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From Public Schools to Higher Education: Exploring the Motivational Factors Behind Career Transitions of EFL Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the key factors influencing EFL teachers' transition to higher education, focusing on financial incentives, job security, professional development, and the reputation of academia. A qualitative research study was conducted and data were collected through semistructured interviews with 18 male and female EFL teachers who had moved from school teaching to university positions. The findings showed that higher salaries, professional development grants, pension plans, and financial stability were the main motivators for the transition. However, the transition posed significant challenges, including increased administrative responsibilities, navigating academic hierarchies, and adapting to a new academic culture. Many experienced anxieties about building their academic identity due to research expectations and pressure to publish. Despite these challenges, post-transition experiences were largely positive. The participants reported greater professional autonomy, expanded development opportunities, and increased engagement with student diversity. The findings contribute to understanding teacher career mobility, highlighting both the benefits and barriers of transitioning to university.

Keywords: Career mobility, EFL teacher transition, Higher education, Teacher motivation

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INTRODUCTION

The field of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching is characterized by dynamic career paths, with teachers transitioning between roles, institutions, and even professions. These transitions are influenced by multiple factors, including job satisfaction, professional development opportunities, working conditions and personal aspirations (Hulme & Wood, 2022). With the growing global demand for English-language teaching, understanding EFL teachers' transition motivations has become crucial. This understanding is essential for improving teacher retention, professional support systems and the overall quality of teaching (Ackah-Jnr et al., 2022; Loughran, 2019).

A considerable body of research has examined EFL teachers' job satisfaction and motives behind career changes. However, most studies focus on intrafield mobility or attrition and lack an analysis of cross-institutional transitions such as school-to-university progression. This is particularly pertinent within the unique sociopolitical context of Saudi Arabia. For example, while Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) explore intrafield transitions and Galloway (2017) addresses exit trajectories from the profession, there remains a limited understanding of the nuanced factors that influence career moves from school-based EFL teaching to positions in higher education, a path that is increasingly relevant in Saudi Arabia's evolving educational landscape. The literature identifies a range of factors influencing EFL teacher transitions, including burnout, insufficient institutional support, financial instability, limited career progression, and unsatisfactory work environments (Xue, 2021; Pacino & Qureshi, 2022; Kim & Davis, 2017; Morris, 2021). These challenges are compounded by personal aspirations for growth and systemic challenges, including changes in labor laws, certification requirements, and regional employment regulations.

In Saudi Arabia, recent reforms, including teacher licensing requirements, subject specialization exams, and regional employment contracts, have further restricted opportunities to work as EFL teachers in schools (Ministry of Education, 2025). While securing a university position offers advantages, it also presents challenges. These include rigorous recruitment criteria, the presence of institutional hierarchies, and a restricted range of options for in-service teachers. However, there has been limited research on how EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia navigate these institutional divides or the motivational and structural factors that drive their professional reorientation.

Despite growing scholarly attention to teacher mobility, few studies have explored the reasons for the transition between school- and university-level EFL teaching, especially in non-Western, reform-intensive contexts such as Saudi Arabia. Existing research tends to either generalize attrition and turnover or focus narrowly on intrasector challenges, overlooking vertical career mobility and the complexities of transitioning between institutional tiers. This oversight masks the distinct pressures and aspirations of teachers transitioning to academia during educational reforms. The lived experience of these transitions, including motivations and institutional/personal barriers, remains understudied. Without this understanding, policies aimed at teacher retention and career development

may fail to address a key segment of the teaching workforce. To address this gap, this study provides a contextualized examination of Saudi EFL teachers' successful school-to-university transitions.

This study focuses on an underexplored group: EFL teachers who have transitioned from schools to universities in Saudi Arabia. Through a qualitative lens, this study explores their perceptions of career mobility, the institutional and personal barriers they face, and the factors that draw them toward higher education. The innovation of this research lies in its contextual specificity and in foregrounding a type of career transition that has received minimal scholarly attention. Diverging from most studies that have generalized teacher attrition, this study explores EFL teachers' mobility from public schools to universities in the context of Saudi Arabia's reform. These findings are particularly relevant given the Kingdom's drive to reform and internationalize its education system under Vision 2030 (Almegren, 2022).

The study benefits policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher preparation programs by offering evidence-based insights into the systemic and personal factors influencing teacher retention and career development. It addresses the imperative for maintaining a motivated EFL workforce during Saudi Arabia's educational reforms. Through an examination of teachers' transition experiences, this study provides actionable recommendations for developing professional pathways that reconcile personal aspirations with institutional requirements.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central aim was to understand why EFL teachers decide to transition from public schools to higher education. Thus, this research sheds light on the following questions:

1. What factors motivate EFL teachers to transition from public schools to higher education?
2. What challenges do they encounter during this transition?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

An extensive body of literature presents various frameworks explaining EFL teachers' transitions from schools to universities. While traditional push-pull models emphasize external motivators (e.g., job dissatisfaction or attractive alternatives), they frequently overlook the complex, context-dependent nature of these career decisions. To address these limitations, this study employs the push-pull, anti-push, and anti-pull (2PAP) framework, a more nuanced, multidimensional model that accounts for both facilitating and constraining factors in career transitions (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Wibowo et al., 2023). Particularly suited to Saudi Arabia's evolving EFL context, where educational reforms and professional dynamics are in transition, the 2PAP framework identifies four distinct forces:

1. **Push factors:** Negative school-based elements that compel teachers to leave (e.g., limited advancement, centralized policies, insufficient resources, commuting burdens, lack of incentives, and unsupportive conditions) (Alharbi & Saaty, 2022; Gulnaz, 2015).
2. **Pull factors:** Attractive aspects of academia that draw teachers toward university positions (e.g., academic prestige, financial rewards, flexible schedules, postgraduate qualifications, research engagement, and the intellectual community) (Abell & Becker, 2021; Alemu & Pykhtina, 2020; Nair et al., 2016).
3. **Anti-push factors** include positive elements that **retain** teachers in their current school settings despite challenges (e.g., strong leadership relationships, leave entitlements, professional respect, and collegial collaboration) (Alsubaie, 2023; Fullan, 2007).
4. **Anti-pull factors:** Negative school-based elements that compel teachers to leave (e.g., limited advancement, centralized policies, insufficient resources, commuting burdens, lack of incentives, and unsupportive conditions) (Aldhafeeri & Alanazi, 2024; Bhatti, 2022; Ross et al., 2024; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020).

Figure 1 illustrates how career decisions are shaped not only by push and pull factors but also by resistance forces (anti-push/anti-pull) that mediate or complicate transitions.

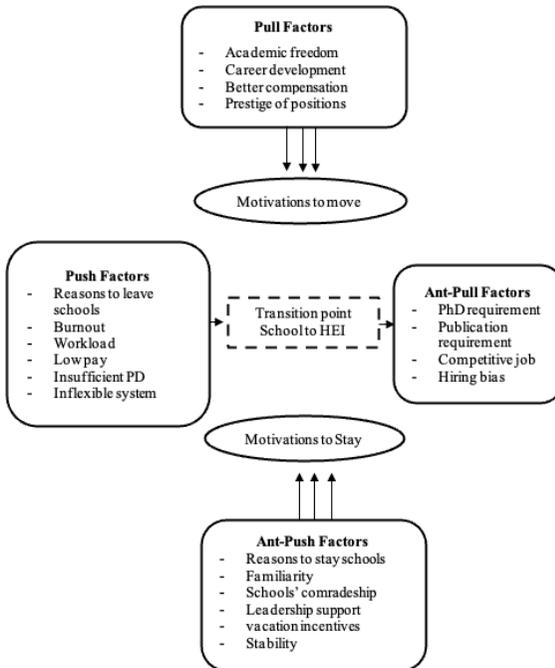


Figure. 1 2 PAP Framework Applied to EFL Teacher Transitions

The 2PAP framework served a dual purpose in this study, informing both the theoretical orientation and functioning as an interpretive lens for examining teacher mobility. While the analysis remained inductive and grounded in participants' lived experiences, the framework provided a theory-informed structure for interpreting and organizing emergent themes. As patterns emerged inductively, the 2PAP model offered a structured analytical approach to understanding the dynamic nature of EFL teachers' career transitions. For example, early-career dissatisfaction themes (e.g., excessive administrative burdens or limited teaching resources) were interpreted as push factors. Similarly, academic transition motivations (e.g., intellectual autonomy or disciplinary freedom) constitute pull factors. Anti-push factors such as collegial relationships and supportive leadership served as retention forces during initial career deliberations. Conversely, anti-pull factors (e.g., restrictive PhD requirements or research pressures) function as entry barriers during transition. Through this iterative application of the 2PAP framework, the study yielded a nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of the evolving motivations and constraints shaping EFL teachers' career mobility in Saudi Arabia. The framework enables a systematic interpretation of how push-pull factors interact at different career stages while maintaining sensitivity to participants' lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a basic qualitative research design, a widely used approach in sociology to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), utilizing semistructured individual interviews. Given its exploratory nature, the study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. In contrast to case studies or grounded theory, this design does not seek to build theory or focus on bounded systems but rather to understand participants' perspectives in depth. Specifically, this study investigates the motivations and challenges experienced by EFL teachers transitioning from public schools to higher education in Saudi Arabia. Framed within the sociocultural context of national educational reforms under Vision 2030, it examines how cultural norms, gender expectations, and institutional structures shape teachers' professional identities. This study highlights the interplay between individual motivations and the broader environment by drawing on Tracy's (2024) notion of qualitative research as an immersive, sense-making process. Differences in background, including levels of institutional support and sociocultural factors, were considered when interpreting how these elements influenced transition experiences.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling following an announcement on WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook, which invited EFL teachers who (a) had taught in Saudi public schools for at least two years between 2010 and 2017 and (b) had since accepted a full-time lecturing position at a Saudi university. Four of the twenty-two lecturers who expressed interest were excluded for not meeting the two-year public school requirement, resulting in eighteen participants from ten universities. Table 1 presents each lecturer's years in public

schooling and higher education, highest qualification, and gender. Upon expressing interest, participants received a detailed information sheet outlining the study's aims, procedures, data collection methods, confidentiality safeguards, and right to withdraw. Afterwards, they provided informed consent via email and a follow-up Zoom meeting. To ensure anonymity and honest disclosure, context-appropriate pseudonyms were assigned.

Table 1*EFL lecturers' profile in the study*

No	Lecturer's Pseudonym	Qualifications	Experience in University	Gender
1	Hamza	PhD, Applied Linguistics & SLA	14	Male
2	Omar	PhD, Teaching English	14	Male
3	Khalid	EdD, Curriculum and Instruction	14	Male
4	Rami	PhD, TESOL	13	Male
5	Zayd	EdD, EdD in Language, Literacy, and Culture	13	Male
6	Faris	PhD, English Language and Literature	13	Male
7	Yusuf	PhD, English Language and Literature	12	Male
8	Nadir	PhD, English Language and Literature	12	Male
9	Rayan	PhD, Translation, and Interpreting	11	Male
10	Fahad	PhD, TESOL	11	Male
11	Imran	MA of Arts in TESOL	10	Male
12	Amira	PhD, TESOL	14	Female
13	Layla	EdD, Educational Linguistics	13	Female
14	Nadia	EdD, English Language Learning	10	Female
15	Yasmin	EdD, TESOL	9	Female
16	Arwa	PhD, English Curriculum and Instruction	7	Female
17	Lina	PhD, Second Language Acquisition	7	Female
18	Farah	PhD, English Linguistics	7	Female

Data collections

Given the limited knowledge about why teachers transition to higher education, I developed a semistructured interview protocol to explore the factors influencing this transition and provide a relevant context for our intended audience. The interview questions were designed within a clear theoretical framework aligned with the study's exploratory aims. This framework draws upon literature regarding teacher motivation, career transitions, and educational challenges. It guided the development of open-ended questions to elicit detailed participant narratives.

Grounding the questions in theory and prior research enabled the protocol to systematically capture both motivating factors and obstacles encountered during the transition from public schools to universities. Data were collected through eighteen semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom between 21 February and 2 May 2024. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. They lasted 33–75 minutes and were scheduled during weekends and public holidays to accommodate participants' professional commitments. The participants were asked for permission to use a recorder during the interview. They were informed about the importance of the recorded data for the data analysis stage, and all of them permitted its use. A consent form was provided to each participant, and they were asked to sign it if they agreed to participate in the study. All participants signed consent forms. Each participant was assured that he/she could respond freely to the questions, as the collected information would remain confidential and their names would be anonymized.

The full interview protocol, including probing questions and instructions, is available in Appendix A. The researcher conducted data collection and analysis iteratively, following a structured process to monitor for code and theme saturation. Following each interview, the transcripts were coded via a framework tracking emergent inductive codes. Detailed characteristics, such as the code name, definition, origin, and application examples, were recorded and refined as necessary for each new code. As the interviews progressed, fewer new codes emerged. By the 15th interview, no new themes had been identified. The final three interviews confirmed the recurrence of established patterns, indicating that data saturation had been reached.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis framework was used to analyze the data (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4), which included six steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report, as described below.

Familiarization with data

I transcribed the interviews and meticulously examined each transcript sentence by sentence to identify emergent themes. Transcription was supported by

TurboScribe software, and I iteratively listened to the recordings to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Coding

Codes were generated by identifying key phrases or ideas in participant statements and assigning descriptive labels. For example, the phrases “Substitute” and “Fill a gap of absent teachers” were coded as “Workload.” The codes were developed inductively from the data, allowing meaningful concepts to emerge without preconceived categories.

Searching for themes

I systematically grouped related codes into broader themes on the basis of their relationships. For example, codes such as “ambition to have leadership positions” and “professional development” were clustered under the theme “career growth and leadership aspirations.”

Reviewing themes

The preliminary themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the coded data. This iterative process involved cross-checking the themes against the transcripts and codes to confirm accurate representation of participants’ perspectives.

Defining and naming themes

Themes were clearly defined and named to reflect their core meanings, ensuring that each theme represented a coherent part of the overall narrative relevant to the research questions.

Producing the final report

I used MAXQDA software to manage the data systematically and prepared the findings with illustrative quotes from the participants. To enhance credibility, the codebook was shared with two assistant professors experienced in qualitative research for peer validation. The iterative transcription, use of software, peer debriefing, and inclusion of direct quotes contributed to the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis (Clark et al., 2021).

Trustworthiness

This study ensured trustworthiness through rigorous attention to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged participant engagement and meticulous interview transcription to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were returned to the participants for member checking, enabling them to verify the accuracy of their responses. The researcher conducted initial coding independently via an inductive approach to capture participants'

perspectives, with codes iteratively developed and refined through ongoing engagement with the data. Two experienced researchers reviewed a sample of coded transcripts to enhance transparency and consistency. This peer debriefing process, a form of investigator triangulation, facilitated discussions of code meanings, clarified thematic boundaries, and refined the codebook. In addition to member checking and peer debriefing, the findings were triangulated by comparing data across participants from diverse institutions and career stages. An audit trail documented all analytical decisions (e.g., code development, theme refinement, and memoing), reinforcing the study's transparency, consistency, and credibility.

Dependability was ensured through a systematic review of code consistency across interviews, confirming thematic stability while minimizing redundancy. This approach aligns with Hennink et al. (2017), who conceptualize saturation as an ongoing analytical process rather than a fixed threshold. The final sample of eighteen participants reached insight saturation, offering sufficient depth to examine motivations and challenges via a structured yet flexible approach. The study comprehensively described the research context, participant profiles, and analytical methods to support transferability. Given the nature of institutional transitions in Saudi Arabia, the findings may be generalized to similar contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The inductive coding process revealed two main themes, with seven codes categorized into push-pull, antipush, and antipull factors. These themes relate directly to the research questions that drove the analysis. The results are organized by theme, followed by the corresponding codes, and supported by direct quotes from the participants. Each theme is presented separately, including its definition, associated codes, and their respective explanations in the tables. This is followed by a discussion highlighting the insights and knowledge derived from the participants' responses.

Theme 1: Key factors influencing teachers' transition to university

This theme focuses on pull and push factors that motivate EFL teachers to move from school to higher education. While participants highlighted various pull factors in universities, these can also be interpreted as push factors that drive them away from schools. The theme contains four codes divided into push factors (increasing challenges in schools) and pull factors (opportunities for growth and leadership in universities, autonomy and flexibility in teaching, greater pay and benefits, diversity of academic work, and reputation of the academic environment). A summary of the codes within this theme is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The codes and their definitions of Key factors influencing teachers' transition to university

Code	Definition	Number of Occurrences
Increasing Challenges in Schools	Comments highlight the rise of behavioral and organisational challenges, worsening student behavior, decreased motivation for learning English, poor adherence to rules, increased teaching demands, long commutes and lack of financial incentives.	79
Opportunities for Growth and Leadership in Universities	Lecturers emphasize abundant professional development opportunities in universities, such as leadership roles, postgraduate studies, and staying current in their fields.	41
Autonomy & Flexibility in Teaching	Teachers seek freedom in teaching and curriculum design, as universities provide greater control over content, assessments, and intellectual independence, unlike schools.	30
Higher Pay, Benefits & Reputation	Comments describe universities' appeal through competitive salaries, prestigious reputations, and benefits such as research funding, development grants, and retirement plans.	19
Total		169

Increasing challenges in schools

This code relates to push factors influencing teachers' transitions. All the participants reported growing challenges in teaching English at public schools, including increasing resistance to learning the language, a lack of discipline among pupils, and insufficient enforcement of behavioral policies, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I was assigned to a remote village 400 km from the city, where students focused solely on core subjects. They viewed English as an irrelevant subject (Hamza).

Students lack the motivation to learn English because they have access to few learning resources (Amira).

I struggled to get students to complete assignments or seek information beyond the textbook. When I report them to the administration, there is no

meaningful response, as they do not enforce basic disciplinary measures seriously (Omar).

This finding aligns with several studies that have confirmed that teaching English as a second language faces challenges, including its low-priority subject, students' unfavorable attitudes toward learning the language, and a lack of parental support (Getie, 2020; Jendli & Albarakati, 2024; Xuan Le & Thanh Le, 2022). This creates a cycle of disengagement that can be broken through only context-based learning, interactive pedagogy, and stronger institutional support.

Another key aspect emerging from this code was that all participants pointed to increased teaching and administrative requirements in school, without corresponding financial incentives. The following two extracts exemplify this point:

I teach twenty-two classes weekly, in addition to coordinating cultural activities and providing both morning and afternoon supervision. On occasion, I remain until 14:00 to monitor students until their parents collect them (Khalid).

Some days, I arrive at 6 am before both staff and students and frequently work until 14:30. On one occasion, I remained with a student until midday (Layla).

Yusuf confirms and summarizes teachers' issues, including workload and pressure from the school principal, students, and parents, through a poem. In the following excerpt, he expresses his feelings and struggles with teaching:

I have tolerated the agony of teaching,
twenty years,
may be too long.
A hurricane of despair,
A susurration of unspeakable rhythms belongs.
I carry a heft so horrifically dismal,
Contorting my soul,
It forces my limbs to tremble.
A task such as numbers,
Infinite and endless.
It is a spell where life's time could never diminish.
Twenty-four burdens every week,
Until the soil whispers to me,
Lurking me down to a world in which I cannot breathe.

Third, all the participants emphasized the frustration of commuting, as most early career teachers are assigned to distant schools in remote villages to meet staffing needs. This daily commute creates numerous problems, with distances ranging between 182 and 310 kilometers per day. For example, two male teachers reported that their colleagues had been involved in accidents while traveling to and from school. Three teachers disclosed accidents during their first teaching year.

I always leave home at 2 am to get to school before 7.15 am because the distance between my home and school is approximately 310 km (Nadia). After my first year, I started looking for another job. I was tired of traveling every day (Rami).

There is no public transport for commuting, and we, a group of six teachers, hired a driver with a van to transport us daily. I paid 1,000 SARs per month, and together, we paid a total of 6,000 SARs per month (Yasmine).

This finding highlights the push factors that motivated EFL teachers to transition from school to university: “pressures of teaching,” “workload,” “commuting,” “lack of financial rewards,” “lack of strict regulations,” “no teaching tasks,” and multistage teaching.” These ideas were confirmed by previous studies. For example, this finding raises the significant issue of teachers being burned out and exhausted. Many studies have discussed several factors that align with these findings and lead to teacher exhaustion, such as work overload, teacher shortages, multilevel teaching, and too many nonteaching tasks (Chen & Chi-Kin Lee, 2022; Tang, 2019; Sharplin, 2014).

The issue of teacher car accidents aligns with that of Al-Ahmadi et al. (2006), who reported 6.2 accidents per hundred female teachers, which is higher than the national rate of four per hundred. Although the exact number of deaths among teachers is unknown, 9,000 people died in Saudi road accidents in 2016 (WHO, 2018), with an average of one death per hour. Economic losses, disabilities, and fractures from accidents (Al-Jadid, 2013; Xu et al., 2020; Al-Bokhamseen & Al-Bodbaij, 2019) cause psychological pressure on EFL teachers, affecting their focus and prompting job changes. In 2023, the Ministry of Education reported 19,728 teacher transfers (ALRiyadh, 2024).

Opportunities for Growth and Leadership in Universities

The participants highlighted that universities provide greater opportunities for professional growth and leadership positions, suggesting that schools do not offer comparable opportunities. The discussion of leadership and career growth in both contexts aligns with the concept of pull and push factors, where universities attract ambitious educators whereas schools offer limited prospects for career progression. All the participants agreed that schools have limited opportunities for growth and promotion. Typical comments included “encouraging participation in conferences,” “leadership responsibilities,” “building partnerships with global researchers,” and “leading a curriculum revision project.” These are clear examples of how ambitious teachers can develop their skills and desire for

job growth after transitioning from schools to universities. As a result, many participants expressed a strong motivation to transition from school to university. The following extracts illustrate this perspective:

There is no similarity between being a schoolteacher and a university professor, who is incomparable in professional development, promotion, growth opportunities, and academic engagement (Farah).

In just one year, I attended two international conferences in two countries: Australia and the United States (Faris).

Since I transitioned to university in 2015, I have been promoted several times until I took on the role of university vice president. If I had not moved from schools and taken that opportunity, I would still be in the same position at school with a limited salary increase (Rayan).

The limited professional development in schools is mainly due to the constraints imposed by the Ministry of Education. The participants reported that they were expected to implement pre-designed curricula with minimal involvement in curriculum development. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that Saudi Arabia's centralized education system restricts teachers' opportunities for professional growth (Al-Essa, 2010; Al-Shibani, 2015). Other studies have also identified the centralized education system as a barrier to career progression and professional development (Maashi et al., 2022; Meemar et al., 2018).

Autonomy & Teaching Flexibility

Despite working within a structured framework set by the university administration and the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), sixteen out of eighteen educators stated that they have the “flexibility to modify syllabi” (Imran), “update reading materials” (Arwa), “add new topics within the approved module specification” (Zayd), “retain autonomy in selecting teaching strategies” (Rayan), “assessment methods” (Lina), “classroom activities to support student learning” (Khalid), and “possess 10% authority to add content to the curriculum” (Nadia). While participants emphasized autonomy and flexibility in universities, two of them confirmed that “modifying modules can be based on students’ feedback” (Farah) and “colleagues’ recommendations” (Nadir). Therefore, the participants’ comments highlighted the significant autonomy and flexibility they experience in universities, in contrast to the more rigid curricula of schools.

Conversely, some participants spoke about push factors as a way of demonstrating the attractiveness of higher education.

Under the centralized system of the Ministry of Education, I must follow a standardized curriculum with minimal scope for adaptation (Hamza).

The requirement to deliver a course within a specified timeframe, with limited consideration for individual differences, is an obligation that is inherently imposed (Amira).

A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that inflexible and prescriptive educational environments can impede teachers' ability to achieve professional growth (see Hughes & Lewis, 2020; Szelei et al., 2020). Hughes & Lewis (2020) explored curriculum reform in Wales and reported that while reforms aimed to empower teachers with greater autonomy, existing practices and accountability measures often constrain their ability to adapt pedagogy to student needs. Dieudé and Prøitz's (2024) study similarly examined curriculum policies across various school contexts. The researchers reported that high levels of state control and standardized curricula restricted teachers' autonomy in instructional planning. This limitation curtailed their capacity to tailor educational content and methods, thereby affecting their professional agency and the diversity of pedagogical practices. In the Saudi context, Alali (2024) reported that institutional constraints, including administrative policies and standardized examinations, limit teachers' autonomy and their ability to adapt teaching methods and materials to student needs and hinder their professional satisfaction and development.

Higher Pay, Benefits and Reputation

The comments consistently revealed that the competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits packages available at universities significantly influenced their decision to transition from schools. This finding shows that higher salaries and benefits offered by universities are considered significant motivators for transitioning to universities. For example, one participant, Omar, noted, "financial incentives at higher education institutes are much higher than those at schools." Rami concurred, stating that "retirement plans' attract him to university. Arwa noted that "flight allowances and accommodation" financial incentives attract her to university. Layla noted that "financial security enables her to pursue a teaching career without being concerned about meeting her basic financial needs."

Additionally, Rami, Farah and Nadia highlighted the prestigious and positive image of academia, which motivated them to seek positions in prestigious institutions. However, fourteen out of eighteen participants noted that salaries in the education sector are generally low and that much of their income is spent on necessities. Nadir and Lina explained that "house payments take up 35% of their salaries", which led them to look for more lucrative opportunities.

Two female participants, Yasmine and Layla, took slightly different views, believing that completing their higher education and health insurance attracted them to universities. As Yasmine noted, "My focus did not lie primarily with salary but with completing my doctoral studies."

The comments referred to the participants' enduring passion for teaching as the center piece of their lives. Still, the tangible benefits of higher pay, improved job security, health insurance, school completion and retirement benefits could not be overlooked. These factors therefore contributed to career change. This finding was supported by several studies that showed that financial incentives, including higher salaries and performance-related bonuses, can effectively attract and retain teachers (Alharthey et al., 2022; Alsoaery, 2023). Similarly, Pacino and Qureshi

(2021) reported that EFL teachers leave their jobs for several reasons, including inadequate training, low wages, and few opportunities for promotion.

Theme 2: Challenges during the transition to university

This theme captures EFL teachers' experiences adapting to the university environment after transitioning from school. It reflects teachers' perceptions of the institutional, professional, and personal changes they have experienced, framed by three main challenges: dealing with increased administrative responsibilities; navigating academic lobbying; adapting to a new academic culture; and managing anxiety about building a scholarly identity, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

The codes and their definitions of Challenges of the Transition to Universities

Code	Definition	Number of Occurrences
Increased Administrative Responsibilities	Lecturers face increased academic and administrative duties after moving to universities, including student monitoring, reporting, meetings, coordination, and fulfilling institutional requirements.	31
Academic Lobby	Some university members with traditional views resist new lecturers, viewing them as less qualified and second-class due to their nonacademic backgrounds.	22
Anxiety of Building Academic Identity	Comments highlight lecturers' anxiety about establishing credibility, building reputations, developing expertise, and contributing to the university community.	14
Total		67

Increased Administrative Responsibilities

This code captures teachers' struggles with bureaucratic requirements, paperwork, and institutional procedures, which many have found overwhelming compared with their previous roles in schools. The amount of administrative work emerged as a key concern, particularly for those who had expected a more research- and teaching-focused role. One participant, Zayd, remarked, "I did not expect the amount of documentation and reporting needed; it takes time away

from actual teaching,” whereas Amira added, “Instead of concentrating on improving my lectures, I spend hours on forms and bureaucratic processes.”

However, some participants acknowledged that the administrative workload, while demanding, was an essential adaptation to the university system. Rayan explained:

The tasks are different, more extensive, and more consequential than in school, but in any case, I need to adapt.

In contrast, Arwa described feeling disoriented by the lack of clear guidance on administrative expectations at the beginning:

At least in schools, the procedures were standardized... At university, every department seems to have its own system, and it was frustrating trying to figure things out on my own.

Other participants expressed concerns about balancing administrative demands with other professional, research and personal responsibilities. One participant, Khalid, remarked:

I already felt pressured to prove myself as a university lecturer, and then adding all these administrative tasks just made it more stressful.

Four other participants reflected on the burden of informal work, which is not financially rewarding but rather time-consuming. For example, Faris noted that “serving on various committees and responding to endless emails, work that is not officially recognized but takes up a lot of time.” Layla agreed, “What is the point of participating in a committee discussing a legislative text that does not require an opinion?” Rami also added that “Many departmental councils we attend have repetitive topics, and we cannot say no to most of them because they discuss regulations.” However, Farah criticized the overloaded responsibilities of academic staff, “our departments replace the functions of other deaneries. ... so, what is the point of discussing a graduate student's request to be dismissed from the university.”

Overall, participants found that coping with increased administrative responsibilities was a major challenge during their transition, although their responses varied. While some eventually adapted, others struggled with the change, highlighting the need for clearer induction processes and institutional support to ease new university teachers' transitions.

Academic Lobby

The academic lobby presented another significant challenge during the transition to university, referring to the perceived exclusivity of academic circles where new members felt insecure about engaging with senior professors or being allowed to join committees that normally have financial benefits, particularly during the prepromotion period to associate professors. Nine EFL teachers transitioning from schools struggled with a sense of marginalization (Rami),

feeling like outsiders in an environment where established academics seemed to dominate key discussions and opportunities (Rayan), and doubted their ability to succeed (Zayd), particularly those without PhDs. [Hamza described this situation as follows:

An inner circle of professors covertly controls key decisions.

Additionally, Lina described her experience as follows:

While not openly challenged, some doubted my capacity for prolific publication or conference attendance.

Similarly, Fahad admitted, “I expected collaboration but found that networking depended more on existing connections than merit.” However, Faris noted, “It’s a structured relational network.” There were also frequent comments about constant hidden conflicts between members over issues such as supervising graduate students, defending academic theses, attending conferences, and competing for limited funding. Sometimes the financial benefits are not worth conflict, “not worth the effort, not exceeding \$266” (Amira).

These findings reveal academic lobbies’ quota control and resistance to newcomers, aligning with research on academia as a competitively resourced space with opaque power structures (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2023; Rumbley et al., 2012, Ylijoki, 2022). In Saudi academia, scholars observe that traditional hierarchies and resource scarcity exacerbate tensions between established and emerging academics, with ‘invisible’ conflicts spanning prestige, control, and finances (Lebeau, & Alruwaili, 2022).

Anxiety of Building Academic Identity

This code reflects EFL teachers’ transitional experiences with university roles. All the participants reported varying levels of anxiety, particularly with respect to their emerging professional identities as academics. The participants reported that much of this anxiety stems from their perceptions of how they will continue to produce knowledge, their sense of wanting to prove themselves through scholarly production, their active participation in meetings and excellence in lecturing, and their anxiety about whether they can meet the academic demands of higher education and succeed in a PhD. Farah stated that “my teaching focus has shifted to publishing pressures for recognition.” Yusuf added that “I constantly worry my portfolio won’t meet promotion criteria.” These accounts reveal how professional identity intertwines with perceived success in publications and research, which is central to academic life.

Notably, teachers frequently cited institutional contexts and cultural differences. For example, Arwa, from a research-intensive university, noted, “publication emphasis leaves me playing catch-up with established colleagues.” This reflects pressures to assimilate into academic culture. Similarly, some lecturers, Omar and Yusuf, from universities with a more teaching-focused mission, often expressed concerns about balancing their teaching responsibilities with academic expectations: “Although I enjoy teaching, I feel that I need to prove myself in

terms of research to fit fully into the academic community.” This analysis indicates that teachers' professional roles and institutional environment shape their academic identity. Conflicts between personal values and institutional culture affect identity and self-worth (Skinner et al., 2021), whereas external pressures such as prioritizing research over teaching create tension (Sherman & Teemant, 2023). Teachers use various coping strategies across careers and contexts (Lau et al., 2022), but the long-term impact of these anxieties remains unclear.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges its key methodological limitations. It collected data solely through semistructured interviews with eighteen lecturers and professors who transformed from schools to universities. While supplementary methods such as questionnaires might have enhanced breadth and trustworthiness, this approach would have contradicted the study's exploratory aims.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors influencing EFL teachers' transition from schools to universities and the complex interplay of push and pull dynamics. The findings show that teachers are pulled into higher education by opportunities for professional development, autonomy, and financial rewards, while increasing challenges in schools acts as an important push factor. The study highlights the obstacles that teachers face during their transition, including adapting to new academic expectations and balancing teaching and research. Posttransition experiences suggest that, despite difficulties, teachers benefit from greater academic freedom, career development, and engagement with diverse student populations. Incorporating these findings into faculty development programs could better support educators in managing career transitions. Policy recommendations include the establishment of structured professional development initiatives tailored to the needs of transitioning teachers, enhanced mentoring systems during the preliminary stages of academic appointments, and institutional strategies to reduce resistance to change. Future research could explore long-term adjustment strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of institutional policies to facilitate smoother transitions from school teaching to academia.

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