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## Enhancing higher education teaching and learning in northern Syria: Academic development needs of teaching staff at free Aleppo and Sham universities



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Higher education  
Academic development  
Teaching and learning  
Conflict  
Syria

### ABSTRACT

Free Aleppo University (FAU) and Sham University are higher education institutions established in 2015 in the non-Assad regime-controlled areas of Northern Syria. Despite ongoing conflict, the displacement of academic staff, damage to infrastructure and severe resource constraints, these universities continue to provide access to higher education to learners in the region, including thousands of internally displaced persons. 'Modernisation and capacity building for academics in research, teaching and curriculum development' was identified as a shared priority for both institutions at a round table in February 2020. This study, conducted by representatives from each university together with Syrian and UK-based academics collaborating on the Council for At Risk Academics (Cara) Syria Programme, responds to this priority by exploring the professional development needs and priorities of academic staff at Free Aleppo University (FAU) and Sham University. Semi-structured interviews with teaching staff at each institution (n=20) were analysed to elicit insight into the teaching experiences and development needs of teaching academics. Findings revealed academic development priorities that are consistent with areas of emphasis in the field of academic development internationally, but also highlighted the need for specialist professional development provision to support staff in responding to the unique challenges of the resource-poor and precarious Northern Syrian HE context.

### 1. Introduction

Syria has been ravaged by war and humanitarian crisis for over a decade. Beginning with the violent suppression of demonstrations by Bashar al-Assad's regime in March 2011, the conflict quickly developed into an international proxy war with multiple belligerents and led to the displacement of over half of the population (IDMC, 2022). The war has affected all areas of life and society in Syria, including higher education. In addition to the destruction of physical spaces and infrastructure, universities have seen their populations suffer disproportionately from persecution (Abdullateef et al., 2020; Shaban, 2020; Watenpaugh et al., 2014). Numerous studies have highlighted the severe resource constraints, political polarisation and human rights violations experienced by academic communities across the country since 2011 (Al Oglia, 2019; Dillabough et al., 2019; Fricke et al., 2020; Shaban, 2020). However, the

impact on HE has been particularly severe in the non-regime-controlled regions of Northern Syria, due to several factors including sustained aerial bombardment (Fricke et al., 2020), armed takeover of institutions by revolutionary groups (Zedani, 2018), a climate of suspicion surrounding political identity (Fricke et al., 2020; Shaban, 2020), receiving no funding from the Assad government<sup>1</sup>, high demand due to internal displacement into the region, lack of accreditation, and (as a consequence) perceived lack of legitimacy by learners and staff (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016; Shaban, 2020). Lack of recognition by the regime also compounds Northern Syrian academic communities' isolation from the global higher education community. For example, UNESCO is unable to

<sup>1</sup> The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) has paid \$30,000 to FAU to cover unpaid student fees from previous years, and now pays FAU monthly instalments.

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provide support to these institutions as it is mandated to work through member states [Millican \(2020\)](#). Lack of accreditation also hinders students' progression opportunities and employment prospects because qualifications awarded by these universities are not recognised internationally. Despite these challenges, however, institutions and academic communities operating in Northern Syria have shown remarkable resilience and are committed to raising the quality of teaching and learning for young Syrian learners [Shaban \(2020\)](#).

This study focuses on two universities currently operating in northern Syria: Free Aleppo University (hereafter FAU) and Sham University (hereafter Sham). FAU was founded in 2015 by academics who had fled from universities under the control of the Assad regime, and its name asserts its claim as the liberated successor to the University of Aleppo [Shaban \(2020\)](#). Earlier branches in Daraa, Homs, Ghoutta, Idlib and West Aleppo were captured by the Assad regime and later Salvation government in 2018 and 2019, but newer campuses have opened in Azaz and Mare in northern Aleppo [Millican \(2020\)](#). FAU has 14 faculties and 4 technical institutes, and offers programmes in IT, Medicine, Electronics, Dentistry, Law, Economics, Education, Arts and Humanities and Islamic Studies [Millican \(2020\)](#). It has a faculty of over 100 and a student body of 7,545. Sham was also established in 2015. It has faculties of Education, Sharia and Law, Economics and Business Management, Engineering, and Political Science. It has 1200 students and 56 teaching staff. There is significant overlap in the teaching staff at these two universities, and some faculty members of each also teach in universities inside Turkey. The death and displacement of many academics in Syria has necessitated the recruitment of newly graduated students at both institutions to deliver the bulk of tuition to subsequent cohorts. These lecturers lack not only higher specialist knowledge, but also classroom experience and pedagogical understanding. Under the current precarious circumstances, where time and resources have been channelled into educational delivery, there have been few opportunities to deliver training or mentoring related to teaching and learning to these staff. However, both institutions wish to improve teaching quality and build staff capacity as part of wider efforts to meet international standards.

This study sits within a wider collaborative project undertaken by researchers at FAU and Sham in partnership with UK-based researchers and facilitated by the Council for At Risk Academics (Cara). This partnership model is intended to enable Syrian-led agenda setting for higher education, foster collaboration and mutual support among Syrian researchers working in non-regime-controlled areas, and strengthen international networks [Millican \(2020\)](#). The project seeks to address challenges associated with sustaining higher education in northern Syria, and responds to priorities identified by faculty and leadership of both universities at roundtables held in June 2019 and February 2020:

- 1 The introduction of civilian personnel training in conflict reduction approaches
- 2 A civic mission adopted by universities with standards of transparency, academic freedom and cultural pluralism
- 3 **Modernisation and capacity building for academics in research, teaching and curriculum development**
- 4 Recognition of the role of academics in supporting and informing those responding to the current crisis and in any future reconstruction process
- 5 Stabilisation of the current context and protection of institutions, their students and faculty members. ([Millican, 2020](#), p.41)

The present study engaged primarily with the third priority. It sought to gain insight into the prior experience and development needs of teaching faculty at FAU and Sham universities, and the academic development capacity of the institutions, in order to inform effective, contextually-relevant and resource-efficient strategies to build staff capacity. The following section discusses the phenomenon of staff development in higher education – commonly termed academic development – considering its emergence and subsequent proliferation globally and interrogating its underlying assumptions and structures of power and in-

fluence, before considering its applicability to the Northern Syrian context.

### 1.1. Academic development: a critique of standardised approaches

The professional development of academic staff 'to [help] colleges and universities function effectively as teaching and learning communities' ([Felten et al., 2007](#)) is commonly referred to as *academic development*, though the terms *educational development* and *faculty development* are also often used interchangeably. While the focus of academic development is typically on teaching and learning, in some contexts it also comprises researcher development (see [Liebowitz, 2014](#), [Sutherland, 2018](#)). Academic development programmes are a cornerstone of higher education in many global contexts, though examples from Anglophone and/or global North countries such as the USA, UK, Australia and Sweden dominate the research literature ([Parkinson, McDonald, & Quinlan, 2020](#)). In such contexts, initial programmes are often delivered within institutions to probationary staff ([Land, 2001](#), [Sugrue, 2017](#)) who receive a formal qualification on completion, while ongoing *ad hoc* provision is commonly delivered to staff of all career stages as a form of continuing professional development (CPD). In the UK in particular, academic development has experienced widespread standardisation at sector level through the application of a 'UK Professional Standards Framework' (UKPSF) ([Advance HE, 2022](#)). The UKPSF now underpins the academic development strategies of nearly all higher education institutions in the UK, in what has been referred to as 'perhaps the most developed attempt to formalise and systematise approaches to teacher development' globally ([Shaw, 2018](#), p.145). However, professional standards for teaching in higher education are an increasingly a core feature of academic development worldwide ([Sugrue et al., 2017](#)). This trend reflects both the general hegemony of European-American higher education norms and values, wherein higher education sectors and institutions globally align their practices with those that dominate international rankings ([Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015](#)), and also the active, expansionist forays into the international higher education marketplace by organisations such as the UK's AdvanceHE (formerly the Higher Education Academy), who now accredit institutions or individual academics against the UKPSF in over ninety countries worldwide ([Advance HE, 2022](#)).

Although some studies have questioned the effectiveness of formal academic development in improving teaching (e.g., [Hibbert & Semler, 2016](#); [Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010](#)), surprisingly little attention has been paid to the implications of this global proliferation of standards formulated in a 'global Northern'/'Western' 'centre'. While the dimensions of the UKPSF ('core knowledge', 'areas of activity', and 'professional values') may *prima facie* seem universal, the specific areas of focus listed under each dimension of the UKPSF were formulated following consultation with UK-based staff and institutions ([AdvanceHE, 2021](#)). As such, they reflect the norms and concerns of that particular higher education context and may not be suited to the realities of other higher education traditions or sectors. Worse, they may tacitly perpetuate legacies of imperialism or geopolitical dominance (see e.g. [Blair, 2014](#) for a discussion of the need for locally relevant academic development). More consideration concerning the extent to which dominant and supposedly universal standards and approaches to academic development are actually appropriate to contexts such as Northern Syria, where resources are severely limited and where adverse conditions relating to ongoing conflict present unique challenges and priorities.

A key objective of this study was to resist the assumption of universality, and to formulate an academic development strategy based on an inductive, bottom-up investigation of teachers' professional realities and perceived needs, rather than a deductive review of international 'best practice'.

## 2. Material and methods

The study sought to elicit insight into the prior experiences, current academic realities and perceived development needs of teaching staff at FAU and Sham through semi-structured interviews ( $n = 20$ ). Our research was guided by the following research questions:

- *What are the barriers and facilitators to effective teaching and learning at universities in non-regime areas in northern Syria?*
- *What is the extent of teachers' prior academic development and/or direct classroom experience at universities in non-regime areas in northern Syria?*
- *What are the perceived competencies and development needs of teachers in non-regime areas in northern Syria?*

### 2.1. Sampling

Participants were chosen on the basis that they were currently working as academic teaching staff at either FAU or Sham. We sought as far as possible to achieve a representative sample in relation to seniority, years of teaching experience and gender at each institution. An initial message was sent via email to all staff at each university seeking volunteers to be interviewed. This was followed by snowball sampling through the networks of the researchers (who are also faculty members at FAU and Sham). Twenty respondents (10 from each institution<sup>2</sup>) consented to take part in the study. Fourteen were male and six were female.

#### 2.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to elicit staff's perceptions of their professional development needs, competencies and self-efficacy regarding teaching and learning, their experiences of teaching at either FAU or Sham, along with descriptive detail concerning their prior or current training in teaching for higher education. Interview schedules were piloted with a subset of participants ( $n=6$ , equal gender and institutional proportions) to check that they yielded pertinent data, and to test the full process for undertaking online interviews (from seeking and obtaining consent to transcribing and uploading data onto Secure Data Centre).

#### 2.1.2. Data collection

Following piloting, 20 semi-structured interviews were undertaken remotely using Zoom, WhatsApp or Skype by two researchers (SA, AN). As teaching at both institutions is predominantly gender-segregated, male staff were interviewed by a male researcher, and vice versa. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed promptly by the interviewers.

#### 2.1.3. Data analysis

Interview data were first coded thematically by the same two researchers who had conducted the interviews, following Thomas's (2006) guidelines for inductive analysis. Inductive approaches involve 'detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made [...] by an evaluator or researcher' (Thomas, 2006, p.238). Data are read and re-read thoroughly, and then ascribed to thematic categories (codes) that emerge iteratively (Thomas, 2006). The researchers then identify patterns within and across thematic categories and write them up in the form of a summary narrative, usually incorporating indicative direct quotes.

To enhance reliability, an initial subset of data was coded by [SA and AN] independently, before comparing findings and discussing with the other members of the research team. When it was determined that the researchers were coding consistently, they proceeded with coding the full data set, conferring throughout with each other, and presenting interim findings to the research team.

<sup>2</sup> Based on primary affiliation. Several participants in fact taught in both institutions

## 3. Findings

Six main categories emerged from the analysis and are discussed below.

### 3.1. Direct teaching experience valued over formal training

Fourteen of the 20 interviewed participants had worked in higher education in Syria before fleeing due to their opposition to the government, while six (R2, R6, R9, R11, R14, R17) had started working at universities in the (non-regime) north of Syria with no prior experience. Four participants had since gained additional experience through working abroad, three in Turkish universities (R1, R3, R4) and one in Saudi Arabia (R5). Years of teaching experience varied from two years to twenty years, with an average of 11 years. Most of those interviewed had worked in their current position for about three years.

When asked about formal qualifications for teaching, it was found that only two participants had completed courses related to teaching practice (R6, R9), while seven said they had not received any form of training in teaching (R7, R8, R16, R17, R18, R19, R20). Only one participant (R1) had had a teaching qualification, at school level:

'At [regime university] I was working at the laboratory supervising students' experiments. When I defected, I moved to west of Aleppo and joined a school as a teacher, then joined another school when I fled to Turkey, where I have gained training on teaching students' (R1)

However, there was a widespread belief that "in Syria we do not have such qualifications" (R4) for university teaching. Rather, gaining a PhD degree in one's discipline was considered the optimum qualification for academic staff at Syrian universities, and it was assumed that teaching ability is developed through on-the-job experience rather than formal training. R4, R5 and R7 had been appointed by a university directly after their graduation from a bachelor's degree and were later granted a scholarship to undertake graduate and/or postgraduate research, either in Syrian or overseas institutions, during which they taught. Most of those with higher degrees had completed several years of teaching practice as an assistant lecturer prior to and/or during their doctoral research programmes and considered this experience to be their training in teaching. In addition to direct experience working in universities, some participants spoke of having gained relevant practical experience working for national or international, private or governmental organisations. For example, R2 discussed having accrued experience working in the laboratories of medical companies, while R3 felt their supervisory experience as a professional engineer was relevant:

'Before joining the academic staff I had supervised many construction projects as a civil engineer in Syria and in Saudi Arabia. Currently, I am teaching my students theoretical lessons, supporting them by practical ideas which I gained from [working on these] real life projects' (R3)

The majority of those interviewed expressed confidence in their teaching ability and considered themselves to be adept at education processes. Participants who had more limited experience, however, were less confident in their teaching abilities:

'Unfortunately, I don't trust [my ability]. And I apologise for saying that of course, because of the difficulties the university is experiencing' (R17)

As discussed earlier, systematic programmes for teaching enhancement through training and development, commonly referred to as *academic development*, have become a mainstay of higher education institutions globally and are central to raising and maintaining standards. The findings presented under the above theme, however, highlight the lack of a culture of continued professional development or formal training in

teaching in Syrian universities. Participants appeared to perceive teaching quality as an individual matter, developed through an individual teacher's on-the-job experience, and there was little evidence of institutional support or intervention, either pre-conflict or at FAU or Sham. On the other hand, these findings revealed high levels of self-efficacy and valuable experiential knowledge among more experienced teaching staff. This experiential expertise could be harnessed as an institutional asset by FAU and Sham to support less experienced staff through, for example, a mentoring scheme, or a teaching and learning forum for sharing of best practice. This is particularly pressing, as recent graduates are being recruited as teaching staff to meet increased demand due to internal displacement into the region, and, as is discussed below, can feel unsupported.

### 3.2. Diverse training and development needs

When asked about their development needs, only one participant highlighted specific needs relating to classroom teaching or student engagement:

'In my opinion, there should be 2 or 3-day courses for teachers, to teach us how to communicate ideas, motivate students and attract them to the lectures.' (R3)

Some participants desired training in online technologies, which is discussed separately below. More common, however, was a desire for training in areas relevant to their disciplinary field (e.g. 'legal studies' (R15)) or specific areas of knowledge (e.g. 'the internet of things', 'electric cars' (R7)). For some, this stemmed from anxieties concerning their own limited subject knowledge; staff shortages had meant that many were teaching courses outside of their specialist area, but pressures of workload did not allow them time to increase their knowledge of the subjects they were teaching:

'I cannot develop myself, especially in the research field, because I have to focus on more than one subject.' (R11).

Others working in science subjects were concerned about deskilling, and emphasised the need for physical resources and project funding that would allow staff and students alike to develop:

'We need to invest in the university's infrastructure, especially to establish laboratories and support practical application lessons.' (R7)

'[the university should] offer the possibility of research and projects and training courses in several fields to develop the teacher and students [...] My wish is to support the postgraduate studies and to support scientific research. At the moment there is no support at all. (R5)

R2, R3, R7, R13 and R15 all emphasised that they needed courses to support them in English language. That almost no participants expressed a need or desire for training related to teaching practice again highlights the belief that teaching is developed through practice, and the lack of a culture of formal institutional support for teaching enhancement. However, although not directly linked to teaching, participants' anxieties concerning disciplinary knowledge point to the importance of scholarship as an aspect of professional development. Though the concepts of research and scholarship overlap, scholarship can be distinguished by its function of 'updat[ing] or maintain[ing] the knowledge of an individual or add[ing] to their skills and experience' (University of Strathclyde, n.d.), while research is more concerned with the production and dissemination of new knowledge. Research by Kreber (2002) and others has highlighted that enabling staff to maintain the currency of their knowledge and skills through scholarship is essential to high standards of teaching and learning. Encouragingly, a collegial conception of the university as a learning community of staff and students is also evident in the data presented above, as is a desire to design and plan innovative

learning experiences. The enhancement of learning environments was also desired, but was hindered by limitations in infrastructure.

### 3.3. Virtual learning

Like most universities across the world, Sham and FAU moved much of their delivery online after Spring 2020. However, due to difficulties encountered, both institutions returned to largely face-to-face delivery for the 2020-2021 academic year. Most members of staff had no prior experience of online delivery, and thus had to learn from scratch. Participants differed in their assessments of how successful they had been in this regard:

'Coronavirus, which although it was an international issue, has forced us to adapt to distance-learning. It was personally challenging too' (R7).

'We developed ourselves in several aspects when we encountered the Corona virus crisis, and we dealt with it easily' (R5)

Some reported that they were still struggling to provide their students with a smooth delivery of content over the internet. While some issues, such as lack of familiarity with software and having to learn new teaching techniques, may be common to other contexts, others were seen as peculiar to Northern Syria:

'Simply it is not normal and cannot be found in different regions of the world and is associated only with the Syrian tragedy. Being Syrians, we know and experience those problems. It is simply the scarcity of the electricity and the internet accessibility. We know it was not only the war but, more accurately it became worse during it' (R7)

In spite of these difficulties, some participants had succeeded in developing their skills independently by being proactive and familiarising themselves with modern techniques for online teaching. Most participants however felt that they needed specialist training courses in online teaching, not only in order to teach through the Coronavirus pandemic but because they anticipated that the shift towards online delivery 'may last [longer]' and that higher education would eventually 'become dominated by online teaching' (R1).

Participants' accounts and reflections regarding online teaching indicate a desire for training in teaching and learning using appropriate learning technologies. Yet the uniquely challenging conditions with regard to connectivity and electricity highlight the need for context-specific approaches, rather than those designed for resource-rich settings. Clearly, there is a need for teaching staff in Northern Syria to develop and use technologies and pedagogical approaches that enable access to learning under the constraints that characterise daily life. The individuals' proactiveness to develop their skills in this area, and the capacity and self-efficacy developed through doing so, highlights not only the need, but also the *potential* for institutional knowledge share.

### 3.4. Research and academic identity

Despite our questions focusing explicitly on teaching as opposed to research or language skills, and our efforts throughout to focus the discussions on teacher development, many participants appeared not to conceive of teaching and research as discrete areas of academic practice, but rather as interdependent. As noted above, some saw research projects and infrastructure as a means to support (students' and their own) learning, while elsewhere research and research writing skills were repeatedly stressed as the most important areas for staff development. Some believed research activity to be an intrinsic point of identity for academics and academic institutions:

'The most important characteristic of an academic teacher is his persistence in scientific research, following scientific developments

accurately, and publishing research accompanying his work as a teacher at the university where he works.' (R2)

'In my opinion, education is not enough in universities. The most important part is the scientific research that is lacking in our Syrian universities in general and the University of Al-Sham in particular. That is, we do not have scientific research. In addition to teaching, I encourage scientific research.' (R3)

'As you know, in the end, the basis for [an academic's] work is scientific research.' (R7)

Several participants voiced their frustration at not being research active or not publishing research outputs. One (R18) noted that at present their university did not even have a library, which limited their ability to read and keep their knowledge up to date. While most accepted that there were significant financial constraints, some voiced their displeasure at their university's inability to provide scientific research facilities, especially financial support, and one participant spoke of staff having to invest in their own development:

'A teacher needs to develop himself continuously through conferences, seminars, and research. Which we exactly cannot do. If we want to do so, it must be through our own efforts.' (R13)

The findings above highlight the importance of scholarship in maintaining academics' knowledge and, consequently, educational standards. However, they also starkly illustrate that being research active can be central to academic's sense of identity. Academic identity has become a fundamental concern of academic development (see e.g. Barrow and Xu, 2021.; Billot & King, 2015), seen as crucial to academics' self-efficacy, motivation and performance. The term 'identity work' has been used to describe reflective practice undertaken by academic staff on academic development programmes, intended to stimulate conscious engagement with professional values. At the same time, however, conflicting academic identity has been listed as a factor impeding teaching quality (Brownell & Tanner, 2012; Carbone et al., 2019), with research often afforded more prestige and esteem than teaching. A careful balance must therefore be struck between supporting staff to self-actualise according to their perceived academic identity, whilst simultaneously raising the esteem of teaching within the two universities. Promoting, supporting and rewarding scholarship and researched teaching may offer a middle ground in this regard. Alternatively, building research capacity might help to foster collegiality among staff. Leibowitz (2014) notes that research is rarely considered within the ambit of academic development, but that in some contexts a holistic interpretation of academic development comprising research and teaching can be appropriate. It should be emphasised however that building research capacity, particularly in lab disciplines, entails significant investment which may not be possible given severe resource constraints.

### 3.5. (Lack of) Access to networks, training and resources

Beyond financial constraints, participants noted that development opportunities for staff were limited by their inability to travel and by their universities' lack of networks or partnerships. A stark contrast emerged between those who had access to Turkey and those unable to leave Syria. Most of the former had received English language tuition from Cara and attended several academic development workshops on a range of topics, and some had gained teaching experience in Turkish universities. On the other hand, those who were blocked inside Syria complained about the lack of support they could access, particularly in English language and modern teaching technologies. Some participants called for international collaboration and exchanges:

'Neither university has been able to secure effective communication with other universities abroad, through conferences, delegates, or otherwise, through exchanging experiences with prestigious univer-

sities such as Turkish universities, which are close to our university.' (R20)

'We need educational workshops and training courses with other universities, and to allow academics to visit us from abroad and exchange scientific experiences.' (R7)

These data align with earlier research concerning academics in the region (Shaban, 2020) and illustrate the isolation felt by academics working at FAU and Sham. However, as the Cara example illustrates, international partnerships and collaboration have facilitated professional development for staff without increasing the resource burden on the universities. Although in recent years, participation in international activities was inhibited by restrictions on mobility, Covid-19 pandemic has expedited the growth of online academic networking, facilitating remote participation in conferences and other activities. As such, notwithstanding the devastating impact of the pandemic, it has revealed cost-effective and inclusive opportunities for continuous professional development. Indeed, this study – a collaboration between FAU, Sham and international partners – has itself taken place under these conditions. One participant called for further close collaboration between universities in the region:

'The occurrence of training workshops, exchange of cadres, visits and cooperative conferences with neighbouring universities will improve the scientific capabilities of the teaching staff' (R6)

## 4. Conclusion

As noted earlier in this paper, this study was undertaken in response to the objective of *modernisation and capacity building for academics in research, teaching and curriculum development*, which had been identified by staff and leadership of FAU and Sham universities following extensive roundtable discussions. Specifically, this study sought to understand the academic development needs of teaching staff, to inform strategies to build teach capacity and thus enhance teaching quality. As discussed, while academic development is widespread globally, it is dominated by models that (notwithstanding their oft-assumed universality) emerged from resource-rich, global North contexts, and which therefore may not be suited to the realities of other contexts. Higher education should first and foremost meet the requirements of the context in which it occurs (Skelton, 2004), and as such any interventions to enhance teaching quality must begin with an assessment of local needs rather than the uncritical application of generalist models.

That said, at a general level, the needs and issues revealed in these findings do not differ significantly from those that characterise common academic development agendas. Moreover, participants' understandings of the competencies and conditions necessary for effective teaching are broadly in alignment with the themes that dominate the literature, and which are enshrined in the dimensions of the UKPSF (AdvanceHE, 2022). This suggests such a framework might provide a useful tool to monitor, maintain and raise standards at an overarching level. However, the *specific* conditions of the Northern Syrian HE context, such as resource paucity, intermittent connectivity and electricity, inexperienced teaching staff teaching outside of their disciplines and lack of formal accreditation pose unique challenges that are not directly accounted for in mainstream academic development agendas or standards frameworks. This highlights that context is critical to how general, top-level principles translate into practice Devlin & Sanarawickrema's (2010). assertion that effective teaching is 'subject to continuous and multiple changes imposed by forces from within and outside universities' (p.111) is particularly pertinent to the precarious and dynamic Northern Syrian context, in which institutions have continuously reckoned with the severe external disruptions, as well as internal tensions Devlin & Sanarawickrema's (2010). suggestion of an 'ongoing agenda [...] to investigate and articulate the meaning of effective teaching in a changed and changing context' (p.111) might be applied at FAU and

Sham in the form of dedicated teaching and learning committees that could pursue this agenda systematically, engaging directly with teaching staff and listening to their needs. While financial resources are severely constrained, our findings revealed a significant resource in the form of experienced staff, which could be effectively leveraged through (for example) a mentorship scheme. Furthermore, many academics' international networking has been expedited during the pandemic, enabling access to resources and support beyond the institutions. With a grounded and systematic approach, there is much scope for an effective staff development strategy that leverages staff expertise and networks to improve teaching and learning at the institutions.

### Conflict of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to declare

### Appendix A: Interview schedule

#### Interview schedule

#### Process

- 1 **Arrange interview time** (in advance)
- 2 **Meet participants online** (Zoom, Whatsapp, Skype)
- 3 **Send link for information sheet and consent form**
- 4 **Record interview** (using the method we tested)
- 5 **Save recording and export to Mp3 / save as file on encrypted USB stick**
- 6 **Transcribe** (45 minutes = 2.5 to 3 hours)
- 7 **Upload transcript and audio to encrypted OneDrive**
- 8 **Delete audio from devices**

#### Questions (initial – follow up as required):

#### Work experience

- How long have you been in teaching in higher education?
- Did you work at regime universities before the crisis?
- How long have you been teaching in your present role?
- Would you tell us about your teaching responsibilities at the university?
- What are the main challenges/difficulties you face in your teaching?
- Do you feel confident teaching?
- Do you think you are good teacher?
- Have you had any training as a teacher?
- How do you think you could improve your teaching?
- Does your university have anything in place in terms of peer observation of teaching or student feedback on teaching?

#### Skills and competencies

- How do you go about planning your teaching activities?
- What skills and competencies do you think that are important for teaching staff to have at your university? (Prompts here – curriculum design, learning activities/teaching methods, assessment, feedback, learning environment, use of technology, student support, evaluation of teaching, quality assurance, diversity of learners, student engagement)
- What skills are you strongest in?
- What skills are you weakest in?
- Do you receive any support to develop your skills?
- How you could the university support you to develop your skills?
- Have you tried to improve your skills by yourself? How?
- What particular areas of your job would you like to receive training or professional development support in?

### Teaching qualification or recognition

*Do you have a teaching qualification? (Note: a PhD or other discipline-specific qualification is not a teaching qualification)*

- Have you tried to apply for teaching recognition or a qualification in the past?
- If yes, what was your motivation?
- If not, why not?
- Would you be interested in applying for teaching recognition?
- Do you keep up to date on teaching practice? If so, what sort of activities would this involve? (Prompts may be reading journal articles, conference attendance/presenting, journal club/other community of practice for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning)

#### Motivations

- What would you hope to achieve from gaining formal recognition for your teaching?
- Do you think formal recognition of your teaching would help you in your career?
- Do you feel that professional recognition for teachers would improve the learning environment at your university?

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