

# The Palestinian Faculty Development Program: Improving Higher Education in the West Bank and Gaza

By Chris Shinn, Joseph Glicksberg and Martha Loeke

Palestinian higher education comprises thirteen universities throughout the West Bank and Gaza, in addition to more than two dozen colleges. Gross enrollment rates for 18-24 year olds is 17%, which exceeds the average for developing nations and is similar to neighboring Arab states.<sup>1</sup> There are two public universities fully funded by the Palestinian Authority (PA), whereas all others are essentially private. Public spending by the PA on higher education in the West Bank and Gaza has declined by 15% since 1996, while enrollments have tripled.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, education received 14% of the total national budget, of which higher education received only 5.6%, which is among the lowest in the world. The corresponding funding level for Middle East and North African countries is approximately 30% on average.<sup>3</sup>

Issues of quality loom large in the Palestinian context, where various political and economic realities have generated decades of brain drain to the United States, Europe, and the Gulf States. Universities face chronic shortages of qualified faculty, to the extent that in 2003 only 52% of Palestinian faculty held PhDs, and none of the Palestinian universities offered doctoral degree programs. Mobility restrictions placed on both professors and students have constrained local efforts to improve and internationalize curricula, engage in local or international collaborative research, and absorb pedagogical advances in a wide range of disciplines.

In an unusual public-private effort the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Open Society Institute (OSI) agreed to partner with the American-based non-governmental organization AMIDEAST to create a response to the crisis in Palestinian higher education. In consultation with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Palestinian Faculty Development Program (PFDP) was launched in October 2005 to increase capacity and quality within higher education in the West Bank and Gaza. Importantly, the PFDP is the only project of its kind in Palestine and its singular focus on higher education also makes it unusual among USAID's global education initiatives. In addition, the Palestinian higher education sector is relatively small so the potential impact can be quite significant. The program, which is implemented by AMIDEAST and OSI, has two main objectives: 1) to promote the expansion, retention, and professional development of promising academics teaching in the social sciences and humanities; and 2) to revitalize and reform teaching at Palestinian higher education institutions, as well as promote an institutional culture of teaching and learning.

The PFDP is now midway through its seven-year mandate and has broadened to include ten different program components that support these two aims. A myriad of challenges have required AMIDEAST and OSI to be extremely responsive, flexible and perseverant. The success of the program rests on the partners' abilities to understand the macro politics of the region, navigate USAID's evolving compliance regulations, and stay sensitive to the economic realities of Palestinian academe as well as the cultural and religious context of the beneficiaries.

One pillar of the project is to build capacity within Palestinian universities through two scholarship programs, one granting PhDs and another offering two separate semester visits for non-degree research and/or course development. Both components send Palestinian faculty to

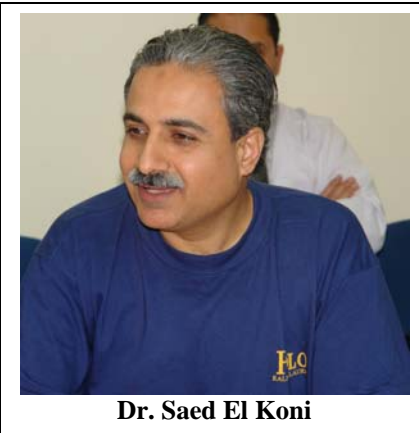
U.S. universities, overcoming a number of political and bureaucratic hurdles such as securing the necessary Israeli local travel permits, U.S. visas, home institution permissions, and U.S. host institution placements. As a result, the attrition rate between the time an individual is selected to the time he or she is scheduled to arrive in the U.S. has been an issue. The original goal was to have 50 faculty earning doctorates at U.S. universities, although the pool of qualified and eligible applicants made this aim unrealistic. Award competitions in 2006 and 2007 produced forty-four PhD finalists, but only thirty-four were actually sent to the U.S. Currently, thirty faculty are enrolled at fifteen U.S. institutions in a variety of fields. Two have already graduated with their PhDs and have returned to Gaza, a third has returned for medical leave, and another failed his comprehensive exams but earned a masters degree in his subject area.

Academic achievement on behalf of the vast majority of the grantees has been excellent, with some earning distinguished honors in their departments. Sadek Firwana, a PhD grantee in education, was a recent recipient of Boston University's Lynch School Award, which is given annually to a student who most "embodies the mission of the Lynch School to enhance the human condition, to expand the human imagination, and to make the world more just." Others, such as Ammar Dweik, who studies public policy at Brandeis University, have found exciting opportunities that draw on past professional expertise and open up new networking opportunities. Mr. Dweik used to be the director of the Central Election Commission in Palestine and was selected by the Carter Center to be a short-term election observer in Nepal. Many other grantees have participated in community outreach or engaged with their broader academic communities in a variety of ways, such as speaking to community groups about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, engaging in participant teaching in area schools, and participating in campus government and internationally-oriented events at their universities.

Rigorous application criteria and selection standards, tailored pre-departure academic training, careful U.S. university placement, and consistent grantee monitoring have contributed to the success of the PhD Fellows program. U.S. universities have been highly receptive to hosting PFDP doctoral grantees, offering substantive tuition fee waivers, dedicated academic mentoring, and responsive on-campus assistance. Similar factors have been essential to the non-degree faculty visit, or Short-term Faculty Fellow component. In this case, however, the program has been challenged in finding faculty who are not only highly qualified, but are also willing and able to take a leave of absence from their home institutions for the time required. Persuading their home universities to grant a semester of leave to their best and typically more senior faculty is difficult, especially given the chronic staff shortages. The faculty themselves have been reluctant to apply for such an opportunity because it often requires leave without pay and time away from their families.

Strategic refinements, such as expanding eligible fields of study, highlighting research as well as curriculum development opportunities, and increasing grantee benefits while in the U.S. have generated increased interest in the Short-Term Fellow awards. Flexible grant policies and the development of closer partnerships with senior Palestinian university administrators have also led to improved impact and program relevance. To date, the PFDP has selected seventeen Fellows whose projects have focused on learning alternative approaches to teaching and developing appropriate curricula for their students.

Dr. Saed El Koni, a faculty member within the business department at An Najah National University in Nablus exemplifies the aims of this type of scholarship. His experience at Syracuse University's Maxwell School during his first visit as a Short-Term Fellow in 2007 resulted in the development of a strong relationship with his academic mentor. This led to a Memorandum of Understanding between Syracuse University and An Najah University to establish a framework of activities including student and faculty exchanges as well as joint research. Two MBA scholarships to Syracuse University will also be available for two appropriately qualified students from An Najah University's business department.



The second pillar of the PFDP addresses faculty needs within the West Bank and Gaza. The impetus here is to amplify the international experience of the U.S.-based grantees by enlivening the academic community in Palestine more generally. In this way, PFDP bridges an investment in individuals to an investment in departments and institutions. Locally-based initiatives include two different grant programs, an annual academic conference, training to improve cross-disciplinary pedagogy, seminars on higher education management issues, and teaching excellence awards. Important advances in the scholarship of teaching and learning have only recently been introduced to Palestinian universities, which still rely heavily on rote learning and other teaching methods considered outdated by the international higher education community. The challenge of changing didactic teaching practices and revising curricula in order to encourage students' critical thinking are increasingly discussed among many Palestinian faculty, but are still rarely reflected in practice.

An important venue for raising awareness of teaching and learning issues is the annual summer PFDP conference in Palestine. For the last two years, the PFDP has gathered more than 200 Palestinian faculty together in a forum designed to explore excellent teaching and scholarship across disciplines. Visiting U.S. faculty present provocative topics for debate, Palestinian professors present their latest research, participants offer constructive feedback, and everyone benefits from the networking and free exchange of ideas. Travel within the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza is severely restricted by the Israeli military, so the PFDP conference offers Palestinian faculty an unusual opportunity for academic discourse, and the event has become the voice for change in higher education in this area.



The PFDP has encouraged international faculty involvement in the West Bank on a variety of levels. An innovative grants program targeting the scholarship of teaching through collaborative projects involves Palestinian faculty directly supported by international academic peers.<sup>4</sup> Two grants on the topics of peer observation in teaching and special needs education are ongoing. A project director from Hebron University is supported by an American from George Mason University and a British scholar at the Arab American University in Jenin. They are working

with twenty-six faculty from five local institutions in an effort to institutionalize peer observation in teaching within Palestinian universities. The second grant addresses special needs education at Bethlehem University (BU). A faculty director from BU is supported by Italian, British and American academics with the aim of re-imagining curricula for teachers in special needs education. The long term goal is to create a BA minor in this specialty area, since there is currently no special education degree program in Palestine.

A partnership between the PFDP and the Central European University in Budapest has also evolved into a productive exchange. Faculty from the CEU deliver the Seminar for Excellence in Teaching (SET), which exposes faculty to a variety of teaching approaches and key issues associated with course design. More than 45 Palestinian faculty have completed an 80-hour certificate program. In the summer of 2009, alumni of SET will be offered a Master Trainer course, which will help them become agents of change within their departments by training their peers. The CEU also offers a series of annual seminars designed to appeal to higher education faculty holding senior level administrative posts at their university or college. Nearly forty faculty took part in these seminars in 2008, with many having participated in seminars in Budapest among academics from various Central Asian countries. This allowed the Palestinian faculty to compare experiences and learn in an international context.

Collectively, the international fellowships and Palestinian-based components of the PFDP constitute a novel approach toward building capacity and instilling a culture of teaching and learning within Palestinian universities. An ongoing challenge will be to integrate these components such that the project results in real higher education reform during its seven-year life. The international dimension of this project, combined with a collaborative, consultative approach toward implementation involving AMIDEAST, OSI, USAID and university faculty, remains crucial to the continued success of this unique faculty development project in the Middle East.

*Dr. Chris Shinn is AMIDEAST's Director of the Palestinian Faculty Development Program and is based in Ramallah, Palestine. Dr. Joseph Glicksberg is OSI's Program Manager of the PFDP and is based in New York City. Martha Loerke is the director of OSI's Network Scholarship Programs and is also based in New York City.*



**Grant director Dr. Sami Basha (top center) of Bethlehem University with Palestinian faculty in special needs education. Chris Shinn (bottom left), director of the PFDP, and visiting Italian scholar Professor Rita Sidoli (right of Chris).**

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<sup>1</sup> USAID (2003) *An assessment of higher education needs in the West Bank and Gaza*. Hashweh, M., Hashweh, M. and Berryman, S. Prepared by Academy for Educational Development, September 2003.

<sup>2</sup> USAID, *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Report Number AB337 (2003). West Bank/Gaza Higher Education Project. Available at: <http://web.worldbank.org/we>

<sup>4</sup> The PFDP's Collaborative Projects in Teaching is modeled upon a program called ReSET which is offered by OSI's Higher Education Support Program and offered to faculty throughout Central Asia.