

'No hope for science in Russia': the academics trying to flee to the west

Monday 4 April 2022, by [FAZACKERLEY Anna](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2022).

Russian scientists are turning to partners abroad to help them escape, but face an uncertain future even if successful

Prof John Duggan*, a climate scientist at a Russell Group university, had a Zoom call a few weeks ago with two Russian research partners shortly after their country invaded [Ukraine](#). Duggan, who has worked with the academics for a while, suddenly found them "unusually quiet and hesitant". He sensed that "they were worried someone was looking over their shoulder".

In [Russia](#), expressing opposition to the invasion is risky. But in subsequent calls Duggan says his friends have become bolder. Now they have given up hope for their work at home. They feel there is "no future for science in Russia" and are seeking positions abroad so they can flee.

Given that [criticising the war](#) can now lead to 15 years in prison in Russia, Duggan describes all communications with the scientists he is trying to help as deliberately "ambiguous". But he says: "They feel shame at what is being done in their name in Ukraine."

UK academics say this is becoming a familiar story. Russian scientists are turning to partners abroad to help them escape, but academics in the UK say even the most talented may struggle to find positions at short notice in British universities.

Our president who ... made the most difficult ... but necessary decision in his life. -
Russian university chiefs' statement echoing Putin's propaganda on the 'denazification' of Ukraine

Last Sunday, the science minister, George Freeman, announced that the UK would follow other European countries in [cutting the bulk of its research ties](#) with Russia and switching off funding for any research with links to the state and its "institutional collaborators".

The Russian government last week prohibited its scientists from taking part in international conferences or publishing research in international journals. Russian scientists say there is some appetite to ignore this, but there are reports that they are being blocked from publishing abroad anyway because some western academics are refusing to review research papers with Russian names on.

Duggan's university, which the Guardian is not naming in order to avoid risk to the Russian academics, is making sanctuary for Ukrainian scholars and students its top priority, along with supporting staff and students already affected by the war. The university is also exploring whether it could offer positions to any Russians. Duggan says: "The university is keen to be as supportive as possible. It will work within government guidelines, but recognises that many individual Russian academics and researchers have publicly criticised this invasion, often at great personal risk."

Science is considered a global endeavour with researchers partnering up with colleagues all over the world. Now many in Russia feel their work, shut off from international collaborations, will wither.

Dr Alexander Nozik, a physicist at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, told the Guardian: "I believe and most of my colleagues believe that it just isn't possible to do isolated science. In physics the science journal system in Russia is mostly dead."

Nozik says "most younger academics, including me" are talking to contacts in [Europe](#) and formulating a "backup plan". He adds: "A lot of world-class scientists I know here can't work on their research because they are so depressed. They can't understand how we can live with all this."

Nozik says he intends to ignore the government statement banning publishing in international journals and many colleagues will follow suit. But he adds that researchers there are "complaining a lot that academics [in the west] are blocking [journal] papers by refusing to review them if they have a Russian collaborator".

Prof Erica Brewer*, an environmental scientist at a northern research university in the UK, fears for the safety of research partners in Russia who are speaking out against the war. "I have received requests from two very talented Russian colleagues asking if I know of opportunities to work abroad," she says. "A colleague and I have put out feelers for them but it is currently not possible to find a place for them in the UK or Europe."

Dr James Ryan, a senior lecturer in modern Russian history at [Cardiff University](#), says: "I've been in contact with academic friends in Russia. Some of them have already fled, and have no intention of returning any time soon. That's the situation with many more."

However, he says, while some Russian academics may be able to use their reputations and academic contacts to secure short term research funding at European universities, finding longer-term jobs in the fiercely competitive academic job market will be much harder.

His own work is affected. Before the invasion Ryan relied on using libraries and archives in Russia for his research, but now he has no idea when he will be able to go back there.

Thousands of academics in Russia have signed [open letters](#) condemning the war. Last Friday, Russia's ministry of justice declared the popular Russian science newspaper [Troitsky Variant](#) "a foreign agent" following its publication of a letter by scientists and science journalists opposing the invasion that was signed by about 8,000 people. The paper's website is now blocked in Russia.

The majority of Russian universities are run by the state and last month the Russian rectors' union, representing nearly 700 university chancellors and presidents, horrified British universities by issuing a [statement](#) echoing Vladimir Putin's propaganda on the "denazification" of Ukraine and supporting "our president who ... made the most difficult, hard-won but necessary decision in his life".

Ryan says that after this, "it would be ethically problematic to seek a formal invitation from a Russian institution [to do research there]".

He firmly supports the British government's decision to cut formal ties with Russian higher education institutions, but intends to maintain informal personal connections with colleagues in Russia. Last week, as an "act of solidarity", he attended an online conference with mostly Russian historians who he says "were certainly not supportive of the Russian war".

He adds: "I would be horrified if academics are refusing to review papers written or co-written by Russians. This is racism."

Terry Callaghan, a professor of Arctic ecology at Sheffield University, says: "We have very strong collaborations with Russian scientists and the invasion is a huge blow to our work."

Callaghan has helped establish 89 [environmental research stations](#) in the Arctic, 21 of which are in Russia, but says "lots of our research is now frozen because of the invasion". "I'm absolutely sure many scientists will leave Russia. Putin has divided the nation, but scientists tend to speak English and they also read the internet so they understand what is really happening in Ukraine."

Callaghan paused his professorship at the National Research Tomsk State University in Siberia after the Russian rector's statement. He says he has halted all formal commitments with Russia but will not abandon personal connections with scientists that he has been fostering for 30 years.

However, he says this is more difficult to do in other places where he conducts research. "In Finland we are not allowed even to email a Russian, and where I am now [in Arctic Norway] we can't have a Russian on a Zoom call."

Individual academics in Russia are still welcome to attend the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies' annual conference in Cambridge next weekend, albeit not representing their institutions.

Dr Ben Phillips, a historian of modern Russian at Exeter University and a member of the society's executive committee, says: "We discussed whether we should exclude Russian participants but decided against it."

He says that instead the conference, which will feature a keynote address from a Ukrainian academic, will have a "strict code of conduct" and panel chairs will ask anyone who expresses support for the invasion of Ukraine to leave. But he adds: "Anyone harassing Russian academics on account of their nationality will be treated the same way."

** Some names have been changed to avoid identifying academics who are trying to leave Russia.*

Anna Fazackerley

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/02/no-hope-science-russia-academics-trying-flee-to-west>