

60 seconds with...

THE CARA ACADEMIC AT MERTON

Last year Merton welcomed an academic from Aleppo thanks to the generous support of the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA). CARA arranges for promising academics displaced through war or oppression to be placed in a host university in the UK.

Merton's CARA academic talked about his experiences as an 'academic at risk' as part of the Merton@Home weekend's series of Global Issues Today Fellows' talks on 26 June 2016.



Photograph: epa / Ali Mustafa

You are here in Oxford as one of the University's CARA academics, hosted by Merton. How did you get involved with CARA?

I applied to the CARA charity in January 2015 after a colleague of mine at the University of Aleppo pointed out the scheme to me: many of my colleagues from Aleppo are now placed in various universities throughout the UK thanks to CARA. After about five or six months of constant contact with them, I was approved by the University of Oxford in June of the same year. It was a surprise to be placed at Oxford as I didn't know where I might be going.

The placement at Oxford is to undertake postdoctoral research, so I am based at the Department of Plant Sciences, which provides me with a supervisor and all the necessary equipment and resources. Merton very kindly provides my food and accommodation in Oxford for free, which is essential, while CARA provides the crucial support and advice to make the journey to a safe country. This year I have also been helped by the Scholar Rescue Fund provided by the Institute of International Education (IIE), USA. The UK government has also helped me through the process of applying for and receiving a visa.

You talked at this year's Merton@Home weekend about the experience of moving from Aleppo – your home city – to Oxford. How do working and researching in Oxford differ from working and researching at your university in Syria?

They couldn't be any more different! Even before the civil war, Syria's universities were undeveloped and the Syrian higher education system was focused on accepting as many students as possible rather than on quality of education or research. In science in particular, Syrian universities, including the University of Aleppo, lacked basic laboratories, equipment and funding to allow a level of research beyond rudimentary sciences. I was only able to develop my own

research in molecular biology while undertaking my PhD in Germany between 2007 and 2012: on my return to Aleppo, I was unable to continue this research and, most frustratingly, unable to impart my knowledge of molecular biology to the next generation of students.

What has been the biggest adjustment you have had to make?

I have been lucky to flee from the violence and conflict in Aleppo. Coming to Oxford from a city in the depths of a civil war, the simplest things – electricity, heating, clean water or even any water at all – are lacking. Applying for CARA's support was itself a challenge: with no internet access in Aleppo, I had to contact CARA through my brother living in relatively-untouched Latakia (on the coast). I would send a CD with my application documents to him in a taxi and he would monitor my email account for emails from CARA.

What has been your biggest highlight of being in Oxford so far?

I can now not only do my work in safety, but with financial and practical help! Oxford is allowing me to expand my scientific career by performing postdoctoral research that I was unable to carry out in Aleppo. One day I hope that I will be able to return to my home country to contribute to rebuilding and improving Syrian higher education.

You must miss and worry about your family, friends and colleagues still in Syria. Do you have anything you'd like to say to them?

I feel very lucky that most of my family live in Latakia, which has escaped most of the violence so far. However, the situation changes every day, and Aleppo is now almost unrecognisable. Very simply, I wish for peace for all my countrymen and an end to the war so that we can attempt to rebuild our country and our lives.