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LIFELONG LEARNING IN PALESTINE

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ABSTRACT

Palestine's universities are recognised as being involved in outstanding work in the difficult conditions of a belligerent occupation. Internal travel restrictions and over 600 checkpoints and barriers have unsuccessfully tried to atomise higher education. Lifelong Learning in Palestine (LLIP) is a Tempus project that sees universities as central influences in broader societal change. LLIP works on cooperating in formal and informal education and training that give the organic connections of a future learning society. This paper outlines the aims and objectives of the LLIP project that began in 2011 and runs up to October 2013. LLIP is exploring new student-centred pedagogies that create a learning culture that sees Palestinians determining their own future as any other people around the world and participating in the creation of a global knowledge based society.

'What Freire was after in 'conscientization' was a social consciousness,
a wideawakeness that might make injustice and unfulfilled promises
simply intolerable ...'

(Maxine Green, 'Introduction' to *Teaching for Social Justice*, Ayers, Hunt and
Quinn 1998)

The relationship between the Holy Land and Europe has not always been on the best of terms—see Abu-Lughod 2011—but as the papers in this journal show, it is not one that universities do not influence in one way or another. Gone are the days when universities stood on hills like walled cities, watching things happen in Europe and other parts of the world. Universities now change along with the relationships of different societies. Academies are not just centres of learning but are also centres

of knowledge informing broader political and economic change. Adding much to the troubles of the present generation of academics, universities are then about the messy business of disturbing hegemonies. In Palestine, the universities are about rolling out education and training to involve all sorts of communities and organisations of civil society. The statistics show incredible development in higher education on the West Bank and Gaza (Nicolai 2007: 71) and it might be important now that the notion of progress should encourage:

the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations' [with the emphasis that the] 'importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. (London Communiqué 2007)

Palestine's universities have now joined a consortium to form Lifelong Learning in Palestine, a group of universities that refuse to see Palestine's universities held back by a de-humanising occupation. Lifelong Learning in Palestine (LLIP) pushes for cradle-to-grave educational vision that articulates the collective hopes for a people living and learning in a global context just like everyone else. In what follows I give a brief outline of LLIP, which is a *Tempus* project involving the University of Birzeit, the University of Bethlehem, Al-Quds University and the Islamic University of Gaza. On the European side, it involves the University of Glasgow, St. Mary's University College London, the National University of Ireland (Maynooth) and the University of Malta. It has just started and will last until 2013.

Higher Education in Palestine

The project is rare in that it does not make the development of Palestinian universities a panacea for endless suffering created by colonialism. Rather, it takes it that higher education in Palestine has now developed to a point where it works in the opposite way to the forced isolation of all the present conditions. LLIP simply says that Palestinian higher and education and society must move on. Nothing can change the fact that Palestinian universities to date have had to organise themselves around campus closures, checkpoints and incursions—see Patrick Cockburn, in *The Independent*, 8 January 2012, for an explanation of the political and economic functions of checkpoints¹. Palestinian universities have not only

¹ Patrick Cockburn 'Patrick Cockburn: The day the checkpoint goons thought I was an American spy', *The Independent*, 8 January 2012. Accessed on line 9 January 2012 at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/patrick-cockburn-the-day-the-checkpoint-goons-thought-i-was-an-american-spy-6286600.html#>.

had to keep going against all odds, they have also had to evolve as authentic centres of thought, scholarly practice and cultural growth. New courses have been established and outreach activities set up around some very impressive Continuing Education Centres which would be the envy of many universities functioning in far more favourable conditions. Yet between 1979 and 1992 the University of Birzeit was closed on an on-off basis for over half that time by military orders. Students were shot and jailed for what would be standard student activities in other parts of the world. No Palestinian university could be closed for similar reasons at the present and Palestinian students take part in exchanges constituting the 'bread and butter' substance of so much global academic work right now. The aim of course to do far more, especially in Europe.

Developed from a disparate cluster of colleges, Palestinian higher education came into being collectively after 1993 with the creation of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education MoEHE. From that point on, funding has always been unstable. Universities have been without central funding resources but have continued to grow, in spite of the carrot and stick arrangements of international funding on which they have at times had to depend. Then, around the time following the second *Intifada*, the MoEHE published its first five-year plan to show that Palestinians were not in any way lagging behind when it came to thinking about a future of Lifelong Learning. The plan advocated an extension of access, improved conditions of quality, a connection between institutionally-based learning and communities in more transparent management systems for both administration and finance. Given the long established climate of indifference to the plight of Palestinians, these principles showed the Palestinian people to be preparing for playing their part in the development of an international global knowledge economy. No institution held back in thinking about the future.

All five principles of the plan aimed to extend higher education, and deepen the generation of new knowledge built around well-established educational practices and innovation in modern communication systems. It was however the last of these principles that marked the real ambition. In full this read as:

a continuous, renewable, participatory process: Education is a life-long activity, in and out of school, fuelled by classroom learning, social relations and communications, community activities, and the mass media. (Quoted in Nicolai 2007: 152)

Ambition however cannot be realistically assessed without considerations of history and political context. Israeli settlements, taking more and more Palestinian land, have been built constantly since 1967. The

settlements and accompanying road blocks and checkpoints make daily academic life near impossible for the Palestinians. The 'separation' barrier, separating city from city and the West Bank from Jerusalem only compounds the problem. Education of all sorts has had to work around these separations as though Palestinians were in exile in their own land. In psychological terms, what does this mean? The Egyptian novelist Mohamed Makhzangi (2009: 37) says exile is:

A place where you neither truly give nor sincerely receive; the absence of an emotional exchange that leaves no room for decorum, but explodes spontaneously and gushes forth like a subterranean spring busting out of its prison ...

So exile becomes an ontological condition that Palestinians in and outside of Palestine know. Exile either flattens you completely or walls you in with language's deepest meanings, the place's long legacy of tradition and custom, its life experience and way of feeling.

The condition refuses any expression of really being free. It separates one Palestinian from another as it forces one family or community to disconnect from others. Whilst Palestinians live with the injustice of this sort of separation, in their education they have never accepted it. Palestinians reject the 'closing down' nature of the occupation especially in education because education is always about opening up the future. Bantustan formations and almost the complete isolation of Gaza have had an impact on ordinary school and university life. Only ordinary 'on the ground' ingenuity seems to have kept many marginalised communities going in the day-to-day creation of all sorts of social and cultural possibilities. It was this creativity that made Palestine's literacy campaign such a success (Fannoun 2008). Now focusing on education beyond literacy, Palestinians have joined various other peoples of the Middle East and North Africa in some extremely dramatic times to participate wholeheartedly in Tempus IV.

LLIP is the first 'joint project' of Tempus on the West Bank and Gaza that focuses on Lifelong Learning as a national system. Unlike many other funding schemes, LLIP introduces a systematic approach right across the Palestinian territories, encouraging a more networked way of thinking about all the different arrangements of Palestinian education. University education goes some length to negate the conditions of geographical fragmentation and LLIP will attempt to follow through that work by embedding Lifelong Learning in arrangements making meaningful, independent and productive Palestinian life more possible. Palestinian universities already roll out a great deal of their provision and the extension of this process will be absolutely fundamental to the success of the project. Student-centred pedagogies will be another ongoing feature where learners will never be lone investigators. Teachers will be students

as students are teachers in policies from the ground up that unify rather than fragment people.

Pedagogies of Respect in the Aims and Objectives

No people passively accept a future that denies them their rights. Rights imply inclusion and broader learning that respects indigenous realities rather than empty international abstractions that make Europeans feel better but get nothing done. Respect, by necessity, is about respect for individual and collective human agency—which in this case is about the Palestinian people determining their own future. Endless humanitarian ‘remedies’ have created a dependency culture that denies this sort of aspiration in education policies—see Le More (2010). Freirean (Freire 1973, 1992 and 1998) pedagogical approaches will name and claim Lifelong Learning for Palestinians which means that epistemic violence will be avoided at all costs. The project will . . .

First critically recognise [all factors that serve as] causes [for Palestinian education being held back], so that through transforming action [Palestinians] can create a new situation, one that makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire 1993: 29)

Fuller humanity will take shape as Palestinians see their contribution to the development of Lifelong Learning, which moves common purpose and critique towards an ‘on the ground’ problematic which, without conclusion, opens up continuous possibilities in education and training. LLIP will thus attempt to connect different episodes of learning in language that continuously negates obstructions to new, unimagined possibilities in living and reproducing more productive lives. Thus formal and informal education will complement each other in Lifelong Learning communities that then develop learning cultures that just see education in a new ‘lifelong’ light that never closes anything down. The project could never deny the realities of the occupation but it will move new international collaborations that promote the European and Palestinian exchange in arrangements that mean universities and training centres share knowledge and skills developed in networks that open up far more collaborative Lifelong Learning prospects.

LLIP will thus move educational possibilities way beyond simple economics, as materials and equipment will be shared in ways that prioritize equality and create the conditions of a more hopeful approach to education and training. Removing psychological barriers will then be an ongoing focus in communication technologies mediating broader learning that breaks any patterns in the internalisation of conditions created by an unacceptable occupation. Capacity-building workshops and seminars

will be arranged in all sorts of locations. Indeed some of these workshops began in January 2012 with around fifty women graduates of Gaza sitting together and looking at how they might help in the collection of narrative data for a needs assessment that would compliment the benchmarking exercise also planned to begin in early 2012.

Benchmarking simply establishes the level of provision already existing. It highlights good practice in centres like Bethlehem so that the model of these practices can serve as models of good practice for other centres. The Community Service and Continuing Education Center of the Islamic University of Gaza already has some innovative provision that would be of benefit to other areas and similarly with the Continuing Education Center of Birzeit. Details of many innovative projects already running will be made known without restrictions. Benchmarking will go some way to bringing this end about. TV and radio stations have also already been involved as dissemination is encouraged right from the start in the whole Arab region. Many throughout the Arab world are now looking at the Palestinians with a view to some of their educational policies informing change far broader afield. The struggles in Palestine for a learning society are just taking root. So much of this process will be possible because of Palestinian traditions. It is not for nothing that the Palestinians are known to be among the educated people in Lebanon, Jordan and throughout much of the Arab world.

The aspirations of Palestine as a learning society are rarely celebrated. This is understandable given the pressing nature of day-to-day struggles that confront the occupation. Palestinians still have rights as learners and central to those rights is the Palestinian memory carried through the language of each generation on to the next. Whilst Palestine has little of its own manufacturing now, it has never limited itself to a fate of passive consumers. Palestine has a past in creative production that has not been forgotten. Skills are passed on in narrative traditions. So much potential is still there but it has to be given the right conditions for its full expression. Pedagogical conditions were high on the agenda at the first LLIP consortium meeting in November 2011. Open dialogue and discussion took place over two days that stated much about what would be avoided on the LLIP project.

Transformation is the focus of LLIP but the transformation can only be made by Palestinians. LLIP will not provide European ideas but the possibility for their reinvention according to Palestinian culture. This is to say that at every twist and turn the indigenous voice will be determined by Palestinian learners. The aim of providing a European input will be to create conditions where the Palestinian voice comes through and joins the global discourse on the best sort of future for a human and productive life. A common agreement emerged in Amman that Palestinians should not

be denied international law and human rights. When rights are denied by the occupation of the West Bank and closure of Gaza then many young Palestinians simply move outside of Palestine to find better lives. It was therefore decided that respect for rights and international law should be maintained as a thread in the project at all times. Denying rights simply denies Palestine so much of its own talent and creativity.

LLIP is now underway in the benchmarking exercise. This will inform the focus of early moves. Further down the line the benchmarking tool will be re-administered to look at its societal impact. In the coming months the work will be more and more of a partnership in seminars and capacity-building gatherings that work around exchange of experience in developing Lifelong Learning. These early tasks will therefore involve much more than exchange visits. We want to build cultural awareness and respect in papers and reports that may be published in *Holy Land Studies* and a number of other publications. All the European participants are looking forward to this work very much. We hope that it simply changes the way we think about Europe and Palestine and prospects for the future. The learning to come out of this project we know will not be limited to Palestine.

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