

SAFE HAVENS AND KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS IN CANADA

Protecting Academic Freedom and Sustaining Global Knowledge in Times of Global Conflict

Policy Brief – April 2026



Introduction

Executive Summary

Armed conflict, authoritarianism, and democratic backsliding are driving the forced displacement of scholars and students at an unprecedented scale. This displacement constitutes not only a humanitarian crisis, but also a global knowledge crisis. When scholars are uprooted, higher education and research systems in countries of origin collapse, global knowledge networks fracture, and expertise essential to governance, development, and innovation is lost.

Canada has begun to lay the groundwork to defend global academic freedom through initiatives and partnerships with programs such as Scholars at Risk Network (SAR Network), The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), as well as other innovative university-led hosting programs. However, current responses are fragmented, limited in scale, and uneven across institutions and provinces. Immigration bottlenecks, precarious academic appointments, and insufficient gender-responsive and youth-focused supports continue to undermine effective integration. Given Canada's highly educated population, robust post-secondary system, and commitment to refugee resettlement aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), governments and universities should act now to strengthen and scale programs that support at-risk scholars.

This policy brief draws on research evidence from three International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded initiatives: (1) Placement, Preservation and Perseverance Project: Afghan At-Risk Scholars, Activists and Students (PPP, 2022-2024), (2) the Academic Advancement and Career Alignment course (AACA, 2024 and 2025), and (3) The Safe Havens and Knowledge Networks in Canada Conference (May 22-23, 2025). This report includes observations from consultations with displaced scholars and students, as well as findings from researchers, professors, and administrators from Canadian and international universities, and evidence from founders and directors of civil society organizations. Not only does this policy brief outline the systemic challenges facing at-risk scholars and students in Canada, it proposes coordinated, scalable policy actions for federal and provincial governments, universities, and national networks.

Research Overview

The policy brief draws on findings from the following IDRC-funded initiatives:

PROJECT	COURSE	CONFERENCE
<p>Placement, Preservation and Perseverance: Afghan At-Risk Scholars, Activists and Students (PPP)</p> <p>(2022-2024)</p> <p>in collaboration with Carleton University/ University of British Columbia</p>	<p>Academic Advancement and Career Alignment (AACCA)</p> <p>(2024 and 2025)</p> <p>in collaboration with Carleton University</p>	<p>Safe Havens and Knowledge Networks in Canada</p> <p>(May 22-23, 2025)</p> <p>in collaboration with Carleton University</p>

Why This Matters to Canada

Low-volume, high-impact investment with long-term national returns

Amplifying Canada's role as an international leader in **academic freedom and human rights**

Strengthening Canada's **research, innovation, and labour market**

Preserving **diaspora-led and transnational knowledge networks** for the future

Key Policy Questions

To move toward a national strategy, the following policy questions are addressed:

How can Canada establish a national framework to protect at-risk scholars that aligns humanitarian goals with the preservation of global knowledge systems?

What policy and institutional mechanisms can enable displaced scholars to transition into **sustainable academic and professional careers in Canada?**

How can hosting, integration, and career development programs be designed to be **gender-responsive and inclusive of displaced women and youth?**

Analysis of Research Findings: Barriers to Professional and Social Integration

1. Immigration and Legal Barriers

At the federal level, Canadian immigration policy has critical barriers and gaps that prevent effective hosting and employment of at-risk and displaced scholars and students. The rapid, whole-of-government response that enabled the resettlement of 40,000 Syrian refugees in 2015[1], the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot[2], and the Group of Five refugee sponsorship program[3] highlighted Canada's innovative thinking in addressing chronic global refugee crises. These programs have now been suspended or paused.

Successful international models can serve as an inspiration for Canada. The IDRC-funded Safe Havens and Knowledge Networks in Canada conference (May 22-23, 2025), at Carleton University[4], brought together representatives from successful national Scholars at Risk programs, including the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) organization in the United Kingdom (UK), the Programme national d'accueil en urgence des scientifiques et des artistes en exil (PAUSE Program) in France, and the Philip Schwartz Initiative (PSI) hosted by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany. National programs supported by all political parties offer an effective model for Canada.

A national program would:

- Establish a dedicated, expedited immigration stream for at-risk scholars;
- Offer alternatives for biometrics and language testing in asylum contexts;
- Allow for mobility and access to domestic tuition, financial aid, and services; and
- Mitigate risks of ongoing transnational repression after arrival.

2. Institutional and Provincial-Level Barriers

At the provincial level, university restrictions and structural challenges also impede the successful integration and ongoing employment of at-risk scholars and the mobilization of expertise. In 2012, the launch of the SAR Canada Section represented the culmination of several years of partnership between individual Canadian universities and the SAR Network. SAR Canada currently has 32 university members in seven provinces. However, each province has its own separate provincial legislation that regulates the universities within its jurisdiction. The result is a lack of national coordination among post-secondary institutions and, furthermore, a lack of incentives for host institutions and employers to recognize and support at-risk and displaced scholars and students. Not only do academic appointments remain precarious, but funding for Scholars at Risk programs is severely limited or absent[5] leaving scholars vulnerable to underemployment and career stagnation.

A national program would:

- Establish national hosting standards and incentives for universities to host scholars;
- Seek to include displacement and migration status in EDI frameworks;
- Offer settlement supports, reduce language and credential recognition barriers; and
- Generate disaggregated data to inform evidence-based policy.

3. Labour Market Integration Barriers

The academic professional market is extremely limited and highly competitive in Canada. For at-risk and displaced scholars arriving in Canada, rapid integration into the Canadian academic landscape is challenging. Scholars need to independently navigate the formal and informal structures of a new academic environment, develop skills to adapt to the Canadian labour market, and try to integrate into professional and social networks. Networking to make professional connections with academics and peers is important for scholars' access to resources, work spaces, and opportunities that will help them gain the much-needed 'Canadian experience' required for career advancement. The strategies for rebuilding professional networks in Canada and acquiring relevant Canadian work experience, combined with ongoing safety and security risks, deter scholars from applying for work opportunities, especially after their sponsored placement periods.

A national program would:

- Work with university faculty members to align scholars' and host institutions' expertise;
- Develop discipline-specific career mentorship programs for network rebuilding;
- Provide career transition training for navigating Canadian employment landscape; and
- Organize and manage research about post-placement employment outcomes.



Carleton University's Academic Alignment and Career Advancement Course

The Academic Alignment and Career Advancement (AACA) course was an excellent successful example of university-based training designed specifically to assist at-risk and displaced scholars in Canada with navigating the Canadian academic and academic-adjacent landscape. After a successful pilot course in 2024, the 2025 course drew upon learnings from an advisory committee of five at-risk scholars (all of whom completed the pilot course) to design 12 expert-led live virtual sessions tailored to four disciplinary streams (Business, Engineering, Science, and Arts & Social Science). The course leveraged institutional capacity to provide sessions about job search and application processes in Canada (e.g., writing academic CVs and resumes, cover letters, and teaching philosophy statements), publishing within and beyond academia, joining research teams and writing research grants, research ethics, library and research management, and networking. Each session had time for live questions and discussion. This was a highly efficient way to provide a breadth of practical information, as well as peer-to-peer learning and support.

4. Gender-Specific Barriers

While at-risk and displaced academics frequently encounter structural barriers such as interrupted research trajectories, credential recognition challenges, and precarious employment conditions, these obstacles are not experienced uniformly. Gender plays a significant role in shaping how scholars navigate displacement, influencing access to professional networks, mobility, caregiving responsibilities, and exposure to discrimination or harassment. Women scholars face compounded risks: cultural restrictions and barriers, particularly in relation to technology and the digital divide. They also carry family caregiving expectations and guilt dynamics around leaving and fragmenting families across borders. Women also face gatekeeping challenges and social responsibilities in the new country. They frequently become family translators and breadwinners while study and working, which creates additional stress and allows less time for research and academic work. Men face their own challenges related to gender norms, such as stress about retaining ‘breadwinner and provider’ roles, loss of professional status and income, and adjusting to new roles in a culturally different society. Recognizing the gender-specific dynamics of displacement is also essential for developing an inclusive national program for at-risk and displaced scholars in Canada.

A national program would:

- Co-design gender-responsive program models with scholars to support integration;
- Educate Faculties about immediate gender barriers to equitable participation, professional development, and long-term retention of displaced scholars within academic communities for women scholars;
- Leverage social work support within the community to help scholars navigate conflicting cultural, religious, and gender expectations; and
- Establish a gender-diverse data collection mandate to address research gap about psycho-social impacts of displacement on gender-diverse at-risk scholars.

5. Mental Health Barriers

Displaced scholars frequently experience isolation, insecurity, depression, and anxiety, often without access to culturally responsive mental health supports. Experiences from initiatives like the PPP show that displaced scholars find it difficult to transition to a new setting due to a range of professional, economic and personal issues. These may all be amplified in cases of family resettlement, especially for women (although men are impacted, as well), who struggle to restore their careers while managing personal affairs and family. Scholars face mental stress, health issues, family reunification challenges and survivor guilt which cause delays and stagnation of their academic and research work. As scholars negotiate experiences of “mental displacement” and grapple with their conflicting identities (i.e., “past self” at home and “present self” in Canada), additional challenges of past trauma, isolation, depression, and anxiety make it difficult to focus on employment demands.

A national program would:

- Develop and entrench formalized “Scholar Care” guidelines for SAR committees at universities;
- Create safe spaces for scholar conversations about mental health and displacement;
- Provide focused resources about displacement to on-campus mental health care; and
- Establish partnerships with community mental health services for scholars’ families.

6. Barriers for Displaced Students and Youth

A moment should also be taken to address displaced students and youth. While displaced scholars encompass established academics seeking to re-establish their careers within the Canadian academic landscape, displaced students also face significant challenges navigating entry into the Canadian higher education system. Furthermore, while significant attention is often directed toward senior scholars at risk, a growing population of displaced youth arrive in Canada (sometimes as minors, either alone or with parents and family) to pursue post-secondary education as part of rebuilding their lives.

Many displaced students arrive having experienced conflict, persecution, or forced migration in their countries of origin. As a result, their educational trajectories are often marked by disruption, uncertainty, and trauma. These students frequently face complex transitions as they adapt to new academic expectations, institutional cultures, and social environments. Students who participated in the PPP expressed concerns about the ways that governments and universities currently lack a system that meets the needs of displaced students. Displaced students struggle with financial barriers, such as international tuition fees, poor mental health (isolation, trauma, stigma, and disconnection), gendered barriers related to juggling family responsibilities and academic pressures, and delays in progress compared to peers because of a digital divide in their home country.

A national program would:

- Co-design SAR programs with at-risk students to install student-specific supports;
- Work with universities and stakeholders to create scholarships for displaced students;
- Create safe spaces for peer support and conversation about mental health;
- Provide targeted resources to professors and students about equitable learning, integration, and success; and
- Leverage campus services to provide equitable learning experiences.

Key Policy Recommendations

Sector	Policy Recommendation
Federal Government	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Establish a national Scholars at Risk (SAR) program supported by stable, long-term funding and modeled on effective international frameworks2. Implement expedited immigration pathways, featuring fast-track visa processing, flexible documentation requirements, and clear temporary-to-permanent residence options3. SAR initiatives should be framed as strategic national investments: low-volume, high-impact pathways that enhance Canada's labour market, advance UNSDG's and national innovation goals, and bolster global knowledge security
Provincial Governments	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Integrate Scholars-at-Risk (SAR) into advanced education planning and skilled workforce strategies to better align displaced scholars' expertise with regional research priorities and labour market needs2. Dedicate funding to universities as incentives for hosting at-risk and displaced scholars and students3. Provide bridge funding for at-risk scholars, streamlined credential recognition, and short-term employment pathways to accelerate scholars' professional integration, reduce administrative barriers, and enable them to contribute quickly and meaningfully to cutting-edge research in their field
Universities and Research Institutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Standardize onboarding and appointments across post-secondary to ensure displaced scholars receive consistent access to research facilities, administrative support, and clear role expectations2. Leverage existing resources within the university and integrate gender-responsive supports and mental health supports that address trauma, caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, and gender-specific barriers, offering culturally informed counselling

and family-focused integration services

3. Support research access and mentorship through structured guidance and meaningful scholarly roles that help scholars rebuild their academic trajectories
4. Provide training for navigating and building career pathways beyond the hosting term at the university by providing focused training courses, discipline-specific mentorship supports, and resources to help them make connections to both academic and non-academic opportunities

National Networks

1. Develop shared crisis-response protocols to coordinate emergency placements and ensure consistent data reporting with disaggregated outcomes that strengthen transparency and impact assessment
2. Engage the tri-agency to fund collaborative, transnational research initiatives and diaspora-led projects that maintain connections to international scholarly communities
3. Advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) frameworks by explicitly recognizing displacement and migration status within EDI policies, thereby formalizing support for at-risk and displaced scholars across institutions

Displaced Students and Youth

1. Encourage universities to apply domestic tuition rates
2. Create focused scholarships for displaced students and youth
2. Provide resources to campus mental health services to support culturally-responsive, displacement-informed care
3. Co-design programs with displaced students as partners, not beneficiaries, leveraging campus services to provide equitable learning experiences

References

[1] <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/about-refugee-system/welcome-syrian-refugees/looking-future.html>

[2] <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/economic-mobility-pathways-pilot.html>

[3] <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/sponsor-refugee/private-sponsorship-program/groups-five.html>

[4] The Safe Havens and Knowledge Networks in Canada conference was held May 22-23, 2025, at Carleton University. The international event convened university professors, government representatives, non-governmental organizations, human rights defenders, students, funders, and civil society to identify system-level gaps and opportunities.

[5] Over the past five years, Canada hosted 25 Scholar Rescue Fund fellows at 16 universities, representing 10 countries. Carleton University exemplifies a successful Scholars at Risk (SAR) model, hosting 20 at-risk scholars since 2013 while supporting employment transitions and community engagement. Nationally, SAR placements are hard to quantify, but recent data show 12 placements in 2024 and 23 in 2023. Currently, 11 scholars hold active placements, with many alumni remaining in Canada; six more await visas. An alumni survey found 62% are employed, and 82% of those work at least part-time in academia.

[6] Placement, Preservation and Perseverance (PPP) Project is a research initiative which aims to provide support to displaced Afghan scholars, civil society actors, activists, and journalists who have sought refuge in Canada. We are a group of academic scholars and activists committed to academic freedom and solidarity. Placement, Preservation and Perseverance (PPP) is a joint collaboration between Carleton University and the University of British Columbia. We are generously funded by the IDRC (International Development Research Centre), Canada along with contributions from CU and UBC.

<https://carleton.ca/afghanistanppp/>

Contact Information

For Further Inquiries

Visit the Safe Havens and Knowledge Networks in Canada website:

<https://cusjc.ca/scholars-at-risk/>