

Cooperating with Civil Society

Palestinian Universities and Social Responsibility



By Bassam
M. Abu Hashish

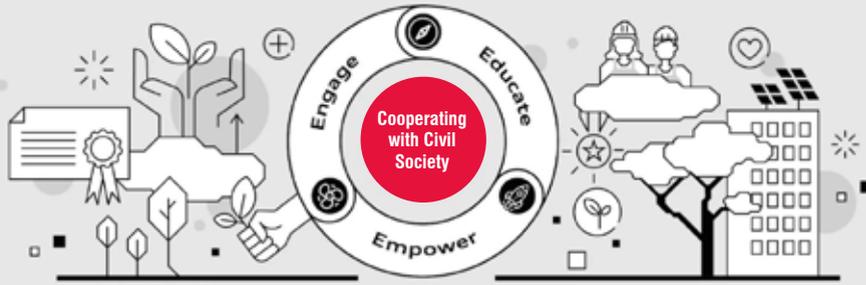
The relationship between universities and civil society in Palestine is marred by a lack of clarity, yet universities are generally building strong interactive relationships with society. As a consequence,

scientific research in Palestine is weak for reasons that include the prevailing poor communication between researchers and local and regional companies as well as the absence of policies that encourage the linking of research results from masters' and doctoral theses with issues and problems that affect Palestinian communities. Existing relationships usually take the form of volunteer work, especially during olive-picking season; blood donation for those injured during demonstrations, marches, and confrontations with the occupation forces and settlers; and engagement in training sessions and internships at local institutions. University media are frequently the voice of the people and shed light on many societal issues. Continuing education centers reflect another aspect of university-initiated social responsibility. University libraries serve as resources and provide information to researchers and the general public, and Palestinian university hospitals and clinics provide the community with medical care in line with international standards. Moreover, universities strive to adjust their offerings to address the educational, cultural, professional, and development needs of communities in order to close the gaps between the market needs and educational outputs.

The Palestinian people face numerous challenges that affect the educational process and the way in which educational institutions aim to meet the needs and aspirations of Palestinian society. Some of these challenges are long-standing and inherited, whereas others are the result of recent developments in an era of instability. These challenges include, among others, the COVID-19 pandemic that took the higher education and scientific research sectors by surprise, as they were not ready to adopt and implement the required adaptations.¹ The annual budget of Palestinian universities is about US\$200 million, funded mainly by tuition fees. Available data indicate a lack of investment and revenues among universities, as they place restrictions on the scholarships they offer internally. This confirms that Palestinian higher education needs sufficient, stable sources of financial support. Improving the output quality

The diversification of community service programs (including lectures, conferences, seminars, workshops, competitions, marathons, and active engagement in community support) offered by universities aims to provide efficient and effective responses to the requirements of comprehensive development in Palestine, especially as Palestine has adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.





of higher education institutions is one of the challenges faced by the Ministry of Higher Education and universities alike, especially as they navigate the prevailing inflexibility of licensing, accreditation, and quality control standards as well as the lack of tools and national studies to evaluate and follow up on teaching processes. In addition, there is a lack of joint programs and degrees, while traditional teaching methods that focus on direct education remain standard, when instead teaching staff should be introduced to training that highlights the role of learners and the development of their thinking, creativity, innovation, and leadership.

The Israeli occupation continues to pose the greatest challenge to Palestinian higher education by creating a hostile environment that has prevented the development of education, while the Palestinian political division has created a state of fragmentation among Palestinian universities and colleges. There is no supreme national authority that supervises universities or institutes; the oversight and scrutiny of new universities, institutes, and specializations has ceased; and the educational curricula have become unsupervised. The commodification of education has led to the acceptance of a large number of students and the introduction of

many specializations, all with the aim to increase the income of universities in order to help them overcome their financial deficit. This also explains the increase in the number of private universities.ⁱ

Universities should better connect with society through providing services to the community by making available scientific applications that target various production centers and by holding training courses for their employees. Partnerships with NGOs can be forged by creating coordination mechanisms between universities and NGOs. Consultative centers within universities can be set up to serve the community and make available and exchange information. Universities can thereby positively impact the functioning of community organizations and local businesses and industries. A national vision for university education should be adopted – and should consider the fact that the conflict with Israel will continue until the occupation is ended. This vision must be transformed into a binding law for universities.

As the Palestinian Authority has the responsibility to ensure that Palestinian curricula and teaching methods are constantly updated, it should address the limitations caused by the conflict with the Zionist

occupation. This endeavor could be achieved by engaging civil society. Current curricula underrepresent Palestinian history and narratives because they are subjected to external agendas reflected in the Wye River and Taba Agreements, signed by the Palestinian Authority and the occupation government during the eras of Netanyahu and Barak. The Taba Agreement provides for “an American-Palestinian-Israeli committee to meet regularly to repel cases of possible incitement to violence and terrorism, and to prepare recommendations and reports on how to prevent such incitement.” Accordingly, the Palestinian educational system operates neither independently nor according to a Palestinian educational philosophy, but rather is subject to political interventions imposed by external powers. Palestinians should strive for independent curricula, which can be facilitated by allowing civil society representatives and institutions to actively participate in discussing teaching materials that adhere to Palestinian principles for courses related to national identity. Civil society experts and consultants can furthermore provide technical support by preparing plans, programs, consultations, manuals, and training materials on leadership methods. The inclusion of social responsibility engagement in the strategic plans of universities not only serves Palestinian society but also reflects on the global position of the university.



Dr. Bassam M. Abu Hashish is the chairman of the Graduate Studies Committee for the Educational Administration Program at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza. Holding a PhD degree in principles of education–educational administration and comparative education, he currently teaches at the Department of Principles of Education and Educational Administration at Al-Aqsa University.

This article is an adaption of the article “Universities’ Roles, Responsibilities and Cooperation with Civil Society,” published by the Palestinian NGOs Network (PNGO), a civil democratic body, established in September 1993, that seeks to support, consolidate, and strengthen Palestinian civil society. The original article is available at <https://en.pngoportale.org/uploads/documents/2021/11/SzCKj.pdf>.

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ⁱ Muhammad Shaheen (2016), “Financing Higher Education in Palestine: Between Reality and Expectations” (in Arabic), Al-Ayyam, available at http://www.al-ayyam.ps/ar_page.php?id=11724978y292702584Y11724978.

ⁱⁱ Nidaa Abu Awwad (2013), “Neoliberalism and Education: Its Content and Effects in the Colonized Palestinian Context” (in Arabic), Arab Future Magazine.

TWiP asked Birzeit University for a brief testimony from students who are engaged in social responsibility-related activities, outlining their engagement and explaining their source of inspiration and the impact that these activities have had on their lives. The following is their response.

We developed the mobile phone application *GiveLife* after observing that many people request blood on social media platforms but receive few or no responses. Blood is always needed in medicine. It is used to treat accident victims, cancer patients, hemophiliacs, and surgery patients. After all, blood cannot be manufactured, at least until now. Thus, the idea of *GiveLife* was born. It is a platform that connects blood banks and blood collection agencies with potential donors in their vicinity. Hospitals, blood banks, and collection service centers register with *GiveLife*. Whenever they need extra supplies of a specific blood type, they are matched with a potential donor through our database. Nearby users are notified through their app and receive instructions regarding how, when, and where they can donate blood. The *GiveLife* application is available on Android and iOS-supported smartphones.

It is very difficult to witness the suffering of victims of accidents or of violence and the agony of their relatives in emergency departments when the need for blood is urgent yet reserves are scarce!

Our donors care enough to want to help, and the application *GiveLife* can aid them in helping save patients' lives. When you give blood, you give someone another smile, another hug, another chance to live. It is the gift of life.

Developing and being able to utilize this app, watching patients benefit, and seeing the relief in the eyes

of their relatives has made us feel satisfied, happy, and somewhat empowered, as we live in a context where many aspects of our lives are beyond our control – not just because of fate but also due to the political circumstances in occupied Palestine.



■ Raghad AbuShama, Miral Albandak, and Hadeel Khader, the founders of *GiveLife*, a mobile phone app for blood donations.

Birzeit University students also engage in other activities to serve their community. Students have traditionally been involved in and still play an important role during the olive-picking season. In the fall, the university's voluntary work program organizes trips for volunteers who wish to help Palestinian families harvest their olives. In addition, the university gives all students a vacation day that allows them to celebrate this special event and help their families pick olives.

The *GiveLife* team: Raghad AbuShama, Miral Albandak, and Hadeel Khader.

Nour+

While working clinical rotations at local hospitals, we noted that many people return to a hospital following surgery or other kinds of treatment when they could or should receive care in their homes instead. We are also aware of the many unemployed nurses who are looking for jobs in Palestine. Moreover, we feel a bit helpless when faced with the growing number of patients who seek care while the capacity of our hospitals remains limited. To relieve the burden on hospitals, nurses, and health care providers, we created Nour+, a program that connects health care providers with individuals who are in need of their services, facilitating access to home health care for those who do not need to visit a hospital.

At the same time, we hoped to create opportunities for unemployed health sector workers and nurses who possess the required skills and experience, enabling them to provide their services independently and allowing them to generate an income to support their families, even if they work only part-time.

The app enables individuals to create accounts privately and safely and

to request the appropriate health service from various home health care providers and from experienced, skilled nurses. Simultaneously we strive for the highest level of professionalism and privacy.

Each health service provider is subjected to evaluation and training to not only gauge but also enhance their expertise. By this, we aim to increase patients' trust in the care they can expect when working with Nour+ agency. Our service also requires health care providers to document their observations and the treatment they provide in a comprehensive report that is made available to the patients and their doctors upon completion of the appointment.

This app targets mainly the elderly and people with special needs because they can find it difficult to travel long distances, particularly for basic care and in cases when such treatment can be provided in the comfort of their own homes instead. We hope that this app will help lessen the burdens faced by the health care system, thus alleviating the situation for both health care providers and the patients themselves. Indeed, creating accessibility to home health care services is not a want it is a need.

Birzeit University encourages students to commit themselves to support their communities both as students and as professionals. It is a long-standing tradition that students engage and lend a helping hand with many activities in the community, including the olive harvest.

Kamar Taha



■ Nour+ founder Kamar Taha with co-founders Shahd Nasser and Layla Hussien.