Higher Education
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01440-0

Displaced academics' mobility and translocational positionalities: 'academic poverty', 'academic death', and 'academic re-existence'

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Accepted: 19 March 2025
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Abstract
There is abundant research on academic mobility, yet the displacement of academics remains neglected within mobility frameworks, despite being a significant form of scholarly movement. Existing research tends to homogenise displaced academics' experiences through deficit-focused narratives that emphasise loss and marginalisation. This paper expands academic mobility frameworks to account for displacement as a dynamic, non-linear process, offering a more comprehensive perspective beyond exilic narratives that may underemphasise the complex interplay of structural constraints and agency. Drawing on two rounds of in-depth interviews with 20 displaced Syrian academics across various host countries, and informed by *translocational positionality*, this study demonstrates that displaced academics' trajectories are shaped by shifting positionalities of both privilege and disadvantage as *displaced individuals* and as *academics.* To conceptualise these complexities, the paper introduces three key phases—*academic poverty*, *academic death*, and *academic re-existence*—to provide a nuanced understanding of their various positionalities as a heterogenous group in diverse host societies. Beyond physical mobility, the findings highlight *non-physical* dimensions of mobility, highlighting *intellectual mobility* and epistemic exclusion within dominant academic hierarchies. By amplifying the voices of displaced academics, this study calls for higher education institutions and policymakers to move beyond temporary support mechanisms and adopt structural reforms that recognise displacement as a legitimate form of academic mobility. A more ethical and inclusive academic environment should acknowledge both the vulnerabilities and contributions of displaced scholars, ensuring their meaningful integration into global knowledge production.

Keywords Higher education · Academic mobility · Displacement · Displaced scholars · Syrian academics · Translocational positionality

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Introduction

To compete in global knowledge economies, internationalising higher education (henceforth HE) has become a policy priority in different countries, and the mobility of academics has become fundamental to public discourse, for its wider implications for HE systems and institutions' reputations (Tremblay, 2005). Academic mobility is often framed as a symbol of scholarly excellence and a strategic tool for HE internationalisation (Kim, 2009; Teichler, 2015). However, when considering the broader landscape of academic movement, displacement emerges as a significant yet neglected form of academic mobility within mobility frameworks.

Drawing on the Syrian context, the country's HE sector has faced severe disruption due to the conflict that began in 2011, losing almost 30% of its academics to displacement and migration (Al-Fanar Media, 2018). This exodus has further strained an already fragile HE system, where efforts to mitigate the loss have involved employing under-qualified staff and postgraduate students to fill academic gaps (Akkad & Henderson, 2021). The displacement of Syrian academics represents a crucial case for examining how displacement functions as an alternative form of mobility, requiring its integration into existing mobility frameworks. Yet, research on displaced academics tends to frame them primarily through deficit-based narratives that focus on loss and marginalisation.

Although a number of studies have provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by displaced academics, many primarily emphasise professional deskilling, loss of social status, and risks to academic freedom (Gamboa & Anjel-van Dijk, 2022; Özgür, 2022; Tzoraki et al., 2021). These perspectives have been instrumental in documenting systemic barriers; however, they often neglect the shifting and context-dependent nature of displaced academics' experiences. In reality, displaced Syrian academics (henceforth DSAs) do not occupy fixed positions of exclusion but navigate varying degrees of privilege and marginalisation, depending on host-country policies, institutional structures, and professional networks. This paper aims to unpack the paradoxes of the mobility of scholars within the experiences of DSAs as both displaced persons and as academics.

Drawing on two rounds of in-depth interviews with 20 DSAs across diverse host countries, this study challenges simplistic representations of displaced academics by foregrounding their agency. It argues that incorporating the voices and experiences of displaced academics into discussions around academic mobility with a *de-homogenised image* is imperative for three reasons: (1) to recognise displacement as a legitimate form of mobility, (2) to illustrate how DSAs experience both disadvantage and privilege in complex ways, and (3) to move beyond reductive categories that homogenise their experiences. In doing so, the study responds to the research question: *How do displaced Syrian academics experience and perceive the impact of their displacement in their host countries?*

The paper begins with a literature review on the mobility of academics and displaced academics and then discusses *translocational positionality* (Anthias, 2008) as a theoretical framework. It then presents the methodology, findings, and discussion before concluding with recommendations for institutional and policy reforms that support the academic inclusion of displaced scholars.

Displacement of academics: a neglected form of academic mobility?

Academic mobility

The phenomenon of academic mobility has gained growing attention in HE research, with scholars exploring brain drain, brain gain, and talent migration, to understand the multi-directional flows of students, faculty, and researchers across borders (Solimano, 2008; Yang & Welch, 2010). It is often regarded as a key driver of career progression (Fernando & Cohen, 2016) and a mechanism for fostering international collaboration and knowledge production (Ackers, 2003; Morley et al., 2018).

While mobility is often framed as an individual rational choice driven by mainly economic and career-related incentives, the push–pull framework—long dominant in mobility research—tends to oversimplify decision-making processes (Altbach, 2004). It is increasingly acknowledged that mobility is shaped by a complex interplay of professional, personal, political, and affective factors, including family circumstances, intellectual commitments, and geopolitical conditions, challenging the assumption that movement is solely driven by career aspirations (Leemann, 2010; Shen et al., 2022). Recent perspectives view mobile academics as knowledge agents who actively negotiate institutional constraints and geopolitical realities, rather than passive recipients of mobility opportunities (Burford et al., 2021; Winkler & Kristensen, 2021). This paper builds on these perspectives, arguing that mobility—particularly for displaced academics—emerges from a dynamic interplay between agency and structure, where motivations are neither purely career-driven nor entirely constrained by external forces.

The idealised portrayal of academic mobility as a "positive force" and "unquestioned universal good" has been critiqued (Henderson, 2019, p. 681), for overlooking "hidden injuries" such as precarious contracts, visa insecurities, and racialised exclusions (Morley et al., 2018, p. 545). Academics moving from the global South to the global North frequently encounter discrimination and exclusion (ibid). Similarly, Burford et al. (2018) highlight how migrant academics in Thailand face precarious contracts, low salaries, and restricted career promotions. While these critiques provide a more nuanced view of mobility, they primarily address voluntary movement. Displacement, however, entails distinct structural constraints, including ruptures in academic trajectories and contested professional recognition.

Theorising displacement within HE requires moving beyond conventional mobility frameworks, which often assume continuous academic engagement and institutional access (Morley et al., 2018). Unlike voluntary academic mobility, typically shaped by career aspirations, displacement is often triggered by armed conflict, persecution, or threats to personal safety (Turton, 2003; UNHCR, 2022). While voluntary mobile academics retain agency in choosing host institutions and negotiating their career trajectories, displaced academics experience ruptured academic trajectories, legal precarity, and loss of institutional belonging. This distinction is particularly important because conventional accounts of academic mobility prioritise rational decision-making, career agency, and institutional integration, whereas displacement literature highlights structural barriers, forced adaptation, and precarity (Bakewell, 2008; Bloch et al., 2021).

Research in forced migration studies underscores that displacement does not follow a singular trajectory of forced or voluntary movement but rather exists along a spectrum of agency and constraint (Betts, 2009). While some DSAs flee due to direct threats, others engage in anticipatory mobility, pre-empting worsening conditions. Even in cases where

displaced scholars exercise agency, their choices remain restricted by geopolitical barriers, funding limitations, and qualification misrecognition (Akkad, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2020). This challenges the assumption that the mobility of academics leads to professional advancement.

The paradox of privilege and exclusion is particularly pronounced in the experiences of displaced academics. While mobility offers new career opportunities, it simultaneously imposes structural barriers—such as legal uncertainties, restricted employment rights, and epistemic exclusion from dominant academic hierarchies (O'Keeffe & Courtois, 2021). These experiences highlight the limitations of existing mobility frameworks, necessitating a reconceptualisation that integrates displacement as a legitimate form of academic movement.

Displaced academics and displaced Syrian academics

Research on displaced academics has provided important documentation of their vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to job precarity, lack of institutional recognition, and the challenges of reintegration into academic systems. These studies have offered valuable insights into the structural and systemic barriers displaced academics face. While the prevailing research has focused on exclusion and struggle, it has often emphasised the enduring challenges they encounter within their host countries and institutions. This study builds on these contributions by exploring a more nuanced perspective that considers both the constraints and the possibilities for agency, resilience, and professional reintegration.

Studies on displaced Venezuelan and Turkish scholars, for instance, reveal mixed experiences, as they balance professional disadvantage with emerging research opportunities in host HE systems (Arslan & Kılınç, 2021; Özgür, 2022). Özgür (2022) found that displaced Turkish academics in Germany often describe their relocation as professional decline, referring to their careers as falling down into precarity, while Ukrainian researchers in Polish institutions struggle with language barriers, limited opportunities, and emotional distress (Kiselyova & Ivashchenko, 2024). These studies illustrate the liminal position of displaced scholars, caught between professional survival and exclusion. Vatansever (2022) extends this argument by describing displaced academics as trapped "between *guest* and *exile* status" (p. 103), which prevents full institutional integration. This in-betweenness is reinforced by temporary funding, insecure contracts, and exclusion from decision-making, leaving displaced academics structurally marginalised even when granted institutional access. While these perspectives provide important insights into systemic inequalities, there remains a need to explore how displaced academics actively navigate structural constraints and create opportunities for reintegration.

DSAs face distinct challenges due to ongoing instability in Syria, the temporality of institutional support in host countries, and the shifting political landscape following the fall of the Assad regime. Recent changes in host countries' policies toward Syrian refugees have further exacerbated their uncertainty, as governments impose stricter residency conditions or revoke protections, leaving many in limbo regarding their legal and professional futures (Amnesty International, 2025). Research on DSAs in Turkey and Europe has highlighted issues of deskilling, bureaucratic barriers, and professional isolation (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Parkinson et al., 2020; Watenpaugh et al., 2014). While initiatives such as the Scholar Rescue Fund and Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) provide temporary assistance, they do not address long-term structural inequalities that limit DSAs' full reintegration into academia.

Despite the rich insights provided on experiences of marginalisation, a significant number of these accounts homogenise displaced academics' experiences, without fully capturing the dynamic and shifting nature of their positionalities. This paper moves beyond static narratives by examining DSAs' experiences through the lens of *translocational positionality*, highlighting how displacement, as a neglected form of academic mobility, produces fluid and contradictory positionalities shaped by intersecting structural and agentic forces.

Translocational positionality

The paper draws upon Floya Anthias' 'translocational positionality', a framework grounded in promoting social justice and challenging existing power structures (Anthias, 2008). Anthias's framework serves as an analytical lens aimed at illuminating the diverse and interconnected understandings of "experiential, representational and organisational" aspects of individuals' lives (Anthias, 1998, p. 505) in relation to varying (dis)locations, such as gender, ethnicity, and belonging. Translocational positionality highlights the importance of contextual, temporal, and interpretive factors as integral elements in the formation of individual positionalities, which are inherently fluid and subject to change (Anthias, 2002, 2008). This framework is particularly relevant to displaced academics, whose positionalities shift across different host countries due to varying institutional policies, immigration regulations, and disciplinary structures.

In Anthias' (2008) framework, translocational positionality captures the dynamic ways in which individuals are situated within diverse and evolving social relations and practices, offering a more flexible and nuanced approach to understanding individuals without imposing rigid categorisation upon them. It hinges on the intersection of two key elements: first, the agency of the individual, which refers to how individuals navigate, negotiate, and contest their positioning within social and institutional structures (positionality processes). These positioning processes include varied actions, strategies, and interactions within legal and institutional frameworks, where individuals seek to establish or redefine their social positions. These procedures may include legal practices, legislations, or institutional frameworks in a given context, which individuals must actively engage with, respond to, or challenge. Structure pertains to the hierarchical and institutional conditions that shape social positions (positionality outcome of social relations). Structure also encompasses wider social divisions of class, race, gender, and ethnicity, which influence how displaced academics are positioned within host institutions. Anthias (2008) emphasises that structures are not static but emerge through social relations, which shape various "structures of differentiation and identification and structures of exclusion and inclusion" (Anthias, 2008, p. 16). These structures define who is recognised, valued, or marginalised within academic spaces, illustrating how positionality is produced through both systemic constraints and the agency of individuals navigating these constraints. An individual's positionality, therefore, is an outcome of the dynamic interplay between agency and structure—where individuals must continuously negotiate institutional, legal, and disciplinary constraints while exercising their agency within these limits (Anthias, 2002, 2008).

The concept of *translocation* extends beyond mere spatial movement; it encapsulates dislocation and fragmentation within processes of social bordering and boundary construction (Anthias, 2008). Social locations are multifaceted and arise from "contextual, spatial, temporal and hierarchical relations around the 'intersections' of social divisions and identities of class, ethnicity and gender" (ibid, p. 9), amongst others. Against this backdrop,

translocational positionality offers a comprehensive framework for examining the shifting and fluid locations of displaced academics, showing that their mobility is neither entirely agentic nor wholly constrained but is shaped by an evolving relationship between individual strategies and structural conditions.

The study

This paper is based on a larger study on the experiences of DSAs and their potential contribution to HE and reconstruction efforts in conflict-affected Syria (Akkad, 2023). The study adopted a longitudinal interview-diary-interview design spanning six months. Participants represented diverse academic backgrounds and levels of seniority, including mid-career and early career scholars. A purposive and snowball sampling approach (Cohen et al., 2018) was used to recruit participants who had held academic positions in Syria before their displacement after 2011, ensuring that participants had relevant academic experiences both pre- and post-displacement. Snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through referrals.

The paper draws on data obtained from two rounds of interviews with 20 DSAs in various countries in Europe. The aim of the first interview ($N=20$) was to explore participants' perceived impact and navigation of displacement as both displaced individuals and academics, as well as their engagement in HE reconstruction efforts. The interview questions focused on the impact of displacement on their academic careers, professional experiences in host countries, and the enabling and constraining contextual factors shaping their trajectories. As part of the larger study, participants were also invited to keep a solicited diary for six months to document their engagement with HE reconstruction in Syria. However, as the diary entries focused on other topics, they were not analysed in this paper. The second interview ($N=20$) was conducted with the same participants six months following the first interview to explore any perceived impact of recent experiences in their host countries, in addition to other different experiences. The interview revolved around recent professional and personal experiences, the perceived impact on academic identity and wellbeing, and the factors influencing these experiences.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online via videoconferencing, ensuring accessibility across different host countries (Cooper, 2009). The interviews provided valuable insights about DSAs' "needs, wants, expectations, experiences, and understandings at both the conscious and unconscious levels" (Nunkoosing, 2005, p. 699) concerning their displacement experiences. A pilot study with two displaced academics in the UK was conducted to refine the interview guide. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Warwick, where the study was conducted, to ensure adherence to ethical research standards. All participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect anonymity, in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), informed by the concepts of *translocational positionality*. The analytical process involved multiple readings of transcripts to identify themes reflecting DSAs' shifting positionalities within structural constraints. Initial coding captured structural barriers (e.g. visa restrictions, qualification recognition) and agentic strategies (e.g. professional networking, adapting research focus). These were clustered into overarching themes, highlighting patterns of exclusion, resilience, and adaptation. Through iterative engagement with the data, three core concepts—*academic poverty*, *academic death*, and *academic re-existence*—emerged to conceptualise DSAs' experiences. These categories were refined to align with both *translocational positionality* and participants' narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of how DSAs

navigate systemic barriers and reclaim academic agency. This thematic structure directly informs the organisation of the findings to illustrate the participants' dynamic positionalities within the contexts of their host countries.

Findings

Displaced Syrian academics and translocational positionalities

The findings illustrate how DSAs' positionalities evolved across different host-country contexts, demonstrating that displacement entails not only physical mobility but also epistemic exclusion, professional erasure, and struggles for institutional recognition within dominant academic hierarchies. Yet, these positionalities were neither fixed nor uniformly negative; they shifted across time and space, at times revealing moments of relative privilege, access, or recognition. The analysis identified three recurring phases of experience both in physical and non-physical forms: academic poverty, academic death, and academic re-existence—each reflecting distinct positionalities shaped by structural exclusion and individual attempts to sustain academic identities.

Fading away in academia: academic poverty and academic death

Drawing on the participants' narratives, *academic poverty* emerged to describe *the accumulation of both epistemic and material deprivation—the loss of access to institutional resources, research funding, professional networks, and career opportunities necessary to sustain academic progress.* This deprivation is shaped by structural and systemic exclusions, limiting scholars' capacity for meaningful academic engagement and reinforcing uncertainty and insecurity within academia. Academic poverty also manifested in a non-physical mobility dimension as *intellectual displacement*, wherein DSAs remained *engaged in scholarly work yet were structurally excluded from institutional belonging*. Epistemic exclusion was evident in constrained environments where participants were unable to access research funding, publish in mainstream academic outlets, or participate in knowledge-production networks, despite their continued efforts to sustain their intellectual contributions.

Themes within *academic poverty* included resource deprivation, professional exclusion, and emotional exhaustion. For resource deprivation, the experiences of many DSAs in their host countries were shaped by systemic exclusion, significantly hindering their academic reintegration. Participants frequently reported struggles with securing funding, mentorship, and institutional resources—barriers that reflect broader patterns of marginalisation within academia (Akkad, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2020). Ali, a Research Fellow in the UK, remarked, "I started as though I had graduated or finished my PhD afresh!" (first interview). Rather than serving as pathways for knowledge integration, host institutions often imposed structural constraints that limited displaced scholars' capacity for sustained scholarly engagement. This underscores the broader issue of epistemic exclusion, where DSAs are unable to contribute to mainstream academic debates due to their marginalisation from key scholarly networks, and thus remain invisible in academic communities.

Professional exclusion emerged as a significant barrier for many DSAs, as their academic identity was frequently overshadowed by their displacement status. Participants described facing systemic challenges, including qualification recognition issues, language barriers, and heightened competition with local scholars, all of which further entrenched

their marginalisation within host institutions. Having already faced career disruptions, some participants took teaching-only positions, despite recognising that such roles limited their research output—an essential criterion for securing permanent posts and institutional recognition. This challenge was exacerbated by restrictive immigration policies and bureaucratic hurdles, which constrained their ability to engage in essential academic activities, including attending conferences and academic events. Aline, a Tutor in Germany, reflected: "I was good enough to teach, but not qualified enough for a permanent contract. The university told me my degree wasn't fully recognised, yet they had no issue hiring me to fill gaps in teaching" (first interview). This reflects a form of professional erasure, as DSAs are reduced to their physical displacement status rather than recognised as scholars, where such barriers reinforced *intellectual displacement* via patterns of professional disenfranchisement and academic invisibility in their host institutions.

Emotional exhaustion emerged as a profound consequence of professional exclusion, manifesting through homesickness, isolation, financial instability, and diminished self-confidence. Nearly half of the participants described the tension between academic ambition and the psychological burden of displacement, where regret, lost pride, and professional disenfranchisement intertwined. Kamel, a Postdoctoral Researcher in Germany, reflected: "Every rejection made me question if leaving Syria was a mistake. The isolation is not just academic; it consumes every part of your life" (second interview). His experience highlights how systemic exclusion not only obstructs professional reintegration but also deepens emotional distress, reinforcing a pervasive sense of marginalisation that extends beyond academia, affecting overall wellbeing and belonging. While some persisted despite these constraints, others experienced prolonged exclusion, leading to complete disengagement—a transition into academic death.

Prolonged experiences of academic poverty escalated into academic death for some participants. *Academic death* is conceptualised as *an extended and entrenched phase of academic poverty, resulting in the cessation of formal scholarly productivity and the erosion of professional identity*. However, rather than signifying complete intellectual inactivity, experiences of academic poverty and death often resulted in forms of non-physical mobility. Even when unable to access formal institutional roles, some DSAs remained intellectually engaged through informal or alternative spaces, such as transnational collaborations, digital teaching, or online knowledge-sharing initiatives. Yet, this intellectual mobility often went unrecognised by host institutions, thus reinforcing epistemic exclusion—a condition in which displaced scholars were intellectually active but structurally marginalised within dominant academic hierarchies.

Themes in the phase of *academic death* comprised the loss of professional identity, sustained precarity, and disengagement from academic networks. Some participants described the loss of professional identity as a critical theme, as prolonged resource deprivation and professional stagnation disconnected them from their roles as academics. Abdul, a Postdoctoral Researcher in the UK, reflected, "We've never been this mobile, and that has immensely impacted our productivity as academics" (first interview). His account highlights how hypermobility, coupled with restrictive visa conditions and short-term contracts, created sustained instability that made it increasingly difficult to sustain a coherent academic trajectory. This highlights the paradox of intellectual mobility, where scholars maintain academic engagement yet remain epistemically invisible within formal HE structures.

Sustained precarity was also a defining feature of academic death, as participants faced cycles of instability due to the unpredictability of academic job markets, restrictive visa conditions, and lack of institutional support. These experiences left many participants feeling trapped, unable to secure stable positions or long-term opportunities. This precarity

often led to disengagement from academic networks, as participants gradually withdrew from professional activities and connections. Adel in France commented: "After my contract ended, I lost my university email, access to journals, and funding […] It felt like my career had ended, not because I lacked expertise, but I no longer had a formal academic identity". As academics, this disconnection deepened their marginalisation within academic systems, while as displaced persons, it compounded their sense of alienation and exclusion.

Reclaiming academic identities: academic re-existence

While many DSAs experienced the detrimental impacts of academic poverty and academic death, some described experiences of *academic re-existence*, where they strategically sought to reclaim their professional identities. This phase stems from their aspirations to be recognised as academics in their own right, possessing a unique voice and potential, rather than being seen as merely displaced individuals (Akkad, 2022). *This phase was not merely a return to academia but also a reconfiguration of academic engagement through resilience, adaptation, and alternative scholarly participation.* Beyond physical reintegration, *this phase also involves intellectual and epistemic mobility to navigate exclusionary academic structures*, where DSAs strategically engage in new scholarly spaces, such as creating alternative pathways of knowledge production, digital scholarship, and interdisciplinary collaborations to sustain their academic visibility (Ackers, 2003; Richardson, 2009).

Themes within *academic re-existence* included leveraging new resources and opportunities, employing adaptive research approaches, and forging collaborative networks. While some DSAs considered their early experiences in their host countries to be detrimental to their personal and academic identities, they gradually reassessed their perspectives and attitudes towards the impact of their displacement. Some turned to alternative forms of knowledge production—including digital platforms and informal mentorship: this transition was not simply a process of regaining lost status but a negotiation of professional legitimacy and scholarly impact within new academic environments.

Leveraging new resources and opportunities emerged as an important theme in DSAs' narratives in rebuilding their academic profiles. For some participants, displacement was perceived as 'a recovery phase' and a 'channel for development' and for realising academic aspirations (see Cantwell, 2011), following the conflict experiences in Syria. Access to advanced research facilities, interdisciplinary projects, and mentorship programmes enabled participants to regain momentum in their careers. For instance, Rand, a Lecturer in Germany, noted, "I felt as a privileged woman when I came [to Germany] that I had an opportunity and support here because of the lack of women's contribution in this field" (first interview). DSAs utilised structural support to strengthen their academic profiles and embrace new scholarly roles, which underscores the importance of institutional recognition and inclusion in fostering recovery and growth.

Beyond material support, many DSAs engaged in epistemic re-mobilisation and knowledge repositioning to leverage intellectual opportunities. Some strategically adapted their research agendas to align with global academic discourses while maintaining their scholarly autonomy. Dima, a Lecturer in Italy, explained, "I had to rethink my research approach. My previous work was deeply contextualised within Syria, but here, I needed to align with international debates without losing my voice" (second interview). This adaptation was not merely an intellectual shift but an agentic response to epistemic exclusion, where research that was once regionally relevant was now sidelined in dominant global

academic discourses. This epistemic shift represents a key non-physical mobility pathway, allowing DSAs to reposition themselves within scholarly communities, despite lacking immediate institutional recognition. In doing so, participants not only engaged in rebuilding their academic identities but also enhanced their long-term career prospects.

Formal institutional collaborations played a critical role in DSAs' experiences of academic re-existence. Many participants built professional networks through institutional mentorship programmes, research collaborations, and interdisciplinary partnerships, which enabled them to regain academic legitimacy. These collaborations provided access to funding, research opportunities, and career advancement pathways, which also demonstrates the role of institutional inclusion in reinforcing professional recovery. Beyond formal institutional collaborations, DSAs actively participated in digital and alternative scholarly spaces to sustain their academic engagement. Fouad, a Postdoctoral Researcher in Sweden, co-founded an online research collective with fellow displaced scholars that enabled disadvantaged scholars to collaborate on publications and mentor early-career researchers from conflict-affected regions. "We realised that if institutions would not recognise our contributions, we had to create our own spaces to be heard", he reflected in the second interview. This engagement underscores the dialectical relationship between exclusion and innovation—while excluded from formal academic spaces, DSAs created their own knowledge-sharing platforms.

Finally, emotional reconstruction and academic confidence were pivotal to sustaining academic re-existence. While agency was evident in DSAs' ability to reclaim their academic identities, the emotional burden of rejection and uncertainty reflected ongoing structural constraints. Aline recounted, "There were moments when I felt like giving up, but securing small gains—mentoring students and collaborating—helped me regain my sense of purpose" (second interview). Her experience highlights the dialectic between resilience and structural exclusion, as academic belonging remained a contested and negotiated process.

The picture becomes more complex when examining mobility experiences across different HE systems and legal frameworks regulating academics with a displaced background. The first and second rounds of interviews revealed that *longer residence in host countries did not necessarily lead to greater professional or personal stability*, as many DSAs remained in conditions of academic poverty and, in some cases, academic death. Unlike voluntary mobile academics, whose transitions are often motivated by career advancement, DSAs experience academic re-existence and non-physical mobility as a negotiated process—one in which they attempt to reclaim academic belonging while navigating exclusionary structures that persist to restrict their formal reintegration. These findings suggest that academic re-existence is not simply about regaining employment in academia but about reclaiming an intellectual identity through alternative scholarly participation. Yet, this form of non-physical mobility remains fragile, as DSAs continue to contend with epistemic hierarchies that regulate whose knowledge is recognised, valued, and institutionalised.

Two portraits of displaced Syrian academics' translocational positionalities

Drawing on distinctive personal and professional lived experiences of two displaced Syrian academics, the study revealed narratives that are vital to illustrate how each DSA is "different from other members of her/his own culture" (Hagemaster, 1992, p. 1127). These unique lived experiences are shaped by their positions and the complexity of the "wider historical,

social, environmental, and political context" (Adriansen, 2012, p. 41) in their host countries. The selection of two participants' contrasting narratives was based on the changing and complex relationship between their positions and surrounding structures. Both cases of DSAs can be seen as experiencing shifting and conflicting positionalities that influence their personal and professional capabilities in their host countries and institutions.

Malik: seizing opportunities amidst adversity

Malik, a Syrian academic displaced to Turkey in 2014, embodies the complexity of translocational positionality by navigating both privilege and disadvantage in his journey between academic poverty and re-existence. With a PhD from Ukraine and years of academic experience, Malik's arrival in Turkey marked a sharp transition to academic marginalisation and epistemic exclusion. He encountered language barriers and restrictive university policies: "There was a university [in my city], but they use only Turkish in teaching, and that was impossible for me to teach in Turkish as I could not speak it" (first interview). This position, at the intersection of linguistic and institutional exclusion, exemplifies academic poverty, where Malik's qualifications held little value in the Turkish academic landscape, thus leaving him on the brink of academic death as he reflected. His expertise and scholarly contributions were not recognised due to structural constraints rather than academic merit, which reflects the contested legitimacy of displaced academics in dominant academic hierarchies.

Despite these challenges, Malik's positionality evolved by both setbacks and opportunities. His acquisition of Turkish citizenship, while a symbol of inclusion and privilege, ironically complicated his professional prospects. He could not renew his work contract because of having obtained Turkish citizenship. He had to apply and compete with other fresh graduates. This contradiction highlights the fluidity of privilege and disadvantage in translocational positionality, where what is traditionally seen as a privilege (citizenship) became a new barrier in the academic job market. This also reflects a broader pattern of professional erasure, where displaced scholars, despite their experience and credentials, are often required to begin anew, competing on unequal terms with local scholars who have institutional continuity.

Malik's transition to academic re-existence took shape when he secured a Visiting Fellow position, although this role further underscored his precarious academic standing. The fellowship came with limitations as "according to the policies of the Academic Registration Office, I cannot be registered as an academic and do publications with this Visiting Fellow position" (second interview). His inability to officially publish his work became another form of marginalisation that hindered his professional development. Nevertheless, Malik demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by finding ways to seize new opportunities. "I have improved my English a lot after getting here [Turkey] as I am working with international professors […] I am collaborating with them, too", he reflected in the second interview. His enhanced language skills allowed him to connect and collaborate with the international academic community to create new professional pathways. Moreover, Malik's creation of a digital library for both Turkish and Syrian students is a powerful example of how his difficult experiences fostered innovation. He created an online digital library and offered it to be used at the university for Turkish and Syrian students. His initiative demonstrates how his unique positionality, despite its challenges, enabled him to contribute meaningfully to his host academic community. While this initiative reflects

his agency, it also underscores the broader structural inequalities in knowledge production, where displaced academics must build alternative avenues for impact due to restrictions on their formal academic participation.

Malik's portrait vividly illustrates the dynamic nature of academic re-existence. His journey as a displaced academic shows not only losses and struggles but also growth and innovation. His narrative encapsulates the contradictions and complexities of translocational positionality, where privilege and disadvantage intersect in unexpected ways, shaping his trajectory from the brink of academic death to renewed scholarly contributions and academic re-existence.

Sara: harnessing skills while navigating (new) responsibilities

Sara, a displaced Syrian academic who relocated to the UK in 2016, offers a poignant illustration of how translocational positionality shapes the experiences of displaced scholars navigating new academic and personal landscapes. Her journey from Syria to the UK is marked by both opportunities and constraints, as privilege and disadvantage coexist in her new experience in the UK.

In Syria, Sara's academic potential was stifled by the conflict and severe academic poverty, which pushed her towards the brink of academic death. "There was no possibility to conduct research anymore" (first interview), she recalled, reflecting on the severe limitations she faced within Syria's collapsing academic infrastructure. However, upon arriving in the UK, Sara found herself in a radically different academic environment. "I got lots of knowledge about different disciplines […] Now I am using techniques that we only used to hear about in Syria" (second interview). Access to advanced research facilities and new academic knowledge represented a privileged positionality, opening doors to academic growth that had been closed to her in Syria.

Yet, Sara's transition to academic re-existence was not without significant personal challenges. As a mother, she found her new academic opportunities constrained by family responsibilities. "I cannot move or decide on getting involved in other projects because of the family responsibilities [and] they [university employers] wouldn't care about my children" (first interview). In Syria, she had relied on extended family for childcare support, but in the UK, the absence of such networks placed an additional burden on her. This intersection of care and academia illustrates Sara's translocational positionality, simultaneously accessing opportunities for academic growth while experiencing new personal limitations. It demonstrates how structural inequalities in academic systems do not account for gendered care responsibilities, reinforcing patterns of professional erasure where scholars—particularly displaced women—are systematically disadvantaged in competing for academic opportunities.

Despite these challenges, Sara's overall academic positionality in the UK implied a significant improvement: "My conditions have become much better in all aspects, […] whether academically, personally, or regarding communication, presenting, and networking" (second interview). Her reflections indicate that her new environment facilitated not just academic re-existence but professional flourishing, as she gained new academic skills and forged valuable connections within the academic community.

Sara's portrait encapsulates the nuances of being a displaced academic, where academic re-existence involves not just professional renewal but also personal negotiations of new responsibilities and limitations. Her experience highlights how displaced scholars, particularly women, must navigate both epistemic exclusion and professional erasure, as

institutional structures do not accommodate their intersectional challenges. While her journey has been marked by constraints, Sara's narrative also underscores her agency in harnessing new skills and navigating the academic landscape of her host country.

The portraits of both Malik and Sara highlight the complexity of translocational positionality in the lives of displaced academics. Their journeys between academic poverty, academic death, and academic re-existence are shaped by the intersection of privilege and disadvantage, where structural barriers such as language, citizenship, and family responsibilities, or gender roles, converge to create unique patterns of constraint and opportunity. Both scholars also illustrate the non-physical dimensions of mobility, where epistemic exclusion, professional erasure, and contested legitimacy within dominant academic hierarchies constrain their participation and recognition.

Discussion

This study examined how displacement shapes academics' trajectories, by demonstrating that their experiences are not fixed within binaries of exclusion or integration but instead shift in response to institutional policies, structural constraints, and personal strategies for adaptation. DSAs' shifting positionalities within Anthias's framework (2008) were reflected in three intersecting, non-linear phases of experience: academic poverty, academic death, and academic re-existence. DSAs' transition between these phases can also be understood as *a form of mobility that extends beyond geographic relocation, encompassing intellectual displacement, professional instability, and shifting institutional recognition*. Rather than progressing in a linear trajectory, these states often coexist and fluctuate depending on structural conditions and individual strategies for adaptation.

The experiences of some DSAs in this study reveal a unique positionality of incessant precarity, where uncertainty and instability persist over time. This precarity can be seen as *timeless*, as its resolution remains unpredictable; *boundaryless*, as it extends across multiple locations, institutions, and professional spheres; and *dynamic*, as it continuously shifts in response to structural constraints, legal uncertainties, and institutional frameworks. This highlights how displaced academics remain in a state of ongoing negotiation rather than moving toward a definitive resolution of their displacement-induced challenges.

Displacement often led to academic poverty, characterised by material and epistemic deprivation, professional exclusion, and emotional exhaustion, limiting scholars' capacity for sustained academic engagement. While mobility is often portrayed as a pathway to career progression (Fernando & Cohen, 2016; Teichler, 2015), the findings highlight how the mobility of displaced academics can also reinforce precarity and marginalisation, where DSAs face systemic challenges in accessing institutional resources, securing research opportunities, and obtaining formal recognition of their qualifications (Akkad, 2022; Arslan & Kılınç, 2021; Parkinson et al., 2020). Ali's description of beginning his career "as though I had graduated or finished my PhD afresh!" encapsulates the ruptures induced by displacement, where previous academic credentials were often undervalued in host institutions. While some DSAs physically relocated in search of better academic opportunities, others experienced a form of *immobility within their host institutions—remaining in motion yet unable to progress*. This state of professional stagnation reflects a form of non-physical mobility, where scholars are forced into *intellectual displacement*, continuously shifting research focus or seeking informal scholarly engagement while

remaining structurally excluded. Their careers became suspended in uncertainty, mirroring a state of epistemic exclusion that limited their ability to fully engage as scholars.

For some participants, prolonged experiences of academic poverty culminated in academic death, where sustained precarity led to the cessation of scholarly engagement and the erosion of professional identity. This phase was marked by feelings of institutional abandonment, intellectual isolation, and disengagement from academic networks, reinforcing the structural exclusions that keep displaced academics on the periphery of HE systems. Abdul's case illustrates how hypermobility, often framed as an advantage in academic careers (Fernando & Cohen, 2016), paradoxically disrupted his academic productivity, as short-term contracts and visa uncertainties prevented him from securing long-term stability. Beyond physical movement, these experiences suggest that academic poverty, induced by displacement, extends beyond material deprivation to include epistemic and professional exclusion. Displaced academics may continue writing or networking without institutional affiliation, creating a semblance of academic engagement while remaining structurally marginalised. This paradox—of being intellectually active yet institutionally invisible—underscores a distinct dimension of academic death, where professional potential diminishes despite sustained efforts to remain engaged.

However, the study also identifies cases of academic re-existence, where DSAs actively engaged in rebuilding their professional identities despite ongoing precarity. While exclusionary institutional structures often reinforced marginalisation, some DSAs leveraged adaptive strategies, such as interdisciplinary collaborations, engagement with academic NGOs, and digital knowledge-sharing initiatives, to reclaim their scholarly roles. Academic re-existence is not solely about regaining employment in academia but about *reclaiming an intellectual identity through alternative scholarly participation*. DSAs engage in alternative forms of mobility—such as virtual collaboration, digital scholarship, and transnational networking—that transcend institutional limitations. These forms of movement enable them to reposition themselves within global academic discourse, even when physically and structurally constrained. Yet, academic re-existence does not signify a full resolution of precarity; rather, it reflects an ongoing negotiation of privilege and disadvantage—of access, recognition, and stability.

The duality of privilege and disadvantage was particularly pronounced in how DSAs experienced displacement as both a constraint and an opportunity. While some participants were able to secure research fellowships, for instance, these opportunities were often conditional on temporary immigration status, preventing long-term academic integration. Malik's case exemplifies this tension: while obtaining Turkish citizenship was assumed to be an advantage, it paradoxically led to employment restrictions that hindered his career stability. Malik's inability to publish under his institutional affiliation also underscores the limitations of non-physical mobility when formal academic structures fail to recognise displaced scholars' contributions. The findings illustrate that displaced academics' experiences are not simply dictated by their initial mode of displacement (forced vs voluntary) but are continuously shaped by legal status, host-country policies, and institutional structures, which create fluid transitions between advantage and disadvantage.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the displacement of academics by situating it within broader academic mobility frameworks and extending existing discussions to account for the complex and shifting positionalities of displaced academics.

By applying translocational positionality as an analytical lens, the paper demonstrates how displaced academics' experiences are neither wholly defined by exclusion nor entirely shaped by resilience but rather negotiated through dynamic processes of marginalisation and recovery, as shaped by their dual status as both displaced individuals and academics.

The study introduces *academic poverty*, *academic death*, and *academic re-existence* as conceptual tools for understanding the heterogeneous realities of displaced academics. These concepts highlight how displacement is not a linear transition from struggle to stability but a fluid negotiation of constraints and opportunities across institutional and geopolitical contexts. Academic poverty reflects the deprivation of resources and intellectual displacement, where scholars remain active but structurally marginalised. Academic death signifies professional erasure, where sustained exclusion erodes scholarly identities. Academic re-existence, however, is not merely a return to academia but also a reconfiguration of scholarly engagement, often through non-physical mobility, including digital scholarship, informal networks, and alternative spaces of knowledge production. Importantly, these concepts are not exclusive to displaced academics but offer insights into the broader conditions of other 'mobile' academics and how academic precarity is experienced across HE systems globally.

The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on academic mobility by illustrating how displacement creates a paradoxical form of mobility—one that entails both movement and restriction, complicating the assumption that academic mobility inherently leads to professional advancement. While some displaced academics rebuild their careers, access to institutional support remains uneven, shaped by host-country policies and structural inequalities. By foregrounding non-physical mobility as a critical dimension of displacement, this study expands the academic mobility literature, demonstrating how displaced academics sustain intellectual engagement despite systemic exclusions.

A key implication is the need for HE institutions to move beyond short-term fellowships toward long-term inclusion strategies. Policies should formally recognise non-physical mobility as a legitimate academic contribution, ensuring displaced scholars are not only engaged in knowledge production but also institutionally legitimised. This includes recognising qualifications, expanding hiring opportunities, and promoting virtual research networks to mitigate professional isolation. Future research should examine how institutional policies shape displaced academics' long-term academic trajectories and whether academic re-existence leads to lasting reintegration or remains precarious over time. Comparative studies could further illuminate how different geopolitical and institutional contexts affect displaced academics' professional futures.

Recognising displacement as a legitimate form of academic mobility is essential for fostering a more inclusive and just HE system. Institutions should actively integrate displaced scholars as contributors to global knowledge production, rather than passive recipients of aid. Indeed, displacement does not erase academics—it redefines them. Whether through physical movement or non-physical mobility, displaced scholars persist, innovate, and reshape global knowledge networks, demonstrating that academia is not just a profession, but a purpose.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank the editors and reviewers for their valuable feedback on the paper. The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to all the displaced Syrian academics who generously shared their experiences and insights, making this research possible. Their resilience and contributions to knowledge production continue to inspire this work. The author appreciates Prof Emily Henderson's early feedback on an initial draft of this paper.

Funding This work was funded by a doctoral Scholarship from the University of Warwick.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical considerations. Anonymised excerpts may be available upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

Declarations

Ethical approval Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Warwick where the study was conducted.

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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