

## **General Aspects of Higher Education, and Quality Assurance System in Palestine**

Mohammed M. Al Subu'  
Professor & Head of the Palestinian Accreditation & Quality Assurance  
Commission (AQAC), Ministry of Education & Higher Education  
(MoEHE), Ramallah, P.O. Box 1932, Tel: + 970 (0)2 2980140, Fax +  
970 (0)2 2980139, E mail: malsubu@yahoo.com  
Palestine

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## **I. HIGHER EDUCATION IN PALESTINE:**

### *Development, Trends and Challenges*

#### General

Educational development in Palestine is a *unique, rich, and challenging* experience; *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, *rich* because of the eagerness and motivation of the Palestinians to learn, *challenging* because Palestine is not yet an independent country and is witnessing conflict on a daily basis.

As for higher education (HE), its development is of a relatively recent date. Two-year colleges have existed since the 1950's. These institutions which focused on teacher training, technical education, or liberal arts, were either government or UNRWA organized. It is only since the 1970's that the universities came into being. Created during Israeli occupation, these institutions were part of a Palestinian collective effort to preserve the Palestinian identity as well as to provide young Palestinians with the opportunity to pursue HE, after it became increasingly difficult for them to go abroad for such studies.

However, the sector has expanded only since the transfer of education from Israel to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) after the Oslo accords in 1990.

With the help of UNESCO, and support from the donor community the PNA created the (MoEHE) and, thus, began the expansion of the education system in general and of HE in particular.

Higher education was legislated through Law no 11 of 1998 for Higher Education. This law defined higher education as a right to every citizen

(Article 2), set the legal status of its institutions, and provided the legal framework for its organisation and management.

Despite the difficult economic and political conditions prevailing in the Palestinian territories particularly since the Intifadas, impressive results have been achieved in HE. Table 1 indicates the history of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Palestine by years of their creation and their type.

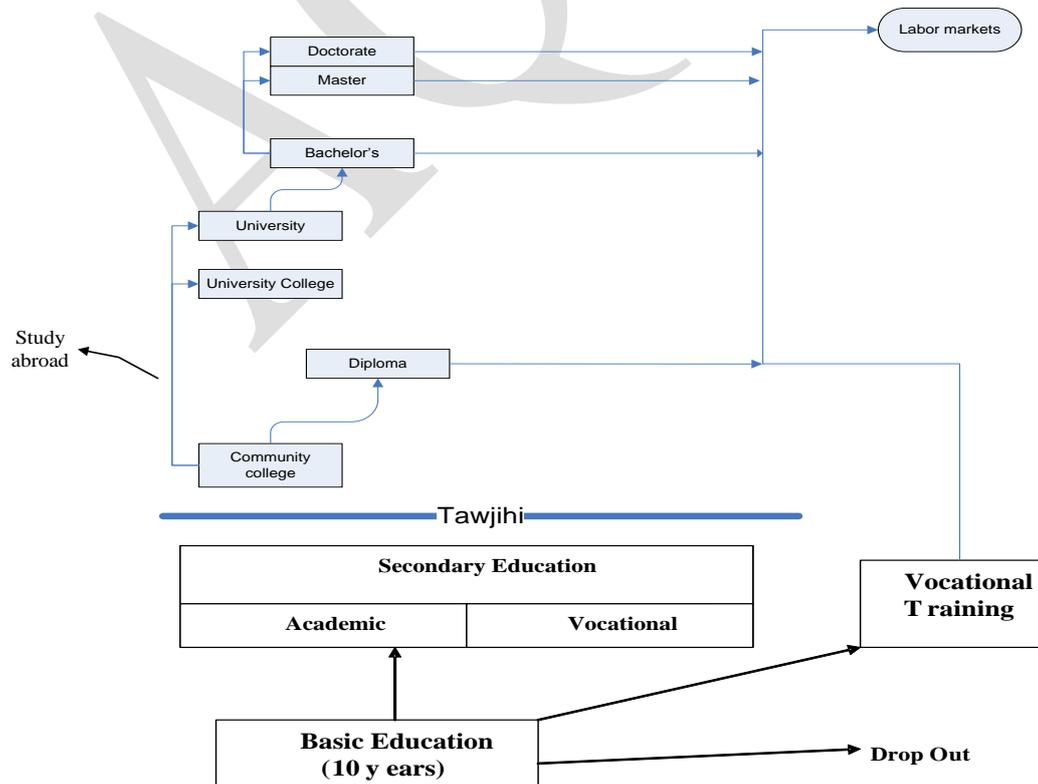
Table 1: Types of HEIs in Palestine by periods of their creation

Type of institutions	Before the 1970s	During the 1970s	During the 1980s	During the 1990s	During the 2000s	Total
Traditional Universities		6	1	3	4	14
Open University				1		1
University Colleges	1	1	1	8	3	14
Community Colleges	2	4	3	5	5	19
Total	3	11	5	17	7	48

Because it is relatively new and the difficulties it faces due to the occupation, the Palestinian HE is struggling to exist. However, its recency has made its relatively open and, therefore, ready to embrace change. It is the fact which explains its relative dynamism even in the face of adversity.

The structure of the Palestinian education system and the articulation between the different levels and types of education are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Schematic presentation of the structure of the education system in Palestine



## Demographic Growth Rate in Palestine

The Palestinian territories have one of the highest rates of population growth in the world. This rate is estimated at about 3.8%. Due to this high demographic expansion rate, it is estimated that the Palestinian population within the territories will double by 2025 (Table 2).

Table 2: Population projections, 2000 to 2025

Year	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Total
2000	2,012,000	1,138,000	3,130,000
2005	2,514,000	1,472,000	3,986,000
2010	3,067,000	1,871,000	4,038,000
2015	3,517,000	2,241,000	5,758,000
2020	3,962,000	2,618,000	6,580,000
2025	4,409,000	2,993,000	7,402,000

## Performance Indicators of HE

Higher education performance indicators show that despite the difficult economic and political conditions, impressive results have been achieved in HE.

### *Quantitative indicators*

Enrolment in Palestinian HEIs has increased significantly since the 1990s. From less than 40,000 students in 1993/1994, the number of students enrolled in HEIs exceeded 180,000 students in 2008/2009. This means that in less than fifteen years, these enrolments have grown 4.5 times.

The rise in enrolments has resulted in an important increase in the number of graduates at the different levels of the HE sectors with variation between the subsectors. It is the highest in the universities, where the number of graduates has increased 7 times from 1994-1995 to 2008-2009 (2,500 to 18,000). In the colleges, the number of graduates has remained basically unchanged (1,500 in 1994-1995 against 1,700 in 2008-2009).

### *Qualitative Indicators*

With respect to the proportion of graduates finding jobs, there is a positive correlation between labor force participation and the levels of education reached. For example, in 2005, the labor participation rate was 89.0% for the holders of bachelor's or higher degrees, 76.9% for holders of two-year college diplomas, and 76.5% for graduates with vocational degrees. The unemployment rate tends to be higher among graduates of vocational training.

A similar trend is observed for the average length of work search. The work search time is higher for HE graduates having attained lower educational levels (16 months average) than for those with higher educational attainments (27 months average).

#### Factors Contributing to the Performance

Quantitative indicators show that Palestine has made significant advances in expanding its HE sector, which could be due to:

- a) Market-oriented HE development policies,
- b) High demographic growth rate,
- c) HEIs admission policies,
- d) Cap on student fees,
- e) Declining employment possibilities for non - degree holders.

#### Persisting Problems

Despite the impressive results achieved under very difficult conditions, major problems persist in the Palestinian HE sector. Among these problems are:

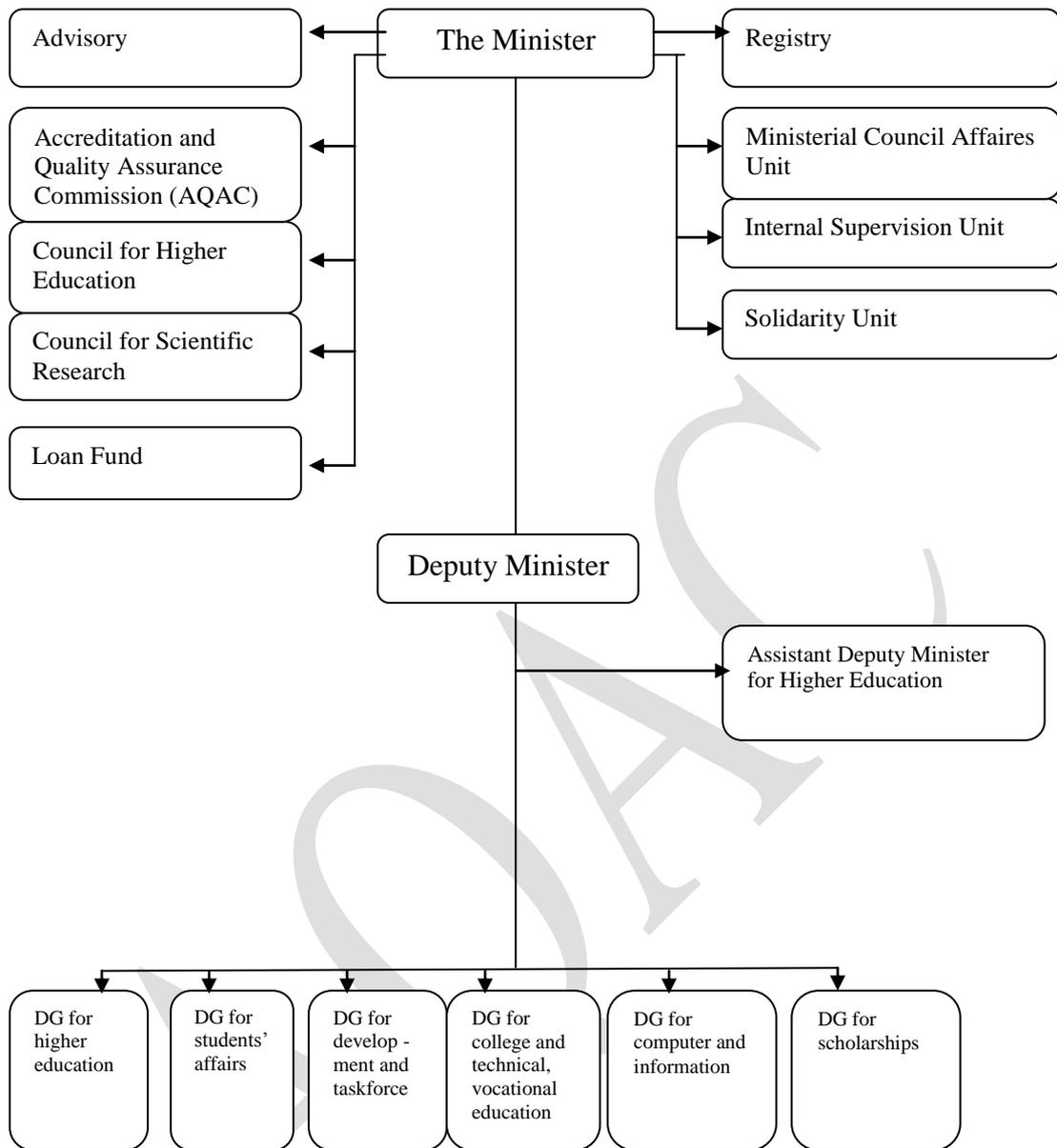
- a) Existing capacity does not satisfy the growing demand,
- b) The increase in higher education enrolment fees,
- c) The influence of labor market demand on program creation,
- d) Inadequate infrastructures and equipment in HEIs,
- e) Insufficient number of qualified academic staff,
- f) Intra-Palestine academic personnel mobility restrictions due to Israeli occupation,
- g) Inadequate access to and use of ICT in Palestinian HEIs,
- h) Inadequate support to research,
- i) Imbalances in the disciplinary distribution of HE enrolments,
- j) Enrolment imbalances between vocational HEIs and universities,
- k) Problems in HEIs governance,
- l) Inadequate central steering of the sector,
- m) Inadequate data base,

#### Policy

The higher education policy in Palestine is based on achieving the objectives that: *HE system should expand capacity, increase access, enhance its quality, and to improve its relevancy to knowledge-based economy.*

The governance of higher education in Palestine is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Macro Governance Structure of the Palestinian Higher Education



### Challenges

There are two basic challenges that face HE:

1. The globalization of economic exchanges, including human capital,
2. The formidable advances in information and communication technology (ICT).

### Quality of Higher education

Enrolment expansion has caused the quality of education to decline in many countries. This is also said to be the case in Palestine. As resources are stretched increasingly thin, the teaching and conditions have deteriorated.

This decline in quality occurs at a time when the new economy based on knowledge and information requires high quality manpower. It is therefore that policymakers establish mechanisms to improve and maintain quality. Internal and External Quality Assurance (QA) systems had to be imposed in order to improve and maintain quality in Palestinian HEIs and ensure that it produces the quality manpower required by the new economic context.

## **II. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN PALESTINE**

The Palestinian quality assurance policy was upgraded in 2002 simultaneously with the establishment of the “Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission” (AQAC) as the only authorized agency responsible for accreditation and quality assurance of Higher Education in Palestine. AQAC is a governmental semiautonomous body under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) and responsible directly to the Minister.

### Structure of AQAC

Besides the permanent working staff, AQAC has two councils; the Accreditation Council and the Advisory Council. The *Accreditation Council* is chaired by the head of AQAC and 12 commissioners: six representatives from HEIs (professors), and six from various fields of professional practices (trade unions, large companies, and public authorities). Among other duties; the council adopts and proves quality standards, benchmarks, procedures and criteria for accreditation as well as monitoring the work of AQAC.

The *Advisory Council* comprises seven committees, one committee for one or more major HE discipline. A committee is chaired by a commissioner and includes not less than five other members of academics, well known in the discipline, and has a sound contribution to the quality of higher education in

Palestine. The committee is expected to give advice on submitted HEIs applications for accreditation, selecting peer reviewers and participates in HEIs site visits. The committee also helps in developing, reviewing, and improving a subject intended learning outcomes (ILOs).

#### Affiliations

AQAC is a member of several international networks for quality assurance, such as International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE). In this context, AQAC negotiates cooperation agreements with regional and international quality agencies for mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and degrees.

#### Role of Palestinian HEIs as Seen by AQAC

Palestinian HEIs are expected to produce qualified manpower, train for a research career, and manage teaching provision.

#### The QA System in Palestine

Growing social demand, privatization of higher education, governments' demand for value for money, globalization, and international market for quality assurance services were behind establishing a system for external quality assurance in Palestine

#### Overall Purposes of the Palestinian QA System

The EQA system in Palestine has three main broad purposes: Quality control, accountability/ guidance; and improvement purpose.

#### Instrument to Regulate Education Quality in Palestine

Palestinian QA system relates to institutions and programs (both undergraduate and graduate), and HE quality assurance is being managed

through direct monitoring of the quality of institutions and programs by AQAC and other professional bodies. The following functions are been addressed:

- Assessments related to the initial opening of programs and institutions (commonly called initial accreditation and licensing respectively) and leading to the status of a publicly - recognized entity;
- Monitoring and evaluating the ongoing institutions and programs (commonly relating to minimum standards).
- Accreditation
- Professional certification of graduates in chosen professional fields.
- The provision of information on the recognition and accreditation status of both institutions and programs.

#### Users and Purposes of the Palestinian QA system

The QA system provides information on the quality of programs and institutions which may be used by a variety of stakeholders, including government (to define higher education country-wide and assure quality higher education for citizenry), students (to assist in selecting an institution for study, and to assist in employment), HEIs (to improve institutional information and data, and enhance institutional planning), and labor market to assess labor market relevance of newly established Bachelor and Master programs.

#### General Features and Approach of the Palestinian QA System

Palestinian QA system is based on the fact that internal QA is the basis for external QA evaluation.

The features of internal QA system are: ongoing self-assessment, documentation of work on QA, identifies poor quality, develops quality culture,

demonstrates accountability, includes all actors (students, stakeholders, and external experts), committed to AQAC standards, and evidence based.

The main features of the external QA system are: Compulsory, uses both 'fitness for purpose' and 'standard-based' approaches as appropriate, uses both accreditation and quality audit option, and deals with public and private institutions, university and non-university sectors and all types of academic and vocational programs.

### Accreditation

Comprises three elements and generally involves three steps with specific activities as follows:

- Self-assessment; a self-evaluation process conducted by the faculty, the administrators, and the staff of the HEI or academic program, resulting in a report that takes as its reference the set of standards of AQAC.
- Peer review ; a study visit conducted by a team of peers selected by AQAC, which reviews the evidence, visits the premises, and interviews the academic and administrative staff, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to AQAC.
- Decision-making ; examination by AQAC board of the evidence and recommendation on the basis of the given set of criteria concerning quality and resulting in a final judgment and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other constituencies.

### Quality audit option

Focuses on

- The institution's internal reporting mechanisms,
- Data collection mechanisms on 'teaching performance',
- Whether the institution collects systematic data on student.

Accreditation and/or audit are cyclical: five years term.

### **Summary**

In spite of the major challenges and difficulties facing the higher education system in Palestine, the Palestinians have managed to create, maintain, improve, and develop a sustainable good higher education system comparable to those on the regional and international levels in terms of competencies and quality.

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