing they had "*just two years to get something"* or face return to danger (P11). This temporal bind is particularly cruel given UK academia's competitive landscape, where international status already creates disadvantages: *"Internationals need residency... which is sometimes very difficult, or it costs a lot of money"* (P7). The abrupt cessation of institutional support compounds precarity. Multiple participants described fellowship endings as *"very sharp"* transitions that *"don't feel good"* (P8), highlighting how universities offer *"nothing"* beyond fellowship periods (P11). This reflects Gallo's (2024) observation that institutions treat at-risk scholars as temporary visitors rather than potential colleagues, despite their academic contributions. These intersecting barriers create what Ingram (2011) terms "destabilized habitus," preventing full assimilation while eroding previous academic identities. As at-risk academics navigate between Beaney's (2024) zones of Vulnerability and potential Disaffiliation, they must simultaneously manage practical survival, psychological adaptation, and professional development within a system viewing their presence as exceptional rather than integral, a positioning that compounds both their displacement-related vulnerabilities and the structural precarity facing all early career academics. Current support structures, despite good intentions, may perpetuate marginalization by failing to address the fundamental challenge: converting disrupted capital within hostile institutional fields. The result is a form of academic precarity qualitatively different from general early career challenges.

Field Navigation: Support Structures and Their Limitations

The support infrastructure for at-risk academics represents a complex institutional field where scholars must navigate between Beaney's (2024) Zone of Assistance and Zone of Affiliation while attempting to (re)accumulate capitals necessary for academic progression.

Cara and partner universities operate as institutional gatekeepers, controlling access to academic fields through 'rites of institution' (Bourdieu, 1990b). Cara's professional development workshops emerged as particularly significant capital conversion mechanisms, with eight of eleven participants highlighting their transformative value. One participant emphasized: *"One of the most beneficial things... was the workshop at Oxford University... specific strategies given... how to write CVs, letters of applications, and prepare for interviews"* (P14). These workshops represent structured attempts to facilitate what Carlson and Schneickert (2021) identify as the cultural capital transformation required when habitus encounters unfamiliar field conditions. Several participants confirmed this impact: *"I used all the strategies and suggestions given to me during the Cara workshops... I carefully looked for all vacant positions"* (P14).

However, the effectiveness of these gatekeeping mechanisms varies considerably, revealing how institutional habitus creates uneven experiences. While some participants successfully leveraged support, others encountered significant communication barriers: *"There apparently is [a Cara representative], but they never introduced themselves"* (P8). This inconsistency reflects what Bourdieu (1990b) terms symbolic violence, where institutional practices exclude through seemingly neutral mechanisms. The mismatch between generic support and specific needs was evident in multiple cases: *"Cara sometimes sent me suggestions of grants... but I did not feel that those related to my own background, my own research"* (P1). Such standardized approaches fail to acknowledge the distinctive positioning of at-risk academics between zones.

The variation in support quality often depended on individual goodwill rather than systematic structures, leaving scholars vulnerable to institutional lottery. One mid-career researcher, already an established academic in their home country, described the shock of navigating unsupportive environments:

> *I was expecting people to be more understanding, to suggest collaborations. But I realized quickly, it doesn't work that way. You have to chase everything yourself, initiate everything. No one approached me first* (P8).

When scholars sought institutional support, they frequently encountered sympathetic individuals lacking decision-making power. One participant recounted:

> *I contacted the Cara representative at my university. She was very nice, very sympathetic, but she couldn't actually help. She just said 'try to apply, try to apply.' She had no authority to create opportunities* (P7).

The absence of systematic support mechanisms meant critical information remained hidden. One scholar discovered essential services only through chance conversations:

> *After two years, a friend doing her bachelor's told me about the career hub. Without her, I'd never have known it existed. The university sends emails, but when you're overwhelmed, when English isn't your first language, you don't know what to look for. Who tells you these things?* (P9).

This informational precarity particularly affected scholars lacking peer networks, as another explained: *“I didn't have colleagues. Colleagues share information. Without them, how should I know what's available?”* (P8).

When support aligns with scholars’ needs, it enables crucial capital conversion. Proactive supervisors proved particularly valuable: *“My supervisor who already has funding from a big grant, she supported me even with a small amount... It’s better than nothing”* (P11). Others facilitated external opportunities: *“My supervisor asked me to apply for what’s called a Bayer [grant]”* (P4). These examples demonstrate successful social capital mobilisation, transforming relationships into resources that mitigate transitions toward potential Disaffiliation. The most effective initiatives demonstrated field-specific relevance with sustained commitment. Successful mentorship was characterised by disciplinary alignment: *“The first one was really helpful. Very committed person, very encouraging... it made me feel like I'm really supported”* (P10). Early engagement proved crucial, as one mentor observed: “*What’s important is to start a little bit earlier... conferences take six months”* (P3). These

insights align with what Gill and Burnard (2013) identify as essential mentorship components: field-specific intellectual development combined with emotional support.

Nine of eleven participants identified networking as a critical gap, recognizing that *"people tend to find postdocs by mainly networking"* (P1). However, institutional mechanisms systematically exclude at-risk academics: *"In terms of institutional mechanisms, there weren't really many things... some schemes that are already there don't allow visiting fellows to be involved"* (P8). This structural exclusion represents the absence of 'bridging capital' (Putnam, 2000), connections facilitating movement from temporary affiliation to permanent positioning. Departmental isolation emerged as a common experience undermining capital formation: *"I felt myself rather isolated in the department... no events, I got to know my colleagues little by little, getting acquainted during lunchtime"* (P15). This isolation is compounded by Cara's limited institutional visibility: *"It's quite surprising how little reputation or visibility Cara has in the UK academic community"* (P12). Perceived confidentiality requirements further complicate community building: *"We're told we shouldn't say that a certain person is supported by Cara"* (P6).

Financial constraints represent another critical limitation. Despite fellowship support, most participants identified funding gaps: *"The biggest challenge is money... sometimes the fund is small and for a short period of time"* (P11). Institutional pressures compound individual precarity: *"My university is going through a financial crisis... they slashed most of their funding"* (P10). The abrupt cessation of support at fellowship completion creates a cliff-edge effect as scholars transition toward potential Disaffiliation. Faced with these structural limitations, several participants developed self-initiated strategies, creating informal networks: *"We created the group of sanctuary scholars... we are informing them that we need special attention because of the trauma most of our colleagues go through"* (P10). This grassroots organizing represents 'bonding capital' (Putnam, 2000), connections among similar individuals navigating institutional barriers. However, such efforts remain disconnected from official structures: *"Yes, I have good connections, but it's my personal endeavours. It's not the university"* (P10).

Even scholars securing bridging employment faced exploitative conditions reflecting their precarity. One participant with extensive medical qualifications described systematic undervaluation:

> *My supervisor pays other postdocs £2,000 monthly. She pays me £500, even though I contribute equally to research. She knows I'm a doctor, that I can work clinically, so why not pay me properly for research? I'm helping her, not her helping me, I'm investing my time and my money just to survive here* (P11).

The financial stress forced scholars into impossible choices between academic aspirations and immediate survival, with some abandoning research careers entirely despite doctoral training: *"I shifted my whole interest because of insecurity. I loved research, I wanted a postdoc, but I couldn't risk the uncertainty"* (P5).

These findings reveal a fundamental tension within support structures. At-risk academics must navigate systems that simultaneously enable and constrain capital accumulation. While moving through Beaney's zones from Assistance to Affiliation, they encounter institutional fields whose rules fail to accommodate their specific trajectories. Cara and universities provide essential resources enabling initial field entry, but their operation through institutional doxa creates systematic barriers to full integration, positioning scholars precariously at the threshold of Disaffiliation even while receiving assistance.

Habitus Transformation: Adaptive Strategies and Policy Recommendations

At-risk academics demonstrate remarkable agency in both individual and collective transformations, demonstrating how scholars actively reshape their dispositions while advocating for systemic change to prevent descent into Beaney's (2024) Zone of Disaffiliation.

Despite significant constraints, most of participants (8 of 11) demonstrated what Bourdieu (1977, p.83) terms 'transforming practices' arising when individuals secure 'symbolic mastery' of governing principles. This manifests through pragmatic career flexibility, embracing what we identify as 'practical-evaluative agency' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), the capacity to make judgments among alternative trajectories. One participant articulated this strategic diversification: *"I'm a bit optimistic, positive... I started working in another industry two years ago, which gives me... another opportunity"* (P10). This approach was consistently echoed, with the same participants emphasizing: *"Don't also feel that your future will be in academia. You need to seek other opportunities in other industries"* (P10).

Participants developed highly strategic approaches to navigating institutional barriers. One scholar described systematic preparation:

> *I attended every workshop the university offered, CV writing, interview skills, grant applications. I treated my fellowship like job preparation, not just research time. Every conference I attended, I collected business cards, followed up with emails, built my network deliberately* (P14).

Another emphasized proactive skill-building beyond research:

> *I knew having only publications wouldn't be enough. I asked for teaching opportunities, even unpaid guest lectures. I volunteered for administrative tasks. I needed 'UK experience' on my CV because employers ask: 'What have you done here?'* (P2).

The most successful participants recognized early that traditional academic pathways, focusing solely on research outputs, proved insufficient without institutional networks and visible UK-based experience. One participant who secured a permanent position within two years attributed success to strategic positioning:

> *From day one, I made myself visible. Every departmental event, every seminar, I attended. I asked senior colleagues to review my work. I didn't wait to be invited, I asked directly. Some said no, but others said yes, and those connections led to opportunities* (P14).

Such adaptability represents more than survival strategy; it demonstrates conscious habitus correction in what Bourdieu (2000, p.163) terms 'awkward positions'. Seven participants actively developed new dispositions, particularly around direct communication: *"I just ask, ask and enforce! When you are ignored or rejected, just push the boundaries"* (P8). Another described being *"very frank telling people my weakness, my problems, what I needed"* (P14). These approaches challenge academic doxa around professional self-presentation, representing what Archer (2007) terms 'reflexive deliberation', the internal conversation through which agents determine their courses of action.

The transformation extends to systematic opportunity-seeking. Most participants emphasized methodical approaches: *"I was working on my research papers and presenting and equally chasing all job opportunities. It was a very consistent, persistent kind of endeavour"* (P14).

Cross-cultural networking proved particularly significant: *“Connecting with colleagues, with British colleagues... Sometimes it's more difficult, but it's definitely much more rewarding”* (P15). These strategies reveal sophisticated capital conversion practices that help scholars navigate from Zone of Affiliation toward stable positioning.

Collective action emerged as a crucial dimension of habitus transformation, though formal mechanisms remained limited. Several participants created alternative support structures, such as the group of sanctuary scholars mentioned above. This group actively advocated for institutional recognition, with participants describing how *“we are in talks now with the PGR [postgraduate research] team to provide us with more support and also with teaching experience”* (P10). Another envisioned expanded networks: *“I wish there’s a way that we can communicate as Cara fellows... we can build a support group with people who already have been through the same things”* (P1), suggesting mixing *"people who have already been through this, and passed, and people who just started”* (P1). These initiatives exemplify bonding capital (Putnam, 2000) while challenging assumptions about individualised academic progression.

Scholars created alternative support infrastructures when institutional mechanisms proved inadequate. One participant described establishing a peer advocacy group:

> *We created a group of sanctuary scholars at the university. We meet with the doctoral academy, we inform them we need special attention because of trauma our colleagues experience. We're now trying to secure teaching opportunities, to get funding aligned with UKRI standards. We had to organize ourselves, nobody else would do it* (P10).

Another emphasized the value of informal networks:

> *At the Oxford workshop, we exchanged contacts. Now we have a WhatsApp group. When someone finds funding, they share it. When someone faces visa problems, others who solved it advise. This peer support, Cara didn't create it, we did* (P4).

These self-organized networks demonstrate nascent resistance to institutional structures that individualize precarity while providing scholars with collective knowledge and emotional solidarity absent from formal support systems. However, participants recognised that individual adaptation cannot address systemic barriers preventing movement beyond Zone of

Affiliation. Arising from specific questions in the interviews, recommendations from participants for institutional adaptation reflect sophisticated understanding of structural requirements, organized around three implementation timelines.

Immediate Bridging Mechanisms (0-6 months)

The most critical proposed intervention addresses the fellowship-to-employment gap. Universities should provide automatic transitional support for fellows approaching completion: for example continued institutional affiliation through visiting scholar status, sustained library and IT access for 12-24 months, and modest bridging stipends (£5,000-£10,000 over 3-6 months). One participant emphasized the devastating impact of abrupt severance: "*When funding stops, everything stops. No email, no library access. You're suddenly outside while still writing up, still applying for jobs. How can you compete?"* (P4).

Emergency funding mechanisms require expansion. Participants identified hardship funds as crucial yet inaccessible: *"There is hardship fund maybe, but I haven't applied for it... I didn't know about this. This is the first time I hear it, from you"* (P9). Several scholars discovered eligibility only accidentally, suggesting systematic information provision should replace chance discovery. Small grants (£500-£1,000) for visa fees, conference attendance, or interview travel represent minimal institutional investment with substantial impact on scholars' capacity to remain competitive.

Medium-Term Structural Integration (6-24 months)

Teaching integration emerged as systematically underutilized despite participants possessing extensive pedagogical experience. One scholar with decades of university teaching described being limited to token involvement:

> *My supervisor invited me as guest lecturer, but it wasn't paid. I spoke only very little, maybe 30 minutes. After all my years teaching, I got one unpaid guest lecture. That was it* (P8).

Another with substantial teaching background explained:

> *They offered me to follow available modules, to see how teaching works here. I wasn't offered actual teaching responsibilities. I needed systematic teaching experience for my CV, but got only observation opportunities* (P8).

Universities should create teaching associate positions (4-6 contact hours weekly) during fellowship periods, providing UK experience essential for subsequent applications while enabling institutional visibility. The modest cost (teaching hourly rates) yields substantial employability benefits.

Designated institutional responsibility at senior administrative levels would address current fragmentation. Embedding at-risk academic coordination within Vice Chancellor portfolios signals institutional commitment while providing scholars with identifiable advocates possessing decision-making capacity. Cross-institutional coordination mechanisms should enable resource sharing and opportunity circulation across universities rather than isolating scholars within single institutions. Participants recommended formal mentoring networks connecting current fellows with successfully transitioned scholars, creating what one described as *"a circular system... Cara fellows who already achieved what they want can go back and help. You pay it back by helping someone transitioning"* (P1).

Long-Term Systemic Change

Immigration reform must address visa requirements functioning as *de facto* exclusion mechanisms. The graduate route visa, while nominally available, provides inadequate support: costly, time-limited, and crucially, non-contributory toward settlement. One participant described the cascading barriers:

> *The visa costs everything I saved. Then landlords won't rent without proof of income. Employers won't hire without stable housing address. I'm stuck in this impossible circle. The visa doesn't solve the problem, it just delays it for two years* (P1).

Fee waivers and automatic work authorization extensions would partially address these structural inequalities.

Credential recognition frameworks must tackle systematic devaluation of qualifications from crisis-affected regions. Participants consistently reported prior experience rendering invisible regardless of seniority. One mid-career researcher described the degradation: *"I was a lecturer, I had management positions. Here, they look at my CV like I'm fresh graduate. All those years disappeared"* (P8). Universities should develop equivalency assessment procedures enabling formal recognition of prior teaching, supervision, and administrative roles rather than requiring scholars to rebuild identities from subordinate entry positions. Existing initiatives such as the

European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which provides standardised credential assessment for displaced scholars, offer potential models that could be adapted specifically for at-risk academics (Špadina, 2018).

Sustainable funding models should replace time-limited humanitarian fellowships with integrated employment pathways. This requires Cara, universities, and research councils collaborating to create structured transitions wherein fellowship periods lead to institutional positions based on performance rather than requiring external competition during fellowship conclusion stress. Multiple participants emphasized the paradox:

> *Universities invest in us for two or three years, then just let us go. Why not create pathways to keep us? They know our work, we know their systems. It makes no sense to waste that investment* (P11).

These recommendations, articulated by participants, demonstrate that preventing Zone of Disaffiliation requires more than temporary support. It demands reconceptualizing how institutions integrate displaced scholars, shifting from humanitarian charity frameworks toward what Fraser (2000) terms 'participatory parity': institutional arrangements enabling at-risk academics to participate as peers rather than supplicants. By combining individual agency with structural critique, participants offer a vision recognizing forced displacement not as deficit requiring benevolence but as distinctive experience requiring tailored institutional responses that enable genuine academic membership.

DISCUSSION

Reframing 'disaffiliation'

This study advances sociological understanding of how forced displacement intersects with academic field dynamics to produce distinctive forms of educational exclusion. By analysing at-risk academics' transitions through the lens of Bourdieusian field theory, we reveal how UK higher education's institutional doxa systematically misrecognises displaced scholars' capital while simultaneously preventing its conversion into field-specific forms. The experiences of the 11 at-risk academics and 4 support network members illustrate the profound internal contradictions that emerge when established academic identities confront new institutional

environments, what Bourdieu (2000) theorizes as the painful internalization of incompatible dispositions. To address this requires not merely extending standard forms of academic career support but fundamentally reconceptualizing how HE institutions understand and integrate displaced scholars into a system which in which independent agency, preparedness to be mobile in pursuit of career progression, and promotion based on prestige and wide visibility, are still regarded, whether formally or otherwise, as the norm (e.g Lubośny et al., 2025; Bojica et al., 2023).

Within this context, we suggest a useful conceptual step may be to note that the critical challenge for all academics is not preventing or avoiding disaffiliation – which is in fact an essential act for any career progression – but ensuring that entering the Zone of Disaffiliation at the end of one career stage enables positive transition to the next rather than regression to precarity or vulnerability. Figure 2 presents this concept in an extended model which further modifies the four-zone model of Beaney (2024, after Özatalay, 2020). In this view, the experiences of at-risk and displaced academics evidenced in this study are integrated with the cyclic dynamics of many academic career pathways. It is important to stress that in making this integration, we do not seek to deny the uniqueness of the at-risk and displaced academic experience. Instead, we align it with other forms of precarity and inequality in academic career pathways (e.g, Angervall and Hammarfelt, 2024) and seek to highlight the central role of disaffiliation as a determinant of progression. We also take the opportunity to highlight that, as clearly evidenced by the at-risk academics surveyed here, the alternative – a return to the Zone of Vulnerability – takes place *even within* UK HE. This is a fundamental question of inclusion: how can universities ensure equitable access to ‘good’ disaffiliation and secure career progression for academics from all backgrounds, including and those at-risk and displaced?

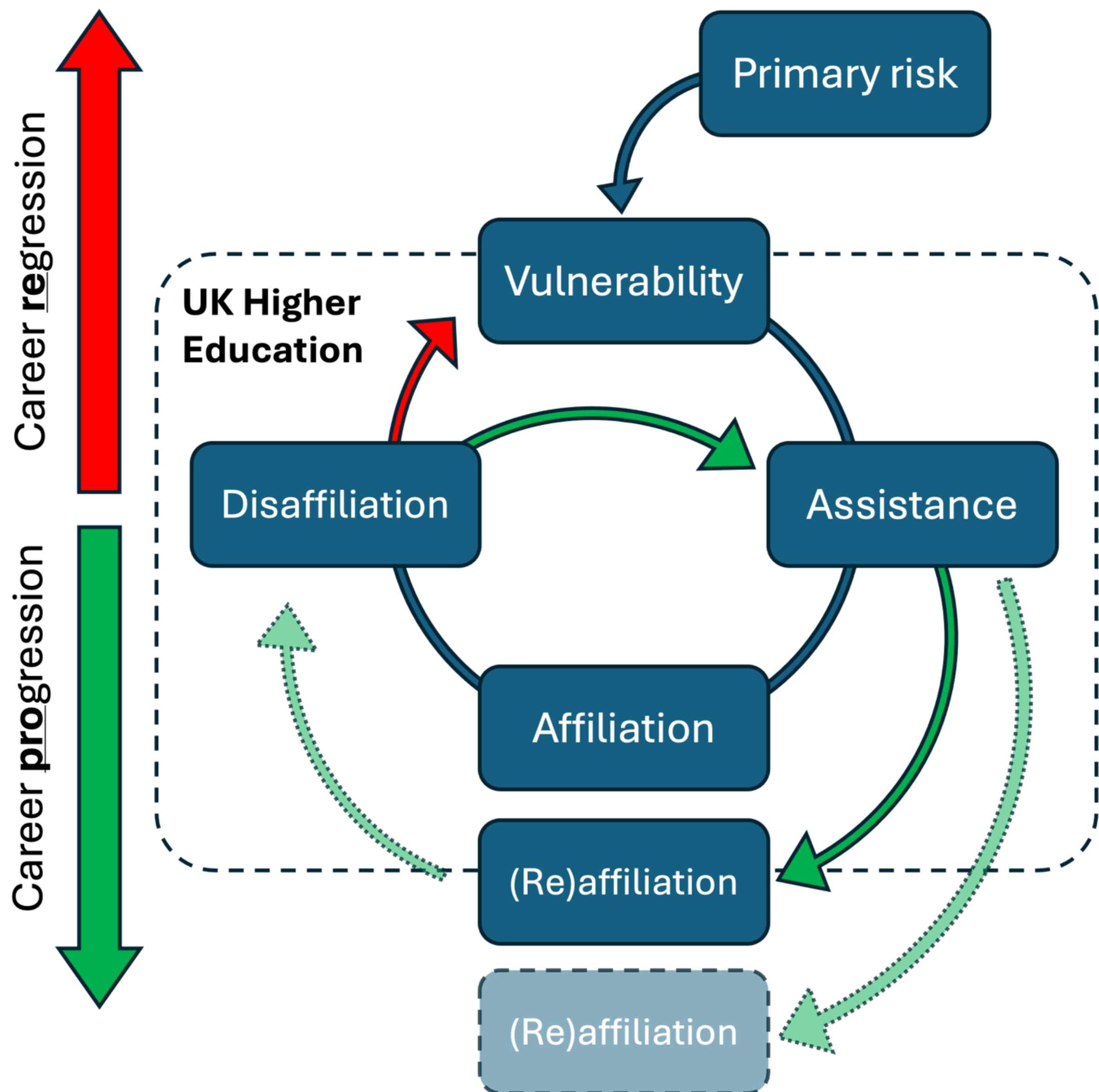

Figure 2. Extended model (modified from Beaney, 2024) for academic experience and career progression. Initial support for at-risk academics escaping into UK HE from primary risks overseas is integrated with the cyclic dynamics of academic career development. Disaffiliation is here seen as a critical point: a 'good' disaffiliation leads with continued and appropriate assistance to reaffiliation and career progression; a 'bad' disaffiliation leads to precarity and potentially a return to vulnerability for at-risk academics.

Academic statelessness

This study's theoretical contribution lies in revealing how humanitarian support frameworks, while materially necessary, function as mechanisms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990b) that reproduce the very marginalization they purport to address. By positioning at-risk academics within victim-saviour narratives (Özdemir, 2019a, p.2), institutions engage in a process whereby support provision becomes inseparable from status degradation. This finding extends Bourdieu's analysis of educational reproduction by demonstrating how institutions mobilize humanitarian discourse to naturalize the exclusion of those whose displacement challenges meritocratic assumptions about academic progression, a process that Ahmed (2012) argues allows institutions to maintain exclusionary structures while appearing committed to inclusion. Methodologically, centering at-risk academics' narratives reveals how institutional fields operate through what 'misrecognition' (Bordieu, 1990a), the process whereby arbitrary cultural boundaries appear natural and legitimate. Participants consistently described feeling overwhelmed by UK academic culture. These accounts illustrate how field-specific capital requirements function as unmarked mechanisms of exclusion, particularly acute in disciplines where cultural capital assumes nationally-specific forms, from writing conventions to pedagogical expectations.

Our analysis demonstrates that forced academic displacement constitutes a unique sociological phenomenon requiring theoretical elaboration beyond existing mobility frameworks. While voluntary academic mobility enables 'global academic citizenship (Kim, 2017), forced displacement creates what we identify as *'academic statelessness'*, a condition where scholars occupy liminal positions between fields, unable to fully activate capital in either origin or destination contexts. This liminality manifests through the 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 2000, p.163) our participants experience, where dispositions formed within one academic field prove not merely different but actively delegitimized within UK institutional spaces.

This academic statelessness differs fundamentally from the general precarity facing early career researchers. While all early career academics experience short-term contracts and funding insecurity (Gill, 2016), at-risk scholars face qualitatively distinct challenges: forced mobility eliminating options to return home; systematic credential devaluation regardless of prior seniority; immigration barriers functioning as exclusion mechanisms before merit evaluation; severed social capital networks; and displacement trauma intersecting with professional pressures. This distinction matters theoretically: academic statelessness represents

educational marginalization wherein displacement vulnerabilities compound rather than simply replicate structural precarity affecting all early career academics.

Emergence of new capital among displaced academics

The emergence of collective organizing among at-risk academics, from informal WhatsApp groups to advocacy for institutional recognition, suggests nascent resistance to field dynamics that individualize structural disadvantage. This pattern mirrors documented responses among other precarious academic populations, where shared marginalization generates collective identity formation and mutual support networks (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015).

Bourdieusian analyses of how marginalized groups develop alternative forms of capital when dominant fields fail to recognise their existing resources are well established in the literature. Reay (2004) demonstrates how women from working-class backgrounds generate 'emotional capital' as a collective resource enabling educational navigation, while Huppatz (2009) shows how excluded groups in feminised professions develop 'feminine capital' that operates parallel to, rather than within, dominant capital hierarchies. Similarly, Erel (2010) argues that migrants do not simply transfer or lose capital but actively produce new forms of 'cultural capital' through creative responses to exclusionary institutional contexts. The slow scholarship movement provides a further parallel, documenting how feminist academics develop collective resistance strategies, including mutual support networks and alternative success metrics, to navigate hostile institutional environments (Mountz et al., 2015).

Viewed through this Bourdieuian lens, we tentatively identify a distinct 'displacement capital', which appears to develop through three interconnected dimensions evident in participant narratives. First, enhanced institutional literacy emerges from navigating multiple bureaucratic systems simultaneously; as one participant noted, applying for the global talent visa required mastering UK immigration law, research impact metrics, and endorsement procedures that later translated into general strategic navigation skills. Second, adaptive flexibility manifests in scholars' capacity to recalibrate career expectations rapidly; participants who successfully transitioned described deliberately building 'UK experience' through unpaid work, volunteer teaching, and strategic networking precisely because they recognized their prior credentials faced systematic devaluation. Third, collective organizing capacity develops from shared marginalization; the sanctuary scholar groups, WhatsApp networks, and peer mentoring

structures participants created represent forms of capital unavailable to more securely positioned academics who navigate institutions individually.

Crucially, this form of capital, which appears distinct to displaced people inhabiting institutional fields emerges precisely because those institutional fields fail to recognize pre-existing credentials, forcing co-development of new adaptive strategies for survival. Unlike the other analogous forms of marginalised capital discussed above, this form emerges specifically from the intersection of forced mobility, trauma, and professional precarity. These individual disadvantages become a potential capital resource through shared experiences of forced academic mobility that enable both practical support (job opportunities, visa advice) and epistemic creativity (alternative ways of understanding academic value beyond orthodox institutional frameworks). Thus, we conjecture that this capital represents simultaneously a form of resilience and evidence of institutional failure, resources that scholars should not need to develop within equitable academic structures. We propose displacement capital as an emerging concept warranting further empirical investigation, particularly through larger-scale studies that can characterise its forms and processes across different disciplines and career stages, and potentially among displaced and refugee communities inhabiting fields beyond the boundaries of academia.

CONCLUSION

While this study illuminates the post-Fellowship transition experiences of at-risk academics in UK universities, several avenues warrant further investigation. Longitudinal research tracking career trajectories over the typical 5-10-year displacement period that participants face could reveal whether temporary challenges of academic statelessness translate into enduring disadvantages or whether effective support enables eventual parity. Comparative studies across national contexts would identify how different immigration policies and support models shape outcomes, potentially revealing transferable practices. Methodologically, participatory action research positioning at-risk academics as co-researchers rather than partcipants could generate more authentic knowledge about overcoming institutional barriers to 'good' transitions through the Zone of Disaffiliation between academic positions. Such research would move beyond

documenting challenges toward developing evidence-based interventions that transform institutional structures, ensuring that forced displacement becomes a source of intellectual enrichment rather than academic marginalization.

This analysis contributes to debates about educational equality by demonstrating how globalization produces new forms of academic stratification irreducible to traditional categories of class, race, or gender. Forced academic displacement reveals how educational institutions, despite cosmopolitan self-presentation, remain fundamentally nationalist in their deep structures, from visa regimes that determine legitimate presence to cultural expectations that police acceptable academic habitus. Our findings challenge self-identified progressive frameworks of inclusion that dominate policy discourse, echoing Ahmed's (2012) critique of diversity as institutional performance. Instead, they demand critical analysis of how educational fields themselves require transformation to accommodate scholars whose trajectories disrupt the assumed linear progression from student to professor within the norms of the globalised academic establishment.

Our modified framework (Figure 2) demonstrates that supporting at-risk academics requires moving beyond closed-loop humanitarian responses toward structural transformation of support for inclusive academic career progression. The dual pathways out of disaffiliation, progression or regression, reveal that institutional support must extend beyond fellowship periods to enable genuine integration. The emergence of displacement capital among at-risk academics points toward possibilities for collective resistance to individualised precarity, yet for UK higher education to fulfil its commitments to diversity and academic freedom, it must transform from a system that positions at-risk scholars as temporary humanitarian subjects, held in benevolent academic statelessness, to one that recognises them as valuable colleagues whose distinctive experiences can enrich academic knowledge production.

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The first author is a former Cara-supported fellow, bringing an insider researcher perspective to this study as detailed in the Researcher Positionality section. This positioning enhanced rapport with participants and provided unique insights into their experiences. The remaining authors declare no conflicts of interest. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Cara or any participating institutions.

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