

FOREWORD

An-Najah National University was honoured to host the International Conference on The Role of Palestinian Higher Education in the Context of an Independent Palestinian State, Nablus, 7-9 November 1996. Convened by the Programme for Palestinian/European/American Co-operation in Education (PEACE Programme), and sponsored jointly by UNESCO and the European Commission, the Conference was the first large international academic gathering held in the Palestinian Territories. It was attended by over 200 participants, representing 65 universities in all regions of the world and 12 IGOs, NGOs, foundations and development agencies. Placed under the patronage of President Yasser Arafat, it also acquired the significance of an important national event for all Palestinians.

In their addresses, President Yasser Arafat and Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, Minister of Higher Education, underlined the important role which higher education has played in the assertion of the national identity of the Palestinians and the contribution it is called upon to make to the development of a sovereign and independent Palestinian Society, based on the principles of just peace, freedom, respect for human rights, equality and participatory democracy.

The importance of international academic co-operation in the efforts of the Palestinians to build up a modern, high-quality system of higher education was brought to the fore by all speakers in the Conference. Prof. J. van Ginkel, Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University, speaking in his capacity as Vice President of the International Association of Universities and of the Association of European Universities, pointed out that: "...this Conference is a clear token of academic solidarity and of partnership. But I want to add immediately that this is not enough. An expression of academic solidarity should always be followed by its implementation through action. I dare say that we have seen enough confessions of solidarity, solemn vows to assist the Palestinian people, without practical implementation. We, the international academic community, should go on and set the example".

The recommendations adopted by the Conference call for increased academic co-operation between Palestinian and foreign universities, as the specific contribution that the international academic community can bring to the progress of the peace process in the region.

During the Conference, the 3rd Session of the General Assembly of the PEACE Programme was held, on 8th November 1996. The Assembly took note with great

satisfaction of the steady growth of this interuniversity network, which has at present 71 members: 61 European and North American universities, 8 Palestinian universities and 2 associate collective members (the Community of Mediterranean Universities - CUM - and the Consortium of Midwestern Universities for International Activities - MUCIA).

This is a crucial period in the history of the Palestinian people. It is also a crucial stage in the development of Palestinian higher education. A viable, efficient and high-quality system of tertiary education, tuned to the realities and needs of Palestinian society and competitive on the regional and international scene, is among the highest prerequisites for independence and sustainable development for the Palestinians.

We are looking forward to the moment when conditions will have been created for Palestinian higher education institutions to function normally in an independent and sovereign Palestinian State, and will take the place to which they are entitled, as equal partners, in bilateral and multilateral academic co-operation. We are aware that it depends, above all, on our efforts, on our knowledge and abilities to achieve that goal. At the same time, we rely very much on the solidarity and co-operation of the international academic community, of which the PEACE Programme is an expression.

The purpose of this publication, which comprises the major contributions presented to the Nablus Conference and some of the documents of the 3rd Session of the General Assembly of the PEACE Programme, is to make better known the current needs and concerns of Palestinian higher education. The emphasis is on the role that international academic co-operation can bring to raising the quality and relevance of teaching and research at Palestinian universities and colleges. It is also an invitation to universities and to academics everywhere to join us in the efforts to translate into life the recommendations and concrete proposals made at the Conference.

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