

# THE LANGUAGE TEACHERS' COMMITTEE WORKSHOPS: AN OXFORD CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

*This study briefly recounts the journey of the teacher-led Language Teachers' Committee (LTC) workshops that started in 2015 as a simple space for the language teachers of less commonly taught languages at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES), University of Oxford, to find out more about how individual teachers teach their specific target language, but that later developed into a platform for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to share best practice and scholarship, and even went beyond these.*

*During the LTC workshops, teachers discovered resources they already had while reflecting on, appreciating, embracing, and enriching them; this had a positive impact on teachers' wellbeing, future actions, and crucial joint professional decisions. The platform was not only important to overcome or ease challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic when language teachers had to switch to online teaching overnight, but it also led to more sustainable kinds of impact, such as raising awareness to the fundamental rights of language teachers as part of their wellbeing.*

*Thus, this paper aims to give a chronological outline of and insights into the last twenty-five years of an HE institution in the UK that has been shaping/affecting the wellbeing of its language teachers. It endeavours to set an example and to raise awareness of the importance of language teaching and to rethink the position of language teachers in the academic world.*

*Keywords: Continuous Professional Development, teacher wellbeing, institutional wellbeing, less widely taught languages, collegial collaboration*

## 1. Introduction and Literature Review

In the UK, despite efforts to promote languages, language teaching in further and higher education (HE) has been suffering considerably for nearly two decades due to a fall in recruitment and uptake (Mann *et al.*, 2022). It is generally believed

that the UK government policy of scrapping modern languages from the compulsory General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects in 2004 is a significant contributor to the current fall of uptake in HE. However, data from Ofsted (2021) says that entries for GCSE French exams saw a steep fall even before 2004. Teachers and students felt that the curriculum had little to do with real life application and that the language papers tended to be marked more harshly than other subjects. The fact that English has become one of the most widely spoken language in the world does not seem to help. The Education Policy Institute (2022) also points out that language learning is now statutory in primary schools, yet there are no clear guidelines for teaching languages at this level. It proposes that this is an additional factor in discouraging pupils from taking languages for GCSE in secondary school. Language, although it is not compulsory, is one of the five subjects of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) which serves as a performance measure for schools in England as introduced in 2010. However, the Education Policy Institute continues to report that only 40% of pupils take all five subjects and many of the around 50% of pupils that take four subjects do so by dropping the language option.

Further to the ongoing developments mentioned above, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic also changed the architecture of language teaching. The fact that they had to switch to online teaching overnight while revisiting many personal and professional survival strategies was challenging for each and every teacher. It was a stressful period that added to already existing typical workloads, time pressures and difficulties juggling different roles (MacIntyre *et al.*, 2019). Even before the pandemic, Hiver & Dörnyei (2017) had already described language teaching as ‘a profession in crisis’, highlighting the underlying fact that teachers are opposed to change as a defence mechanism against uncommonly high levels of stress in their work, leading to teacher burnout and decline in teacher recruitment.

It is generally believed that a deeper understanding of teachers and the circumstances they work in can help to identify what support language teachers need to flourish in their profession, both for their own benefit as well as that of their students. Recently, a growing number of researchers have started to explore language teacher wellbeing specifically (e.g. Wieczorek 2016; Mercer and Kostoulas 2018; MacIntyre *et al.* 2019; MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer 2020; Sulis *et al.* 2023). Mercer and Kostoulas (2018), for example, attempted to

establish an overall understanding of the issues facing language education professionals all over the world, both individually and as a community. A useful mindset to study teacher wellbeing and its theoretical grounding is through positive psychology (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer 2019), which proposes the PERMA model of wellbeing (Seligman 2011): **P**ositive Emotions, **E**ngagement, **P**ositive **R**elationships, **M**eaning and **A**ccomplishment. More research tools based on the PERMA model continue being designed to gain a better understanding of the complex dimensions of wellbeing in various contexts.

To better understand and appreciate the unique context with its resources and challenges to wellbeing for the language teachers at the centre of this study, we take up the following definition by Sulis *et al.* (2023:23):

...we conceptualise wellbeing as multifaceted and dynamic emerging from the interplay between psychological and sociocontextual factors changing across settings but also time... when striving to understand wellbeing, it is vital that scholarship examines the individual embedded in their holistic personal and professional lives and understands how their wellbeing resources and needs can change over time.

As regards the various factors that can affect and/or shape teacher wellbeing, Sulis *et al.* summarises them as follows:

...multiple layers of sociocontextual factors affect teacher wellbeing, stretching from the macro-level of society and government policy to the level of family and community, further down to micro-level of the school and each individual classroom. As such, teacher wellbeing must be understood as emerging from the interaction between an individual and the multiple levels of context in their personal ecologies. (Sulis *et al.* 2023:29)

The context/institution a teacher works in forms a crucial part of their wellbeing; thus, it is not only the teacher's individual responsibility but, as Mercer and Gregersen (2020:33) put it, 'a shared responsibility – for individuals and institutions as well as for wider educational and cultural systems'.

Usually, teachers are expected to develop their best practice by themselves as part of their job, to adapt to new teaching environments, and to cope with any challenges not only on a daily basis but also in extreme situations such as the pandemic. Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2019) argue that CPD should also take into consideration the needs of the workplace within a broader institutional and national framework meeting the educational expectation. Thus, availability and accessibility of CPD activities, both individually and collectively, are crucial parts of language teachers' professional lives which should be supported by the

institution they work at, respecting teachers' capacity and possible contribution to CPD activities.

Reflecting on the complexity of the professional development of language teachers, Guan and Huang point out the following specific details:

Language teachers' professional development emerges from a process of refreshing and reshaping teachers existing knowledge, beliefs and morals, and practises and reflections rather than just simply imposing fresh language teaching theories, methodologies and teaching materials on teachers. Thus, language teachers' professional learning is a complex process which requires knowledge in varied disciplined fields of psychology, sociology, methodology, etc. Besides, teachers' cognitive and emotional involvement individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine teachers' professional convictions and beliefs, and the strong eagerness for professional improvement and change are all needed in the process of language teachers' professional development. (Guan & Huang 2013:211)

In the UK, at least in England where our institution is located, it seems that language study is both less popular and undervalued throughout the education system. Besides, language teachers are overwhelmed with the workload and different supplemental roles that they have to fulfil. The teachers' wellbeing must be examined in order to understand and support them in various aspects: their personal lives, professional roles, psychology, and social and cultural factors. CPD is considered essential to support the language teachers' professional lives both individually and collectively.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is as follows:

- to shed light on how contextual factors affect teacher wellbeing at different phases of their teaching career;
- to discuss the contextual and institutional factors in an HE institution that have affected language teachers' wellbeing for over a quarter of a century;
- to show how a collegial platform not only helped to overcome or ease challenging times but also had a more sustainable impact on rediscovering integrity, respect for each other, and what it means to be language teachers that believe in CPD.

The study is based around the following questions:

- What opportunities are there for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for language teachers of less widely taught languages?
- Can there be a more sustainable and collegial route to language teachers' CPD within an institution?
- Are institutions really supporting their teachers' wellbeing? If so, how?
- What are the contextual and institutional factors that positively (or negatively) affect teacher wellbeing?

As the authors of this article are members of the LTC (Language Teachers' Committee), occasionally a subjective tone (using the pronoun 'we') will be used.

### **3. Method**

The method adopted for this study is narrative inquiry and narrative thinking, without reference to an individual formal interview. Meetings, workshops, gatherings and conversations in the corridors over the past 25 years have provided plenty of material: anecdotes, opinions and feelings, of which some are new, while others are repetitions which have been passed down from previous colleagues. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:18) emphasise the importance of studying experiences narratively as 'a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it'. It is a way of presenting and understanding one's experience, whether individual, social, past, present, ongoing, or discontinued. Kim (2016:156) defines narrative thinking as 'an attempt to create a fit between a situation and a story schema about some experience or event that consists of who, what, how, and why'. Over the last 25 years, the language teachers at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES) at the University of Oxford have experienced landmark events as well as gradual and sudden changes in their working environments and career trajectories. These include additional or discontinued duties and courses, and working with new colleagues in a different environment and in different spaces, besides pursuing their professional development.

Furthermore, Lindsay and Schwind (2016:18) state that narrative inquiry is 'educative and transformative'. Narratives can show how each individual

interacts with, and contributes to, the ecology they are in, from which we can learn and make reference to. In the introduction to her dynamic approach to narrative inquiry, Daiute (2014:4) illustrates ‘narrating mediates experience, knowledge, learning and social change’. What the narratives *do* can be examined as well as what they *say*. In this case study, the authors have been at the heart of every stage of the narrative events both as listeners and participants as well as CPD workshop leaders. Thus, this paper aims to give a chronological outline of and insights into the last 25 years of an HE institution in the UK that has been trying to shape and positively affect the wellbeing of its language teachers.

#### 4. Background and findings

Universities in the UK are structured differently from one another in terms of language provision and there is not a sector-wide consensus on role responsibilities and grades that inform job descriptions in contracts. Some relevant details can be found in the public domain or on university websites, some are only available when the job is advertised publicly.

Academic contracts at many UK universities are categorised into either research and teaching or pure teaching contracts. Most of the language teachers are employed on teaching-only contracts but in both cases, there is a career path, and submission of research to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is the UK’s system for assessing the excellence of research in UK higher education, is encouraged.

On the other hand, there are still a few HE institutions in the UK where language teachers are employed on ‘academic-related’ contracts and are expected to provide teaching only. These institutions encourage professional scholarship for language teachers to develop, keep up to date and share best practice; however, teachers neither have a career path, nor are they eligible for submission to REF. Such differentiation is not healthy for the sector and puts any attempts to professionalise language teaching at a disadvantage as it implies that language teaching (and/or applied linguistics) is not perceived as an academic field.

Ambler *et al.* (2022) collected data on university teachers from three subjects across fifty-seven universities in the UK; this did not include language teachers. They report, however, that the traditional academic role which has three duties – research, teaching, and administration – is changing. Teaching-only positions

began to be created and especially the most prestigious universities have started to benefit from these: the post-holders can take over teaching duties from their research-active colleagues. They further reported that universities have started to develop a career path and reward schemes for them, although the job descriptions of teaching-only members of staff vary among the HE institutions.

The so-called Russell Group represents twenty-four leading UK universities that aim to work with the government and with research funders to make the case for quality teaching to be funded more sustainably and thus to maintain academic excellence. These universities have histories varying from 50 years to nearly 1,000, but the Russell Group itself is a newer body and first met in 1994. Set up as a professional incorporated organisation in 2007, its aim is to help ensure that universities in the UK have the optimum conditions in which to flourish and continue to make a social, economic, and cultural impact through world-leading research and teaching.<sup>1</sup> Russell Group institutions have adopted and adapted the criteria and guidance drawn up for the National Library of Academic Role Profiles, which were produced in 2004 by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES 2004).

It was promising to see that many universities shifted towards teaching structures compliant with the national profiling of roles, with the principle of Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value, and with the 2010 Equality Act and its provision for 'protected interests', to create a meaningful improvement for staff in terms of employment who are responsible for the delivery of approximately 50% of the degrees that they serve.

Teaching contracts have been revisited in the light of nationally agreed criteria for the sector, implementing the national framework and guidelines for teaching and scholarship, and any grading has since been assessed by HERA (Higher Education Role Analysis Scheme) supported by the institution.

#### **4.1 The Oxford Case Study**

The Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES), formerly called Faculty of Oriental Studies, at the University of Oxford is home to a range of languages and subjects that cover an enormous geographical area, from Morocco

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the Russell Group, its aims, and constituent members are available from its website: <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/> (accessed 13/05/2024).

in the west to Japan in the east, and a long-time span from the earliest civilisations, c. 3'500 BCE, to the present day. Courses offered at undergraduate and graduate levels entail a wide range of topics including history, literature, material culture and religion, but in all cases are built around the teaching of languages.

Twenty-six languages are currently taught at the Faculty, almost all of them less commonly taught languages in the UK. The term 'Less Commonly Taught Language' (LCTL) refers to a nation's current educational policy and political situation that are used as the basis for this classification (Gor & Vatz 2009). Thus, it is important to bear in mind that it does not refer to the number of speakers of a specific target language, but rather to the provision and availability of these languages in comparison to more commonly taught languages, as determined by educational policies. Furthermore, LCTLs are usually genetically, typologically, and culturally distant from the learners' native language, which can affect their learnability and make it difficult for learners to achieve functional proficiency without a significant time investment and often an extended immersion experience (Brecht & Walton 2000).

The languages at AMES are predominantly taught by the language teachers, which makes the teachers a crucial part of the degrees. Throughout this present study, the term language 'teacher' will be used interchangeably with the term language 'lecturer', as the title of the language teachers at the Faculty changed after long debates from 'language instructor' to 'language lecturer' in 2021.

For some subjects at the Faculty, there is only one language teacher, while for others there might be three to four, depending on the student intake and the size of the department. For example, in Japanese Studies there are currently four, in Arabic Studies five, and only one language lecturer in each of Hebrew, Tibetan, Turkish, and Korean Studies. However, what all the language teachers at the faculty share is the fact that they have a common goal: teaching a less commonly taught language for various academic purposes.

In terms of demographic background, most of the language teachers at AMES were born, grew up, and finished higher education in the countries of the languages they teach, often in a country where the target language is widely spoken and they are defined as 'native speaker' teachers. The majority are women who originally came to the UK as young adults for work or further study.



In fact, in the past, the role of the language instructors at the faculty was very similar to that of modern language assistants in the UK,<sup>2</sup> typically at secondary schools but also in higher education. These language assistants were not required to have any teaching qualifications or experience in teaching the target language. They only had to be 'fluent' in the language and their main duty was to foster students' linguistic and cross-cultural speaking skills.

Until 1999, each post was for an initial term of up to five years; since the employment policy of the university did not permit posts to be renewable, the holder had to leave at the end of their service. This meant that with this length of contract, they could not apply for 'indefinite leave to remain' settlement status in the UK. In one anecdote it was indicated that in those days, another common belief was that native speakers who stayed in the UK for too long would become less authentic users of the target language and hence would turn into 'non-native' speakers. One of the pre-1999 language instructors referred to themselves as a 'disposable cloth', referring to the fact that they were dismissed after having completed a fixed term contract and describing a feeling of being undervalued and used or exploited. In other words, they would be disposed once they were no longer usable by completing the fixed-term contracts and having turned into 'non-native speakers'. Such a negative and pessimistic metaphor was not encouraging to a new generation of teachers. It transmitted a feeling of disappointment, but on the other hand gave them the power of resistance and fostered their intention to make changes: a mission to improve the landscape and to be seen as professional language teachers in their own right.

It was only in 2003 that language instructorship positions were finally made permanent appointments. The majority of the teachers at AMES are now on full-time, permanent contracts, but there are still a few teachers who are on 25% to 70% FTE contracts. Most of the current full-time, permanent language teachers were on limited terms and even zero-hours contracts for many years. Most of them had to re-apply for their own posts. Working conditions have improved for the language teachers at AMES in the past 25 years to some extent. This is the result of tremendous efforts made by both the language teachers and other faculty members, including professors and administrative staff.

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<sup>2</sup> The role and profile of these language assistants is usefully defined by on the British Council website: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/study-work-abroad/in-uk/teach-language-uk> (accessed 13/05/2024).

Some colleagues recalled that they were confused upon seeing their contract for the first time and did not sign it for a couple of months after realising that the salary was not sufficient to make a living, the working hours were too high, and that there was no career path. Some colleagues were informally told to leave if they were not happy, and to seek employment somewhere else. Clearly, these situations were not positive experiences for the wellbeing of the language teachers.

Furthermore, research was not included in the instructors' contracts, and their work was seen as less academic not only by the institution in terms of grading and salary scale but also overall on daily basis by their colleagues. As indicated above, language instructors, now called language lecturers, are still categorised as 'academic-related' members of staff. The relationship between former lecturers (now called associate professors and professors) and language instructors used to be much more formal, and there was a sense of division. Some colleagues requested to be called and/or referred to by their titles. Some 'academic' colleagues used expressions such as 'language studies' and 'content studies' in order to differentiate what they believed was taught in terms of importance, referring to language teaching as less academic and easier compared to the lecture type of lessons focusing on a specific topic, which implied again a hierarchy of work and position. Several language teachers indicated that they did not feel they belonged to the academic community and felt less valued.

Professors have been teaching language classes, too, but usually of a certain type: translation from the target language into English and reading set texts, which most language lecturers are rarely required to teach. Moreover, expressions such as 'top-down', 'glass-ceiling', 'second-class citizen' and 'teaching robot' were often used among teachers to reflect on their feelings. Teachers did not feel that they had autonomy, despite the fact that they had been fairly free to choose how and what to teach, and were highly regarded by their students in questionnaire feedback. Neither did they feel they were respected, and this feeling of disrespect also came through experiences that had nothing or little to do with their duties, i.e. not being welcomed on the first day of work, not being

given certain roles or responsibilities, individual office spaces or a college affiliation.<sup>3</sup>

There are forty-four colleges and halls at Oxford, and having no affiliation with a college could cause the members of the University to feel excluded. Colleges are independent employers within the collegiate University community and have different arrangements for their college fellows/tutors. Some language teachers with a college affiliation pointed out that they felt as part of the academic and social community because of this affiliation.

Other reasons for feeling excluded from the academic community were not being invited to certain meetings or informal gatherings, not receiving congratulation cards for personal events such as weddings, when they themselves had signed and contributed to others' countless times. Language teachers reported that they felt part neither of the academic nor the admin staff. They felt isolated and left alone. It was only when the LTC was established within the faculty that they had a community that they belonged to and that could act together.

The days when people believed that any native speaker could teach the target language have long gone. As an appointment criterion, UK universities typically advertise the position of language teachers as asking for them to have (a) 'native' or 'near-native' fluency in the language, (b) experience in teaching the target language as a foreign language, and (c) 'ideally' having a postgraduate degree in a relevant field. Some language teachers in the past have felt that having a PhD would over-qualify them as language instructors. However, in recent years applicants with such a qualification have regularly applied for the post and been hired, despite the fact that the advertisement remains the same and with the contract not specifying research as a necessary qualification. It is not possible to ascertain whether candidates with a PhD or similar qualification were considered more employable than those without; however, it is undeniable that a higher degree matters to HE.

Furthermore, institutional needs also have become more demanding, and the structure and system of the faculty much more complex. Student profiles have changed too; students now have easy access to language learning tools. The current trend is having self-taught students who learn the language as a hobby

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<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of the Oxford college system and the role they can play for research and teaching staff, see the following website: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/colleges/introducing-colleges> (accessed 13/05/2024).

online before starting their degrees or even take up a language qualification including GCSE and A levels.

Meanwhile, some UK universities have begun to acknowledge that the role of language teachers is a category of its own and that language teachers are professionals in their own rights. Some universities have already created a career path for language teachers, similar to those of professors, and the job titles have been changed to reflect this. The instructors voluntarily decided or were asked to take up more and wider tasks, and the division between the two began to be less obvious. As a matter of fact, a single instructor who was alone in the department inevitably worked more closely with their lecturer/professor colleagues and shared more duties and responsibilities with them. As a result, instructors began to question the long hours set out in their teaching contracts, and to voice their views that the importance of their work should be officially recognised. They wanted to feel respected as colleagues equal to everyone else in the Faculty and to eventually open the path for career progression.

## **4.2 Language Teachers' Committee (LTC)**

In 2006, a Language Teachers' Committee (LTC) was established at the suggestion of the language teachers and chaired by the most senior language instructor at the Oriental Institute (as the Faculty was known at that time). Its purpose was to help the spread of techniques geared towards good practice of language instruction throughout the Faculty, to identify issues and concerns about teaching, and to make recommendations to the Faculty Board. The committee met and still meets once a term, and an agenda is sent out beforehand. Attendees in recent years have been 20 language lecturers, five colleagues with other teaching responsibilities within the faculty, the Chair of the Faculty Board, Faculty/University IT specialists and a faculty administrator to take the minutes.

The LTC has given language teachers autonomy, time, and space to share ideas with other colleagues whom they would perhaps seldom see on a regular basis. It has transformed the outlook of the individual, giving them a wider perspective and reminding them of the greater structure or community to which they belonged. It also has made them more aware of how unique and diverse the various language teaching programmes were.

The LTC has also encouraged language teachers to meet informally outside the faculty, which gave them the opportunity to discuss their concerns and wishes among themselves on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, in 2005, the Athena Swan Charter, a framework which is used chiefly in the UK to support and transform gender equality within higher education and research, and which aims to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in various fields, was established.<sup>4</sup> Oxford University was a founding member and has held an institutional Athena Swan award since 2006. As mentioned before, the population of female language teachers at AMES is still higher, although the gender gap has recently narrowed to some extent.

In 2007, with support from senior members of the faculty, the senior language instructorship position was introduced, and all the language instructors were invited to apply. This was a significant step and the first sign of a career path. However, unfortunately, after the appointment of a few language instructors for senior instructorship, the position was discontinued in the following year without any official justification and the possibility of a career path for other colleagues was ended.

In 2009, language teachers finally made a request to the faculty to revisit existing contracts, including a re-interpretation of the contact hours, and a reconsideration of the way the language instructors could feel included and respected in the faculty and gain equal opportunities to a career path alongside lecturers, who by this time were being referred to by their new titles: associate professor. This request involved the Division – that is the organisational unit comprising all faculties in the Humanities – and the University and College Union. As a result of these negotiations, the Faculty agreed to reduce the contact hours of language instructors from twenty hours to sixteen per week at least *de facto*, as an unwritten rule, after coming to a joint agreement that a strict interpretation of the existing contracts, which stated ‘up to twenty hours’, were contrary to national norms.

No significant development followed in the next six years.

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<sup>4</sup> More information on the principles and tenets of the Athena SWAN Charter can be found on its website: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/transformed-uk-athena-swan-charter> (accessed 13/05/2024).

In 2015, the faculty started an internal review of language teaching. Unfortunately, no language instructors were invited. A year later, the faculty again set up a Working Party for the Review of Language Teaching, which this time included three language instructors, three students and one external professor, together with three professors from the faculty.

Because of these developments, language teachers began to feel that they needed their own arena in which they could discuss language pedagogy and exchange good practice in a less formal context compared to the LTC meetings, but more structured than occasional tea parties. As a result, LTC workshops were set up, beginning in Spring 2016.

### **4.3 LTC workshops**

LTC workshops are organised termly, three times per academic year. There are in-house speakers, who may hold language taster sessions that act as a useful preparation for Open Day and outreach events. Some colleagues present their latest research, or guest speakers from other institutions give talks on applied linguistics. We use the same platform to conduct surveys for institutional needs, such as a survey on self-generated language learning preferences, to find out more about our students. During the pandemic, for example, the LTC workshops gave language teachers an opportunity to (virtually) get together and learn IT skills needed for online teaching. Typically, someone would attend an IT workshop (e.g. on Microsoft Teams), and then pass on the acquired know-how to their colleagues. Language teachers had created their own support bubble. It was necessary to communicate closely with each other in order to discuss what was possible, practical and sustainable. Moreover, they began to appreciate the good ideas they already had and started to think of new ways of helping each other and acting with integrity.

It is the expectation of the faculty that staff will participate in the mission and activities of the LTC to share and develop best practice. Any kind of research, scholarship, data gathering and analysis, and publications are relevant to language teachers' practice and understanding, particularly to their lessons and tutorials where skills like discourse analysis, deep reading, translation, text analysis, new teaching strategies, etc., are a crucial part of the success of not only the individual teacher but the institution itself.

Here are some of the contents covered in the LTC workshops:

- Textbook analysis
- Various taster sessions
- Learning styles and learners' strategies
- Teaching speaking skills
- Self-generated study and learning outside the classroom
- Learning languages in the twenty-first century (Book discussion)
- Digital Civics
- Teaching dyslexic learners
- How to support incoming students upon their return from the Year Abroad
- How to use TEAMS and Canvas in our context
- Language learning and teaching during the Pandemic
- Ideology in the translation of political discourse during the Syrian Conflict
- Corpora and the study of Arabic vocabulary
- Virtually hands on – Digital life and language teaching
- The pandemic and language teaching
- Disability and Language Learning/Teaching: university policy
- Peer Observation for CPD

Two surveys:

- Student Reflection on Language Learning
- Language Teaching Survey

In April 2019, following the internal review of language teaching norms at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, which lasted for two years, the then Chair of the Faculty made a representation to the Division suggesting that a cross-faculty review be conducted, which would harmonise the terms and conditions of language teaching against the sector. The Division set up a Working Group (WG1) for the Review of Language Instruction Provision, which excluded any

representation by language teachers on grounds of ‘conflict of interest’. WG1 created a report indicating that they had sought input and feedback from language instruction staff via a series of meetings and had produced a proposed framework comprising generic role descriptions for language instruction staff across the Division and a document mapping duties and skills for reference. This report misrepresented some of the terms of employment at other universities; language teachers from AMES therefore produced data showing that Oxford had fallen behind in pay, and that some universities allowed (varying degrees of) career progression for language teachers. WG1 subsequently recommended that in light of the additional information gathered during the development of the framework and via meetings with language instruction staff, the grading for language instruction posts be reviewed in liaison with Personnel Services.

A new Working Group (WG2) was established, along with a consultative forum, and an independent benchmarking study was commissioned. These were very welcome steps that the language teachers hoped would bring clarity and transparency to the review process.

The first forum was held with representatives from the Humanities Division and the language instructors of AMES, Modern Languages and Classics. The negotiation of titles, salaries, and career paths began. In 2020, an independent benchmarking study on language instruction provision in UK higher education was developed to examine how the grading and role responsibilities for language instruction staff compares to that in other universities. Fourteen other universities were included in the study.

After weeks of back-and-forth responses to the benchmarking report, asking for clarification and highlighting the parts that had led to misinterpretations and misunderstandings, the university decided to go forward on the basis of the report’s main conclusions and recommendations.

In those years, besides the LTC workshops with CPD purposes, language teachers at AMES also regularly came together to discuss and follow the developments at their institution which were crucial for their wellbeing in terms of both their personal and professional lives. This process was tiresome. Many language lecturers indicated that there was, for the first time, some hope for a possible change, but others were less hopeful and gave examples of their own disappointing past experiences that they had had to endure for years. Some teachers found these conversations stressful and difficult to listen to; however,



the collegial platform made it possible to create a supportive environment where colleagues were able to openly speak up and collectively fight for their rights.

In 2021, as a first success, the language teachers' titles changed, and language teachers at the Faculty of Modern Languages and AMES all became language lecturers. Overall, language teachers believed that there should not be a question of enforcing or restricting titles in such a way as to perpetuate the 'othering' of language teachers, rather than embracing them as equal partners engaged in research-informed teaching. The norm should have been for titles to follow those of research staff, only with 'Language', or 'Teaching', or 'Education' appended.

Contracts were also upgraded to salary scale grade 7, which was a step in the right direction. Two Teaching Officers, one chosen from among the language lecturers and another from the academic staff, have been appointed. They will act as a point of contact for any issues related to language teaching across the faculty and will facilitate communication between language teaching staff and academics.

## 5. Conclusions

Some UK HE institutions are not in line with sector norms and differ substantially from comparable institutions with regard to:

- matching skills/responsibilities to grade and salary;
- creating dedicated teaching and scholarship tracks to facilitate career progression according to the legal definition of 'equal pay for equal work';
- allocating titles in the spirit of that equality;
- recognising language teachers for degree courses as 'academic' staff.

Ambler *et al.* report in their study that, 'promotion prospects for Teaching-only staff remain poor... Teaching-only teaching loads are much higher than their full-time counterparts'. They continue:

If the UK is to maintain its position in international league tables that primarily measure research and if student learning is not to suffer, Teaching-only contracts cannot be perceived to be 'second class'. If ambitious and talented academics are to choose this career path, the reward structure must change. (Ambler et al. 2022:18)

There is an urgent need to establish some form of dedicated teaching path for language teachers within the foreseeable future, ideally as part of a strategic plan.

Some UK universities have implemented a formal designated teaching career track or pathway, or are planning to produce one within the coming years. This will give language teachers the possibility to progress to far higher points on the salary scale – all fully the result of the imperative felt by these institutions to comply with the 2010 Equality Act and with the Athena Swan Charter. However, some universities' avoidance of applying these standards to specialist language-teaching staff shows a marked disregard for their relative value and a divergence from the practice of comparable institutions.

The current Oxford Grade Descriptions, for example, offer no criteria for 'Teaching' roles, but only for roles in 'Research', 'Administrative/Professional', 'IT/Technical', and 'Operational Services'. Several universities in the UK have never implemented the nationally agreed criteria for these roles that are set forth in the National Library of Academic Role Profiles mentioned earlier. They have therefore never evaluated their language teachers on the basis of the criteria and norms adopted elsewhere in the sector according to the nationally agreed profiles. Thus, any fair re-evaluation of jobs and grades should proceed after establishing suitable criteria in line with national norms with the base of the sector.<sup>5</sup>

As the teaching track career pathway is evolving, university practices in terms of progression and promotion within that pathway are evolving, too. At present, several universities have clear promotion pathways from Teaching Fellow through to Full Professor based on teaching alone. Others restrict progression within a particular grade band, with other practices in between. Promotion is usually dependent on demonstrable quality of scholarship, assumed line management responsibilities, and assumption of key administrative functions, again varying by institution with no established practice.

Research and scholarship should be part of current and projected essential criteria for language teaching jobs to show evidence of continuous professional development in language teaching, and to show familiarity and interest/engagement in language pedagogy.

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<sup>5</sup> These data are available from the relevant University website: <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/job-evaluation> and <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/grade-and-category-descriptions> (both accessed 13/05/2024).

As language teaching evolves in most HE institutions, it is hoped that categorisations such as 'academic' or 'other than academic' will change and that there will continue to be the flexibility that allows contracts for staff producing 'research' of the type and quality that may be submitted in the Research Excellence exercises to exist alongside others that imply pedagogical 'scholarship' of the type which many language teachers, in any case, undertake as a matter of course. Some universities have various mechanisms for overlap and accommodation of both types of contract – with 'research' and 'scholarship' being criteria for progression.

We hope that our story shows to some extent how much individual teacher wellbeing is intertwined with contextual and institutional wellbeing, and how it is directly affected by institutional culture. Establishing the Language Teachers' Committee within the Faculty was the first step to make our existence visible and our voices heard. The LTC workshops became an important platform not only for professional development purposes but also for personal development. We have witnessed that these gatherings have brought people together and created the environment and trust between teachers not only to be present for each other but also to tackle and resolve difficult long-standing matters which involve fundamental rights of language teachers regarding their profession, salary, and psychological wellbeing.

We always believed good practice and our compassion would eventually have a positive impact. We are still negotiating for a career path and higher pay-scale grades for language teachers in line with comparable universities that have already started to acknowledge the need for change and have begun to move forward. However, as Mercer and Gregersen (2020:10) put it, 'institutional-level values must be actively cultivated through practical, concrete, recognisable actions and structures, beyond simple lip service'.

What is still essential?

- positive collegial relationships and a working environment that supports individual teacher wellbeing together with institutional (collective) wellbeing;
- a sustainable and encouraging platform for CPD activities not only during unexpected times (like the pandemic) but throughout teachers' careers as

preparation for sharing daily best practice as well as readiness for challenging time;

- better and more sustainable career paths for language teachers supported institutionally and nationally whilst recognising this profession as an academic field and addressing vital issues such as low pay, burnout, stress, teacher wellbeing, CPD, and job prestige and satisfaction;
- starting with individual teacher wellbeing but encouraging institutional wellbeing to support teacher wellbeing;
- organising CPD activities with contributions from colleagues not only for professional but also personal development purposes in a less formal, collegial platform;
- institutional support for creating a collegial platform for a diverse working context while respecting the personal and cultural differences of the teachers;
- an intellectually rich working environment that is equitable for all members of staff and provides a sense of belonging in order to thrive, flourish and reach their potentials within a collegial and sustainable community full of understanding respect and mutual support.

Note: Since starting to write this case study, Oxford University has commissioned an independent analysis of all aspects of pay and conditions for University staff, and colleagues on joint appointments between the University and Colleges in 2023. The purpose of the Pay & Conditions project is to conduct a comprehensive review of the total reward and benefits offer across all staff groups, and to report to the Vice-Chancellor and University Council on its findings and recommendations. Further information about the scope and objectives of the review can be found here: <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/pay-and-conditions-review-objectives>

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