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Palestine: bringing education home

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Al Quds Open University spares students the ordeal of Israeli checkpoints

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Image Credit: Supplied

Breaking barriers Students and faculty in front of the Masqut Building of the university

The right to education, according to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, is

a universal entitlement, a human right, but this somehow does not apply to Palestinians living amid military checkpoints that impede their access and movement and walls that separate them.

Al Quds Open University's distance-learning programme, though, has brought some relief to Palestinians seeking education, with the aid of technology.

The university was conceived in 1975 to address the need of higher education for the Palestinians, taking into consideration their demographic, social and economic condition under Israeli occupation. Unesco then conducted a feasibility study for the university project in 1980 and the Palestinian National Council approved the plan in 1981 but it wasn't until 1985 that the execution of the project began.

By the end of 1985 a temporary office was opened in Amman with the consent of the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the period from 1985 to 1991, committees of specialists prepared academic programmes, study plans, and oversaw production of educational materials such as textbooks and audio-visual aid.

Finally, in 1991, the university commenced its educational services, with its headquarters initially in occupied Jerusalem, but later moving to Ramallah. It then spread its coverage and study centres to major Palestinian cities, beginning with a few hundred

students.

The number of students has been increasing since and today totals 62,000. This is 40 per cent of all students enrolled in higher education in Palestine and 61 per cent of the university's students are women. Although high-school graduates generally enrol, middle-aged women and men outnumber them.

The beginning was difficult for the university as it coincided with the first Palestinian Intifada, which began in 1987 and continued for six years. It also experienced the economic consequences of the First Gulf War.

Nevertheless the adverse conditions did not deter the university administration, as it was rooted in the concept of steadfastness and identified with the struggle of the people. Today Palestinians know that the university is a source of knowledge, available to every person in all homes.

On Palestinians and education, American President Barack Obama — while addressing the Israeli students in occupied Jerusalem during his recent visit to the region — said, “It is not right to restrict a student's ability to move around the West Bank.”

Al Quds Open University has circumvented this restriction of movement with technological advances and by establishing branches in every governorate.

Today, Al Quds Open University operates 17 branches in the West Bank and 6 in the Gaza Strip and students attend branches closest to their homes.

Lucy Hishmeh, the director of public relations, explains: “The university is near their homes, as the prevalent culture hinders the lady from going outside for higher education. Thus, if you can’t go to university, the university comes to you. Also using technological resources such as virtual classes, videoconferencing and web television, and contacts through the website, students do 75 per cent of their work online but they do have to attend lectures for ‘face-to-face’ sessions, which are not about receiving or giving information but about discussion. Science students, on the other hand, are required to attend laboratory sessions in these face-to-face meetings.”

As for the academic staff, Hishmeh says: “All professors have to take a three-month training course in how to use virtual classes and e-education, during which they learn how to download curriculum online in a pedagogical way. Furthermore, a Quality Assurance Department oversees the tasks of professors to maintain quality and the high standards set by the university”.

Hishmeh points out the unique and objective manner of evaluation: “Professors set the tests, but a committee does the evaluation — their colleagues evaluate the tests. This means that the professor is obliged to cover all material as others, not they themselves, are going to

test the students.”

Besides the restrictions on movement, Palestinians suffer severe economic hardships. “Students pay 15 Jordanian dinars [Dh78] for every credit hour, while other institutions in Palestine cost between 60 to 65 Jordanian dinars, depending on the faculty students attend,” Hismeh says. “Funding obtained from external sources help pay student fees for families of prisoners and martyrs. NGOs and some families adopt students and pay their fees. But given the student numbers this is not enough.”

Hishmeh says the university is contributing to society in more ways than one. “Al Quds Open University provides opportunity to a lot of people to continue their education, especially employees of ministries who only have diplomas to begin with but go on to obtain bachelor’s degrees,” she says. “Since women are at university, you are educating half of society, which then reflects in every household and on children and society as a whole.” Most importantly, degrees obtained from the Al Quds Open University are internationally recognised.

The university has many success stories, many heart-rending ones. In the northern part of the Gaza Strip, Muna Sheishniey’s husband was arrested by the Israelis and she had to take care of her children on her own. She obtained a scholarship from the university, which prioritises the needs of families of prisoners and martyrs. Under difficult circumstances she spent her

time studying, caring for her children and visiting her husband in an Israeli prison. She eventually obtained her bachelor's degree with distinctions. Sheishniey then spent two days of the week in Rafah, in Egypt, to complete her master's degree. Today, she is employed by Al Quds Open University in Gaza City as a social worker and is also completing her PhD in social work.

Umm Imad, who is 55 years old, lives in Qalqilya in the West Bank and works for the Ministry of Social Affairs. Three years ago, she completed her bachelor's degree, studying along with her son, daughter and grandchildren — all of whom were enrolled at Al Quds Open University for the same courses and taught one another. Today, Imad is a director in the Office of Ministry of Social Affairs in Qalqilya.

Even though Al Quds Open University has these success stories to tell, the hardships of the occupation and the poor economic condition of most Palestinians pose a daily struggle. "We operate from some our own and other rented buildings that are neither suitable for open education nor for the numbers of students enrolled. Our budget for office and classroom space is not adequate, so is the budget to cater to the many who apply for bursaries and grants. We wish we could do more."

Even under a severe military occupation, a yearning for education continues to energise Palestinians to resist and achieve. In doing so, they arm themselves with knowledge that, they believe, will not only empower

them to survive but to also live in dignity.

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