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■ AL-QUDS OPEN UNIVERSITY AN OASIS IN THE MIDDLE OF ISRAELI OCCUPATION

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BACKGROUND

Al-Quds Open University (QOU) is a general Palestinian institution for higher education. It has an independent academic, financial and administrative status. It provides distance learning and open education system, which encourage the learner to shoulder the responsibility. Al-Quds Open University system of education means, in essence, taking education to the work place or residence of interested learners, instead of requiring them to attend regular classes at a traditional campus, the matter that allows learners to study and work at the same time. During its establishment, the QOU went through three stages as follows:

1- Planning Stage:

Taking into consideration the Palestinian people's need for higher education, and based on their demographical, social and economical situations under the Israeli occupation, the university started in 1975. Upon the request of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, UNESCO conducted a feasibility study for the university project, which was approved by the UNESCO general conference held in 1980. Then the Palestinian National Council approved the plan in 1981. But because of unfavorable circumstances, the execution of the project was delayed until 1985.

2- Preparation of Curricula Stage:

It started at the end of 1985 till 1991, by opening a temporary office in Amman the capital of Jordan, with the consent of the Jordanian ministry for foreign affairs. During this period, committees of specialists were formed to prepare academic programs, specializations, study plans, and the production of educational materials, such as textbooks and supportive educational media; mainly educational audio-visual aids. A studio was established to accomplish the latest.

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3- Execution and Implementation Stage:

It started in 1991, when the University undertook its educational services with its headquarters in Jerusalem. QOU opened some educational regions in major Palestinian cities, that included few hundred learners.

Nowadays, the university extends its educational services to about 50,000 students. The number of students registered till the end of the 2006 spring semester was 50,799. The following map shows the distribution of QOU educational regions and study centers:

QOU Educational Regions and Study Centers



AL-QUDS OPEN UNIVERSITY PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES...

Al-Quds Open University philosophy stems from a strong belief and a sincere commitment to play a distinctive role in the education of the occupied Palestinian people. Its distinctive role emanates from the adoption and application of flexible educational system, which increases students' access to various academic programs offered at distance by QOU.

The main objective of Al-Quds Open University is to provide the Palestinian students with good quality of higher education, and advanced training in various fields of study.

The university contributes in solving the problems arising from the inability of the Palestinian conventional universities, to cater to the massive increase number of students, who are qualified and interested in higher education. It also contributes to train students to use self-learning mechanisms, enhance their intellectual and critical thinking abilities, develop students' characters, prepare them for a useful role in the Palestinian society, and provide continuing education and professional preparation in various applied studies.

AL-QUDS OPEN UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC DEGREES AND PROGRAMS

The university grants the following two degrees:

- Diploma in Education: This degree is awarded upon learner's completion of thirty three credit hours in education courses. These courses include Foundation courses, basic courses, specialization courses and optional courses.
- Bachelor's degree: This degree is essentially equivalent to its counterpart in conventional universities. It is awarded upon learner's completion of the required one hundred thirty three to one hundred thirty eight credit hours, and meeting the specific requirements of any given specialization.

Academic Programs

The university offers the following five academic programs which leads to Bachelor's degrees:

Technology and Applied Sciences

In this program, the university offers the following two majors:

Hours	Major
137	Computer Information System (CIS)
137	Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Agriculture

This program offers one general major:

Hours	Major
138	Agriculture Science

Social and Family Development

This program offers the following major:

Hours	Major
133	Social Service

Administration and Economic Sciences

This program offers the following majors:

Hours	Major
137	Administration
137	Economics
137	Accounting
137	Finance
137	Marketing

Education

This program offers the following majors:

Hours	Major
133	Elementary Education
133	Islamic Education
133	Arabic
133	English
133	Mathematics
133	General Science
133	History

Continuing Education Center

In addition to the above-mentioned academic studies, the continuing education center offers the opportunity to any Palestinian citizen, regardless of age or qualification, to attend any of the continuing education and training programs. However, no university degree is granted at the end of this kind of study. Only diplomas or certificates are awarded.

Why do we need distance learning and open education in Palestine?

From Perraton and her colleagues' point of view, distance education has been used to reach trainees in geographically challenging areas, such as the riverain regions in Guyana, mountainous areas in Nepal, the dispersed communities of the Indonesian archipelago and the small island states in the Caribbean and the Pacific. It also has been used in some high population countries such as China and Pakistan, where distance programs played an essential role in providing teacher education on a huge scale. It has been used in many Latin American countries too. (Perraton et al, ----, 18).

But in Palestine, the need and the circumstances are different. The Israeli occupation had isolated the Palestinian villages and towns by installing hundreds of Israeli army checkpoints, which makes it very hard for the people to move fast and freely. Occupation is the main challenging factor which makes Al-Quds Open University a necessity. The circumstances of the Palestinian learners imposed by the Israeli occupation require and necessitate offering distance education.

This style of education enables the under-occupation QOU learners to get their education without necessarily attending full-time institution. Also, this education style has made it attractive for students, who, many of them, for practical, economic, social and geographical reasons due to occupation, cannot reach the traditional campus.

It also makes it particularly appropriate and convenient for the Palestinian learners scattered all over Palestine and those working but cannot leave their jobs, to attend full-time courses at the Palestinian traditional universities.

Al-Quds Open University has around fifty thousand students in a variety of fields, and one thousand and four hundred academic supervisors, all spread across the West Bank and Gaza. Any means available of enhancing QOU exist-

ing service delivery, with a clearly identifiable impact on the quality of education that the students receive, is considered a top priority. Establishing and using an e-Learning platform that supports the existing system was considered to be a viable solution that has proven itself elsewhere, and has become an envisaged essential ingredient of quality distance education.

Due to the difficult political conditions in our region that severely restricted the movement of Palestinians, including Al-Quds Open University students and staff, there is a need to remain connected with the university, its centers and staff.

What different elements do we need to make DE work?

Perraton and her colleagues see that, to make distance education work, we need the following structures and facilities:

- *Governance, planning, management and funding
- * Materials development and production: in-house in a variety of media, such as print, cassettes/videotapes, and cd-roms
- * Materials reproduction and distribution,
- *Students recruitment and advice,
- *Student support including the supervision of classroom practice,
- *Assessment and evaluation of learners,
- *Feedback system/formative evaluation,
- *Record systems. (Perraton, ----, 28.). Based on the above mentioned, Al-Quds Open University has all the above-mentioned structures and facilities.

What sort of technologies does QOU use?

Perraton and her colleagues see that open and distance learning may use print, broadcasts, cassette recordings, computer-based materials, computer interaction, video-conferencing, and face-to-face learning. (Perraton, ----, 12).

Of the above-mentioned technologies, Al-Quds Open University uses the following:

Print: The University has four hundred fifty developed in-house textbooks covering all specializations.

Broadcasts: Partly broadcasting.

Cassette recordings: QOU has a production center where video and audio cassettes are produced. Then they are distributed to the educational regions and the study centers to be available for the learners and the academic supervisors.

Computer-based materials: QOU has produced computer-based materials serving some of the courses. The learner may see these courses through the university portal and through Avicenna virtual university.

Computer interaction: The learner may have an access to the portal and Avicenna Virtual University. He is able to interact with his fellow-learners, or his academic supervisors, or the administration.

Videoconferencing: The usage of videoconferencing is restricted to the QOU administration due to its high cost.

Face-to-face learning: The learner has the choice to attend weekly meetings to discuss with the academic supervisors difficult concepts related to his field of specialization.

In addition to the above mentioned facilities, the university presents the following to enhance its learners learning:

- The Information and Communication Technology Center (ICTC) Unit is dedicated to provide state-of-the-art information and communication technology to the University. It has forty four staff members divided into four departments (*Software Engineering, Multimedia, Network & Support, and Training*).
- QOU has one of the largest Wide Network (WAN) in Palestine that connects all university branches (twenty seven sites, using FR "Frame Relay" technology with two E1 lines & VPN to connect Amman Office with the ICT Center in Ramallah).
- One thousand eight hundred sixty two PCs.
- Thirty seven computer labs including two for blind students and four for the community services training courses.
- Seventeen free Internet labs.
- Seven ICT labs.
- Twenty two multimedia labs.
- Email and Internet service is available for all employees, instructors and students in the different study centers and offices.
- Completely in-house developed system using cutting-edge technology (Admission, Registration, Bank of assignments and Exams etc...).
- A University Academic portal which was launched in may/2004 (<http://portal.qou.edu>), is now accessible to about fifty thousand (50,000) learners and one thousand four hundred (1400) academic supervisors in the West Bank & Gaza educational regions and study centers.

The functions implemented currently in the Portal are:

- Student & Tutor Information System
- File Upload Unit
- Internal Messaging (Communication) System between students and instructors and instructors themselves.
- Dynamic News & Bulletin Boards.

Avicenna Project

- Avicenna Virtual Campus is an ambitious project that aims at creating new community of universities sharing best practices and pedagogical innovation through a network of E-learning centers across the Mediterranean basin.
- 15 countries involved, including Palestine which is represented by AL-Quds Open University (QOU).
- Accelerate the adoption and best use of ICT-assisted Open Distance Learning (ODL).
- Funding: 20% QOU funded, 80% EU Funded.

Al-Quds Open University has so far produced nine modules, which were uploaded on the platform and they are now accessible to the students. The production of another fourteen modules is to be completed before the next

fall semester. Authors of these modules are academics from QOU and other Palestinian universities.

While it maintains its leading role, AKC Palestine aspires to expand the Avicenna Project in Palestine by including other academic institutions. The implementation of this sub-project should yield the following benefits:

- 1) Solve the Human Resources Problem at the Palestinian universities.
- 2) Update and manage curricula and materials, especially in technology (ICT) related fields, which is costly due to their constantly changing nature.
- 3) Enrich the working environment for local faculty members, and create more of an incentive to stay within the teaching profession.

Occupation's connection

If one wants to relate the educational process in Palestine to political situation, he will realize that all the Palestinian universities in Gaza and the West Bank, other educational institutions and hundreds of schools are all subjected to severe restrictions in the delivery of knowledge, as a result of Israeli measures.

Normal education has continued to be disrupted over the past thirty five years of occupation, especially during and after the first Palestinian uprising (Intifada) against the Israeli occupation, which started in 1987. Birzeit University was particularly singled out for oppression during this period, because of its perceived role in intellectual leadership. Faculty and students were arbitrarily detained, the university president was exiled, and the campus was closed for extended periods. The measures resulted in a movement of 'underground' education, when faculty met students in private homes and other unofficial 'campuses'.

Today, student and faculty attendance at all universities continues to be severely affected by the presence of Israeli checkpoints, curfews, sometimes by direct harassment, attacks and willful destruction. A single checkpoint on a West Bank road can close down teaching for many days. A study term of fifteen weeks usually ends up being compressed into less than 12 weeks, or extended over six or seven months.

The academic and other effects are cumulative and drastic in the long-term, since few courses are taught in full. Not only is educational delivery impaired and an acute financial crisis affects all aspects of educational work. There is an unsettling sense of constant precariousness that makes any planning and any motivation difficult indeed. Priorities have shifted from an emphasis on quality to a struggle for mere survival.

One can realize that the problem of attendance at Palestinian universities predates the current Al-Aqsa Intifada (uprising), has less to do with 'security' than with Israeli long-standing occupation policies. Israel has always targeted education, community developments and Palestinian civil society. It has been limiting, fragmenting and disconnecting the Palestinian areas for a long time.

Four main factors influence educational work: (1) Israeli closures and curfews; (2) Israel's restrictions on movement everywhere in the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza; (3) Israel's network of roads to its colonies/military outposts 'settlements' in the West Bank and Gaza; and (4) inability of students and faculty from the West Bank to enter Israel's 'Jerusalem' boundaries or to cross them to go to other destinations. Since 'Jerusalem' is centrally located, Israel's actions in effect disconnect the various Palestinian areas to the north, south and east (<http://www.alquds.edu/press/articles/geography.php>).

The Open Education in Palestine decreased the suffering of university students, who are obliged to pass at least one checkpoint in order to attend their classes, in addition to the Israeli soldiers' constant harassment and humiliation at these checkpoints. So the distribution of Al-Quds Open University educational regions and study centers enables its students to study at their places, with less daily problems imposed by the Israeli occupation.

In addition to this, we can also see the effects of the political situation on the economical situation, which influence a great number of families, who are unable to pay their sons and daughters tuition fees. So the open education gives these students the chance to work and study in the same time. This, as a result, will enable them to afford to pay for their study, and to fulfill their ambitions and dreams.

Also, there are a lot of married women and house wives who wish to pursue their education, but due to the problems, humiliation, harassment at the Israeli checkpoints, their husbands will not allow them to pass these checkpoints. So QOU educational system participates in solving this problem by enabling these housewives to get better education. It's worth mentioning that female learners form more than 50% of Al-Quds Open University students' body.

Such Israeli malpractices are confirmed by a lot of Nobel-prize winners, thinkers, journalists, and researchers. One of these is Kathleen Christison, an American former CIA analyst, who wrote an interesting article, on how the New York Times newspaper covers the Arab Israeli problem, and particularly the Palestinian Israeli issues. Her article's title is: "Just how much does the New York Times tilt towards Israel; and how much does it matter?" She says:

"Often this is a matter simply of reporting or analyzing from an Israeli perspective, without taking the Palestinian perspective into account--as if all reporting from Israel and about Israelis is essentially reporting on "us" and on concerns in which we the readers are vitally interested, whereas reporting on Palestinians is about a different, foreign people and therefore of much less interest. This occurs, for instance, when we're treated to frequent features on the personal and psychological impact of suicide bombings on Israelis but seldom see stories about the impact on Palestinians of the occupation and all its aspects--the civilian deaths, the roadblocks, the land confiscation, the curfews, the depredations by settlers, the shootings by soldiers, the destruction of olive groves, etc., etc. Times reporters seem to spend little time in the West Bank and Gaza--less and less as Israel tightens its control over these territories--and as a result there is relatively little reporting on the situation there. Even the stories about Israel's July 22 missile attack in Gaza that killed 14 innocent civilians were filed from Jerusalem, not from Gaza." (<http://www.counterpunch.org>, 2002)"

At last, it's also worth quoting psycholinguist Chomsky who was interviewed by Yudilovitch in the ZNET Daily Comments, who said;

"The 'real issue' that is being ignored is the systematic destruction of any prospects for a viable Palestinian existence as Israel annexing valuable land and major resources, leaving the shrinking territories assigned to Palestinians as viable cantons, largely separated from one another and from whatever bit of Jerusalem is to be left to Palestinians, and completely imprisoned as Israel takes over the Jordan valley." (<http://us.f543.mail.yahoo.com/ym/showletter>, 2006).

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