



## USAID West Bank and Gaza

# Four Decades of USAID Support to Higher Education in the West Bank and Gaza

### Overview

USAID/West Bank and Gaza has been actively supporting the Palestinian education system since the early 1970s. Over this period, USAID support has ranged from providing assistance to school facilities, infrastructure improvements, and scholarship programs to strengthening of human resource capacity. In the past 10 years, USAID has introduced innovative programs designed to improve the quality of basic and higher education and enhance the competitiveness and good citizenry of Palestinian youth in preparation for the demands of the twenty-first century workforce.

Over the years, USAID has adjusted its program focus to support the needs of the sector and add value to the education system, along with the many donors supporting the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). Prior to 1994, USAID mostly focused on scholarships and infrastructure to support schools and nascent universities. From 1994 to 2005, USAID provided critical support to the MEHE to help stabilize the education sector, providing assistance to ensure access and improve school facilities. In 2005, the USAID/West Bank and Gaza Mission established a formal education office. This event marked a strategic shift in USAID programming: to align the Mission's work with the Ministry's goals and strategies to improve the quality of basic and higher education, as well as to strengthen opportunities for youth development, workforce preparation, and global citizenship. Since this period, the Palestinian education system has achieved significant progress, and USAID has been a partner throughout.

### Challenges in Higher Education.

The Palestinian education system exhibits a number of structural and systemic challenges that continue to constrain learning outcomes, employment, and competitiveness of youth. These challenges are underscored by the near 40 percent youth unemployment rate, according to the latest figures by the International Labour Organization. Most students in secondary and tertiary education enroll in humanities and social sciences (74 percent), while a relatively low percentage (24 percent) enroll in sciences. A very low percentage of students (2 percent) enroll in technical and vocational education. There are very few PhD programs by universities, and the majority of instructors do not hold doctoral degrees.

### USAID's Strategic Response and Approach

Since 2005, USAID's strategy in supporting higher education institutions has consistently focused on how to better prepare students to be competitive in the modern, global economy. One approach focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, attempting to transform the dynamics of the classroom and culture of inquiry through the Palestinian Faculty Development Program. The second approach was to enhance the capacity and service offerings of the universities' career centers, through the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program. The two programs offer complementary approaches to achieving the goal of improving the competitiveness of Palestinian graduates.

The **Palestinian Faculty Development Program** (2005–2015) focused on improving the quality of instruction in universities by promoting and institutionalizing **Centers of Excellence for Teaching and Learning**. These Centers continue to have dedicated full-

and part-time staff and an operating budget that sustains their efforts to support university professors. A few universities have developed curricular policies on instruction, assessment, and relevance that direct the efforts of the Centers within an overarching strategic plan.

The **Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program** (2011–2016) aimed to strengthen the capacity of the career centers in universities to better prepare their students for the workforce by introducing a suite of guidance and counseling tools and services offered to students. The **career centers continue to deliver guidance and counseling services** through dedicated staff and trainers, budgets, and policies that mandate student participation and link with the universities' overarching strategic plans.

### **Success of the Palestinian Faculty Development Program**

Prior to the advent of the Palestinian Faculty Development Program, the notional approach to higher education instruction in universities was teacher-centered, conducted through professorial lectures, and with few student-teacher, peer-to-peer interactions and experiential or project-based learning opportunities for students. Further, the academic curricula were highly theoretical, divorced from the practical work-life aspects of Palestinian society. Students graduating from these institutions were ill-prepared for the rigors and requirements of the needs of the modern workforce. The lack of student preparedness and dearth of "soft skills" was a common complaint voiced by prospective employers.

**Innovative Model: The Center of Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CELT).** The Palestinian Faculty Development Program was designed in 2005 to respond to the needs of the Palestinian higher education institutions. Originally conceived by USAID, AMIDEAST, and the Open Society Foundation, the scope of work focused on providing scholarship opportunities to graduates to pursue master's and doctoral degrees, provide short-term training and study tours to improve the quality of instruction in the classroom, and recognize high-performing professors and lecturers who were able to demonstrate innovative instructional practices. Beginning in 2012, the question of how universities were to sustain these reforms led to the creation of the CELTs.

The mission of the CELT is to provide a resource for lecturers and professors at universities to build faculty capacity to deliver high-quality, effective instruction and research opportunities to their students. CELTs fulfill their mission through delivering ongoing training and support to faculty in areas ranging from syllabus development to implementing relevant research projects with community and private-sector stakeholders. They have produced and managed a clearinghouse of materials and online resources, which span a variety of disciplines and serve many different departments. They also sponsor and organize conferences and symposia and help faculty produce and publish research. Since 2015, the CELTs have been self-sustaining without direct external support provided by any donor. Their lasting impact on the university system is their influence on how the traditional academic culture of the university has given way to fostering dynamic research and learning for both students and faculty.

### **Keys to the Palestinian Faculty Development Program's Success.**

Representatives from Bethlehem University, An Najah University, and Palestine Polytechnic University were interviewed to determine how their experiences with the CELTs have shaped the program's success. These universities have actively situated the CELT as one of the mechanisms to advance their institutional missions. The foundation of the CELTs was laid in the Palestinian Faculty Development Program's earlier efforts with senior administrators and faculty. Key to their success was the Palestinian Faculty Development Program's **ability to work over a longer-period time horizon** with senior decision-makers who grasped how the one-off benefits of the short-term studies and workshops could be institutionalized and replicated through the work of the CELTs.

When USAID and AMIDEAST conceived of the CELTs, they envisioned a center within the university that could continue the professional development services to faculty introduced under the Palestinian Faculty Development Program. These services include workshops on enhanced instructional practices and classroom interaction techniques, outreach to private businesses to link theory with real world practical experiences, and facilitation of experiential- or project-based research and learning opportunities for faculty and students.

And yet, if these centers only provided this service function, their long-term impact would be muted. Rather, in the case of the three universities visited, each had elevated the role of the CELT to ensure that these centers have more direct influence over the organizational culture and direction of the university faculty and policies.

**Aligning policy to practice.** At Bethlehem University, the academic leadership did not want reduce the center to a place where only training occurred. Rather, the trainings and workshops were to be situated in a broader context. The policies that drive academic excellence, which set expectations for faculty and facilitate an enhanced learning environment, were to be driven from an array of mission-focused programs. The CELT at Bethlehem University became one of the most important tools to advance the university's vision and drive these academic policies. In short, the thrust was to align the vision of the university with the mission of the CELT. As such, the center became an integral part of the work—a hand of the Academic Affairs office.

**Introducing project-based, experiential learning opportunities.** An Najah University, which has a very conservative reputation in terms of its academic policies, has accommodated the **community-based learning** approach promoted by the CELT. Community-based learning, according to the An Najah CELT deputy, was a radical departure from the traditional ways of teaching and learning in the university. With community-based learning the professor designs an entire course around one project that is driven by the needs of a public-sector or community-based organization. This course does not rely on the traditional textbook, nor on the traditional grading and examination scheme that all other courses must follow. An example, recently implemented, was a graduate course on urban planning that helped the City of Nablus develop a rehabilitation plan to restore the old city centers of several villages near Nablus.

The academic leadership of An Najah (the president and vice president) approves upward of 10 courses per semester that follow the community-based learning model. The CELT provides orientation and training to professors on how to develop community-based learning courses and has begun developing a database of private, public, and

community partners to help professors identify projects and counterparts.

### **Success of the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program**

USAID designed the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program to strengthen the capacity of Palestinian universities to prepare students for the demands of the modern economy. Implemented by the International Youth Foundation (IYF), the program aimed to enhance the role and capabilities of the university career centers to deliver an array of student-focused services ranging from career counseling to internship programs.

#### **Keys to Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program's Success**

**Adjusting mid-course and adapting to beneficiary needs.** The success of the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program is seen in the way the universities have come to adopt guidance and counseling services as a core mission of their work. The program shifted its focus to supporting career centers as a result of the midterm evaluation's recommendations. The shift was based on the midterm evaluation's finding that youth-serving institutions best placed to sustain the impact of the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program were the university structures. This was a testament to the relevance and effectiveness of the counseling service programs introduced, as well as to their alignment to the mission and goals of the universities these programs were supporting.

**Aligning policy to practice.** The Palestine Polytechnic experience shows how existing demand by leadership coupled with strong technical assistance can lead to lasting and sustained institutional reforms designed to produce better learning outcomes. Prior to 2012, Palestine Polytechnic University did not offer any systematic service for career counseling or workforce preparedness to its students. Today, it not only has an established Center for Entrepreneurship and Career Development (CECD), but has transformed its strategic focus to that of an "entrepreneurial university development model" (**Figure 1**). The entrepreneurial model emphasizes the role of a university to contribute to the development of private enterprises and the regional economy. The core pillars of Palestine Polytechnic's strategic plan are to prepare students for the

modern economy and establish direct links with community and private enterprises. These goals are driven by the work of both the CECD and the CELT.

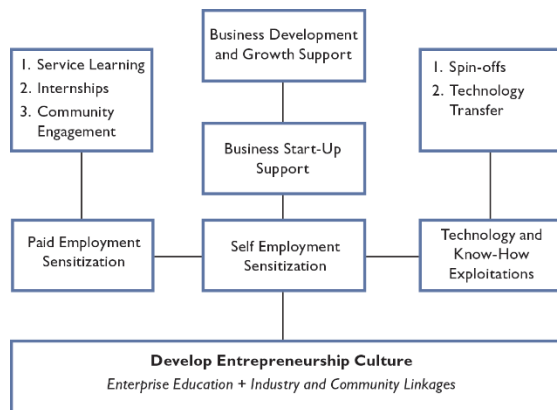


Figure 1. Palestine Polytechnic University's Strategic Entrepreneurial Development Model

**Demonstrated effectiveness of the career center.** Though the city of Hebron is widely recognized as the center of industry in Palestine, the unemployment rate has been quite high. The businesses are family run and tend to be insular in their hiring of employees. Palestine Polytechnic University was getting consistent feedback that its graduates were not ready for the demands of the labor market, and that they did not have the soft skills that employers needed, such as interpersonal communication. Graduates were thrust into the labor market wholly unprepared to do the necessary networking, interviewing, and employment preparation needed to find employment or stay employed. This feedback to the university's leadership led in part to the university's pursuing the entrepreneurial model and embracing the role of the CECD.

CECD's programs were adopted early on based on their demonstrated success in helping students become more employable. The Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program-supported internship program proved particularly effective in helping students obtain employment post-graduation. According to the CECD Director, during the first three years of the Youth Entrepreneurship Development Program, 40 percent of all participants were employed at the place of internship, 28 percent were hired immediately elsewhere, and 3 percent opened their own business. The evidence of impact, more than anything else, elevated the role of the CECD in the strategic plan and focus of the university. The success of this initial batch of students led to another

round of proposals, which led to the institutionalization of the center as a core structure in the university.

**Establishing program synergies between career center services and the CELT.**

Palestine Polytechnic has further taken advantage of the reinforcing and multiplier effects between the CELT and CECD programs. The CECD programs have led to improved instructional practices by relying on professors to deliver the modules. The modules themselves reflect best practices in student-centered, inquiry-based, and experiential instruction. The CECD programs emphasize an external community focus for students, which resonates with the community-based learning activities encouraged and promoted by the CELT. Moreover, the CELT emphasis on engaging students in critical thinking, communication, and experiential learning fosters the outcomes in student behavior and workforce preparedness that the CECD aims to achieve. The symbiosis of the two programs is recognized through their integration into Palestine Polytechnic's Strategic Entrepreneurial Development Model (Figure 1) where the CELT advances goals related to community linkages and enterprise education, and the CECD supports efforts related to business startup, service learning, internships, and self-employment sensitization. The relationship of these two programs to achieving the common goal is illustrated in Figure 2, where the CELT and career centers offer the universities two pathways to improve the competitiveness and employability of youth: CELTs through enhancing the learning environment and career centers by enhancing their employability and preparation for the workforce.

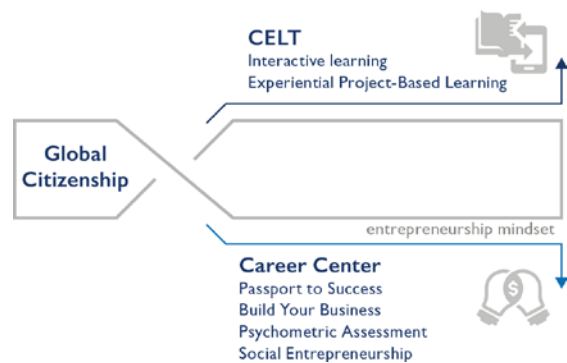


Figure 2. Two approaches to improving student preparedness and citizenship by universities