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Lasallian Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: The Unique Challenges Facing Bethlehem University

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Bethlehem University

Bethlehem University of the Holy Land is a Catholic Christian co-educational institution of higher learning founded in 1973 in the Lasallian tradition, open to students of all faiths and traditions. Bethlehem University is the first university established in the West Bank, and can trace its roots to 1893 when the De La Salle Christian Brothers opened schools in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nazareth, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt.

The University is located on 8.67 acres of the De La Salle Christian Brothers property on Frères Street at the highest point in the town of Bethlehem. In 2013, Bethlehem University was given an extraordinary opportunity to purchase a parcel of land, the "Mount David Property." It consists of 12,457 square meters of land and 6,170 square meters of buildings. Purchasing this property expanded the campus of Bethlehem University by one-third with a property that is 300 meters from the existing campus. It will also allow the University to meet future facility needs for existing and new programs. However, the University is still struggling to raise considerable funds to develop this property.

Bethlehem University has five faculties and one institute: the faculty of arts, the Shucri Ibrahim Dabdoub faculty of business administration, the faculty of education, the faculty of nursing and health sciences, the faculty of science, and the institute of hotel management and tourism. It also has an institute for community partnership (ICP), which plays an important role in community development through outreach in offering non-degree programs.

Bethlehem University offers 23 undergraduate programs, four graduate programs, three associate diploma programs, ten high diploma programs, and four professional diploma programs.

As of fall 2016 the total number of degrees conferred was 16,481 (67.1% female). The total number of enrolled students was 3,290 students (78% female). The number of undergraduate students was 3,076 students (78.3% female), and the number of postgraduate students was 214 students (74.8% female). Religion of enrolled students: Muslims 77.1%, Christians 22.9%.

Higher Education in Palestine

In general, Palestinians place great importance on education. They believe that education is a way to increase employability as well as standards of living. In spite of almost half a century of

the Israeli military occupation and the restrictions and dangers imposed by it, higher education in Palestine has progressed at a very fast pace since the founding of Bethlehem University as the first four year university.

The situation is unique, rich, and challenging. It is unique because it is one of the very few places in the world, if not the only one, where a Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) is being built from scratch when MoEHE undertook the responsibilities of reforming the education system. It is rich because of the eagerness and motivation of the Palestinians to learn. And it is challenging because Palestine is not yet an independent country in which conflicts preside on a daily basis.²

However, the history of Palestinian universities is relatively recent. Palestinian universities came into existence in the 1970's. The creation of these institutions of higher education was part of the efforts of Palestinians to preserve their identity, as well as to provide young people with the opportunity to pursue education in Palestine instead of somewhere abroad.

Bethlehem University was a founding member of the Council for Higher Education that was established in 1977 as the need grew for coordination among the institutions of higher learning, and for the provision of support and guidance in planning. The Council, whose membership was made-up of representatives from the universities and from West Bank and Gaza professional associations, was adopted by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and recognized as the body representing higher education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Council was the channel for major running cost funding from the PLO or Arab governments or EU, which gave it the necessary clout to impose its policies and guidelines on universities.

The Palestinian Ministry of Education was created in August 1994 the same year the Palestinian Authority (PNA) was established in the West Bank and Gaza as a result of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO. The Council of Higher Education became a body of the Ministry and has been chaired by the Minister of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) to this day.

The education system at that time of transition was in a dire state. The fact that Israeli authorities did not supply the PNA with any files from the previous system meant that direct information as guidance was in complete absence.³

Nowadays there are fifteen universities, nineteen university colleges, and eighteen community colleges, which have been accredited by the Palestinian Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC).

According to a 2012 report titled “Higher Education In The Occupied Palestinian Territory” published by the Palestine National Tempus Office, there are four types of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)⁴:

- *Governmental*: Run and financed by the PNA
- *UNRWA*: Run and financed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

- *Private*: Run and financed by several foundations, charitable societies, religious denominations, individuals and companies.
- *Public*: Most higher education institutions were set up mostly during the period of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The majority are non-profit and originally created and owned by local charity associations and NGOs. They depend on fundraising and receive partial government funding.

According to the statistics published by the Palestinian MoEHE for the 2014-2015 academic year⁵:

- The number of new students who were enrolled in educational institutions for the academic year (2014-2015) was 62,454 students (36,141 female and 26,313 male);
- The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions for the academic year (2014-2015) was 221,395 students (133,362 female and 88,033 male);
- The number of graduate students in higher education institutions for the academic year (2014-2015) was 40,043 students (24,111 female and 15,932 male);
- The number of workers in the Palestinian HEIs for the academic year (2014-2015) was 15,584 (7130 faculty staff, 646 academic administrative, 23 researchers, 2,233 administrative staff, 1,447 support staff, 1,302 teaching assistants, 2,803 other)

Challenges Facing Higher Education in Palestine

Although the Palestinian higher education system proved itself and was able to survive and even grow in adverse and unstable conditions over three decades, it still faces a number of alarming challenges.

Financing Higher Education in Palestine

The financial and economic situation in Palestine is one of the major challenges the higher education sector faces. The Arab World's withdrawal of financial support as well as the decrease of financial support coming from other donor countries due to the situation with the refugees coming from Syria, and other Middle East countries, affects the financing of Palestinian institutions of higher education.

The Palestinian National Authority has devoted nearly 1.7 percent of the Palestinian GDP and 30 percent of all education spending to higher education. However, not more than 60% has been distributed in any one year.

Insufficient funding is a major concern for all Palestinian HEIs. It has a seriously negative impact on the quality and relevance of higher education in Palestine. Tuition fees cover around 60% of the operating budgets of universities. The average for Bethlehem University falls way

below that with not more than 40% covered by tuition. Consequently, almost all HEIs in Palestine depend on fundraising to be able to survive.

At the beginning of the academic year of 2001-2002, the MoEHE launched the “Student Loan Fund.” Through this fund, the Ministry provides students who have financial difficulties with interest-free loans that they can start paying back in the form of monthly soft installments following their graduation and employment.

Often academics' salaries could not be paid under such dire circumstances, yet the universities continued their work, indicating a strong commitment to the principles of learning and knowledge in Palestinian society.

To try to address this daunting challenge, the Council of Higher Education formed a committee of experts to start preparing for a national endowment to support higher education in Palestine. The aim of the endowment is to provide some kind of a safety net to help the higher education sector provide its valued service. To take advantage of the endowment, Palestinian HEIs must compete based on performance.

Increasing Demand on Higher Education

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) the population of Palestine was 4,816,503 in 2016. The percentage of youth (15-29 years) was 29.9 in 2016.

One of the major challenges facing HEIs in Palestine is the growing demand for higher education. In the 2014-2015 scholastic year for example, there were around 81,000 students who took the *Tawjihi*, which is a general national exam taken after completion of high school. Around 62 percent of them passed the exam. This exam is mandatory for all students who plan to attend a university or expect to work in the public or private sectors.

The number of new students who joined the Palestinian HEIs in 2014-2015 was about 62,000 students, 57% of whom were females.

This huge demand on higher education forced some HEIs to increase enrollment, doubling it in some cases, while funding has remained the same or even declined. This led to a decline in the number of community college students, as more students were rapidly enrolling in universities instead. The consequence of this is that the quality and relevance of higher education will continue to be compromised.

Unemployment

One of the most difficult challenges that face students of higher education in Palestine is the choice of the subject of their study. With the limited available university seats and the restrictions on mobility imposed by the Israeli military occupation, coupled with the severe financial difficulties, many students tend to accept to study a major that is available as opposed to one they truly enjoy.

Moreover, the subjects that most Palestinian students study are often inconsistent with the growing needs of the Palestinian economy and society. The intense competition between the graduates of higher education in the local and even regional markets has led to the difficulty of finding employment opportunities for graduates.

According to the PCBS, approximately 30,000 students graduate annually from Palestinian HEIs. The 'Labor Force Survey'⁶ done by the PCBS for 2015 indicated that the unemployment rate in 2015 reached 25.9% (22.5 % for males and 39.2 % for females). The highest unemployment rate was among the age group 15-24; it reached 40.7% (36.4 for males and 60.8% for females). The unemployment rate for males who have completed more than 13 years of education was 23.5%, while it was 84.5% for females in the same category.

The Israeli Military occupation

The Israeli military occupation poses one of the greatest challenges that face the development of higher education in Palestine.

The various forms of harassment and violence that have touched faculty, staff, and students, as well as restrictions on mobility over the years, have made it difficult to enjoy a normal educational life. Often students are stopped, searched, and harassed at military checkpoints on their way to and from class. Inviting scholars from outside Palestine is a very serious challenge that most universities face. One example is the difficulty of obtaining an Israeli visa for someone to enter Palestine.

This cycle of political engagement and Israeli reprisal continued in the West Bank throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and Bethlehem University was no exception. Several times the Israeli military forced the university to shut down in response to routine demonstrations or even Palestinian cultural events on campus. Bethlehem University has been closed 12 times by the Israeli military.

The longest period of closure was during the first Intifada (1987-1990), in which all West Bank universities were closed by Israeli military order. Bethlehem University was forced to shut down for three years, with many doubting it would ever reopen. Despite this, the administration and student body found ways to resist the illegal closure and went to almost any length to continue daily operations. Former Bethlehem University president, and long-time faculty member, Brother Joe Loewenstein, noted "During those years, the Israeli military declared meetings of ten or more people 'political' and thus illegal. So we decided to hold classes of eight students and one professor, in order to maintain some normalcy." Classes were held off-campus and members of the administration would routinely visit the families of students, who were arrested or killed, offering solace and advocating on their behalf. Both the faculty and students faced the two⁷.

The Unique Challenges that Face Bethlehem University

The Impact of Religion

Being the only Catholic institution of higher education, not only in Palestine, but also in the whole region, Bethlehem University is an “oasis of peace” where Muslims and Christians study together in an atmosphere of tolerance, dialogue, and respect for one another.

At a time when Christian-Muslim relations seem at a low point in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere across the Middle East, this university is a unique place – a Catholic institution of higher learning where Muslims and Christians can meet and build cultural and social bridges for the future.⁸

However, this does not happen very easily. Having more than 75% of its student population being Muslim, and even more surprisingly that 78% of the students are women one can imagine the size of the challenge the university faces. For many of the Muslim students this is actually their first exposure to Christians. Especially these days with what is happening in the region, many of those young people come with some misconceptions about Christians and Christianity. As time goes by and through their interaction with their fellow Christian classmates, as well as with the teachers and staff, they discover that Christians are true Palestinians who speak the same language, share the same culture, and face the same suffering by the military occupation.

Although Bethlehem University is open to people of all faiths and treats them with dignity and respect, it should probably put more emphasis on “hiring for mission” through which it hires faculty and staff who will commit to its mission through deepening their understanding of its Catholic and Lasallian heritage. Bethlehem University should not only focus on hiring based on academic competence but also on hiring people concerned about transforming the lives of young people entrusted to it.

Gender Imbalance

Statistics of fall 2016 indicate that the total number of enrolled students is 3,290 (3,076 are undergraduate students and 214 are graduate students). Females make up more than 78% of the student population. This disparity between males and females is also an issue in some other Palestinian HEIs, as well as many other countries in the world.

In its meeting of February 24, 2016, the Bethlehem University Board of Regents discussed this important issue. They were worried about its implications on Bethlehem University. From a sociological point of view in the Palestinian context, it could lead to the perception of Bethlehem University as a university for women. And from a Christian and Catholic perspective in which Bethlehem University engages in the Church’s teaching of gender equality and the complementarity between men and women, Bethlehem University is committed to expanding genuine discussions concerning traditions of thought and attitudes in gender matters.

Attracting Qualified Faculty and Staff

The difficulty in finding and employing quality faculty and staff at HEIs in Palestine has been a major obstacle in educational development. Many factors play a role in creating a lack of incentives for specialists to join academia. Politically, the realities of being an academic are limiting and confining due to the Israeli military occupation and the restrictions imposed on movement for Palestinians. As a result, academics cannot easily move from one university to another. In addition, faculty and staff are not always compensated with adequate salaries for their important work. Palestinian HEIs must follow a unified salary scale determined by the MoEHE, which oftentimes presents an insufficient salary for faculty and staff.

There is a general flight of human capital from Palestine, which makes it difficult for HEIs to find qualified staff and faculty to work at their institutions to begin with. As mentioned above, the prolonged political and economic situation of Palestine, has led to a severe lack of employment opportunities that would normally present themselves in a civil society. Palestinians are inclined to move abroad for employment, where positions in their field and sufficient salaries exist. Therefore, Palestine struggles with a general deficiency in human capital where incentives to stay in Palestine for employment are minimal as opposed to regions abroad. Overall, it is difficult to invest in the development of education and knowledge in Palestine with a shortage of educational leaders and mentors.

Questions for Consideration

1. The University's story is one of people committed to pursuing their higher education – perseverance and courage in the face of adversity and injustice – working together in hope with an ever widening international circle of colleagues to build a better future (Bethlehem University 2016). How can your institution partner with Bethlehem?
2. Try to relate the above-mentioned challenges to challenges that are faced by the institutions of higher education in your own country. What could be done to support Bethlehem University to continue providing quality education to the people of Palestine while maintaining its Lasallian and Catholic identity?
3. In what ways does the university's institutional value of inclusiveness get compromised while fostering and maintaining other values that underpin its Catholic and Lasallian identity?

Endnotes

1. Muna Matar is the assistant vice president for academic affairs at Bethlehem University. She earned a PhD degree at University.

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6. “Labor Force Survey 2015” [Accessed June 2016, <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/Book2194.pdf>].
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8. Matthew Bunson, “Bethlehem University Called an ‘Oasis of Peace,’” *Our Sunday Visitor Catholic Publishing Company* (2016) [<https://www.osv.com/Article/TabId/493/ArtMID/13569/ArticleID/16566/Bethlehem-University-called-an->].