

The Status of PhD Research in Palestine: Contemporary Issues and Future Challenges

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Introduction

Before beginning, it is important to note, when discussing any aspect of Palestinian institutions, in this case education, that Palestine presents an exceptional case. The situation that exists in Palestine is unlike that of any other state in the region, and as such the statistical data and information is itself exceptional. After all, Palestine is not yet a fully independent sovereign state, and access to and quality of education is disrupted as a direct consequence of the current political circumstances within both the West Bank and Gaza.

At present there are just fewer than 50 higher education institutions spread over the West Bank and Gaza; these include public and private universities, local community colleges and open education centres. The total number of students for the 2008/09 academic year standing at 182,556; of which there are 5,678 students studying for a higher level qualification (higher diploma, or masters). There is currently only one PhD degree programme offered within Palestine, provided by An-Najah University, which is in Chemistry and which currently has three students enrolled; applications have been made for two further PhD programmes in Mathematics and Physics, also at An-Najah University. The older of these academic institutions were established during the mid 1970s, and many more have followed over the recent decades.

Research in Palestine - Demonstrating a Need

There exists lack, as there has been for a number of decades, of credible and sustained academic research within Palestinian higher education institutions. This is acknowledged by recent studies and papers, including the 'Education Sector and Cross-Sector Strategy' for 2011- 2013 of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE). There are numerous reasons for this, and I will elaborate on these in this paper.

As the MoEHE states, the higher education institutions in Palestine were established with the main goal of providing training and education up to the bachelors degree level; the initial aim of the universities was to attract large numbers of students to prevent their emigration to other countries to fulfil their educational needs. During the early days of these institutions the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) funded all students who wished to continue their education in the newly established universities. However due to the political instability in the 1980s, due in part to the first Palestinian intifada, the funding of higher education was reduced, which meant that students began to carry the responsibility of financing their tuition fees themselves; though the political situation has stabilised greatly in recent years, students are still required to cover the full costs of their tuition. Tuition fee payments do not cover the full educational costs however, with only 40% of costs being met in some of the public universities; thus, leaving higher education institutions in Palestine with a funding deficit. Funding was made available through the EU, which covered staffing costs and eventually through an agreement between the MoEHE and the World Bank. Though much of these financial deficits have now been reduced or eliminated, they do exist in some institutions, and the risk of their reoccurrence due to the instability of funding streams is very real. This can have a trickledown effect on quality standards; as the MoEHE strategy states, there is a

direct link between the financial deficit of the Palestinian higher education centres and poor quality teaching (only 34% of teaching staff hold a PhD, for example).

Financial restraints are one of the main reasons why academic research has been marginalised in Palestine. Higher education received less than 5% of the PA's annual budget in 2008, far below the relative amount received by higher education sectors in other states. Because of the severe lack of domestic funding, from the PA, within the higher education sector, Palestinian institutions are required to seek external financial assistance which usually comes from donor countries; and all scientific research centres within Palestine depend on this donor money. Inevitably this dependence on funding from foreign governments has a significant, and often negative, impact on the research that is produced. Research priorities are set, not by the researcher or by the needs of the institution, the Palestinian economy and local need, but by the donor country. Similarly, research that is funded by the private sector, either Palestinian or international, is focussed on areas that are already established such as Pharmaceuticals.

Another contributory reason to the lack of viable research in Palestine is that the infrastructure that exists within the higher education sector is not equipped to deal with high level academic research. Upon their establishment Palestinian universities were focussed on one sole aim, to provide students with a bachelor's degree; the infrastructure that was put in place to accommodate these aims has not been upgraded to deal with the contemporary needs of the sector. The emphasis was placed on teaching, not research, with bachelor's level students not being required to complete independent research to achieve their qualification. This focus on teaching means that academic staff spend their time teaching rather than conducting research, and whilst some academic research is undertaken, it often goes unnoticed as there are only a few suitable journals in which one can publish such work. Masters level study has suffered from this lack of research based education as well, with the current system for obtaining a bachelor's degree changing very little in the way of independent research requirements. This may help explain the late emergence of higher studies programmes in Palestinian universities.

It should also be noted that academic freedom is not always enjoyed universally either in the West Bank or Gaza; like many countries in the region freedom of expression is restricted, though perhaps less visibly in Palestine, and as such the freedom to research and publish as one pleases is a luxury that most, but not all, can afford.

The final major cause for the lack of research in Palestine is the one reason that is unique to Palestine. The West Bank and Gaza have been under what the international community has regarded as 'occupation' by Israel since 1967. This paper does not seek to make any points regarding the political situation, but rather to present the facts as they are and how they are affecting the state of research within Palestine. Since the start of the second intifada, there have been a number of actions taken by the Israeli military that have had considerable effects on the ability of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to carry out research successfully; most notably are the military enforced restrictions on the movement of Palestinians both within the West Bank and Gaza, but also between the two. Gaza was isolated with the closing of its only airport in 2000 and with severe restriction of movement in and out of the enclave; this made it near impossible for Palestinian students and researchers to travel between Gaza and the West Bank to conduct any research or study. Movement restrictions have eased in the West bank over the past few years and in the last few months in Gaza, though freedom of movement is still heavily restricted in Gaza, which has been under siege since 2007. Also instrumental in restricting the ability of Palestinians to carry out successful research are the prohibitions of importing certain technical equipment, scientific apparatus used in laboratories for example, and these restrictions are even more stringent for Gaza. In addition to these 'on the ground' obstacles to research, at the onset of the second intifada in

2000, funding for higher education in Palestine that came from donor countries was reduced to almost zero, and was reallocated for 'emergency needs'.

Joint Degree Programmes

Palestinian students have benefitted enormously from the current existence of joint master's level study programmes with European countries. Such programmes allow students to experience, not only a different culture, but also a different method of study. As students who have participated in these joint programmes return to Palestine it is hoped that they and their ideas can help change academic practice in Palestinian higher education and research institutions (increase independent research etc.) Though such programmes are indeed helpful, there are currently no joint PhD programmes between Palestinian and European universities; one very clear reason for this is that there is currently only one PhD scheme offered in Palestine and this is in its infancy. Though, thinking to the future, joint PhD schemes are certainly an attractive prospect for Palestine; they would facilitate an increase of PhD study programmes within the West Bank and Gaza, whilst allowing Palestinian infrastructure to adjust to become more accommodating of scientific research, without the pressure to make instant changes. It would be beneficial to the Palestinian higher education sector to first introduce PhD study in such a way, as the exceptional situation (entry restrictions etc.) in the West Bank and Gaza means that very few, if any, Palestinian universities attract international students; thus for the moment at least, programmes of study (including the one current, and any future PhD schemes) are designed to accommodate only Palestinian students. This is in contrast with other Arab states, Egypt for example, where universities are able to attract candidates from all over the world, particularly from Arabic speaking countries, and thus can afford more ambitious and independent PhD programmes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The future of a state depends on higher education and scientific research; Palestine has been under occupation, in one form or another, for more than 40 years and is yet to achieve the status of a sovereign nation. Higher education in Palestine is desired, in the local culture, due to the value placed on knowledge, not simply as a means to improve the quality of one's life or the economy. This explains the increasing number of higher education institutions in the Palestinian territories (49) compared to the inhabitant's number (slightly more than four million). It should also be noted that the institution to student ratio can be explained in part because of the restrictions placed on the movement Palestinians; access to higher education was solved by creating more universities, to serve a local community that were unable to travel to existing institutions.

As detailed previously there can be little doubt that higher education and scientific research in Palestine faces many obstacles which prevent this vital sector from playing its role in building the future state of Palestine.

The need of an objective evaluation of the higher education and the scientific research has become a necessity to make this sector, flexible (capable of adjusting quickly with the needs and changing conditions), serving and supportive (meeting the needs of the society, the local and regional market), qualitatively competitive (its criteria competes with the criteria of higher education regional and international systems), distinguished (scientific research environment, creativity and innovation), and a vehicle for economic and social development.

The first obstacle in developing the higher education and the research in Palestine is the lack of human resources, this problem was described by the MoEHE in its strategic plan, it shows that the total number of workers in the Palestinian higher education institutions in 2008/2009 is around

12,433 (21.7% part time) including 76% males and 25% females distributed according to job classification of the Ministry as follows: 44% educational academic, 4% academic administrator, 0.1% academic researcher, 4.5% administration, 15.2% clerical work, 7.4% assistant teacher and researcher, 3% specialized professionals, 8% technicians and artisans, 13.8% unskilled labourers.

The above-mentioned distribution shows that the teaching faculty make up 44% of the workers (around 55% with the research and teaching assistants) and this ratio is not in harmony with the international distribution (two thirds for teaching and the rest as administration and services). Members of the teaching faculty do not enjoy job security and often look for jobs abroad or part time work with companies, industries and NGOs, meaning an increase in emigration of the qualified competent people abroad. On the other hand, and in light of the current conditions in the higher education institutions, it is extremely difficult to attract teaching expertise from abroad into Palestine. The situation as it stands has 34% of the members of the teaching faculty in the Palestinian universities holding PhD degrees and more than 50% holding a master's degree; as we go higher in the academic degrees, we notice lower female representation. The percentage of part-time members of the teaching faculty is 21.7%.

Another obstacle detailed in the above section is the constraint on financial resources, again the report of the MoEHE shows that this crisis is escalating gradually, and even if the tuition fees are paid in full, they won't cover more than 60 - 70% of the operating expenses of the public universities. This difference between the revenues and the expenditure will increase if the Ministry implemented its quality criteria through defining a certain ratio of students per teacher, and the ratio of the Masters holders to the PhD holders and ratio of the graduates and non-graduates and number of hours in addition load, etc. as stated there is a direct proportional relation between financial deficit and poor quality for teaching.

This deficit in the budgets of several higher education institutions has had several negative impacts:

- i. Salaries were not paid on the set time every month; the saving funds were used to achieve sustainability.
- ii. "Artificial" reduction of the cost of the student through refraining from increasing the number of faculty members to meet the increasing number of students.
- iii. Expenses of libraries were reduced.
- iv. The master's programme was opened as a source of high tuition and fees.
- v. The load of the faculty member was increased.
- vi. Number of part time workers was increased.
- vii. Expenditure on attending scientific conferences was reduced and budgets of scientific research were also reduced.
- viii. Scholarships and similar chances were reduced.

This general situation of the higher education has badly influenced the scientific and academic research and shares the responsibility with other reasons on the absence of the PhD programmes. The lack of an important industrial sector (traditional *and* new technologies) and companies which, in a developed country, support the research through the funding they offer to diverse subjects and fields. We can understand why this sector has almost no impact on the Palestinian economy since it is considered by many a 'conflict zone' where companies are always hesitant to invest.

The absence of a legal infrastructure to protect the intellectual property and to promote scientific research is a contributory factor; the current law is a remnant of Ottoman rule in Palestine dating back to 1911; a revision of these laws and the creation of new ones is a must in the future.

The effect of 'occupation' on research and higher education is again a barrier to success; all citizens of Arab countries wishing to study (or simply visit) are prohibited from entering the Palestinian territories, this is in stark contrast to other Arab countries where we can find Jordanian PhD students studying in Lebanon and Egyptians in Morocco etc. Therefore we believe that one of the reasons of the lack of PhD programmes in the Palestinian territories is this prohibition of access. Furthermore the freedom of movement between the West Bank and Gaza is also severely restricted and in many cases, almost impossible. As a direct result of this present 'closed' nature of the West Bank and Gaza, any PhD programme in Palestine would not be self-sustaining, and a situation would inevitably arise whereby the input would far outweigh the eventual output. This can be demonstrated by the current state of the sole PhD programme currently operating in Palestine; with the number of the PhD students rarely exceeding four, and more commonly there are just one or two students, depending on the year.

The lack of the lecturers, who hold a doctoral degree, in most fields of study, could be one of the serious obstacles faced by Palestinian universities when seeking accreditation of any future PhD programmes.

In final conclusion, the current state of PhD research in Palestine is, as best, sub-par and the reasons for this have been detailed above; the recommendations of this paper are that more joint PhD programmes be initiated to fill in this gap in viable research. These joint PhD schemes would allow a new generation of students to acquire the skills needed to be able to carry out world class research.

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