Report

Friends of Palestinian Universities

VIRTUAL FELLOWSHIPS FOR GAZA HIGHER EDUCATION

Supporting academic continuity and institutional resilience in Gaza through equitable international collaboration

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October 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Virtual Fellowships for Gaza Higher Education project was supported by the UCL Social Research Institute.

The project gratefully acknowledges the support and contributions of Rachel Rosen, and Professors Toby Seddon, Humera Iqbal, and Mette Berg from the UCL Social Research Institute.

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Introduction

Amid the systematic destruction of Gaza's higher education sector during Israel's ongoing genocidal campaign, including the destruction of more than 90 per cent of school and university buildings documented by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry, this report presents the findings of a study examining how virtual fellowships can serve as a form of international academic solidarity and institutional support for Palestinian academics and universities. It aims to provide academics and university administrators in the UK with practical frameworks for developing sustainable and equitable virtual fellowship programmes that support Palestinian scholars while contributing to the continuity, resilience, and recovery of higher education institutions in Gaza. Virtual fellowships are formal remote academic positions that enable scholars to engage in research, teaching, institutional collaboration, and international academic networks without the need for physical relocation.

The systematic destruction of Gaza's universities requires sustained and structured support from the international academic community. In this context, universities and academics in the UK carry an important responsibility to support the continuity of Palestinian higher education through meaningful forms of academic solidarity and collaboration, in line with broader UK academic commitments to global partnership and exchange. This report identifies virtual fellowships as one important pathway for advancing academic solidarity. As flexible, responsive, and scalable models of collaboration, virtual fellowships can support Palestinian academics while helping maintain academic continuity within Palestinian — and particularly Gaza's — universities under conditions of scholasticide.

The analysis and recommendations presented here are informed by discussions with, and calls issued by the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, which brings together Gaza's non-profit universities to coordinate and direct efforts for international academic support, as well as interviews with Palestinian academics and UK-based academics involved in organising virtual fellowship initiatives for Palestinian scholars in Gaza. The report also draws on case study analysis of existing virtual fellowship programmes and related initiatives supporting Palestinian academics.

Method and Questions

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining the systematic mapping and comparative analysis of UK-based virtual fellowship initiatives developed to support Palestinian academics in Gaza, alongside institutional frameworks and guiding principles for international academic collaboration with Gaza's universities, including guidance developed by Friends of Palestinian Universities and the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza.

The comparative analysis examines these initiatives and frameworks through key dimensions identified as central to equitable and sustainable academic collaboration in the Gaza context, including approaches to institutional partnership, design structures, funding mechanisms, forms of academic engagement, and their implications for academic continuity and the resilience of Palestinian higher education. These dimensions were selected because they directly shape how virtual fellowship programmes are designed, implemented, and sustained, as well as the extent to which they support Palestinian universities without reproducing extractive models of engagement.

Primary data is generated through semi-structured interviews with five Palestinian academics and representatives of Gaza's Emergency Committee of Universities, alongside four UK-based academic practitioners.

These interviews are used to examine how such programmes are developed, coordinated, and operationalised in practice within unequal global academic contexts and in relation to the priorities articulated by Palestinian academic actors. They inform both the analytical framework of the report and the development of future virtual fellowship models and approaches to international academic collaboration with universities in Gaza.

The research adopts a principles-based approach that draws directly from the priorities and needs articulated by Palestinian academics and universities. This approach aims to support UK-based academics and institutions in developing future virtual fellowship programmes and forms of academic collaboration that are equitable, sustainable, and responsive to the realities of higher education in Gaza.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- What forms of academic engagement, support, and collaboration do virtual fellowship models enable, and how can they strengthen the capacity of Palestinian higher education under conditions of scholasticide and institutional destruction?
- What principles and forms of engagement should guide virtual fellowship programmes and online academic collaboration with universities in Gaza?
- How can virtual fellowship models be designed to ensure that academic collaborations are embedded within existing institutional structures in Gaza rather than bypassing them, while also supporting the continuity and longer-term reconstruction of the higher education sector?

Palestinian Higher Education Under Occupation and Scholasticide

Palestinian universities were established under prolonged military occupation, where restrictions on movement, surveillance, and recurrent incursions have long disrupted academic life. Operating within conditions of structural constraint, these institutions have remained vulnerable to closure, disruption, and physical destruction. Despite this, they constitute a central pillar of Palestinian society, serving not only as sites of learning and research but also as spaces of political consciousness, social cohesion, and knowledge production, while sustaining collective resilience and preserving intellectual life.

Many Palestinian universities evolved from earlier institutions such as teacher-training colleges, schools, and further education centres, before becoming fully established universities in the 1970s. Higher education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) consists of governmental, public (not-for-profit), private, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees' institutions. Most universities operate as autonomous, not-for-profit entities, relying heavily on tuition fees and limited public funding.

The destruction of higher education in Gaza during Israel's ongoing genocidal campaign represents a continuation and intensification of a long-standing pattern of targeting Palestinian universities through closures, raids, arrests, physical attacks, and the destruction of educational infrastructure. Since October 2023, Gaza's entire higher education sector has been systematically targeted. All 19 recognised higher education institutions have had their infrastructure destroyed or severely damaged, alongside libraries, laboratories, archives, and other academic facilities. At least 178 university faculty and staff members and thousands of students have been killed.

This systematic targeting of academic life has been described by international academics and UN experts as scholasticide, a term coined by Karma Nabulsi during Israel's 2008–09 assault on Gaza to describe the deliberate destruction of educational institutions and their capacity to sustain knowledge production, intellectual life, and future societal recovery. The current war represents an intensified and sustained phase of scholasticide, with devastating consequences for academic continuity, institutional stability, and the future of Palestinian higher education. Despite these conditions, universities in Gaza have continued to function through online instruction and gradual reopening efforts, striving to maintain access to education amid unprecedented devastation and severe financial constraints, including the inability to pay faculty and staff salaries.

Gaza's three major universities have established the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza to coordinate international academic support and safeguard institutional continuity. The committee seeks to counter fragmented or externally driven initiatives that bypass local institutions and undermine existing academic structures. By prioritising coordination, institutional rebuilding, and academic continuity, the committee aims to ensure that international interventions strengthen—rather than replace—Palestinian higher education institutions and contribute to the preservation of Gaza's intellectual and educational future.

In this context, UK universities have both the capacity and the responsibility to play a meaningful role. Drawing on established practices of international collaboration and extensive academic networks, they can contribute to sustaining Palestinian higher education through structured and equitable partnerships. One increasingly important pathway for such collaboration is the development of virtual or online fellowship programmes, which offer a practical and scalable mechanism for academic solidarity, institutional support, and knowledge exchange under conditions of scholasticide and infrastructural destruction.

Virtual Fellowships As a Pathway for Engagement

In the context of Gaza, where higher education institutions have faced systematic destruction and prolonged disruption, virtual fellowships offer a critical pathway for international academic support, solidarity, and capacity-building. They enable academics to develop their professional careers and engage in international academic networks while remaining embedded within their home institutions, helping sustain academic continuity under conditions of scholasticide. By facilitating access to resources, research networks, collaborative opportunities, and essential research and financial support, virtual fellowships support Palestinian scholars' academic development and help preserve their academic identity amid extremely difficult living circumstances. As one Gaza-based academic and virtual fellowship recipient reflected, virtual fellowships helped ensure that "you don't lose your identity as a scholar, your role as an academic," even while living through "displacement, hunger and loss."

Virtual fellowships can also support the resilience and continuity of Palestinian academic institutions while fostering reciprocal intellectual exchange between Palestinian and international partner institutions. At the same time, they benefit host institutions by contributing new perspectives, experiences, and forms of knowledge to collaborative research and academic engagement.

While research fellowships have traditionally relied on physical presence,[1] virtual formats have gained increasing prominence in recent years—particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine—demonstrating their potential as flexible and resilient forms of academic collaboration. There have recently been established models of UK collaboration[2] with universities in the Global South that are structured around virtual fellowships. Several UK institutions, including the University of Liverpool, the University of Leeds, and SOAS University of London, have developed or participated in virtual fellowship programmes that enable scholars to engage remotely in research, teaching, and academic exchange. These programmes demonstrate how online fellowships can facilitate sustained academic collaboration without requiring physical mobility, making them particularly well suited to contexts where travel is restricted or institutions are operating under conditions of crisis. By combining access to academic resources and collaborations, and integration into research networks, such models provide a practical and tested framework for international engagement.

Several online fellowship initiatives have already been established to support academics in Gaza. Many of these initiatives emerged in response to the calls and priorities articulated by the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza and the guidance published in the Friends of Palestinian Universities' Partnerships with Palestine: An Introductory Guide to UK-Palestinian Higher Education Collaboration. Most were developed through consultation with the Committee, with facilitation and coordination support provided by Friends of Palestinian Universities.

For example, the Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF) at the University of Bristol is a collaborative initiative designed to support research, networking, and professional development for scholars in Gaza. Similarly, the Virtual RUL–Gaza Fellowship at the University of St Andrews offers remote research fellowships for Palestinian scholars, providing financial support, academic mentorship, and integration into international research networks.

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[1] See Appendix

[2] See FPU's guide on international collaborations

Virtual Fellowships As a Pathway for Engagement

Alongside these programmes, initiatives at University College London (UCL) and the University of Exeter illustrate additional approaches to virtual collaboration. The UCL initiative, developed as a pilot research collaboration with scholars in Gaza, emphasises co-produced research alongside the provision of academic and material resources. The Exeter Virtual Scholars Scheme provides access to academic resources and opportunities for engagement at the level of individual academics and departments.

Beyond the UK context, the University of Alberta's Disrupted and Displaced Palestinian Scholars and Students (DPSS) initiative demonstrates a broader institutional model that combines virtual residencies, bursaries, supervision, and collaborative academic programming within a university-wide framework.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate the emergence of different approaches to virtual fellowship design, varying in their degree of institutional embedding, funding structures, and modes of collaboration. These variations provide an important basis for assessing the conditions under which virtual fellowships can most effectively support academic continuity, institutional resilience, and sustainable forms of international academic solidarity.

Guiding Principles for Gaza Fellowship Programmes

This section outlines a set of guiding principles for developing virtual fellowship frameworks in the context of Gaza. The principles draw on the Unified Call and the priorities articulated by the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza in order to avoid fragmented or externally imposed forms of support, alongside interviews with representatives of the Committee, Palestinian academics, and UK-based academics involved in organising virtual fellowship initiatives for scholars in Gaza. Across these sources, several recurring priorities emerge. These include resisting scholasticide through the continuation of teaching and research; supporting the long-term resilience and rebuilding of Palestinian higher education institutions; respecting the institutional autonomy and academic agency of Gaza's universities; ensuring that international support is delivered through partnership with existing institutions rather than parallel structures; strengthening coordination through representative bodies such as the Emergency Committee; and moving beyond symbolic expressions of solidarity towards practical, structured, and enduring forms of academic collaboration.

The principles outlined below translate these priorities into a practical framework for the design, implementation, and evaluation of virtual fellowship programmes. Rather than relying on externally defined benchmarks, the framework centres the institutional realities, constraints, and priorities articulated by Palestinian universities themselves. It adopts a solidarity-based approach that emphasises institutional continuity, reciprocal partnership, material support, and collective recovery, while recognising Palestinian universities as active partners in shaping international academic responses.

Institutional Partnership and Non-Bypass

A central principle of virtual fellowship design is that programmes should work alongside Palestinian universities as institutional partners, contributing to institutional continuity and recovery rather than bypassing existing Palestinian academic structures. Institutional partnership here refers to the active involvement of Palestinian universities — depending on their capacity and operational conditions — in shaping research priorities, programme design, decision-making processes, and forms of academic engagement. Grounding virtual fellowships within existing university structures can help avoid forms of international engagement that may unintentionally weaken or sideline Palestinian higher education institutions.

Possible approaches to operationalising this principle may include developing memoranda of understanding (MoUs) between UK and Palestinian universities where feasible, or using interim partnership mechanisms such as letters of intent where formal agreements are not possible, establishing shared decision-making processes, and involving relevant educational subcommittees and institutional representatives in programme implementation. Additional approaches may include joint steering committees, co-designed research agendas, shared selection processes for fellows, and regular institutional consultation to ensure alignment with locally defined priorities.

This principle further requires avoiding fellowship models that recruit scholars without the knowledge, involvement, or consent of their home institutions, and ensuring that all academic activities supported through fellowships are formally recognised, aligned with locally defined research priorities, and institutionally anchored within Palestinian universities. By foregrounding institutional integrity, fellowship programmes can avoid reproducing unequal power relations and instead reinforce the authority and autonomy of Palestinian higher education institutions under conditions of crisis.

One example of this approach is the Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF) at the University of Bristol, which was developed in collaboration with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza. The programme supported three academics from the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Aqsa University and was open to applicants from Al-Azhar University through the Committee's institutional networks. It provided virtual access to research resources, financial support, networking and academic collaboration opportunities, and online professional development workshops. The organiser of the fellowship, Basma Hajir, described the scheme as "a direct response" to calls made by Gaza university leaders following the destruction of universities, emphasising that it emerged as a "bottom-up initiative."

As part of its institutional partnership approach, the programme also established letters of intent with the participating universities and fellows to outline shared expectations around recruitment, selection, and the aims of the fellowship. According to the organiser, the decision to use non-binding letters of intent was both "strategic and practical," allowing the programme to avoid lengthy bureaucratic procedures and launch quickly at a time when universities and academics in Gaza were calling for urgent support.

Bristol's programme also drew on guidance developed by Friends of Palestinian Universities (FPU) for equitable collaboration with Palestinian higher education institutions, suggesting that this type of virtual fellowship could become a more scalable and institutionally grounded model for international academic solidarity.

Similarly, the UCL initiative was developed through consultation with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza and its education subcommittee, facilitated by FPU. According to the project organiser, Rachel Rosen, the fellowship emerged from a workshop between UCL's School of Education and representatives from Gaza universities, where Palestinian scholars discussed both the effects of scholasticide and the forms of solidarity they considered most necessary. The project proposal was subsequently reviewed by the Emergency Committee, which approved the initiative and distributed the call for applications through the three universities. The organiser further noted that the agreements established with co-investigators and universities in Gaza drew on the Bristol model, highlighting the importance of learning from and building on existing approaches to institutionally grounded collaboration.

Resilience and Sustainability

A key principle of virtual fellowship design is supporting the long-term resilience and sustainability of higher education in Gaza by moving beyond short-term, emergency-driven interventions toward more durable and institutionally grounded forms of collaboration. In the Gaza context, this involves considering how fellowship programmes can contribute not only to supporting individual academics, but also to the longer-term continuity, recovery, and stability of Palestinian higher education institutions.

Possible approaches to operationalising this principle may include establishing renewable or cohort-based fellowship programmes, developing longer-term academic partnerships, and coordinating funding arrangements between host institutions and Palestinian universities. Where feasible, funding structures may be designed in ways that strengthen institutional capacity within Palestinian universities, including support for administrative and payroll systems. This may also involve collaboratively applying for research grants and external funding to support longer-term institutional continuity and academic collaboration.

The University of Alberta's Disrupted and Displaced Palestinian Scholars and Students (DPSS) initiative further demonstrates how institutionally coordinated approaches to virtual academic support can contribute to the long-term resilience of Palestinian higher education. Developed as a collaborative effort across multiple academic units and university leadership structures, and in coordination with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza, the initiative combines virtual residencies, bursaries, mentorship, and collaborative academic programming within a broader university-wide framework. The programme aims to enable Palestinian scholars to sustain their teaching and research activities, while also fostering international dialogue and intellectual exchange through public lectures and collaborative symposia. The initiative's call for applications further noted that the Emergency Committee could circulate the call and coordinate institutional nominations through its member universities, reinforcing the programme's connection to existing Palestinian higher education structures. By embedding academic support within longer-term institutional and funding frameworks responsive to evolving priorities, the initiative demonstrates how virtual fellowships can contribute to institutional resilience, research continuity, and sustained academic engagement beyond short-term emergency intervention.

The University of Exeter Virtual Scholars Scheme, which primarily provides online academic affiliation, library access, and affiliation with one of Exeter's departments within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences for Gaza-based scholars, has operated across multiple rounds of fellows, illustrating how virtual fellowship initiatives may evolve beyond one-off emergency interventions toward more continuous and renewable forms of academic support. According to the organiser, the scheme has now established a "well-established and robust process" that the university is seeking to expand across additional faculties. Following successive calls for applications, the programme has grown to include 72 virtual scholars embedded across the faculty.

Guiding Principles for Gaza Fellowship Programmes

The Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF) at the University of Bristol also reflects an approach oriented toward longer-term resilience and institutional sustainability. Although the fellowship initially began as an individual initiative intended to demonstrate a "proof of concept," the programme has since prompted ongoing discussions with Bristol's senior leadership about formally embedding the initiative within university structures. According to the organiser, Basma Hajir, the fellowship was received positively by university leadership, and the university's Sanctuary team incorporated GERVF into its successful reaccreditation application. Discussions are now underway regarding how the programme can be institutionally supported and sustained within the University of Bristol, which illustrates how virtual fellowship initiatives may evolve from emergency solidarity efforts into more durable and institutionally embedded forms of academic engagement.

The UCL initiative similarly reflects an effort to develop more sustainable and expandable models of virtual collaboration. According to the Principal Investigator, Rachel Rosen, the project began through a small internal funding scheme with the intention of building toward a larger and longer-term initiative capable of supporting more scholars in Gaza. The project team is now exploring opportunities for additional funding and has also advocated for professional associations to establish virtual fellowship schemes. The organiser emphasised that embedding virtual fellowships within universities and professional organisations as ongoing programmes is important for creating longer-term sustainability and strengthening institutional connections between Palestinian and international academic institutions.

Equity, Mutuality, and Academic Exchange

Fellowship design and implementation should be grounded in equity, mutuality, and academic solidarity, recognising the profoundly unequal conditions under which Palestinian academics work and affirming them as equal intellectual partners rather than passive recipients of support. This requires that research priorities and programme design are co-developed with Palestinian universities and relevant academic bodies to ensure alignment with locally defined institutional and disciplinary needs.

The principle further entails sensitivity to disparities in infrastructure and resources, while actively resisting hierarchical or colonial dynamics often reproduced through mentorship- or host-led models. It also requires flexibility and responsiveness to the extreme and rapidly changing conditions under which scholars in Gaza are living and working, including displacement, limited electricity and internet access, and ongoing insecurity. Instead of one-directional knowledge transfer, fellowships should promote reciprocal exchange, co-production, and shared intellectual authority, including joint authorship, collaborative teaching, and co-designed research outputs.

Interview insights with Palestinian academics emphasise that meaningful collaboration is experienced not as "support" or "charity" but as ongoing academic relationships, characterised by mutual benefit, intellectual exchange, and shared ownership of outputs. Fellowships should therefore move beyond transactional models towards sustained engagement, fostering long-term academic relationships that support continuity, collaborative knowledge production, and the development of future research and funding opportunities.

The interview from the UCL initiative further highlighted the importance of reciprocity and anti-colonial approaches to research collaboration. The project organiser described attempts to develop research collaboratively with scholars in Gaza around themes of home, reconstruction, and storytelling, while also acknowledging the practical limitations of fully co-producing research under conditions of war and displacement. Rather than positioning UK-based academics as the primary intellectual leads, the organiser emphasised that "the scholars in Gaza are leading conceptually on the questions and how to approach them," describing this as an important "anti-colonial shift."

Guiding Principles for Gaza Fellowship Programmes

Similar principles can also be seen in the Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF) at the University of Bristol, which centred its fellowship programme on the theme of "scholasticide." By foregrounding the destruction of Palestinian educational institutions and academic life as a central area of collaborative research and intellectual engagement, the fellowship aligned its research agenda with concerns identified by Palestinian academics and universities themselves. In doing so, the programme moved beyond one-directional models of academic support toward forms of exchange grounded in shared political and intellectual concerns.

The Emergency Committee identified language accessibility and equitable selection as key equity issues that should inform the design and implementation of virtual fellowship programmes. Committee members emphasised that barriers related to language and unequal access to opportunities can inadvertently exclude scholars in Gaza and reproduce existing inequalities if not addressed in programme design.

Linguistically inclusive programme design should not assume English-language proficiency as a prerequisite for participation. Where possible, programmes should support bilingual or multilingual forms of engagement through translation tools, interpretation services, bilingual communication, and the involvement of Arabic-speaking staff or collaborators. Such measures can help reduce linguistic barriers and broaden access to academic collaboration, research, and professional development opportunities.
The Emergency Committee also highlighted equitable and coordinated selection processes as an important equity consideration. To promote equitable access and avoid duplication, fellowship providers should coordinate with Palestinian universities to help ensure that opportunities are distributed more broadly, reflect institutional priorities, and reduce the concentration of support among a small number of individuals. Programmes may prioritise first-time applicants or introduce limits on repeated fellowship participation, while remaining responsive to the realities and needs of scholars in Gaza.

Material Solidarity

Material solidarity recognises that academic collaboration cannot rely on symbolic engagement alone, but must be underpinned by tangible resources that sustain academic labour and institutional capacity. As a guiding principle, it affirms that funding is not merely logistical, but a political and ethical commitment to sustaining Palestinian higher education as a living system and supporting Palestinian academics living under extremely difficult conditions marked by displacement, scarcity of resources, and severe economic hardship.

In practice, this requires direct financial support for academic labour, including salaries, stipends, and research-related expenses, delivered in ways that balance urgency with institutional accountability. Interview evidence highlights the importance of flexibility in how funding is allocated—allowing scholars to respond to immediate research and survival needs—while also recognising that, for longer-term impact, funding should be integrated into institutional structures wherever possible.

Within the UCL initiative, stipends were intentionally bundled together to allow scholars discretion over how resources could best support their work and daily realities. Similarly, the Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (GERVF) at the University of Bristol was established through a modest grant of approximately £8,000, from which participating scholars each received a £1,000 stipend alongside access to academic resources, mentoring, and professional development opportunities.

The programme was designed to provide direct academic support while maintaining flexibility in how scholars utilised the funding. Meanwhile, the University of Alberta's Disrupted and Displaced Palestinian Scholars and Students (DPSS) initiative embeds financial support within broader university-wide structures designed to sustain research continuity and respond to scholars' evolving needs over time.

Material solidarity also entails engaging with the practical and administrative realities of implementation, including financial transfer barriers, institutional regulations, and access constraints. Effective programmes therefore require persistence, adaptability, and active engagement with institutional systems, rather than reliance on symbolic forms of support only.

Context and Challenges Facing UK Academic Engagement

While the guiding principles outlined above provide a framework for designing equitable and institutionally grounded fellowship models, interviews with UK-based academics and programme leads highlight a number of interrelated challenges in their implementation. These challenges often reflect tensions between institutional requirements, resource constraints, and the need to develop responsive, solidarity-based forms of collaboration, as well as the broader impact of anti-Palestinian racism and constraints on Palestine-related solidarity within academic institutions. They also point to the wider question of academic responsibility, particularly how UK universities and academics navigate and uphold commitments to resisting scholasticide, advancing equitable collaboration, and supporting the continuity of higher education in contexts shaped by ongoing colonial and imperial violence.

A key challenge lies in institutional and administrative structures, which are not designed for remote, co-produced, or crisis-responsive collaboration. Interview data indicates that even relatively small-scale initiatives encounter barriers in areas such as onboarding, access to institutional resources, and formal affiliation. Efforts to secure associate staff status for Gaza-based scholars, for example, have been delayed by rigid requirements such as right-to-work checks, highlighting how institutional procedures—often developed for standard employment pathways—can inadvertently exclude scholars working within their home universities in contexts of war and infrastructural destruction.

These constraints require ongoing negotiation and persistence at the level of individual departments, often relying on supportive individuals willing to challenge existing procedures where institutional frameworks do not initially accommodate such forms of collaboration. Interviewees nevertheless emphasised that these barriers can often be navigated through incremental and bottom-up approaches, including identifying supportive institutional actors, adapting existing procedures, and building informal precedents that may later enable more formalised structures of support.

Related to this is the issue of funding and resource constraints, particularly the reliance on small-scale and flexible funding streams. Interviewees noted that many Gaza virtual fellowship initiatives originated through internal or pilot funding, often conceived as initial steps toward larger grant applications and longer-term collaboration. In practice, these schemes are frequently assembled through individual academics' research budgets, discretionary funds, or small institutional grants. While such grassroots and bottom-up approaches enable rapid implementation and responsive forms of solidarity, they may also face challenges around scalability and long-term continuity. Rather than positioning institutionalisation as opposed to grassroots initiatives, interview evidence instead highlighted the importance of creating pathways through which smaller-scale programmes can gradually develop more durable institutional partnerships, renewable funding structures, and sustained forms of academic engagement over time.

Context and Challenges Facing UK Academic Engagement

Interviewees also pointed to governance and contractual complexities, particularly in establishing equitable and institutionally grounded frameworks. While agreements have been developed between UK institutions and Gaza-based universities to ensure institutional recognition, these often take the form of informal or non-binding arrangements to allow for rapid implementation. This reflects a broader tension between the need for speed and flexibility in crisis contexts and the longer-term goal of formalised, institutional partnerships.

A further challenge concerns the politics of collaboration and power asymmetries. Interview data highlights structural tensions in co-produced research: while projects aim to be collaboratively designed, the realities of war and survival in Gaza often mean that UK-based academics take on a greater role in initiating and structuring projects. Although efforts are made to shift conceptual leadership to Gaza-based scholars, these asymmetries are difficult to fully overcome within existing academic structures, which tend to reproduce hierarchies between Global North and Global South institutions. At the same time, interview participants emphasised the importance of designing collaborations in ways that remain responsive to the pressures facing Palestinian universities, including by developing flexible partnership structures that support institutional capacity without creating additional administrative burdens.

These challenges are accompanied by practical and structural constraints, including technical barriers such as unreliable internet access, difficulties in transferring funds, and the everyday realities of working under conditions of war. From the perspective of Gaza-based scholars, participation in virtual fellowships takes place alongside significant personal and structural challenges, including displacement, limited access to electricity and internet, and the emotional toll of ongoing genocide, while also reflecting a strong commitment to maintaining academic identity, community, and continuity.

These factors shape not only the feasibility of participation but also the expectations and design of fellowship programmes, which must remain flexible and responsive to rapidly changing conditions.

Despite these challenges, the interviews highlight significant opportunities for UK universities and academics to develop meaningful and institutionally grounded forms of collaboration with Gaza-based scholars. Interview data demonstrates how small-scale and grassroots initiatives can establish durable institutional links, create spaces for collaborative knowledge production, and function as proof-of-concept models that can gradually expand into larger and more sustainable programmes. Several interviewees further emphasised the importance of not waiting for ideal institutional conditions, but instead beginning with available resources and supportive networks in order to build momentum, institutional precedent, and longer-term pathways for continuity over time.

From Principles to Practice: Designing Virtual Fellowship Programmes

Rather than proposing a single, fixed model of virtual fellowship, this section outlines a set of core considerations for designing programmes that are responsive to the specific conditions of faculty in Gaza. Drawing on the analysis of existing initiatives and interview data, it identifies key components of programme design and proposes broad parameters and practical insights to guide their implementation.

1. Institutional Partnership and Governance

A central consideration is the extent to which fellowships are embedded within collaborative relationships between host institutions and Palestinian universities, including coordination around programme design, scholar selection, research priorities, funding arrangements and institutional recognition, rather than operating solely at the level of individual scholars. While establishing formal partnerships can be administratively slow, existing initiatives suggest that interim mechanisms such as letters of intent can enable responsiveness and institutional coordination while working towards more formal partnership agreements.

Recommended parameters:

- Co-governance between UK host institutions and Gaza-based universities
- Clear recognition of home institutional affiliation, including listing the scholar's Gaza university affiliation in publications, talks, conferences, and project materials, and ensuring fellows continue to represent and remain associated with their home institution throughout the fellowship.
- Use formal institutional agreements, such as MoUs, where feasible, while recognising that other forms of institutional partnership or letters of intent may also be appropriate depending on context and capacity
- Engagement with representative bodies (e.g. relevant Emergency sub-committees) to ensure alignment with local priorities in research collaboration

2. Programme Design and Academic Engagement

Virtual fellowships must be designed with flexibility to accommodate the realities of working under conditions of severe destruction, infrastructural collapse, and an uncertain and precarious context. Interviewees, including recipients of virtual fellowships and UK-based academics who established virtual fellowship programmes, emphasised the importance of minimising rigid expectations and allowing scholars to shape research priorities, activities, and outputs in line with their capacities, interests, and rapidly changing circumstances. Rather than requiring entirely new projects, programmes may support ongoing research, collaborative outputs, or forms of engagement that prioritise continuity over novelty. Emergency Committee discussions further highlight that fellowship duration and structure should be responsive to the nature of the research itself, rather than fixed timelines.

Recommended parameters:

- Discipline-sensitive fellowships aligned with Gaza's institutional priorities, developed in coordination with relevant sub-committees.
- Flexible outputs (e.g. articles, blogs, podcasts, teaching contributions, community engagement)
- Structured but light-touch engagement (e.g. periodic meetings, seminars, collaborative spaces)
- Emphasis on co-produced research and intellectual leadership from Gaza-based scholars

3. Application and Selection Processes

Application and selection processes must balance accessibility, transparency, and meaningful institutional involvement. Interview data suggests that open calls can enhance fairness and perceived value, while engagement with Palestinian universities helps ensure alignment with local priorities and existing academic structures. Discussions with the Emergency Committee highlighted the importance of involving Palestinian universities in the design and oversight of fellowship programmes, while recognising that different models of involvement may be appropriate in different contexts.

Institutional participation may take a variety of forms, including contributing to programme design, circulating calls through university networks, providing input into eligibility criteria and research priorities, endorsing applicants, or participating in selection processes where appropriate. Rather than prescribing a single approach, the key consideration is that application and selection processes should be developed in consultation with Palestinian institutions and remain responsive to their priorities and capacities.

This points to different possible approaches:

- Open competitive model: transparent calls with joint selection committees
- Institutionally mediated model: departments or universities play a stronger role in identifying candidates
- Hybrid model: open calls combined with institutional endorsement, consultation, or coordination with universities in Gaza.

4. Funding Structures and Resource Allocation

Funding remains one of the most significant challenges facing virtual fellowship initiatives, with many current programmes relying on small-scale, temporary, or ad hoc sources of support. This raises broader questions about the long-term sustainability and institutionalisation of virtual fellowships within international academic structures. Effective programmes require flexible and responsive funding arrangements that can adapt to the realities of operating under conditions of scholasticide, where both institutional capacity and the livelihoods of individual academics are under severe and ongoing pressure.

A mixed funding model offers a viable pathway for supporting virtual fellowships. Within such a model, funding can be structured to balance institutional support with direct incentives for individual scholars. This may involve providing direct stipends to fellows alongside contributions that support institutional continuity and research capacity within Palestinian universities, while UK host institutions assume responsibility for the majority of administrative and project overhead costs.

The overall cost per fellow will vary depending on the scope and duration of the fellowship, the level of institutional support required, and the availability of funding. Funding arrangements should remain adaptable to different institutional contexts, programme designs, and research priorities. At the same time, funding models should remain attentive to local academic salary structures and economic conditions in Gaza in order to avoid unintentionally distorting local institutional dynamics or creating unsustainable disparities. In some cases, this may involve structuring fellowships as partial salary support or supplementary stipends rather than full salary replacement.

This points to the need for balanced funding approaches that can take different forms depending on context:

- Institution-centred pathway: funding routed through Palestinian universities or intermediary bodies to strengthen institutional capacity and sustainability.
- Individual-centred pathway: direct stipends to provide immediate support and maintain incentives for academic participation.
- Hybrid pathway: a combination of salary support, direct stipends, and institutional overheads to balance individual and institutional needs.
- Resource-centred pathway: access to academic resources and infrastructure, including libraries, databases, software, publishing support, mentoring, training opportunities, and professional networks, to support research continuity and scholarly engagement.

The appropriate model may vary depending on the operational capacity of Palestinian universities and the scale of the fellowship programme. In the current context, implementation requires flexible coordination between UK host institutions and Palestinian universities in ways that support institutional continuity without placing excessive administrative burdens on already strained university structures.

5. Intermediary Coordination and Institutionalisation

The role of intermediary organisations can be critical in coordinating funding, partnerships, and programme design. Interview data suggests that such bodies can help navigate institutional barriers, mobilise resources, and enable collaboration at scale. One possible pathway involves a coordinated funding model in which fellowship support is shared between host universities and external funding sources. While host institutions may contribute partial financial support, additional funding could be secured through coordinated fundraising and grant mobilisation led by an intermediary body. This structure would allow programmes to operate through existing institutional frameworks while maintaining flexibility in mobilising resources.

Within the UK context, this pathway could involve engaging major funding bodies—such as the British Academy or the Royal Society—to support and institutionalise virtual fellowship programmes for scholars in Gaza. Securing the endorsement and participation of established funding organisations would strengthen the credibility, sustainability, and visibility of such programmes within the UK higher education landscape. In this configuration, an organisation such as the British Academy could potentially act as an intermediary body by coordinating funding streams, facilitating partnerships with host universities, and providing institutional oversight. By building on existing frameworks, such as the Middle East Partnership Programme, this approach could integrate Gaza-focused fellowships into recognised funding structures while contributing to more balanced institutional collaboration between UK and Palestinian universities.

Professional disciplinary associations may also play an important role in institutionalising virtual fellowship models. The interview with the organiser of the UCL initiative highlighted ongoing efforts to encourage organisations such as the British Sociological Association (BSA) to establish virtual fellowship schemes. Disciplinary bodies could provide additional platforms for sustained academic engagement, professional recognition, and longer-term institutional support.

At the same time, this represents one of several possible coordination pathways. Alternative models may involve university-led coordination through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), faculty-to-faculty and department-to-department partnerships, academically embedded subcommittees, or hybrid arrangements combining institutional and intermediary roles. Such partnerships can provide a foundation for longer-term collaboration beyond individual fellowships, including joint research, teaching, supervision, and academic exchange. Across these variations, the central consideration remains ensuring that coordination mechanisms support both institutional engagement and programme flexibility, while remaining responsive to the priorities of Palestinian higher education institutions.

6. Scalability and Sustainability

Scaling virtual fellowships requires balancing flexibility with institutional commitment. Interview data suggests that pilot models can serve as proof-of-concept initiatives, enabling gradual expansion and longer-term funding. Emergency Committee discussions emphasise the importance of aligning scale with both research needs and equitable access, to ensure that fellowships do not prioritise speed or quantity at the expense of depth and impact.

Scalability may also involve embedding virtual fellowships within broader research collaborations, partnered research centres, or thematic academic programmes linking UK and Palestinian institutions. Such models may provide more durable institutional frameworks for collaboration and may align more closely with existing UK research funding structures.

Recommended parameters:

- Cohort-based models with periodic intake
- Minimum duration of six months, with flexibility for extension
- Incremental scaling based on available resources
- Long-term goal of embedding programmes within institutional and funding structures

Conclusion

These components provide an illustration of how a collaboratively governed virtual fellowship programme might be structured in practice, with UK institutions, Palestinian universities, and representative bodies such as the Emergency Committee contributing to programme priorities, selection processes, and forms of academic collaboration according to their capacities and roles. In practice, this may involve phased or flexible forms of coordination, where UK host institutions initially assume greater administrative responsibility while maintaining ongoing consultation and institutional alignment with the Emergency Committee and Gaza universities.

Rather than a fixed blueprint, this model represents a synthesis of key principles and design considerations identified through the analysis of existing initiatives and interview data. The primary contribution of this report lies not in prescribing a single model, but in offering a framework for assessing and designing virtual fellowship programmes that are responsive to the conditions and priorities of Palestinian higher education institutions in Gaza.

Importantly, the framework recognises that virtual fellowship programmes may begin on a relatively small scale and under conditions of limited funding, institutional capacity, or administrative support. While not all initiatives will be able to establish comprehensive or fully institutionalised partnerships from the outset, programmes should seek, wherever possible, to embed mechanisms that strengthen institutional relationships, research infrastructure, and long-term collaboration. This requires creativity and flexibility from UK institutions and academics in identifying pathways for support that are both immediately responsive and capable of contributing to longer-term sustainability, scalability, and the recovery of Palestinian higher education.

Setting Up a Virtual Fellowship: Key Steps and Questions

Step 1: Define the Type of Fellowship

Questions:

- Is this an individual initiative, departmental programme, or institutional partnership?
- Is the focus research, access, mentorship, teaching or collaborative exchange?
- Is the programme short-term emergency support or long-term collaboration?

Step 2: Establish Institutional Relationships

Questions:

- How can Palestinian universities and EC subcommittees be consulted?
- Is formal partnership feasible, or are interim mechanisms needed?
- How will home institutional affiliation be recognised?

Step 3: Determine Funding Pathways

Questions:

- Is funding philanthropic, grant-based, or institutionally supported?
- Can funding support both scholars and institutional continuity?
- How can administration and overheads be managed?

Step 4: Design Fellowship Structure

Questions:

- What level of flexibility is needed?
- What outputs are realistic under current conditions?
- How will scholars participate despite infrastructural disruption?

Step 5: Selection and Access

Questions:

- Open call, institutional nomination, or hybrid model?
- How will equitable access be ensured?
- Will repeat applications be limited?

Step 6: Sustainability and Scaling

Questions:

- Can the initiative evolve into a longer-term programme?
- How can the fellowship lay the foundation for longer-term institution-to-institution partnerships?
- What mechanisms (e.g., collaborative grants, MoUs, departmental partnerships, research centres, or intermediary funding arrangements) could support sustainability and future expansion?

Appendix

Research fellowship and academic support models encompass a range of approaches shaped by different institutional priorities, funding structures, and assumptions about mobility, collaboration, and academic solidarity. These include emergency protection and scholar-at-risk programmes, academic exchange and visiting fellowship schemes, fully online or virtual fellowships, institutionally mediated models, and grassroots or solidarity-based initiatives. Emergency protection programmes such as CARA, Scholars at Risk (SAR), the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, and MSCA4Ukraine primarily focus on the safety and relocation of individual scholars facing conflict or persecution. Academic exchange and visiting fellowship models, including schemes at institutions such as the University of Oxford, SOAS, and the University of Cambridge, support research development, international collaboration, and professional visibility through temporary placements within host institutions, but often depend on physical mobility. Fully online or virtual fellowship models—including the Virtual Ukraine Institute for Advanced Study (VUIAS), initiatives at the University of Liverpool, University of Leeds, and SOAS, and Gaza-focused programmes such as the Gaza Education Research Virtual Fellowship (University of Bristol), the RUL–Gaza Fellowship (University of St Andrews), and the Virtual Scholars Scheme at the University of Exeter—enable scholars to remain embedded within their home institutions while accessing international academic networks and resources. Institutionally mediated models, including British Academy fellowship schemes, Newton International Fellowships, and initiatives such as the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, demonstrate how intermediary bodies and national funding organisations can coordinate funding, partnerships, and academic collaboration through established institutional frameworks. Alongside these more formal structures, grassroots and solidarity-based initiatives—including the BRISMES Fund for Higher Education in Gaza, ISNAD program, and the Palestinian Student Initiative within the New University in Exile Consortium—provide flexible and responsive forms of support grounded in scholar-led collaboration, fundraising, mentorship, and solidarity networks.

Report | Virtual fellowships for Gaza higher education: Supporting academic continuity and institutional resilience in Gaza through equitable international collaboration

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