

## WORKING GROUPS SESSION

### Summary of debates

The Conference continued its deliberations in four Working Groups. Debates in all working groups were lively and resulted in numerous recommendations and in proposals for practical action. They are summed up below.

#### **Working group 1 : *Institutional Development of Higher Education in Palestine.***

Chairperson: **Professor Ivar Ekeland**, Université Paris IX-Dauphine

Main Speakers: **Dr. Rami Hamdallah**, Vice-President, An-Najah National University, and  
**Dr. Mufeed Shami**, Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education

Rapporteur : **Professor Valerio Grementieri**, University of Siena

The Working Group was attended by some fifty participants and occasioned a thorough debate on the current state and future prospects of Palestinian higher education. **Professor Ivar Ekeland** opened the session by underlining the importance of the topic assigned to it for the future development of Palestinian higher education. He emphasised the relevance of the addresses of President Yasser Arafat and of Minister Hanan Ashrawi for the debates in the Working Group. He also referred to the key-note address of Dr. Abu Lughod, during the first plenary session and Dr. Munthir Salah's brief presentation of the historical development of higher education in Palestine during the opening session, which should be kept in mind by the participants of the Working Group, in their deliberations.

Professor Ekeland gave the floor to **Dr. Mufeed Shami**, of the Ministry of Higher Education, who presented the document: *Higher Education in Palestine: Institutional Development*. Dr. Shami pointed out that Palestinian higher education evolved out of badly felt needs, on the initiative of private sector groups and individuals, including members of the Palestinian Diaspora. Most of the 8 Palestinian universities were established under occupation and were supported mainly by the PLO. They are independent, autonomous institutions and have their own boards of trustees.

Of the many issues facing higher education at present, Dr. Shami focused on problems related to access and quality. With regard to access, he pointed out that student numbers have grown constantly and the figure of 40,000 students will be reached soon. Access raises problems of admission criteria, assuring equity and, above all, preserving quality. With regard to criteria of admission, it was pointed out that the use of the Tawjihi score as a criterion, has led to an unbalanced situation in which students with high scores pursue science, engineering and pharmacy programmes, while those with low scores pursue studies in the humanities and education. Entrance

examinations have been introduced for certain programmes (English, Physical Education, Fine Arts), but the system requires further refining.

As far as equity is concerned, it was pointed out that, until recently, higher education was free for all students. At present, fees are charged and they have been on the increase. This calls for the introduction of a scholarship system and a student's loan scheme for poor, well qualified applicants. At the same time, it is necessary to create alternative educational opportunities for young people who seek admission to higher education. In this respect, the 22 community colleges in the West Bank and Gaza (run by UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority, or by the private sector) can play a major role, particularly in view of the fact that, many of them offer programmes in technical, vocational and service fields that are badly needed. Some of them could and should be turned into technical schools. Al-Quds Open University is one other possibility to solve the pressure for new admissions, provided the quality of its programmes is enhanced. Study abroad should be available for particularly gifted students, who can make an important contribution to Palestinian society upon their return.

The participants in the discussions identified a number of major challenges facing Palestinian higher education which require urgent action to be taken by those concerned. The following recommendations were made in this regard:

- i. elaboration of a national policy with regard to higher education, as a first priority need. The system of higher education, well-tuned to the needs of Palestinian society, should be of high quality, so as to render it competitive on the international and regional scene. The system should integrate both existing universities and the community colleges, with changes in missions, structures and programmes of existing institutions, as required, in order to assure their efficient functioning and, gradually, their self sustainability;
- ii. setting up an evaluation and accreditation system of Palestinian universities and colleges, to be conducted by an appropriate national body, while also involving the institutions themselves in the process, through self-evaluation. The aim of the evaluation should be to raise the quality of programmes, to increase their relevance for the needs of society, to remove current imbalances among programmes and, more importantly, to remove duplication of similar programmes offered by several universities. The evaluation exercise is also important in order to increase efficiency, through integration and co-ordination among existing institutions and programmes, so as to constitute a coherent national system of higher education;
- iii. to assure access to higher education, through measures aimed at achieving both equity and quality. This requires clearly defined admission criteria, (including entrance examinations, when this applies) and a system of scholarships for young Palestinians of needy families, who have the necessary qualifications to pursue higher education studies;

- iv. evaluation, revision and development of programmes and curricula, both at the university and college levels, as a means to achieve quality. Special emphasis must be placed on the development of programmes and curricula in science and technology;
- v. institutional and staff development should be pursued systematically, both at the national level, as part of the overall strategy for the further development of Palestinian higher education, and at the level of each institution;
- vi. a special effort must be made to improve management at various levels of the higher education system;
- vii. in the efforts to reach all the objectives mentioned above, *international* academic co-operation and support are called upon to play an important role. Building up closer links with the international academic community is vital for the Palestinian higher education institutions at this crucial moment of their development. Co-operation structures and networks such as the PEACE Programme, are particularly useful to further promote and diversify these links.

**Working group 2 : *Raising the Quality, Relevance and Efficiency of Teaching/Learning and Training at Palestinian Higher Education Institutions.***

Chairperson : **Professor Vincent Hanssens**, Secretary General, International Federation of Catholic Universities

Main Speaker: **Professor Afnan Darwazeh**, An-Najah National University

Rapporteur : **Professor Louis Lemkow**, Vice Rector, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

The workshop was attended by forty five participants, with well over 30 interventions. The main speaker presented a comprehensive paper which concluded with a set of concrete proposals. An additional list of recommendations came from the floor.

Quality in the university context is a broad and complex concept, not easy to define. The participants agreed, however, that, any attempt to assure quality in higher education requires an examination of the ways and means to raise the efficiency of the institutional system as a whole, with particular reference to the following elements: goals, contents and curricula, delivery systems, management, and evaluation. It was, of course, stressed that availability of funds for concrete projects and programs was fundamental to any notion of raising quality. Financing will certainly play a critical role for the future of the Palestinian universities. Some background statistical data was given on the Palestinian universities: student and staff numbers, qualifications of academic staff, student drop-out rates, (there was some disagreement over the interpretation of this data), libraries, computing facilities, etc.

Assessment of needs was discussed at length, both by the main speaker and by the participants, who emphasised that it represented the key to improving quality, efficiency and relevance of teaching/learning and training. Also much discussion was devoted to the issue of training programs for staff on “how to teach” as well as on “what to teach”. Training of academics in how to use new technologies, and knowledge of new management systems was highlighted. There was a broad consensus that management systems should be democratic, and strong attention should be given to achieving relations of trust between the different components of the university system: academics, students and administrative staff. Evaluation of both students and academics was debated, with a significant divergence of views.

It was pointed out that the lack of freedom of movement in Palestine and the closure of universities, as a result of Israeli policies, represented a considerable burden and difficulty for the normal and efficient functioning of the higher education system. There was an important role for foreign universities and academics in raising the Palestinian human rights issues in their own countries and in demanding the observance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy for the Palestinian universities.

The following recommendations were formulated by the Working Group:

- i. needs assessment studies on different issues related to higher education should be undertaken, before taking decisions. Priorities should be established, by striking a balance between needs and what can be realistically afforded in the long run, in view of the actual potential existing in the Palestinian society;
- ii. the quality of education in Palestinian universities should be defined in terms of: sustainability, accessibility; and efficiency in responding to community needs;
- iii. academic programmes and curricula should be submitted to continuous re-evaluation by a specialised committee, consisting of local and international experts, including curriculum designers;
- iv. a policy for the recruitment of academic staff should be instated. The relevant qualifications for posts should be defined and additional training in such questions as classroom management and instruction should be provided, particularly for new staff;
- v. university instructors and professors should receive training on teaching methods. “Knowing how to teach” is no less important than knowing “what to teach”. Special training courses should be organised for this purpose in all universities and colleges. The experience of other universities abroad could be utilised, including that of the UNESCO supported Arab Network for Professional Training of University Teachers, based in Alexandria, Egypt, which should be requested to pay special attention to the needs of Palestinian universities with regard to pedagogical training. A “Learning Resources Centre” should be established, to serve the needs of all Palestinian universities;

- vi. university and college teachers will be empowered to do basic and applied research, by providing them the necessary modern facilities and skills. In this connection, libraries should be endowed with the most recent publications and materials, and facilities for the use of computers, E-mail, and the Internet should be provided;
- vii. co-operation between Palestinian and foreign universities in research, exchange of visiting professors, publications, materials and training programmes should be further promoted. The PEACE Programme and/or other organisations must be approached to provide the Palestinian universities with a sufficient number of scholarships in order to meet needs in particular fields of knowledge;
- viii. Palestinian universities should take advantage of new information and communication technologies, in order to overcome the lack of free movement of students and faculty and lack of space available for the universities to expand physically. A pilot training project, in co-operation with European partners, on the use of new technologies should be established. Funding should be provided for the creation of local and global networks, and for the preparation of multimedia materials;
- ix. PEACE Programme member-universities should reinforce their solidarity with Palestinian universities, by calling on the relevant international organisations as well as on their governments to ask the Israeli authorities to put an end to the continuous breaching of human rights, freedom of movement of students and staff and to the repeated closures of the Palestinian universities.

**Working group 3 : *Promotion of Advanced Studies and Research at Palestinian Universities: the Role of Regional and International Co-operation.***

Chairperson: **Professor Hanna Nasir**, President, Birzeit University

Main Speaker: **Professor Henri Jaqaman**, Bethlehem University

Rapporteurs : **Professor Willy Laporte**, University of Gent, *and*  
**Dr. Ziad Abdeen**, Professor, Al-Quds University

The Working Group was attended by fifty five participants. In a short introduction, Dr. Hanna Nasir underlined the relevance of the topic of the Working Group for the future development of Palestinian higher education. At present, most programmes offered by Palestinian universities are at the undergraduate level and there is a shortage of research in practically all domains. Dr. Henry Jaqaman presented the Working Document: *Promotion of Research at Palestinian universities - Investment in Research, and Development*, emphasising that the development of Palestinian society is not possible without research. This requires considerable investments, which are lacking. As things stand at present, the Palestinian researchers should be satisfied if the

modest amount of US\$10 per capita (i.e. a total amount of US\$25 million) could be raised and allocated for research. He further proposed a number of solutions, which are included in the recommendations below.

More than 25 interventions came from the audience. They referred to concrete needs in advanced studies and research at Palestinian universities, and put forward practical solutions to redress the current situation. The following recommendations were formulated about three topics: Advanced Studies, Research, and the Role of the PEACE Programme.

## I. Advanced Studies

1.1 Considering that any effort for social and economic development of Palestinian society requires the existence of highly qualified people, and that the most important decision a nation in development can take is to invest in human resources,

- it is of the highest priority that, at a first stage, Palestinian universities should offer education on a graduate level, not only for basic sciences and technology but also for humanistic, social, cultural and educational sciences. At a later stage, post-graduate and doctoral studies should be provided.

1.2 Considering that, at present, scientific know-how in a range of fields is missing, and that there are not enough research opportunities at Palestinian universities, and considering that building up a research tradition and a research culture needs time and considerable resources,

- it is recommended that scholarships should be provided to gifted graduates for study abroad at a post graduate or doctoral level. During the next few years, graduate studies could be supported, by bilateral or multilateral agreements with universities which can send teachers for intensive courses, or by international programmes of the European Community and of other international funding organisations.

1.3 Considering that, because of a variety of reasons, Palestine has a large number of small size universities, a sustained effort should be made to achieve rationalisation, through close co-operation between the eight existing universities,

## II. Research

2.1 Considering that research should be the base for university education and considering that research is a prerequisite for development,

- a research culture should be initiated. Hereby, the Palestinian National Authority, the Palestinian society at large and the international community should be motivated to provide funds, structures, and facilities. Moreover, a national research plan should be elaborated, with clear objectives and priorities;

a national council for scientific research should be created, as a stimulating and co-ordinating body; national scientific societies should be founded, to develop links and contacts with the international scientific societies and associations; a national data bank, or clearing- house should be established, in order to serve as a centre for scientific information; a system for evaluating research quality should be developed.

- 2.2 Considering that the Palestinian resources are limited, international support should be provided by

integrating Palestinian universities or research groups in existing European programmes and, initiating joint research ventures, from which all partners could benefit.

### III. Recommendations for the PEACE Programme

- 3.1 The Palestinian universities should make an inventory of their most badly felt needs and priorities with regard to advanced studies and research, which should be transmitted to the PEACE Programme Office, for distribution to the member-universities.
- 3.2 In their turn, the member-universities of the PEACE Programme should indicate the domains in which they want to be involved, including the resources - both human and material - which they are in a position to provide.
- 3.3 The Peace Programme should match the needs of the Palestinian universities with the offers of the PEACE Programme member-universities into concrete projects, and should seek international support for their implementation.

#### **Working group 4: *The Role of Palestinian Higher Education in Meeting Community Needs at Local and National Levels.***

Chairperson: **Professor Carlo Di Benedetto**, Co-ordinator, Community of Mediterranean Universities

Main Speakers: **Professor Manuel Hassasian**, Vice President, Bethlehem University

**Mr. Said Kana'an**, Director of Research Centre, An-Najah University

**Mr. Ghassan Shak'a**, Mayor of Nablus

Rapporteur : **Professor W. John Morgan**, Professor, University of Nottingham

Forty five participants attended the Working Group, of which 33 were Palestinian. Two of the main speakers, Professor Emanuel Hassasian and Mr. Said Kan'an

introduced the debates. Mr. Ghassan Al-Shak'a, who had contributed to the elaboration of the joint paper, was unable to attend, because of civic duties.

The debates that ensued, pointed out the vital importance of the topic, bearing as it does on the relationship that universities and other higher education institutions must develop with Palestinian society. Moreover, the universities in particular have the responsibility of representing Palestine in the international academic community and of preparing its citizens for full participation in both the society of nation states and in the global economy. There was some criticism that the paper, at least as presented orally, did not focus on the problem given, but concentrated instead on the particular role and functions of university research centres. This was considered to be too narrow.

The contributions from the floor emphasised the lack of a workable definition of what is meant by the rather vague term "community needs". Such a definition was seen as an essential prerequisite to policy and action. It can only be reached through the use of criteria understood and agreed by the members of society, a task of civic education and participatory democracy. It will also be necessary to re-evaluate the effectiveness of the system in the light of the needs not thus identified. Given the scarce resources, it is important to agree on priorities. This implies a certain rationalisation of the system. Public understanding and acceptance of the objectives of the higher education system, is also essential, if there is to be public resourcing and the exercise of accountability. Numerous examples were given from the floor to illustrate these points of principle.

The main recommendations of the Working Group were:

- i. That the Palestine National Authority commissions a series of interim economic and social plans, based on research and public consultations, which could be carried out by the universities. These should consider particularly (but not exclusively), labour markets and employment, demography, health and social policy, the environment, scientific planning, technological innovation, justice and the rule of law, etc.
- ii. That the Palestine National Authority, in the light of the findings and in consultation with the institutions, evolve a national policy for education which prepares students for lifelong and recurrent education.
- iii. That such a policy should include a national system of accountability, evaluation and accreditation that takes into account the perspectives of the consumers of higher education (students, parents and potential employers). This will assist in the setting of priorities and the maintenance of standards.
- iv. That the institutions of higher education be required to formulate their aims and objectives in a mission statement that can be recognised and understood by such consumers and checked by them against performance.



- v. That the universities in particular recognise that they have an obligation to educate, as well as to train, the members of the society. This could mean the provision of non formal, civic and cultural education in addition to continuing training for the professions and offering the standard formal programmes of teaching and research. This may be achieved through a system of community colleges, whose work is validated by the universities.
  
- vi. Progress towards the above, particularly the setting of clear objectives for innovative programmes, based on thorough needs analysis and subject both to internal and external evaluation, should be a necessary determinant for development agencies and potential donors in the allocation of funds and of other support. The PEACE Programme could act as a register and evaluator of projects.