

STINT Teaching Sabbatical Fall 2022
University of Texas at Austin,
Department of Middle Eastern Studies

Final Report



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Introduction

In December 2021 I received the good news that I was accepted as a STINT fellow at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). UT is one of the largest universities in the US with its 52,000 diverse students and 3,000 teaching faculty across 18 colleges and schools. As Texas' leading research university, it attracts more than \$650 million annually for discovery.

Its main campus is situated in the very center of Austin. The architecture on campus reflects the history of the city of Austin with its mix of old historical buildings and brand-new modern buildings.



(<https://www.utexas.edu/content/about-texas>)

Austin is the capital city of the state of Texas, represented by the beautiful Texas state Capitol.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austin,_Texas#/media/File:TexasStateCapitol-2010-02.JPG

The city is however radically changing due to a large influx of global companies such as Tesla, Apple, Google, Samsung and IBM and as a result of this — an increasing population. Besides making the city a vibrant and exciting place to live, it has led to a skyrocketing of prices for housing and living.

Austin is the live music capital of the US. The Moody Center receives world artists, while local clubs are breeding grounds for aspiring artists. There are several both big and smaller music festivals during the year, attracting musicians of all kinds.

The UT is also home to one of the largest college stadiums in the US. Its football team, known as the Longhorns, is represented by a mascot called Bevo, a Longhorn steer with burnt orange and white coloring from which the UT derived its color scheme.

Being situated in a city recognized for its creative and entrepreneurial spirit, the UT provides a place to explore countless opportunities for tomorrow's artists, scientists, athletes, doctors, entrepreneurs and engineers.

Preparation and Planning

I was accepted as a STINT fellow at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin (D. MES).



<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/mes/>

In January 2022 I reached out to my academic host, Dr. Jonathan Kaplan and to my administrative host, Brett Bowman. Through email correspondence Dr. Kaplan suggested that I would teach an undergraduate course on the Dead Sea Scrolls, a course he normally gives but due to reduced teaching load would not be able to give during the Fall semester of 2022. I was happy to take on the course and was generously provided course material from Dr. Kaplan.

Guided by Mr. Bowman, I began the visa process which was more extensive and complicated than I had expected. As neither Mr. Bowman nor I was familiar with the process (Mr. Bowman being recently hired for the position) it was prolonged as we missed to complete some important steps of the way and had to figure out why the visa application didn't go through as expected. However, it all turned out well in the end, and by early summer my family and I had received our J1 and J2 visas.

In April, my husband, 11-year-old son and I accepted the generous offer to go on a planning trip to Austin. It was by then already hot outside, exceeding +30c and we quickly realized the importance of a water bottle! I met with Dr. Kaplan who gave me tour on campus as well as introduced me to the D.MES where I met Prof. Na'ama Pat-El who is chair of the department. I was well received and immediately experienced the good atmosphere at the D.MES.

Advised by previous STINT fellows in Austin, we had decided to look for a house in Hyde Park, a lovely, bohemian neighborhood filled with colorful bungalows in close proximity to the university. As it proved difficult to find housing within our budget, I reached out to Mr. Bowman and Dr. Kaplan for help. Dr, Kaplan put me in contact with a colleague at the UT who was interested in leasing her house and in April we visited the house and signed a leasing-contract. My son was enrolled at Lee Elementary, a school attended by the children of several previous STINT fellows. Luckily the school had a visitors' day in April, so we got the chance to see it from the inside, something that was important for us and especially for my son.

Tasks and Responsibilities

My teaching responsibility for the Fall semester of 2022 was a course in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The course presented an in-depth study of the Dead Sea Scrolls in order to understand better the development of law, interpretation, ritual, messianism, apocalypticism, and prayer in the late Second Temple period. The course also included discussion of the archaeology of the Qumran community, textual production and transmission in antiquity, scribal practices in antiquity, and pseudonymous authorship. Given that the course runs over a whole semester, there was plenty of time for the students to reflect on the achieved

knowledge and to relate the different areas of knowledge, something that aroused more interesting discussions as time went by.

I gave three 50-minute classes per week: Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Being used to teach for at least 90 minutes at a time, I worried that 50 minutes would be a too short time to communicate anything of value. Despite my worries, it turned out well. I discovered that 50 minutes is a lot of time and also the amount of time that you may hold the attention of the students. Moreover, there are benefits of meeting the students three times a week, the small chats before and after class where you get to know each other as well as the smaller structure of preparation for the students, are helpful for both students and teachers.

Thanks to Dr. Karen Grumberg, who lent me her office, I had a beautiful space to work in and to receive the students during drop-in-hours.



(My classroom in the Parlin Hall)

I had 25 students in my class. Unlike many of my students in Göteborg who are becoming ministers, pastors, or teachers, my UT students—being part of the Liberal Arts program— are preparing for a life as journalists, lawyers, or doctors, to mention some. They also came from a more diverse religious and cultural background. This meant that they didn't always have previous knowledge on the subject taught but also that they could contribute on a deeper level from their respective competence in other areas. I found the students being both ambitious and friendly, it was easy to create a good learning environment where the students could express their opinions on the subject dealt with. The result of the course evaluation confirmed that the students were overall very satisfied with the course, and so was I.

To my aid I had a teaching assistant, Ruthanne Brooks. She was enrolled in the Master program at D.MES and turned out to be a valuable help for me during the course. She became an important support for the students and together we planned the course as it went along; all during our long Wednesday-coffee breaks at a local café. She did most of the course grading and also some teaching.

The course on the Dead Sea Scrolls carries the 'Global Cultures flag'. Global Cultures courses are designed to increase your familiarity with cultural groups outside the United States. In such a course one should expect a substantial portion of the grade to come from assignments covering the practices, beliefs, and histories of at least one non-U.S. cultural group, past or present.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

Apart from my course on the Dead Sea Scrolls, I participated as much as possible in the department activities, such as attending graduate seminars, faculty

meetings, public lectures, and social events. It should be pointed out that I was invited to all department meetings and that I was treated as a regular fellow faculty member, something that I've understood is not always the case for STINT fellows.

I took part in Dr. Kaplan's graduate Hebrew bible course where the students read through the whole Hebrew bible during a two-year period. It was interesting and educational to participate in this highly ambitious course and I learned much from Dr. Kaplan's pedagogics. It turned out that the Master/PhD program at the D.MES at UT is the most ambitious in the whole US when it comes to Biblical Hebrew at a graduate level.

I also took part in the international scholars' program at the UT. Texas Global offers a variety of opportunities to engage and meet with other international scholars. One of these is the recurring event "Meet the scholar" where international scholars meet, eat, drink, and talk under informal conditions. I also went to a Thanksgiving lunch where international scholars were offered a traditional thanksgiving meal, all very nice and generous.

Lens Suk at Texas Global invited me and the other STINT fellow at the UT to a lunch soon after arrival. She was very helpful with everything concerning both work and family life in Austin. Before leaving Austin in December, she invited us to have coffee and to summarize the semester, it was a valuable moment.

In October, STINT invited to a mid-term meeting in Columbus, Ohio. It was a great time for a break and to reflect on my stay so far with the other STINT fellows. Together we summarized the first half of the term and reflected upon how to best manage the second remaining part of the semester. I was also interested in listening to the special invited guests who talked about the University of Ohio's conscious attempts to attract first generation students as

well as the discussion about the land grant universities, also called 'land-grab' universities.

On November 29, I was invited to give a public lecture at the department. The topic, "Metaphor or Symbol? Temple Imagery and Community Identity in the *Serekh ha-Yahad* (1QS)." was based on my current research. The lecture was attended not only by faculty and students from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, but also by faculty and students from the Department of Religious Studies. The discussion that followed after my lecture gave me important insights into my research and I was happy for the possibility of introducing myself also as a researcher.

Important Learning Points: Comparing and Reflecting on the Teaching Experience

As a STINT fellow you have both the option of designing a course of your own or to take over an existing course, I chose the latter and found it an interesting experience. The syllabus, course readings, assignments, and topics for each class were already fixed. I certainly had a chance to rework the course but I decided to keep it the way it was as I could use my creativity to develop the lectures and seminars as I wanted, and to try different pedagogical methods in class. I found that I learned a lot from 'walking in Dr. Kaplan's shoes' for a semester. The course was well designed, and I was in particular impressed with the way that the learning outcomes from each lecture and seminar were clearly presented. The clear structure of the course with a number of well-chosen examinations in form of quizzes, tests and papers helped the students in their progression. I also found the course grading system to be transparent and motivating for the students and a help for the teacher.

The 100-credit system included both assignments and class attendance. Late submission caused reduced credits, something that motivated the students to submit in time. From a teacher's perspective this means that you do not have to offer re-examinations; it is up to the student to decide his/her level of ambition. Further, I found that the matrix used for grading the papers was a helpful tool in communicating the strengths and weaknesses of the work at hand, giving the students a clear idea of which area of academic writing to improve. I will certainly benefit from these experiences in my role as a teacher back home.

I also found the system with teaching assistants (TA) to be beneficial for both the TA and the teacher. As a TA you are gradually given responsibility and can grow as a teacher under the supervision of a senior colleague. As a teacher it is great to have an assistant to help out with administration, and in the best of worlds, someone to plan and run the course with.

As an overall impression, the current situation and future of Humanities in the US is so much more promising than in Sweden where we constantly struggle with an alarmingly sharp decrease of students across the Swedish universities leading to many Swedish departments in the Humanities facing serious economic challenges. The consequence of this is that courses not attracting enough students will be cancelled or, as the case with my home department, campus courses become online courses. Given the US higher education system in which students have much broader education and the Humanities are an integrated part of the overall education for the students, the Humanities are less vulnerable. This may be the best part of my overall US-experience; having experienced to work in an environment where there is a future for Humanities.

Action Plan forward

Firstly, I will lecture on my experiences as a STINT fellow for my colleagues at the Departments of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at the University of Gothenburg. Being the fifth STINT fellow sent out by the department, there is already a great familiarity and appreciation of the program, hence there is a tradition to build on. Secondly, I will meet with my nearest colleagues teaching Biblical Studies and Hebrew and share my experiences with them. Hopefully this will help us in developing our courses and pedagogics both for undergraduates, graduates and PhD-students. When it comes to future interaction with my host department, I am already invited to a research conference at the D.MES in November. I find that there is a mutual interest in upholding the academic contacts between myself and those of the faculty at D:MES that I came into closest contact with.

Recommendations

I hold it for likely that those accepted as STINT fellows already know how to network and navigate in academic environments and therefore have the capacity of making the best of their Teaching Sabbatical workwise. I do however have some general recommendations when it comes to creating a life abroad for such a limited time as is the case with the Teaching Sabbatical: 4,5-5 months is a short time for creating a social network, finding activities for oneself and the family (if you bring one) but it is a too long time not to have a social network and activities! My recommendation is therefore to live as if you were to stay for a longer period, sign up for activities, go to social events, invite family and friends from Sweden to come and visit, and plan for at least one journey to see something different during your stay.

I would also recommend future STINT fellows to keep an extra eye on both the visa process and the process of being hired and not take for granted that this runs smoothly. Unfortunately, I realized just upon arrival in Austin that I was not hired. I could not receive my UT-EID, access Canvas or get an UT-email, all necessary for my work. Hence, I had to begin the process of being hired at arrival. This is quite an extensive process, requiring a lot of paperwork, and it took up most of my time during the first weeks of my stay in Austin. I was however assisted by Mr. Bowman, Prof. Pat-El, and Dr. Kaplan who did everything in their power to help me navigate in the complicated process.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank STINT for giving me the opportunity of spending a Teaching Sabbatical at the University of Texas at Austin and for the generous sponsoring. This has been an amazing opportunity for achieving new perspectives on teaching and learning in one of the top-international higher education environments. I am grateful to my home department LIR at GU for supporting me during the admission process and allowing my leave of absence during my time at the UT. I am in particular grateful to chair of department Katarina Leppänen and to director of studies Martin Westerholm.

My heartfelt thanks go to the Department of Middle Eastern studies, in particular to Prof. Na'ama Pat-El and Dr. Jonathan Kaplan for receiving me, making me a part of the faculty, and for being so generous with your time. I would like to extend my gratitude to the whole faculty and staff at the D.MES who all made me feel so welcome and cared for throughout the semester.



Faculty at the D.MES

I would also like to thank Lena Suk at Texas Global for taking care of me and STINT fellow Tobias Samuelsson during the Fall semester of 2022.

Most of all I wish to thank my lovely students for making my STINT Sabbatical into such a great experience!

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