

Challenges to Higher Education in a Palestinian Statehood

I have always had the fullest admiration of the Palestinian people who were able, despite occupation and in the absence of the experience of statehood, to build universities that are among the best in the area. Difficulties faced by Palestinians in the Diaspora made it inevitable for them to be self-reliant. Frequent migrations have taught them to value education highly. Those with education made it through life, and those without education had difficult times. Education in its turn brought wealth to some Palestinians working abroad. It thus became necessary to build bridges between people who are out and those who are inside and to capitalise on human resources.

Palestinians do not have natural resources to rely on, no oil, limited water resources and no land. Since education is the only capital Palestinians have, it cannot be traditional, it has to be well-tuned to the needs of the people, it should seek to alleviate poverty and move towards globalisation. The prerequisite for joining global education is quality and Palestinian higher education has to be competitive in an era of globalisation.

I. Challenges to Palestinian Higher Education

Thus the role of Palestinian universities is a challenging one; universities need to “tailor education” to the needs of the people and to raise the quality of their teaching and research to the level expected of them. In addition to the responsibility of preparing students for employment, Palestinian universities have a national responsibility: the university is part of the national aspiration of Palestinian people and part of their value system.

Palestinian higher education has to render the following results:

1. preservation of Palestinian cultural heritage, universities should fulfil national aspirations;
2. promotion of democratic, cultural and human values. They should encourage dialogue, multilingualism, pragmatism and develop real democracy in the minds of men and women;
3. search for excellence through serious encouragement in competitions;
4. develop human resources and make them really contribute to the social and economic development;
5. making studies and surveys to find the priority areas of human resources development services, and to plan and structure programmes on how we want a human being to be;

6. universities should be flexible in modifying plans, activating human resources and training people for life-long education through constant refreshing of their courses;
7. university education should be accessible to all those who are qualified on the basis of merit;
8. universities should help in the modernisation of education in a world of uncertainties and to a population of students which is increasing rapidly;
9. universities should meet the challenges of globalisation where competition becomes high and knowledge generated therein is the most important tool.

II. Palestinian Universities and Palestinians of the Diaspora

It is time to call upon the Palestinians of the Diaspora to help in building their own country as they have left their imprints on many countries especially in the Gulf. Palestinians are highly educated people and many are prominent distinguished professors abroad. They need to shed their knowledge and experience on the mother land. They can keep their roots abroad while helping their old country to develop particularly in human resources.

Palestinians should not follow other Arab models in university education since the experience of the eight Palestinian universities is outstanding and needs to be capitalised on. There is, however, the necessity of co-operation between all Palestinian universities and the organisation of this co-operation should be the responsibility of the Council for Higher Education. Further, the Council of Higher Education is also responsible for funding and technical co-operation. Funding should be made available to Palestinian universities.

III. Access to Higher Education

When we speak of access to higher education, many universities and other countries have fallen to misinterpretation of this terminology. I wish to remind you that the declaration of human rights has emphasised free education mainly in terms of Basic Education for All, in terms of the compulsory cycle. That education is a must for every human being.

But when it comes to higher education, the universal declaration of human rights has said higher education shall be equally accessible to all, on the basis of merit. Let us not forget the merit, because once we talk about higher education we are talking about access to higher education by those who are qualified for higher education and who can make the quality in terms of higher education. Otherwise, we will end up with low quality university graduates, who will have no jobs because they do not meet the standard of future challenges, they do not have a brand, we have to brand people by the quality education. Low quality graduates is a waste of the investment in higher education.

It is of serious importance how to modernise and better manage institutions of higher learning. How to improve teaching to respond more effectively to a world of the twenty first century, a world of increasing competitiveness and uncertainty. What is the true value of education obtained from such an old and traditional system? The student population is growing rapidly and higher education systems are not responding to the market-place. How far will these trends shape the university of tomorrow and influence new trends in education? These, of course, are important questions for meeting the challenges of globalisation and free-market economy, based on competitiveness. Knowledge will be the most important tool for this global competition. Knowledge is generated in the university and this is where a large share of research is carried out. How much R and D can the university provide to link itself with industry? The market economy would influence not only funding of the university research, but also what should be taught to students. All those questions should be thoroughly debated. Each one makes a topic for a full seminar.

IV. Value of Higher Education to Palestinians

Palestinians value the pursuit of education greatly and have one of the highest enrolment rates in higher education among the countries in the region, whether living in the Palestinian territory now or living outside Palestine, in other countries. As a matter of fact, Palestinians have contributed a great deal to the development of the Arab region. They are truly behind much of the development in the Gulf and in the development of neighbouring countries, particularly Jordan. Wherever they went, because of their education, they have left their prints. They brought wealth and vast experience back to their country and this is the main source for their livelihood.

Palestinians see the development of human resources as their major source of income. The number of Palestinians at work in the Arab countries, although dwindling right now, has always been very important for investment at home. When a Palestinian democratic statehood is created, and stability is established, then it is expected that the State will develop quickly because of the abundance of manpower qualified resources abroad which will be backstopping the development of the State.

V. Imbalances in Current Trends

Through presenting some statistics, I wish to show that Palestinian universities suffered for a long time from imbalances between the number of students in the humanities and those in sciences in favour of humanities. This imbalance was attributed to the fact that Palestinian universities began their educational missions with humanities since they were less costly to establish and they required little expenses unlike sciences, engineering, pharmacy and medicine which need labs and other very costly requirements.

Drastic measures have to be put to redress the current imbalances with respect to the levels of study of the higher education system of the Palestinian State. Currently

we have about 36,000 students in the universities but only 9,000 students in technical and community colleges.

With regard to the fields of studies, we can see that university graduates over the last 15 years represent 81% in humanities, education, Islamic studies and business, 15% in basic sciences, and only 4% in technical fields. Enrolments in community colleges show only 25% in technical fields and 75% in academic fields. This is a very serious matter for the Palestinian authorities concerned. The challenge now is to deal with these imbalances. First of all it requires commitment of the State to finance higher education as a pillar of its statehood, and second it requires the private enterprise to link itself with the higher education institutions for developing the skilled human resources it requires. This link should be a partnership for training, retraining and research and development. So higher education in the Palestinian State should be innovative and not only for social status, but also for employment opportunities and the development of the Palestinian enterprises.

However, we should not underestimate the work already done. To create eight universities and twenty community colleges under foreign occupation is really a miracle, and no one should minimize the efforts which were made. But now, we should try to divert to new frontiers of disciplines with emphases on science, engineering and technology schools, and to create the endogenous capacity of the technical know-how. For this we need resources, particularly from the European Community, to overcome these imbalances in higher education.

Higher education in a Palestinian State should address transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary education. The problems facing humanity in the next millenium cannot be addressed through mono-disciplines with the traditional rigid walls. It should be flexible, based on a wide range of complimentary courses with various levels of credit hours exchangeable to allow the students to move across borderlines of specialisation, according to the needs of market for professionals. The development of new technologies particularly in the information age requires the development of new brain-intensive manpower resources. The same goes for genetic engineering and biotechnology which require a new interdisciplinary approach to cope with scientific achievements and development. Also, addressing the environment, population, poverty and management of human and natural resources requires a new style of graduates.

Education programmes should be developed as diversity of packages, in term of short and long courses and in-service education and training for adults. Evening courses to utilise the university infrastructure could be opened for those who are engaged in work during the day-hours.

Also there is a need to develop graduate studies in relevant fields. Since they account, at present, for only 1% of the university student population, research cannot be done effectively with this small percentage. There is a need to expand the graduate programme of each university, and to encourage research among faculty members. Funding resources should be made available to encourage research, incentives should

be created to promote research activities by reducing teaching load and promoting sabbaticals, travels to present papers, and attend symposia.

VI. Relevance

For the development of a truly democratic Palestinian State, higher education should be engaged in this development. Self-reliance and capacity building of human resources to the state is crucial. So Palestinian higher education should not develop after any model in adjacent Arab States. It should be endogenous to the geography and demography of the Palestinian State. It should be based on quality and merits, but should respond to the future needs of the state. It should stress the development of the limited natural resources particularly water resources and their management. Also, it should stress on biotechnology for intensive crop and animal production. It should stress on the exploitation technology of mineral resources. And above all, it should stress the new frontier areas to create the knowledge-based and brain-intensive information technology - cybernetics and small and medium industries. Management of natural and human resources is considered our weakest point in the Arab world. Public and private enterprise management for the high and medium levels should be stressed in creating the state-of-art Arab management schools. The art of management is considered the most important tool in overcoming the edge of competition in the market place.

VII. Structure of Higher Education

For community colleges, there are two modalities, one is public, and the second is private. The private could be modeled on non-profit foundations. Both should be encouraged to provide the technical and medium core of the Palestinian cadre. The education here should be linked to the needs of the community. It is important to stress languages and technical know-how.

For university higher education, it is important to dwell on the success of the current eight universities which exist now in Palestine. They need to be reinforced and organised in term of diversity of programmes, levels of programmes, quality, teaching and research, better infrastructure laboratory and workshop facilities. The need to use the state-of-art innovations in higher education should respond - but not be limited - to the needs of the growth and development of both public and private sectors of the Palestinian State.

The Palestinian universities should be independent and fully autonomous in term of management and in running their own affairs. Each university devises its own curricula, its own programmes, its own ways of development. They should not form a xerox copy, but should be diversified on their own to compete among themselves for quality, for better programmes and facilities. Each university, should develop its own structure under its own independent board of trustees, who appoints the president and safeguards the independence and freedom of expression of the university. In addition,

each board of trustees should be engaged in a continuous campaign of fund-raising for the development of the university.

There is a need for a council of higher education to coordinate and develop the state policy of higher education and to become the national steering mechanism for diverting financial resources from the state or foreign sources to fund the universities. No ministry of higher education should be created, because it has proven in other Arab countries to be ineffective and fringes on university independence. It also creates bureaucratic structure and red tape which hinders the growth of competition among universities. Any say about duplication is over exaggerated, because without duplication, competition for quality will be hindered and monopoly which yields low quality would prevail.

VIII. Financing Higher Education

1. Through the Council for Higher Education, the State should contribute to financing higher education institutions based on prorata of students admitted in science, engineering, technical fields, management and administration and humanity fields - each category has a level of allowance per student.
2. The European Community and other multilateral and bilateral funding sources should be approached with concrete projects for building the infrastructure of the higher education system for the Palestinian State. UNESCO is ready to contribute to the upstream work for identification and formulating projects undertaken to draw a Palestinian master plan of higher education. Palestinian universities are encouraged to attend the World Conference on Higher Education which will be convened by UNESCO in 1998.
3. Universities should be allowed to set their own student fees to cover their operating costs and compete for better quality of education. The fees should be paid by all students admitted to the university. However, low-income students who meet the criteria of admission may be helped to cover their fees in the following manner:
 - a. "Student loan" from a revolving fund, to be created in each university. Students, once they graduate and become employed, should return the "debt" to the university revolving fund to be utilised for other needy students.
 - b. Government scholarships for students who meet the criteria of admission. This will support both the State in building its own cadre of professionals, and the university for covering part of their student fees.
 - c. Study-through-working, where students are encouraged to work part-time on or off campus to finance their education. Students here may be

allowed to enrol as part-time students which may require an extra year or more to complete the requirements of their degrees.

- d. Fellowships from international agencies, foundations or local industries to support some students.

UNESCO has sent two missions to Palestine. One mission has produced the report on Higher Education in the West Bank and- Gaza Strip, a very comprehensive report and has addressed the funding mechanism of the Palestinian higher education. Another one was about the Human Resources in Palestine. Those two studies, which were undertaken by UNESCO, commenced immediately after the peace accord was signed with Israel on the White House lawn.

I would like to close by saying that the work that has been done so far by higher education system in Palestine is remarkable. The Palestinian State should dwell on what has been accomplished. Still a lot of work lies ahead. We should be more coherent in terms of what new disciplines and trans-disciplines need to be created and how to co-ordinate higher education and provide a sustainable funding mechanism. The linkages with other universities, whether we talk about networks with European universities, with American universities, or with Arab universities, are very important links to promote the higher education system. Those bridges bring knowledge, bring expertise, provide scholarships, short-term and long-term training. Also, what is needed, really, is to draw on the Palestinian Diaspora through "TOKTEN" projects, where the transfer of knowledge could be bridged to Palestine to provide the professional experience needed for the economic and social development. So Palestinians abroad will be intimately linked to contribute to build their dreams for a great country, a prosperous democratic Palestine.

The floor was then given to **Professor Gabi Baramki** for the closing address of the Conference and for the adoption of its Recommendations.

Professor Baramki began by stating that the International Conference on *The Role of Higher Education in the Context of an Independent Palestinian State* has successfully met the objectives for which it had been convened, and will play a positive role in the future development of Palestinian higher education and in promoting international co-operation between Palestinian and foreign universities. He referred to the numerous concrete proposals for future action and to the recommendations made in the various Conference sessions and in the working groups. This, he pointed out, renders it difficult to present to the Conference a final text which could be adopted as "The Recommendations of the Nablus Conference". He asked the participants to entrust the Organising Committee of the Conference and the Steering Committee of the PEACE Programme to prepare such a final document and to assure its wide circulation.

In the light of the debates of the Conference, Dr. Baramki stressed that higher education should be viewed as the basis for development and for meeting the social

and economic needs of the Palestinian society. At the present stage in the historical development of the Palestinian society, higher education is called upon to make a special effort towards developing awareness of the national identity, national integration and statehood. Above all else, it is important to raise the quality of its teaching, training and research. In this latter undertaking, international co-operation and initiatives such as the PEACE Programme constitute efficient and cost-effective instruments and ways of action.

Summing up the recommendations presented in the various sessions of the Conference, Dr. Baramki pointed out that they centred on two main themes:

1. Solidarity through action;
2. Stressing high quality programmes at Palestinian universities.

With regard to the first axis, he emphasised that solidarity with Palestinian universities has been the major reason for the establishment of the PEACE Programme. At present, it has become a priority to match the expression of solidarity with action. In concrete terms, the support of the PEACE partners is expected to be in the form of human resource development, more specifically:

- a) training university staff in the management of universities;
- b) faculty development, to meet immediate and long-term needs of the universities for qualified teaching and research staff.

With regard to enhancing the quality of education at Palestinian universities, the speaker pointed out that this is, at present, a priority of the Ministry of Higher Education. The PEACE Programme can help in several ways:

- a) scholarships and grants for study abroad, with stress on selecting young graduates with the relevant skills and potential for study in high quality programmes, so as to bring new blood into the faculty;
- b) support for scientific research, both basic and applied. This should take the form of joint research programmes between Palestinian universities and other member universities of the PEACE Programme. In this respect, the establishment of a National Research Council by the Ministry of Higher Education would be an important step in the support of research in general and at universities in particular;
- c) assistance for the establishment of graduate studies in relevant fields. Such vertical expansion needs to be done gradually and with a great deal of thought and proper feasibility studies. Planning ahead is vital in order to make sure that both human resources (software) and the infrastructure (hardware) are available, prior to launching any graduate program.

Prof. Baramki concluded by expressing warm thanks to all participants - both Palestinian and foreign - for attending and bringing their active contribution to the success of the Nablus Conference. He then thanked the Palestinian National Authority and the Ministry of Higher Education for extending their full support to the Conference, as well as UNESCO and the European Commission for their generous financial and intellectual contribution. Special thanks were conveyed to An-Najah National University, to its President, Dr. Munthir Salah and its Vice-President, Dr. Rami Hamdallah for a job well done. He also thanked the PEACE Programme, the staff of its office in Paris and Mr. Yousef Dajani, from the Ministry of Higher Education for the special effort to assure the preparation and successful holding of the Conference.

At the end of the session, a French participant asked for the floor in order to present, on behalf of the French universities represented at the Conference, a strong protest against the closure of several Palestinian institutions of Higher Education including Hebron University. He called the participants in the Conference to ask the Israeli Government to put an end to the harassment of Palestinian academics and students, in disregard of academic freedom and university autonomy. Such acts do not help stability and peace in the Region.