



## **PEACE Programme**

**International Conference on University Cooperation for the Progress of Civil  
Society in Palestine  
Bethlehem, 26-27 February 2005**

### **FINAL REPORT**

Over 130 participants - rectors, vice-rectors, senior level academics, directors of international relations offices and students - from 32 universities in Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom) and from Palestine attended the International Conference on "*University Cooperation for the Progress of Civil Society in Palestine*", which was held in Bethlehem on 26 and 27 February 2005. The Palestinian participants included also representatives of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Palestinian National Authority and of various NGOs and scientific and professional organizations. Representatives of UNESCO, UNDP, European Commission and of the Diplomatic Missions in Jerusalem were also present. (Cf. Annex, List of Participants; Annex 2, Agenda).

### **Opening Session**

**Brother Vincent Malham**, President of Bethlehem University, greeted the participants on behalf of the host institution and thanked PEACE for convening the Conference in Bethlehem. Stressing that interuniversity cooperation is "indispensable to the development of Palestinian universities", he wished success to the Conference in achieving its goal, namely "to work together to find ways and means to make education-relevant and challenging education- available to the young people of Palestine. They deserve a chance for a better tomorrow and a future of peace".

**Professor Manuel Hassassian**, Executive Vice-President of Bethlehem University and President of PEACE, welcomed the participants and expressed satisfaction for the fact that, after having been postponed several times, the Conference could be finally convened in Bethlehem. Emphasizing the remarkable achievements of the Palestinian universities, despite the tremendous difficulties encountered under occupation, he stressed that their mission "to prepare the Palestinian youth for the moment when they can assume their long overdue status among the family of nations" has acquired increased significance and importance at present when "there is a new chance for the voice of reason and justice to

prevail”. International solidarity and support are essential for the Palestinian universities to achieve that mission. The endeavor to “build bridges with the neighbors and with the world at large” he said, should be accompanied by a campaign in defense of academic rights as essential human rights.

Professor Hassassian thanked the European Union, UNDP, the World Bank, as well as USAID, AMIDEAST and other US cultural organizations, for their important contribution to developing the Palestinian higher education system. He expressed particular thanks and gratitude to UNESCO, for the assistance extended to the Palestinian people in the fields of education, science, culture and communication and for the constant support to the PEACE Programme. Stressing the role of PEACE in promoting academic cooperation with Palestinian universities, he emphasized that this is also a contribution to enhance the latter's role in building up civil society and instilling democratic values in Palestine and ultimately to peace and mutual understanding.

**Ms. Costanza Farina**, Director of the UNESCO Office in Ramallah, presented the message addressed to the conference by Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO. Stressing that the Conference meets at a propitious moment for the resumption of the peace process, when real opportunities exist to bring about a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, the Director-General emphasized the additional meaning and significance of the meeting within this new context. “For the Palestinian people” - he pointed out – the universities “play a key role in generating human resources so necessary for development in all its dimensions”, while also serving as “key institutions for building a vibrant, prosperous and democratic Palestinian society”. That is why UNESCO has consistently sought to assist and promote higher education and has encouraged the academic institutions world wide to create and maintain special ties with their Palestinian counterparts. Assuring the participants of UNESCO's continued support to the PEACE Programme, the Director-General stressed that he was looking forward to the outcome of their deliberations in terms of further opportunities for promoting academic cooperation with Palestinian universities.

**Mr. Timothy Rothermel**, Representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), commended the contribution of the European and American universities to developing cooperation with Palestinian universities. Referring to the series of UNDP Arab Human Development Reports – of which a third volume is to come out soon – he pointed out that there is a new consensus around the need for change focused on freedom, good governance and political reform in the Region. Quoting Dr. Asmi Shuaibi, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, he stressed the simultaneous need to put an end to foreign occupation in Palestine and to build democracy as the basis on which further progress can be made. Palestinian universities have shown exceptional vitality, creativity and dynamism. They have kept growing even under extreme diversity and are now in a position to contribute as true and equal partners in the international academic interchange. PEACE – he pointed out - can contribute to enhance their potential to do so.

**Mr. Jose Maria Ferrer**, the Spanish Consul in Jerusalem, presented the message addressed to the conference by **H.E. Mr. Miguel Ingel Moratinos**, the Foreign Minister

of Spain and former European Peace Envoy to the Middle East. Stressing both the urgent need and the new hope for a fair solution to the Middle East conflict, the Minister pointed out that university cooperation can bring an important contribution to developing the path to peace, in a region, where, he pointed out, quoting Pope John Paul II, “it is bridges not walls that are needed.”

**HE Dr. Naim Abu Al Homos**, Minister of Education and Higher Education, Palestinian National Authority, presented the key note address to the Conference. Thanking the participants for coming to Palestine, he spoke about the impediments facing Palestinian education because of Israeli measures such as checkpoints, siege, curfews, closure of schools, universities and colleges, arresting students and teachers and shooting. Many students were killed and hundreds injured. Now Israel is building a new separation wall on Palestinian land, thus separating Palestinian cities from one another and even separating students from their schools. He noted that the Palestinian students are confronting hardships with patience and restraint, but with the strong determination to pursue education, which they regard as a basic human right. He stressed the remarkable achievements of the Palestinian universities, despite the difficulties they have been and are still encountering.

Dr. Abu Homos offered a broad overview of the needs and priorities facing higher education in Palestine, emphasizing that the Palestinian National Authority is fully aware of its key role in all plans for national development. Referring to the great challenges facing higher education at present, he stressed that while the Palestinians are ready to make sacrifices and invest in higher learning and research, substantial international support is needed in order to allow the youth of Palestine to have the kind of higher education they need and deserve. Pointing out that PEACE has helped develop bilateral and multilateral links between Palestinian and foreign universities, he expressed the hope that the Bethlehem Conference will give a new impetus to its action to promote international academic cooperation in favor of Palestinian universities.

At the end of the opening ceremony, a **Memorandum of Understanding** was signed between the universities of Pavia and Siena (Italy), the universities of Bethlehem, Birzeit and An Najah and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to establish a **Center for Advanced Studies and Research in International Cooperation and Development in Palestine (CARS-ICD)**.

### **Panel 1: Priorities for the Development of Higher Education in Palestine**

The debates of the conference were continued in 3 consecutive panels devoted to specific aspects of the overall theme of the Conference. Panel 1 was devoted to *Priorities for the Development of Higher Education in Palestine*. The debates, moderated by **Professor Gianni Vaggi**, Vice President of PEACE, were introduced by 5 panelists.

In the first contribution, **Professor Manuel Hassassian** presented basic facts and figures on higher education in Palestine, insisting on the challenges it is facing at present. Thus, while student enrollments grow at a rapid rate (from 40.000 students in 1994 to 126.000

students in 2004), financial means to sustain it have been on the decline. PNA budget allocations have been below the planned targets because of the need to attend to other priorities. International support from various sources has also declined. Revenues from fees, which were expected to cover up to 60% of running costs, did not materialize, because of the drastic fall in revenues of the Palestinian population following the outbreak of the second Intifada.

As a result, the teachers/students ratio has fallen and the quality of education requires improvement. There is high unemployment of university graduates. There are enormous impediments in putting into practice a genuine R&D policy and strategy. He further insisted on the need to improve strategic planning, to adopt relevant programs and assure their quality, to improve management capacity and to increase administrative transparency, to build infrastructure, to secure human resources and increase provisions for student's aid.

**Professor Rami Hamdallah** emphasized the unique nature of the Palestinian universities not only through their history but also in terms of their mission and purpose. Stressing that it is necessary to continue efforts to render higher education affordable and inclusive, he focused on assuring the quality and relevance of programmes as the most pressing present need. Fostering R&D is essential for that purpose, as is the need to renew programs and to link them closer to the real needs of local communities. In their teaching and research, the Palestinian universities should shift more to problem solving, to developing entrepreneurial innovation skills and to sound acquisition of professional practices. The measures adopted lately with regard to quality assurance, accreditation of programmes and overall monitoring of performance should be continued and reinforced. The universities should also increase their awareness of the added value of cooperation and should seek alliances with the local communities and with all sectors of society. They should also develop closer links with the other forms of post compulsory education and training.

**Professor Roberto Schmid**, Rector of the University of Pavia, Italy presented the initiative launched at the Conference of the ministers of education of the Mediterranean countries (Catania, November 2003) to establish a Euro-Mediterranean network of centers for advanced studies and research, to develop a distance-learning system for the Mediterranean area, a digital library for countries of the area and to activate mobility programs among the countries of the Region. Five centers of excellence have already been established in Southern Mediterranean countries following that meeting. He then outlined the initiative to establish the Centre for Advanced Studies and Research in International Cooperation and Development in Palestine (CARS-ICDI) for which a Memorandum of Understanding was signed at the Bethlehem Conference (see above). To conclude, Professor Schmid pointed out that the mobility of students, scholars and researchers will contribute to increasing reciprocal knowledge, respect and tolerance in the Mediterranean Region. PEACE – he said- could be part of the Euro-Med networking.

**Professor Adli Saleh**, Assistant President, Arab American University of Jenin, highlighted several priorities for higher education in Palestine at present, namely: meeting the

strong enrollment demands, rooting higher education in government strategic planning and quality assurance. He pointed out the urgent need to enhance R&D at Palestinian universities, to increase the support facilities (e.g. libraries, laboratories, etc.) and to assure equity of access. He stressed that international cooperation, promoted by PEACE, could help meet these needs and priorities.

The positive role played by PEACE in supporting Palestinian universities to establish international links and cooperation arrangements with universities abroad was also emphasized by **Prof. Daoud Zaitari**, President of the Palestinian Polytechnic University, Hebron. In particular, PEACE has been very helpful in providing the possibility to many university teachers to upgrade their training abroad through its Scholarship Scheme. He insisted however, that their needs are so large and diverse that PEACE should not restrict its action to offering grants only. It should also focus on R&D, on enhancing the relevance and quality of academic programmes. PEACE should also help establish joint academic ventures and improve the necessary know-how and expertise of Palestinian universities in order to make better use of existing cooperation and networking arrangements.

The debates that followed the contributions of the panelists focused on urgent needs and priorities. While, as one speaker stressed, 'Palestinian universities are in great need of almost everything' it is necessary to prioritize and to focus on those needs for which PEACE could do something through interuniversity cooperation. The areas of action should include in the first place *raising the quality of teaching and research* through close links with centers of excellence abroad, through *staff development* based on upgrading the training of Palestinian university teachers abroad and the establishment of *new academic programmes* of recognized priority for national development. Other issues raised during the discussions concerned the decline in student's enrollment in science and technology, the need to involve universities in national consultancy services, to promote partnerships with the private sector and enhance the sustainability of institutions in general. *Quality assurance* was stressed as a priority of utmost importance, with a particular note to ensuring a proper ratio between academic vs. research activities of Palestinian faculty staff. Two areas mentioned by several speakers referred to the need to develop and improve "student's affairs" services and health care teaching infrastructure.

The moderator concluded the debates by stressing that the main role that PEACE should play is that of *catalyst*, trying to bring together all those individuals and institutions that are willing and committed to support higher education in Palestine.

## **Panel 2: University Cooperation for Institutional Development of Palestinian Universities**

The debates of Panel 2, moderated by **Professor Annick Suzor-Weiner**, Vice President of Université Paris-Sud 11 and member of the Steering Committee of PEACE, were infused by several key concepts: PEACE and its potential contribution to peace, human development, globalization, hard science, reduced student interest in mathematics /

physics, culture, communication, increasing student population, priorities, strategies, finances and the sustainability of institutions.

**Professor Ulrich Eckern, University of Augsburg**, presented the initiative to establish a Center of Excellence in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at Birzeit University (ECCE-Birzeit). The initiative has been taken by a group of internationally known mathematicians and physicists within the framework of UNESCO's "Contribution to peace and human development in an era of globalization through education, the sciences, culture and communication". Referring to the documents distributed to the participants about the Project, he pointed out that ECCE-Birzeit is still an idea which deserves to be further developed and eventually put into practice. He invited PEACE to extend its support to it.

**Professor Nabil Kassis, President of Birzeit University** indicated that his university became aware of the need to cooperate with institutions worldwide ever since it was established. The University of Sienna, a founding institution of the PEACE Network, was one of the first to establish links with Birzeit University. PEACE and the Coimbra Group helped Birzeit University expand its external contacts. The University follows a clear strategy and policy with regard to international cooperation. Based on dialogue with potential partners, it insists on reciprocity and avoids asymmetry. The university is not lured by donor specific agendas, and avoids adopting "popular" programmes that are of little relevance or do not represent the interests of the institution. To stress the strength of these basic principles which are continuously adjusted, Prof. Kassis pointed out that when several Master programmes were launched at Birzeit University, no special measures to adapt to the Bologna process (to which the Palestinian universities wish to adhere) were necessary. The speaker concluded by stressing that the goals of broad international cooperation in which Palestinian universities should be involved on an equal basis may not be reached as long as the Palestinians are under Israeli occupation.

**Professor Fouad Badran** of the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) in Paris introduced the cooperation project for adult and continuous education at Palestinian universities initiated by CNAM with support from the French government. The project is intended to establish networks of individual academics to provide in-service training in the field of engineering and technology. Horizontal structures have been developed and summer workshops have been organized in several countries of the Middle East, including Palestine. Efforts are made to develop large thematic groups and activities meant to serve for the development of new ideas and for upgrading professional training. A TEMPUS Project aimed at developing Distance Education capabilities at Palestinian universities is now under preparation. PEACE is very well equipped to provide support to these endeavors and its cooperation would be most useful.

**Professor Albert Marouani, Rector of University of Nice, Sophia Antipolis** stressed the openness and the strong commitment of his university to international cooperation, particularly in the Mediterranean region. Grants are channeled to students from these countries and courses in various disciplines - such as mathematics - are offered during summer. Stressing the readiness of the University of Nice to cooperate with all

Palestinian universities in all fields of common interest, he mentioned several on-going programmes (such as Med-Acqueil) through which study grants are offered and to which Palestinian students could apply. He further referred to the support extended by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs to projects aimed at establishing joint master programmes in various fields, which could be used for the same purpose. TEMPUS and other EU programmes – especially the ones geared to the Mediterranean Region - provide opportunities to enhance the participation of Palestinian universities in joint projects. PEACE can be of real help in assisting them to make full use of the benefits of international cooperation.

**Professor Imad Hodali**, of Al Quds Open University (AOU) and Director of the Avicenna Knowledge Center presented the University, which is now the largest tertiary education institution in Palestine, with 45,834 students. It has branches and centers covering all the Palestinian territories and caters also for Palestinian expatriates in the Middle East. AOU pursues systematically the introduction of new technologies in education and the adoption and optimum use of ICT-assisted Open Distance Learning. This task has been facilitated considerably by its association to the Avicenna Project launched recently by the EU and UNESCO. Fifteen countries of the Region, including Palestine, are involved in the Project and an international academic network has been established in order to create a Mediterranean virtual higher education space. It will include a virtual library and will offer multimedia and multi lingual courses. At the present moment, the focus is on training of experts in distance education and on training teachers for the production and use of courses and of distance education methods.

The Avicenna Knowledge Centre established at AOU has been equipped with the basic infrastructure and has begun the production of courseware. It facilitates access to the web and the transfer of best practices and of advanced research for the benefit of all Palestinian universities. Building on what has been achieved thus far and given the real need for an advanced system of open education in Palestine, it is intended to develop a special *Avicenna Project for Palestine*. PEACE is called upon to extend its support to this initiative.

**Professor Fakhiri Hasan, President, Hebron University** mentioned that his university is short of practically everything: money, other resources, library and laboratory facilities, etc. But the institution has distinguished professors who are devoted to their work. More students should come to Hebron to benefit from its educational programmes. To illustrate the quality and relevance of research done at the university, he referred to a project implemented through a grant from the International Atomic Energy Bureau to investigate the increased incidence of cancer in the Hebron area.

Several major issues emerged from the ensuing debates, with recommendations which are summed up below:

- (a) The need to upgrade the *training of teaching staff* at the Palestinian universities remains acute. PEACE should continue and reinforce its Scholarship Scheme in response to it.

- (b) *Distance education* provides new opportunities for higher education in Palestine to enhance quality, to increase access and to overcome difficulties caused by frequent closures of institutions. PEACE should support the establishment of an up to date *system of open distance learning*, through the special *Avicenna Project for Palestine*. Coordination among all Palestinian universities is needed, working in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.
- (c) Building a *virtual university library* for Palestine should be a priority objective of the initiative mentioned under (b) above.
- (d) The reduced interest among students for mathematics and physics and for sciences in general is a matter of genuine concern because it affects the recruitment of young researchers. International cooperation – and support from the PEACE Network – can help find solutions to remedy the situation through initiatives such as the proposed Centre of Excellence in Mathematics and Theoretical Physics presented at the Conference.
- (e) The Palestinian universities should be assisted to get full information about existing programmes of interuniversity cooperation and about linking and networking arrangements, so that they could join them. PEACE should act as a forum for meetings and facilitator of contacts.

### **Panel 3: The Role of Higher Education in Building Civil Society in Palestine**

The final panel was devoted to the *Role of Higher Education in Building Civil Society in Palestine*. The theme occasioned a broad range of views expressed by the panelists and culminated in a lively debate by many contributors from the audience.

**Professor André Hurst**, Rector of the University of Geneva stressed that defining the responsibility of higher learning towards society has been a perennial question ever since Plato's Academy. The mission of higher education is and has always been dual: to advance knowledge and the capability to use it for the benefit of "society", for the common good. The latter mission is important because, he pointed out, referring again to a classical quote, "society does not want simply to live. It wants to live well". With regard to serving knowledge and its advancement, the main issue is one of access, because – turning again to a classical quote - "in a republic, access to knowledge must be equal". With regard to their role in society, the responsibility of the universities pertains to values and to the need to instill them as supports of the strength and applicability of learning. Finally, he asked what universities could and should do in order to meet these two requirements. One answer comes in the form of intercultural communication, through broad and open academic cooperation. The defense of the values of knowledge - he suggested – is best served by an academic community that regards itself as a "world university". Citizenship education as promoted by the universities should be a model for world citizenship.

**Professor Hasan Dweik**, acting President of Al Quds University argued that because of the political situation, Palestine's issues are in many ways not comparable to those of

European countries. This refers to building civil society as well. He pointed out the importance of research and development for the future of Palestine. Financial assistance is very important, but it is not enough to make the significant jumps that are needed in this respect. There are no breakthroughs in research, nor are there adequate transfers of knowledge. Pointing out that 1.1 million of the 3.4 million Palestinians are engaged in education, he stressed the importance of informal education and the responsibility of the universities to promote it. In the same vein, he pointed out that many students go into teaching, but Palestine needs badly to create an industrial society. Emphasizing that the Palestinian universities have a tremendous responsibility towards society, he highlighted the importance of teaching subjects such as human rights and ethics, meant to better equip students to appropriately utilize their knowledge.

**Professor Nabil El-Haggar**, Vice President of the University of Science and Technology, Lille 1 – France, centered his contribution on the specificity of Palestinian society, and the corresponding manner in which the contribution of Palestinian universities to its enhancement could be put. Universities have a mission to train and educate people so that they can subsequently change the world. Understanding the implications of change is especially important in the case of Palestine. Education has been essential throughout the 40 year process of developing national identity and in defining Palestinian society. Palestinian social structure has been destroyed and deconstructed under occupation. Achieving national liberation is essential but not sufficient to build up civil society. It can only emerge through a long process of cultural development. The role of the universities is essential to achieve cultural development in this broad sense.

Referring to phenomena of barbarism, violence and terror, he stressed how important it is for the Palestinian universities to do all they can in order to quell them from within, while addressing also the barbarism from without –that is, the barbarism of occupation. Countering barbarism is the task of cultural development. Fostering in each individual the development of their own view of the world is what the work of the university is about, he said, quoting from Paul Ricoeur who held that education gives us the possibility to have an objective view of the world and, at the same time, to break away from inborn attitudes.” Instilling this sentiment is the core task of universities, and it is the delicate balance between the two that keeps men upright.

The next speaker was **Mr. Omar Somi**, President of the General Union of Palestinian Students of France, who attended the Conference as a member of a French student delegation visiting universities in Palestine and Israel in order to have a better understanding of the realities on the ground. (The other members of the delegation who attended the Conference were Mr. Yassir Fishtali, President of the National Union of French Students (UNEF) and Mme Francois Castex, French member of the European Parliament).

He argued for a bigger role for students in the way in which education is developed and discharged. Noting that there were few students in the audience, he pointed out that increased student participation is necessary for the PEACE Programme as well. Referring

to the stipulation of the PEACE Scholarship Scheme which requires students to return to Palestine after completing studies abroad, he argued that personal freedom as well as the value of a strong Palestinian Diaspora should be taken into account. This point generated quite a response from the audience. A beneficiary of a PEACE grant, who had returned to teach at her university in Palestine, was of the opinion that personal freedom should prevail. The moderator of the Panel insisted on the need to balance personal freedom with moral responsibility because, she pointed out, the pernicious effects of the "brain drain" phenomenon cannot be neglected. Debates in the Panel moved then to a broad range of issues pertaining to the role of international cooperation for Palestinian universities. Several speakers raised the issue of the conditions under which cooperation ventures with Israeli institutions and their research facilities could be appropriate. There was general consensus that the issue requires careful examination.

### **Approval of the Panel Reports; Closing of the Conference**

The Reports of the three panels were presented by the rapporteurs (**Dr. Radwan Barakat, Dr Guri Eggan and Ms. Charlotte Taylor**, respectively). They were approved by acclamation by the participants.

Professor Manuel Hassassian closed the Conference pointing out that it has achieved its goals in all respects. He thanked once again the participants for making the effort to come and the members of the Steering Committee of PEACE for all they have done to prepare it and assure its success. He then thanked all contributors– panelists, main speakers, and those who had taken the floor- for the quality of their inputs to the debates. He thanked the high level personalities – both Palestinian and foreign - who had honored the Conference with their presence. Very special thanks were then addressed to all Bethlehem University personnel for the work done to hold it in optimum conditions.

He further mentioned that the debates of the Conference have covered many aspects of the work of PEACE, to be dealt with at the 6<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly of PEACE, which was to take place immediately after the closing of the International Conference. Pointing out that meeting is open to participants from non-member universities he invited all participants in the Conference to attend the General Assembly Session as well.

Several European speakers took the floor to express their high appreciation of the Conference, the quality of the contributions made by the Palestinian participants and the warm hospitality extended to them by the organizers.