

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN PALESTINE: CURRENT STATUS AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

MAHER HASHWEH  
MAZEN HASHWEH

## Background

**P**alestine, located at the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, was, as part of greater Syria, under Ottoman rule for about 400 years. After World War I, Palestine fell under British mandate. Subsequent to, or concurrent with, the creation of the State of Israel on the majority of the historic land of Palestine in 1948, Palestinians stayed in two areas in Palestine, while the rest became refugees in other countries. The area of the West Bank is 5,860 square kilometers and the area of the Gaza Strip is 380 square kilometers. In 1967 both areas were occupied by Israel, and in 1994 the Palestinians were granted some autonomy that included control of the educational system in these areas.

The population of the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, in 1997 was 2.68 million inhabitants, in comparison with the population of the previous year, which was 2.53, with an increase of 5.9 percent. The Palestinian society is a young society; the percentage of people younger than 15 years old ranges from 40.2 percent in the Jerusalem district to 50.3 percent in the Gaza Strip districts.

The modern educational system in Palestine was established during the British Mandate period. The West Bank became part of Jordan after 1948; consequently, schools were integrated into the Jordanian educational system. Egypt administered the Gaza Strip, and schools adopted the Egyptian educational system. After 1967, the educational system in these two areas continued to use the Egyptian and Jordanian curricula with some modifications that were introduced by the Israeli military 'Civil Administration' which directed the educational system. In 1994, the Palestinians took control of a system of pre-tertiary education that was governed by the British, Jordanians, Egyptians, and finally the Israelis; prior to that, therefore, Palestinians had never controlled the system.

When the Palestinian Ministry of Education assumed control in 1994, the system was in a state of neglect. The Palestinians' priorities focused on building new schools and repairing existing ones, and they set low priority to improving the quality of education, postponing the tackling of this issue to a later stage. However, with the very high population growth among Palestinians (the student population in schools is around 815,000 students in the year 1999/2000 and grows

at about six percent annually) they are forced - after almost five years of taking control of the educational system - to grapple with the quantitative problem of providing education for all rather than improving the quality of education. Examination of recent reports about the status of school education in Palestine (World Bank, 1994, Palestinian Ministry of Education, 1995) indicates that the most important problem facing the system of per-tertiary education is still one of quality; schools emphasise knowledge transmission and rote learning, and neglect teaching the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for the twenty-first century.

At the tertiary level, two-year colleges existed since the fifties. These institutes, which focused on teacher training, technical educational or liberal arts, were private, governmental or belonging to the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency). In the early seventies three universities that granted bachelor degrees were established. Most existing institutes of higher education came into being under occupation with the secret help of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was illegal at the time. These institutes were part of individual and collective efforts to preserve the Palestinian identity and to provide young Palestinians with the opportunity to pursue higher education after it became increasingly difficult for them to pursue it abroad. Prior to the Gulf War, about 60 percent of the community colleges and all the universities were funded with contributions from Arab countries. After the Oslo II Agreement, international donor organizations fund the major share of the costs of higher education in Palestine.

## **Current status**

### *Universities*

There are eight Palestinian universities and four university colleges that offer Bachelor degrees. Most of these institutions are public, with only two that are directly supervised by the Palestinian Authority, and two supervised by the UNRWA. The total number of students registered at the Palestinian universities and university colleges is about 52,000, with males constituting 56.4 percent of the total. The largest proportion of students is enrolled in the faculties of education (23.9%), while the smallest proportion of students is enrolled in the faculty of medical professions (0.05%). The proportion of students enrolled in science faculties or science-based professional schools is less than 25 percent.

There are large differences between one university and the other in numbers of students, and in indices of quality of education, such as qualifications of faculty members, and extent of facilities and resources such as books and scientific equipment. The average ratio of students to teachers in the different universities and colleges is 36, ranging from 74 to 11.

The total number of teaching staff is 1726 individuals, 86.3 percent of whom are males, while Ph.D. holders constitute 46.2 percent, ranging from 0.0 percent to 67.3 percent. The average ratio of books to students among universities is 11, ranging from 2 to 99.

### *Colleges*

There are 16 Palestinian colleges that offer programmes leading to a Diploma. There are four governmental colleges supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, three colleges supervised by the UNRWA, and nine private colleges. There are 4299 students registered in Palestinian colleges, 45.3 percent of whom are males. The largest percentage of students (34.5%) can be found in the field of business and finance. The smallest percentage (1.1%) is in the field of social work. The average ratio of students per teacher is 16, ranging from 26 to 5. The number of teaching staff is 366 teachers; of these, 71.3 percent are males. Ph.D. holders constitute only 4.9 percent of the teaching staff, while Bachelor degree holders constitute 57.9 percent. The average ratio of books to students is 39, ranging from 214 to 4.

### **Recent developments**

While there have been a number of reports issues recently which provide detailed analyses of the tertiary educational system in Palestine (Hashweh, 1998; Ministry of Higher Education, 1997; MAS and World Bank, 1997), in the context of this short report we can only focus on the most important challenges facing the system. We are categorising these under three headings: policies, programmes, and finance. We will deal with each of these in turn.

### *Policies*

There are indications that the newly-established Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is facing difficulties in implementing policies and regulations in a situation characterised by lack of proper administration, planning and policy-setting in most of the institutes of higher education. The situation is made more challenging because there is an absence of legislation, (since the draft Law of Higher Education has not been adopted by the Palestinian Legislative Council yet). As an example, not all universities adhere to set admission criteria. In the Fall of 1996, Al-Azhar University, situated in Gaza, had a very high student to faculty ratio (48:1), but in order to improve this ratio in the direction of the set guidelines,

and considering the low ratio of library books per student, the university was asked not to admit more than 1,000 students. The University, however, admitted over 2,000 students, as a result of a political decision to respond to the closure imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip, and the inaccessibility of Gaza students to West Bank institutions. In 1997/98, the student to faculty ratio has jumped to 74:1. Table 1 shows the total numbers of students in universities and two-year colleges for the last four years.

TABLE 1: Number of students in Institutes of Higher Education in Palestine between 1994/95 and 1997/98

Type of Institute	Academic Year			
	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98
Community College	4110	3822	4599	4299
Universities	29380	37094	46176	52427
Total	33490	40916	50775	56726

Source: MOHE, 1998; PCBS, 1997

The Table shows that the enrollment in universities is increasing at a rate that is seriously threatening the quality of higher education in Palestine: it is clear that the Palestinians do not have the material and human resources necessary to sustain such a development. On the other hand, despite the various calls for the expansion of technical education, the enrollment in these two-year institutes has remained relatively stable.

Another example is that although guidelines to limit duplication in professional schools were issued, the CHE did not have the political or executive authority to implement such policies. Thus, there are engineering schools at three universities: Birzeit, Najah and Gaza Islamic; two pharmacy schools, one at Al-Azhar and another at Najah; two law schools, at Al-Quds and Najah (with a third one being contemplated); and two schools of agriculture, at Najah and Hebron.

The institutes of higher education are usually governed by boards of directors. There are problems with the selection process of the board members, the qualifications of the members, and the definition of rights and duties of the boards. There are, also, serious management problems at the universities, where qualified senior staff are difficult to find, especially at the salary scale available. Few, if any, training programmes are available for potential staff at the middle or senior

management levels. Again, it is not clear how much power the MOHE has to enforce its regulations and directives on existing universities. The possible interference of the political structure has, in the past, complicated matters, and continues to be used as a pretext to violate regulations and procedures. However, the MOHE is now in the final stages of introducing a new policy that makes a distinction between the licensing of institutions of higher education, and accreditation at the programme level.

### *Programmes*

Examining the programmes at the Palestinian universities and colleges reveals problems in the efficiency, relevance and quality of higher education in Palestine. According to a recent report by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE, 1997), there are several departments in the social and natural sciences which are duplicated at every university and whose graduates find difficulties in employment. Continuing education programmes initiated by universities and colleges seem to manifest a very high degree of duplication; and they do not fit within any coordinated plan, with clear and measurable objectives. Many university-level programmes which are currently offered are irrelevant to societal and market needs. The present curricula at the community college level tend to be abstract and theoretical, and are not in tune with rapid technological change. On the other hand, there is no mechanism for continuous curricular development and adjustment which could incorporate input from employers in the private sector. The programmes were designed, delivered and assessed without quality assurance mechanisms that could ensure competency.

As to the quality of education, the same MOHE report asserts that 'in the absence of a detailed micro-analysis of the quality of programs, the prevailing perception is that the overall quality of the output of the university-level academic training is low: both in terms of providing relevant skills to be used locally, as well as providing a solid academic grounding to allow the graduate to compete successfully, regionally and internationally.' (MOHE, 1997: 57).

The report continues to point out that research activities, where they are carried out, tend to be isolated from the teaching activity, and that the present structure at the universities presents the students with a compartmentalised and unreal approach to human knowledge. Finally, the report points out to the weakness of the graduates in language and communication skills.

Recently, some universities have started re-evaluating their programmes. However, the greatest developments are occurring in the technical colleges, where a new modular competency-based curriculum is being developed, and some programmes leading to a Bachelor of Technology in high technology areas are being designed.

## *Finance*

Since the Gulf War, a high degree of dependency on external funding developed, with the European Union being the main contributor. Efforts are being made by the MOHE in order to diversify the sources of funding. However, there is no concerted effort by the institutions themselves. A recent report by the World Bank (1997) asserts that the financing of the post-secondary level has still to be rationalized.

The MOHE recently reported that, given the prevailing economic situation, it could not support a policy whereby tuition fees were raised substantially in order to generate sufficient resources for the different institutions. Such a policy would also be generally resisted, given that there is a strong belief that access to higher education is a right, and that costs should be subsidised to a very large extent.

Other problems include the fact that the resources and facilities at universities and colleges - such as libraries, laboratory equipment, and so on - are not used to their fullest capacity after class hours. This decreased their cost-effectiveness. There are no noticeable serious attempts by most universities at developing income-generating activities as a means of increasing their revenue base. Universities do not exercise a serious budgeting process, which separates between operating and developmental needs. On the other hand, there is a rapid and uncontrolled expansion of course programmes, without any serious cost analysis and examination of their sustainability. Finally, there is no sustained, graduated government subsidising, or regular budget allocations, although the MOHE has presented a proposal to the Palestinian National Authority for revenues through service and consumer taxes. One can understand, therefore, why currently there is a serious public debate within the Palestinian Government and the Legislative Council regarding the financing of higher education.

## **Conclusion**

We have painted a somewhat gloomy picture of the state of higher education in Palestine, a picture indicating that we have reached a situation where a system that used to be the pride of the Palestinians a few years ago - especially in the light of its contribution to the steadfastness of the Palestinians under occupation and to the preservation of national culture and identity - is now seriously on the verge of collapse. The system is characterised by poor governance and planning, by lack of an adequate finance structure, by a rapid and at the same time often unjustifiable expansion of study programmes, and by indications of a deterioration in the quality of education. However, there are some important signs of hope. Chief

among these is the fact that our most important resource for painting this picture was a report by the Palestinian MOHE that also includes a rationalisation plan to improve the situation. In addition, designs of new study programmes (and particularly in the technical colleges), serious efforts to enforce new policies by the MOHE, and public debate about the crises of higher education – all these provide indicators that, at the public and official levels, efforts to confront the crises are under way.

---

**Maher Hashweh** is Assistant Professor of Education at Birzeit University. Address for correspondence: Department of Education, Birzeit University, Birzeit, Palestinian Autonomy Areas, via Israel. Tel./Fax.: +972.2.2956567. E-mail: mhashweh@arts.birzeit.edu. **Mazen Hashweh** is Head of Expert Team on Vocational Training, Palestinian Ministry of Labour, Ramallah. Address for correspondence: 4 Ibn-Batuta Street, East Jerusalem, via Israel. Tel./Fax. +972.2.6284181. E-mail: muhanned@mol.pna.org

## References

- Hashweh, M. (1998) *Education and Training in Palestine*. Ramallah, Palestine: Palestinian Ministry of Labor – Expert Team on Vocational Training.
- MAS and The World Bank (1997) *Development under Adversity: The Palestinian Economy in Transition* (Draft 2).
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (1997) *Education Statistical Yearbook 1996/1997*. No.3. Ramallah, Palestine: PCBS.
- Palestinian Ministry of Education (1995) *Education: Palestinian National Program of Action*. Ramallah, West Bank: Ministry of Education (March).
- Palestinian National Authority: Ministry of Higher Education (1997) *Rationalization Plan for the Higher Education Sector (1997-2001)*. Ramallah, Palestine: MOHE.
- Palestinian National Authority: Ministry of Higher Education (1998) *Statistical Yearbook of Palestinian Universities and Colleges: 1997/1998*. Ramallah, Palestine: MOHE.
- The World Bank (1994) *Emergency Assistance to the Occupied Territories*. Washington, DC: World Bank.