

# Report on the Nahrein Network's Academic Research Course in 2025

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the training programme conducted for Iraqi academics on academic writing and research skills, delivered by Dr Fran Sutherland and Dr Ariane Smart with the support of Dr Mehiyar Kathem in 2025. The training aimed to strengthen participants' capacity to use critical methods for academic research and writing.

The Academic Research Course was delivered for two cohorts in 2025, supporting 138 academics (57 in the first and 81 in the second cohort). The first cohort ran in February-April 2025, and the second cohort in May-July 2025. The Academic Research Course delivered 10 sessions for each group on the online platform UCL Extend, including five seminars and group discussions. The course is now also available on Google Classroom, where learners from the course may use it for their own professional and teaching development.

## 2. Objectives of the Academic Research Course

The intended learning outcomes of the Academic Research Course were to:

- Gain familiarity with techniques and approaches to encourage critical thinking.
- Identify features of critical thinking useful for Iraqi contexts, with awareness of how these may (or may not) differ to Western concepts, towards a critical framework in Iraq.
- Apply effective reading strategies and techniques to texts and images.
- Develop information literacy, using knowledge to check sources and to identify issues.
- Engage with relevant literature critically while sustaining one's own argument.
- Form arguments and research questions and use these in the development of students' own academic writing practice.
- Explore ethics, integrity and positionality in research.
- Understand the importance of 'finding voice' and expressing ideas, concepts and approaches to research.
- Understand the scope of international journals and what journal editors look for in academic articles.

### 3. Assessment and review

Assessments took the form of a portfolio submission, which was then reviewed (rather than assessed) by Dr Fran Sutherland and Dr Ariane Smart. The first group saw 57 complete the course after submitting their portfolios successfully. For the second cohort, learners could submit a portfolio about their own research ideas and projects, under the title “Writing your research paper” or submit a portfolio about “teaching research skills”. Of the 81 participants in the second cohort, 50 chose the first option and 31 chose the second. A total of 138 candidates from the two groups therefore completed the course.

### 4. Key observations

- Participants extensively used Artificial Intelligence to prepare their portfolios (over 60% of the total submissions according to Dr Fran Sutherland). Some learners used AI creatively, to improve their own work and writing, while a significant minority were using it without much care for their own opinions and perspectives. It seems that AI is widely used in Iraqi university settings and is not discouraged. It is important to note that for both cohorts, it is also likely AI was used to aid English language skills, rather than replace learner perspectives and contributions.
- As the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education has marketed the Academic Research Course as a Training of Trainers (TOT) programme, the trainers adapted to those demands, especially for cohort number two. First, the course portfolio was adapted by providing an additional choice of questions regarding teaching skills. Second, course discussions focused on harnessing existing academic skills to develop a TOT programme. This came in the form of not only encouragement and discussion but also underlining that any TOT programme would need to engage in critical skills. There was a discussion, particularly in cohort two, about what a TOT would look like. Unfortunately, many, though not the majority, thought that it should merely be in the form of technical instructions derived from top-down training. It is important to note that the course could potentially be used as a prompt for discussions about the design of Training of Trainers courses. Those discussions need to happen in Iraq, through local initiatives, though non-Iraqi academics can offer support and facilitation, should it be required.
- Communication, dialogue and group-based engagement, which was widely encouraged in both cohorts, was a hugely successful component of the Academic Research Course. Discussion about some of the topics in the course enabled those actively engaged to air their perspectives in a friendly, constructive setting. This aspect of the course seems to be generally missing in the Iraqi academy.
- A glaring language gap within the learner groups created a wedge between English language capable researchers and those who did not feel confident to speak in English. As the course was taught in English, those who successfully completed the course and attended many of the classes were generally those with better English language skills. The large majority who were initially interested in the course but had very poor English language skills dropped out within the first or

second week. Language competency, particularly in English, seems to be a significant factor in the Iraqi university system, influencing intra-group dynamics among academics.

- As there were varying academic skills and knowledge capabilities within the cohorts, it is important to now identify strong candidates to deliver training and support as part of a potential TOT programme. This could be done through an online form, an assessment and group discussions, for instance.
- Having smaller cohorts would have made discussions more effective, but given the time and budget constraints, and the demands made by the Ministry of Higher Education to reach a large audience, it was not possible to do this. Ideally, to reach optimal levels of impact, each cohort should have had 10 to 15 active participants.
- While the focus of the course was on criticality and related topics, many participants (though not the majority) found it difficult to work with the subject, as evidenced by their portfolio feedback submissions. This was also the case for the topic of ethics and positionality. It is, in sum, difficult to teach complex, nuanced concepts without thorough discussion and ongoing assessments and feedback. While discussions were facilitated, it was generally those with stronger English language skills, or those who were more familiar with the concepts introduced in the course, that had a stronger presence in group discussions. Despite the trainers' efforts, many participants felt left out, and this was made more difficult to address given the large cohort numbers. The use of Padlet, where learners were able to submit queries or questions in real-time, prove a highly effective way to generate interact in these larger cohorts.
- It is also worth noting here that the provision of a certificate after the completion of a training course contributes to a candidate's career progression at their universities. It could therefore be that many participants were only interested in obtaining a certificate for that purpose, rather than for self-development and learning.

## 5. Feedback from participants

As the course was delivered in English, only 81 of the much larger of 200+ participants who had initially been instructed to join cohort 2 by the Ministry of Higher Education successfully completed the course. Initial response from those with poor English language skills was that the course should either be in both English and Arabic, or that there needed to be a translator. Feedback was positive from the 57 learners in cohort 1 and the 81 learners in cohort 2 who joined the majority of sessions and submitted a portfolio. A sizeable number of learners asked for further, similar courses for their own personal development.

A legacy seminar, now that the course is available on Google Classroom, is planned for Thursday 14 August, to a select number of participants who have shown interest in using the course for their own research, teaching and professional development, to act as 'owners' of Academic Research Course in future.

Feedback from participants include the statements below:

‘The course was well-structured and provided a good foundation in academic writing and research. I particularly appreciated the emphasis on structuring arguments. Highly recommend for early-stage researchers but also beneficial for more established academics.’ Cohort 1 participant.

- ‘This course was incredibly helpful in refining my academic writing skills. Before attending, I often struggled with organizing my thoughts and developing strong arguments. Fran and Ariane’s detailed breakdown of research paper structure was very helpful’. *Cohort 1 participant.*
- ‘This course significantly improved my ability to write clearly, critically engage with literature, and structure academic arguments effectively. I would highly recommend this course to any MA student or early career researcher looking to strengthen their academic writing and research capabilities.’ *Cohort 2 participant.*
- ‘As a non-native English speaker, I was nervous about academic writing. This course helped me understand critical research skills and how to express myself. Fran and Ariane were very supportive, and the course materials were easy to follow. I now feel more confident’. *Cohort 2 participant.*
- ‘The Academic Research Course helped improve my ability to write more critically, especially when reviewing the literature in my field. The unit on argument development was incredibly useful. A section on how to incorporate counterarguments into academic writing would also be beneficial.’ *Cohort 2 participant.*
- ‘While this course taught me essential academic writing skills, the real value came from learning how to incorporate critical analysis into my research. I particularly appreciated the focus on not just summarizing literature but evaluating it through a critical lens’. *Cohort 1 participant.*
- ‘The course’s focus on critical analysis was particularly required, as it is missing in Iraq. We need more such courses to ensure that we continue to use critical approaches to research in Iraq rather than regurgitate information to our students’. *Cohort 2 participant.*
- ‘The Academic Research Course, with a few changes, could be rolled out across Iraq’s university system. In Iraq we lack such courses, and we should use this course as a basis to develop further courses on critical writing and analysis.’ *Cohort 2 participant.*
- ‘Some of us were informed that this would be a Training of Trainers (TOT) programme. Our discussion in the course was very helpful in identifying what a TOT course might look like, and the Academic Research Course was helpful in instigating discussion. Some of the group identified a TOT programme as a technical exercise, while the majority however understood it to be a process involving critical engagement. We need to work more closely with our universities and the Ministry of Higher Education to have these discussions about critical research and how to integrate it into Iraq’s higher education’. *Cohort 2 participant.*

## 6. Advice for future TOT programmes:

- Any future TOT programme developed by the Ministry of Higher Education or Iraqi universities, or others, should take language skills into serious consideration.
- The outlines and scope of a TOT programme should be premised on professional participatory discussions within the Iraqi university system, of both English capable and Arabic-only speaking researchers.
- Any potential TOT programme should be representative only of the target group in question. The contents of the TOT programme should be adapted, and ideally several smaller courses could be developed, rather than one big one.
- A TOT programme can include central issues of criticality, positionality and ethics, but there is also a choice to omit those themes and topics. The selection of topics should be derived from an overall strategy and programme of support for Iraqi higher education.
- The Academic Research Course's key topic of positionality, which is a central one for any university researcher and academic, goes to the heart of the issues concerning higher education in Iraq today, and could be expanded within this programme, or a new course developed for it. The same goes for the topic of research ethics.
- It is essential that a TOT programme, whether developed outside Iraq or in the country, should not be viewed as top-down instructional learning but rather in terms of supporting individual needs of academics to strengthen their own teaching, training, learning and research by harnessing their existing passions and skills. In sum, there is no silver bullet to becoming an effective researcher or academic, though it is vital to improve the skill set of early career researchers, as the future of the sector.
- A TOT programme is most effective, as the Nahrein Network and its facilitators have learned, in small, manageable groups, and ideally within groups who share similar skills and topic backgrounds. Groups should ideally comprise 10-15 participants, working closely with an instructor, such as the successful Academic Mentorship Programme that Dr Ersun N. Kurtulus led for the Nahrein Network. In that programme, as it should ideally be for TOT programmes, sessions and support were delivered by a trainer familiar with the Iraq context and able to provide independent, unbiased or critical and neutral, advice to individual academics. The group setting helps harness communication, dialogue and exchange of ideas and information, which would inevitably further stated goals.
- Follow-up by a group of researchers should be integrated into any future TOT programme, and the lessons learned, if any, could feed iteratively into a wider assessment of TOT needs.