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INFORMATION SHEET
ورقه معلومات

The Impact of the Separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on Higher Education

May 2010

The Palestinian higher education system was planned and developed as a unified system, designed to serve the needs of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip alike, and it functioned as such for many years. There were close ties between the universities in Gaza and those in the West Bank, with regular meetings for strategic planning, conferences, and joint educational and research programs; lecturers and students commuted between the two areas.

As with other sectors, the field of higher education in the Palestinian territory is more intensively and extensively developed in the West Bank, and in past years it served residents of both areas. Currently there are 14 universities operating in the Palestinian territory, nine of them in the West Bank and five in the Gaza Strip, as well as dozens of professional training colleges, mostly in the West Bank. Students at West Bank universities are served by twice as many lecturers relative to the Gaza Strip and are offered a wider range of educational choices: there are about 30% more undergraduate study programs and around 40% more graduate programs offered in the West Bank than at Gaza universities. Several important degree programs are only offered in the West Bank and not in the Gaza Strip, including dentistry, occupational therapy, medical engineering, veterinary medicine, environmental protection, democracy and human rights, and a PhD in chemistry¹.

Students from Gaza have traditionally chosen to study at West Bank universities for a variety of reasons: to obtain a degree not available in Gaza, to participate in an academic program more suited to their needs, or to study under a particular professor. Sometimes they chose a West Bank university simply for a change of scenery and a fresh start, just like many other young people in Israel and around the

¹ The Higher Education Institutions Statistical Yearbook, 2007-2008, The Ministry of Education and Higher Education, The Palestinian Authority, available at www.mohe.gov.ps

world. In 1998, there were about 1,000 students from the Gaza Strip enrolled in universities in the West Bank².

In 2000, when travel restrictions between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank were imposed by Israel following the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the academic relationship between the West Bank and Gaza sustained a severe blow. Since then, applications by students from Gaza to travel to the West Bank to pursue their studies have been categorically denied by Israel, without its conducting individualized security checks for each student. Israel also began to restrict travel between the two areas for lecturers and researchers who wished to take part in academic and research activities in the neighboring area. These restrictions became a sweeping ban in 2007, when Israel tightened the closure as part of its measures taken against Hamas government. The closure prevents universities from holding joint conferences, undermines the possibility of conducting academic and research programs together, and stops lecturers from the West Bank from traveling to the Gaza Strip when they are needed. Since then, Gaza universities have also suffered from a shortage of books, equipment, and laboratory instruments, which were previously brought in from the West Bank.

“[...] The opportunities for joint activities and programs between West Bank universities and the Gaza Strip universities have become extremely limited, if not non-existent. There is almost a complete rift between them. The only communication is via video and telephone. [...] Academics and lecturers are denied the opportunity to advance their qualifications and expertise. They are forced to stay in Gaza and are limited to its intellectual confines. All this is having a negative impact on the standard of education for the students”.

(Mahmoud Ja'abari, Under-Secretary for Higher Education, the Ministry of Education in the Gaza Strip, Nov. 22, 2009)

In the West Bank, there are many more opportunities for academics to travel abroad and to host foreign experts, while the total closure of the Gaza Strip cuts it off from the outside world. Ties with the West Bank could provide Gaza with a link to the international academic milieu, but due to the policy of separation between the two areas, this link has been blocked. The ban on travel from Gaza to the West Bank in certain cases prevents students from Gaza who have been accepted for study abroad from reaching their destinations, since those who are required to visit foreign consulates in the West Bank for visa interviews are prevented from doing so.

² This data was provided to B'Tselem by the human rights project at Birzeit University. Found in “Divide and Rule: Prohibition on Passage between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank,” 1998, available at www.btselem.org

Medicine is one of the essential fields of study in Gaza which has been hit hard by the separation policy. In the West Bank, unlike Gaza, there are specialization programs, a university hospital, and relatively advanced medical infrastructure. As a result of the enforced separation, vital clinical study is taking place at local Gaza hospitals ill-equipped for such activity or at hospitals in Egypt, despite the additional difficulties in reaching them due to the fact that the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt is closed most of the time. The medical faculties in the Strip are unable to conduct joint conferences and research with their West Bank colleagues and cannot send students for practical training and research at more advanced hospitals and medical centers in the West Bank. The universities in Gaza cannot diversify their limited medical faculties with the help of the medical community in the West Bank, and they are forced to settle for inadequate educational solutions, such as studying specialized medical subjects remotely via video.

Particularly hard-hit has been the medical faculty of al-Azhar University, which was established in 1999 as a branch of al-Quds University in Abu Dis in the West Bank. A year later, it found itself forced to function independently, without access to its parent university. Since 2000, the faculty members of the two universities have not been able to meet in order to plan their syllabi, and al-Azhar students are forced to study the full seven years of their medical degree programs in Gaza. They cannot, as was planned, attend courses in the West Bank or host courses presented by lecturers from the West Bank. For example, the course in clinical neurology is taught via video due to the lack of a qualified lecturer within the Strip. Furthermore, the students are prevented from having access to the library, modern laboratory facilities, and medical equipment at their parent university.

“The students feel robbed of access to the university that they are enrolled in. [...] Medical students need to receive intensive practical training and to be up-to-date with the latest developments, but in Gaza they are far away from these developments. [...] The anti-education policy adopted by Israel affects every aspect of learning – the students, the lecturers, the teaching materials. The body of learning in Gaza has been punctured by the closure”.

(Dr. Suhil al-Madbak, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, al-Azhar University, Gaza)

The number of medical graduates in Gaza is insufficient to meet the demands of the medical system, which is suffering from a severe shortage of skilled, educated, and specialized medical professionals, and from gaps in many medical fields. The deficiencies in the medical training at Gaza universities make it exceedingly difficult for students to acquire the skills required to work in their profession:

[...] We are closed in on ourselves and cut off from the West Bank and the outside world. The outcome is the strangulation of the learning process in Gaza. [...] The impediments to education in the field of medicine are leading to a deterioration of the medical capacity and the medical facilities of Gaza, and are impacting the humanitarian and medical situation in the Strip. [...] We have begun to lose hope of ties between the West Bank and Gaza; it's easier to get to London than to the West Bank. [...] The medical community of Gaza has potential, but it is like a bunch of weakened cells with no room to move or heal".

(Mufid al-Mukhalalati, Dean of the Medical Faculty at the Islamic University)

Another example of academic cooperation between Gaza and the West Bank which has sustained a mortal blow due to the separation between the areas is an academic program in the field of **occupational therapy**. The program was created by Bethlehem University for students in Gaza in response to the extreme shortage of qualified occupational therapists and the lack of such training in Gaza. As part of the program, young people from the Gaza Strip were supposed to start studying in Bethlehem in 2003, but Israel prohibited their exit from Gaza outright. The program's coordinators were forced to improvise alternatives from a distance, such as flying in a lecturer from Norway, delivering courses via video, and conducting practical training in Egypt in 2007, subject to the rare openings of the Rafah Crossing at that time. The students suffered from a lack of access to the libraries and professional equipment of Bethlehem University, and the lack of someone to provide regular supervision of their studies and practical work.

Gisha petitioned the High Court of Justice on behalf of the occupational therapy students, asking that each one's application to travel to the West Bank be evaluated on an individualized basis. The State resisted, arguing that students are considered a "risk group" and the universities in the West Bank serve as "greenhouses for growing terrorists". In the summer of 2007, the Supreme Court rejected the petitions but recommended the creation of a mechanism "that will deal individually with cases where positive humanitarian implications are known"³. Despite the Court's recommendation, to the best of Gisha's knowledge, not a single student from the Gaza Strip has been given a permit to study in the West Bank since.

There are currently more than 35,000 people with disabilities in the Gaza Strip - approximately 2.5% of the population⁴ - who are in desperate need of occupational therapy, which can help them function in daily life. Nevertheless, there is still no

³ HCJ 11120/05 *Hamdan v. The Commander of the Southern Command* (unpublished, Aug. 7, 2007), available in Hebrew at www.elyon2.court.gov.il

⁴ National Society for Rehabilitation, "Statistical Report about Disabilities in Gaza Strip", Sept. 2009, available at www.gnsr.org

undergraduate program in occupational therapy in the Gaza Strip, and students from Gaza have no way of traveling to the West Bank to study this professional field.

Due to the prohibition on travel from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank imposed by Israel on students, the number of students from Gaza enrolled in academic programs



in the West Bank has plummeted since the year 2000. The few who make the effort to enroll encounter the standard refusal from Israel regarding their applications to travel to the West Bank. At least eight students from Gaza were accepted to undergraduate programs at Bethlehem University in the summer of 2009 and all their applications to travel to the West Bank were

denied by Israel. Israel has maintained its opposition to their travel, despite intervention from both the university and the Papal Nuncio, the Vatican's ambassador to Israel, who serves as the head of the university. Nineteen-year-old **Auda al-Jalda** from Gaza is one of them: he is being denied access to his studies in business administration in English at the university he chose:

"The atmosphere in Bethlehem University is different from the one in Gaza: it's multicultural and with more liberty [...]. Besides, I have uncles and cousins in Bethlehem, so there's a better learning environment for me there compare to here, especially considering the harsh circumstances in Gaza today. Like any other student, my dream is to complete my studies and to receive a degree from an important university like Bethlehem University, and the prohibition against accessing the West Bank ruins my big dream. [...] I feel I lose hope to reach my studies, which affects my level of education and the course of my life. This is an assault on the freedom of movement of Gaza residents, mainly the students: it's my right to study in any university in my country".

Having no choice, Auda began to study at the Islamic University in Gaza while awaiting the approval of his request to travel to Bethlehem and the university where he truly wants to study.

Any remaining students from Gaza studying in the West Bank live in constant fear that Israel will remove them to the Gaza Strip, as it has regularly done in recent years to Palestinians who have their address listed in Gaza but live in the West Bank. That is what happened to **Berlanty Azzam**, a 23-year-old student from Gaza who began her studies for a BA in business administration at Bethlehem University in 2005. She arrived at the university after receiving an entry permit to



Israel. Right before graduation, Berlanty's studies were cut short: in late October 2009, as she passed through a checkpoint in the West Bank, Israeli soldiers noticed that the address listed on her identity card was in Gaza and they removed her there on that very same night, blindfolded and handcuffed. The removal was carried out in violation of an explicit promise given that day by army representatives to Berlanty's attorney from Gisha, that she would not be removed before a petition to the High Court was submitted on her behalf. Representatives of the State refused to allow Berlanty to return to the West Bank, despite the fact that no security concerns were raised about her at any stage. The High Court accepted the State's position, and rejected the petition brought on behalf of Berlanty by Gisha in December 2009⁵. Accordingly, Berlanty was forced to stay in Gaza with no possibility of returning to Bethlehem to complete her degree.



The separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is contributing to the crippling of the higher education system in Gaza, its difficulties in upgrading and diversifying its faculties, and its staff members' limited opportunities to broaden their intellectual horizons. It is preventing young people living in the Gaza Strip from studying disciplines not offered in Gaza, from choosing where in their territory they will study, and from being exposed to academic environments outside the Strip. The separation is a blow to their aspirations for personal and professional development, it denies many of them the opportunity to provide the residents of Gaza with services they desperately need, and it thwarts their dreams to use their higher education to contribute to the creation of an educated, properly functioning, and thriving civil society in the Gaza Strip.

⁵ H CJ 8731/09 *Azzam v. Commander of IDF Forces in the West Bank* (unpublished, Dec. 9, 2009), available in Hebrew at www.elyon2.court.gov.il. In January 2010, Bethlehem University granted a BA to Berlanty after letting her complete the rest of her academic duties by correspondence.