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ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

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PALESTINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE

Elias H. Tuma

The Palestinians have often prided themselves on their educational achievements. The growth in numbers of students, teachers, and institutions has been impressive. The rate of literacy has gone up and college graduates have multiplied, but much remains to be accomplished. In this regard, education in Palestine is similar to education in the rest of the Arab world. All seem to measure achievement by numbers, often at the expense of quality. They glorify degrees, titles, and certificates, though all three could be misleading. The Arab countries, and most developing countries, have been caught in a trap while trying to establish their identity and achieve independence from colonialism. In the process they seem to have used institutions of higher education as one of the instruments. The results have been less than satisfying. Quantity has triumphed over quality, and rote learning over analysis and critical thinking. The high rates of population growth and the promise to extend educational opportunities to all have spread the resources too thinly to realize the ideal objectives. The Palestinians are now at a strategic stage in their socio-political and economic development and therefore have a great opportunity to avoid the mistakes of others and build a solid, viable, high quality system of higher education.

The Palestinians have established at least eight universities in the West Bank and Gaza, spread out in areas of population concentration, and more institutions and programs are being contemplated. As far as can be determined, all these institutions are private, although they may be receiving support from the Palestine National Authority. This means that they individually determine their curricula, orientation, and standards. They are under no obligation to coordinate their programs with each other, and so far there is little evidence of coordination to avoid duplication and meet the demands of society and the economy. Large numbers of graduates are unemployed. This no doubt is due in part to the depression of the Palestinian economy, but it is also because of the perceived low quality and relevance of the education and training of these graduates, some of whom were educated in other countries. The impression is common that many of the graduates are poorly trained and unemployable in their declared fields of specialization. Some foreign experts working in Palestine claim that it is hard to find two good engineers or city planners in the country. High officials in the Palestinian Authority complain that you cannot find three good economists to serve in government. Furthermore, the quality of research products by these professionals rarely meet international scholarly standards. Whether true or not, such charges are often used to justify the employment of foreign experts in positions that would be coveted by Palestinians. Higher education in Palestine deserves serious attention before it is too late.

Probably the first step in that direction is to establish some coordination between the various institutions of higher education in order to reconcile objectives, promote complementarity, and avoid duplication and redundancy. By careful coordination and division of labor it will be possible to create high quality graduate and research

programs in some of the institutions, without undermining the academic programs of the others. Coordination and specialization would also help to adopt standards and build programs that would graduate scholars and professionals and produce research products that would compete internationally, in corporations, research and academic institutions, and in scholarly journals.

Educational resources in Palestine are scarce. Coordination among institutions would help to pool and allocate resources efficiently, and enhance division of labor, both horizontally and vertically. For example, one institution may offer a doctoral degree program, another a BA/BS degree, and a third may offer a preparatory 2-year program, still considered as part of university education. Or the two-year program may lead to a terminal vocational certificate.. Such coordinated specialization will allow screening of students, offer flexibility to students and instructors, rationalize expenditures, and harmonize educational programs with demand in the economy and society.

A second major step, which coordination will facilitate, is to create a secular depoliticized system of higher education. Planned coordination will obligate institutions to render their programs compatible with those of others on the basis of educational objectives, merit, and resource availability. Failing to secularize and depoliticize higher education will condemn it to mediocrity and conformity, and obstruct creativity and intellectual independence. In this process, Palestinian academicians in the diaspora may be an invaluable resource, still waiting to be tapped at minimum cost to the Palestinian institutions.

The system of education in Palestine needs help to avoid irreparable damage. Emphases on numbers at the expense of quality, political/confessional education at the expense of secular, rational, and free intellectual thinking, and on duplicative programs at the expense of highly specialized quality programs are already apparent. It is also apparent that failure to reform and build up higher education will lower the quality of the educational system as a whole since the graduates of higher education will be in charge of elementary and secondary education. The damage will be reflected in an uneducated labor force and a smaller pool of students well prepared for higher education. Luckily there is still time to arrest the damage and prevent its recurrence, and build a high quality system of education the Palestinian people deserve.

AVP is a non-partisan non-profit monthly published and edited by Elias H. Tuma, professor emeritus of economics, University of California, Davis, CA. The views expressed above are those of the author and do not implicate the University in any way. On internet: <http://polar.ucdavis.edu/Econ/Tuma/tuma.html>