



## How EU-Supported Projects Helped Increase Cooperation between Palestinian Universities

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## ***Abstract***

In the past few years, the European Union has been one of the main donor countries giving financial assistance to the Palestinian people. It supported projects in various fields such food, health, academic and cultural exchange. The EU mission is to develop a Palestinian infrastructure capable of meeting the needs of a stable and viable state amidst the political upheavals.

The Palestinian academia has being one of the main beneficiaries of these projects with Palestinian universities participating in EU-supported projects that had tangible results affecting the education in Palestine. Often these projects required the participation of more than one Palestinian institution, thus indirectly strengthening relations between members from different organizations.

Al-Quds Open University, the leading open and distance education institution in Palestine, has taken part in some of these projects. In this paper we shed light on some of these projects and how it helped increase cooperation between Palestinian universities. These projects include ***Avicenna Virtual campus, Eumed Connect and Rufo Projects.***

## **Introduction**

Since 1948, Palestinians have realized that the only reliable basis for their economic survival is their knowledge. Sudden cataclysmic demographic shifts, continuous political instability, and the dearth of local natural resources have made human resources the most important foundation for social progress, economic development, and cultural identity among Palestinians. This principle operates at the individual, group and national levels.

There are numerous Palestinian educational institutions scattered all over Palestine and student enrollment could be one of the highest rates in the region. These achievements are impressive by world standards, and are certainly outstanding in comparison to many Arab countries and most of the third world. However, serious reservations remain. The availability of financial, human and material resources for the continued development of Palestinian education is highly questionable. The European Union has been helping the Palestinians over the past decade to overcome these problems not only in the educational sector but also in other fields.

However, cooperation between Palestinian educational institutions was not as close as some might aspire. Competition is clearly more visible than cooperation. The reason could be attributed to the lack of a central authority in the past decades before the Palestinian authority came to power in 1994.

The EU-Supported projects created an opportunity for people from different Palestinian universities to meet and cooperate as partners in these projects thus indirectly increasing cooperation between these institutions.

Al-Quds Open University (QOU) has taken part in at least three of these projects and in the following discussion; we shall explain how these projects increased cooperation between Palestinian universities in general and between QOU and other institutions in particular. Before delving into the projects, we shed light on the QOU and its mission.

## **Al-Quds Open University**

Al-Quds Open University (QOU) is a higher education institution dedicated to the provision of university- level studies which reach beyond access-restricting barriers. The services provided by the University establish more equalizing educational opportunities for all Palestinian and Arab adults who possess the general secondary school certificate.

The University is committed to excellence in teaching, research and public services. It is also committed to a high degree of relevance between its academic programs and the developmental needs of the Palestinian society and the whole Arab region.

The University was established in the West Bank and Gaza in 1991. Now, it operates twenty three study centers in major cities. To realize its objective of extending its services to the Arab World, the University established two study centers in Saudi Arabia in 2002. The University's student population now stands at about 61788 students (at the beginning of the present academic year 2007/2008), it has already graduated 28244 students (till the end of the last academic year 2006/2007) and has a total of nearly 2000 academic supervisors of which between 25% and 30% of them only are full-time staff (the others are part-time and work in other educational institutions).

QOU awards the bachelor's degree in eleven specializations. This degree is essentially equivalent to its counterpart in conventional universities. It is awarded upon completion of the required number of credit hours and meeting the specific requirements of any given specialization.

QOU needs to provide the best possible service to these students and supervisors, through the following targeted objectives:

- Provide opportunities and facilities for good quality higher education and advanced training in various fields of study to meet the needs of the largest possible number of Palestinians and Arabs, particularly those whose economical, social and geographical conditions prevent them from attending traditional universities.
- Contribute to solving problems arising from the inability of conventional universities to cater for the massive increase in the numbers of students who are qualified for and interested in higher education.
- Train students to use self-learning mechanisms and enhance their intellectual and critical thinking abilities.
- Develop students' characters and prepare them for a useful role in the community through encouraging cooperation and training on self – employment projects.
- Provide continuing education and professional preparation in various applied studies to enable students update and sharpen their qualifications to play a constructive role in their communities.
- Produce and develop self study material in various domains of knowledge and develop effective means to delivering them at a distance.
- Conducting and transmitting research in open and distance learning.

## **Avicenna Virtual Campus Project**

The aim of the AVICENNA project was to accelerate the adoption and best use of ICT-assisted E-LEARNING in 11 Mediterranean non-EU Member States (MNMS). Demand for E-LEARNING in the target Universities and societies already exist. The project aimed at establishing adequate local infrastructures and at transferring best practice and professional know-how within the target universities. It was stimulated and met by the sensitive engagement of some of the European leading Open Universities and E-LEARNING providers, under the aegis of UNESCO. Together with European universities they formed a network of 15 AVICENNA Knowledge centers (AKCs) with a primary objective to assist 11 target Universities in MNMS to install and run E-LEARNING centers or AKCs. Adequate expert support, intensive training of key personnel in AKCs, content sharing and translating, will create the conditions for a successful take-up of E-LEARNING within the target universities and countries, while reducing the cost of such an initiative. This implies that all the Centers respect common standards and norms with regard to technology and E-LEARNING services, including facilities for blind students. Each country has already identified its own Knowledge Centre. The short time-scale, the number and variety of target groups mean that successful outcomes can only be achieved if there is, from the outset, strong support and effective knowledge transfer from experienced E-LEARNING partners, within a realistic timetable and viable project objectives, supported by effective communication channels, strong management and quality control.

### ***Current Status***

The project ended on September 2006. In the past 3 years, the Avicenna project created new momentum in each partner country and capacity building for producing e-learning courses was also visible. Avicenna Knowledge Centers in each country provide e-Learning opportunities to students and adult learners in the Euro-Med region.

### ***Main output***

Avicenna has a direct impact on the activities and strategies of the partners. The following outputs are occurring:

- A dynamic network of 15 operational Knowledge Centers in the Mediterranean;
- An educational virtual library containing more than 100 multimedia and multilingual course units;
- A common set of standards and methodologies and a model framework for open distance learning in the region;
- Several experts trained in distance education;
- a support base for pedagogical innovation and development of Mediterranean educational institutions.

### ***How it increased Cooperation with other universities in Palestine:***

In Palestine, the implementation of the project created an opportunity that the AKC Palestine hosted by Al-Quds Open University is approaching authors from other universities to work on the production of e-learning courses. Some of those courses were produced by Palestinian lecturers working at other Palestinian or Jordanian universities. This kind of work and sharing of ideas and human resources made it possible for both institutions to explore other avenues of cooperation beyond the Avicenna Project.

Moreover, there were some discussions and suggestions relates to idea that the AKC work is expanded into other universities where a small or a local Avicenna model is implemented by local partners.

### ***Obstacles***

The Implementation of Avicenna suffered some delays, problems and sometimes contradicting instructions from the UNESCO. The obstacles also relates to the smooth acceptance of the ideas by authors. The project regulations and assumptions didn't take into consideration the special circumstances of the individual countries involved.

Moreover, E-learning has not being in practice for the past years or so at many institutions and for some this concept was new and they had to digest the outcomes.

### ***Sustainability***

The Installation of adequate infrastructure and intensive training of trainers are the crucial requirements of implementation of the project. The nodes of the network, the AVICENNA Knowledge Centers (AKCs), were in each partner institution to support a Euro-Mediterranean network for ODL services, including production and delivery. Pedagogical resources were also stored and managed into the "Avicenna virtual library", which forms a network knowledge data-base of pedagogical resources and tools.

To operate the network, deliver ODL courses, and produce and adapt online material, faculty at the knowledge centers are due to receive training in multimedia production, while teachers and tutors should know how to interact with students and support ODL course delivery. Students are to be offered training courses in the utilization of ODL services and relevant technologies in a pedagogically effective way.

This existing infrastructure coupled with the know-how attained by tutors, producers and AKC staff in general is emerging as new branch of the university. AKC work is currently sustained by the motivation of students to use the online course and by the university need to improve its teaching deliveries and build on e-learning successes carried out so far. Each University is obliged to support the AKC in each country.

Lifelong Learning is gaining ground as underlying principle of modern education. This should be also a motivation for universities to invest in e-learning as one important delivery methods for lifelong learning.

## **Eumed Connect Project**

The EUMEDCONNECT project is a pioneering initiative to establish and operate an IP-based network in the Mediterranean region. Countries in the Mediterranean region able benefitting from the EUMEDCONNECT project are Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. The EUMEDCONNECT network connects the national research and education networks of 11 of the project's 12 partners, at speeds of up to 622Mbps.

Based on the above project, new visions started in several countries that focused on deploying the services provided by this project to as many as possible of the local higher education institutions and research centers. Now we can say that NRENs (National Research and Education Networks) are established in all the countries mentioned above, and while the EUMEDCONNECT project provides wideband connection between countries. The NRENs provide the wideband connectivity between the institutions in each country. Finally, we can say that institutions (Universities and Research centers) in different countries communicate and establish great cooperation in many aspects between them. Also this infrastructure is considered to be very essential to develop distance and open education, Electronic Education and Virtual Education techniques.

### **Phase 1**

Phase 1 highlighted the 'digital divide' between the Mediterranean region and more advanced regions such as Europe. Before EUMEDCONNECT, there was almost no direct Internet connectivity between Mediterranean countries, and little research and education linkage between the Mediterranean area and Europe. This situation held back market use and growth, in turn hindering the growth and development of research and education networking. The need for the EUMEDCONNECT network was clear. Phase 1 also established that the EUMEDCONNECT network was technically feasible.

### **Phase 2**

Phase 2 involves the actual development and operation of the EUMEDCONNECT network infrastructure. After completion of a specification and tender process, contracts were awarded, and installation work carried out for the first connections, which came into service in April 2004. 11 of the 12 EUMEDCONNECT Mediterranean partners are now connected to the EUMEDCONNECT network.

The EUMEDCONNECT network was originally contracted to operate up to June 2006, but in January 2006 its funding was extended to July 2007. Options for continuing to operate the network beyond this date are being discussed by the project partners and with the European Commission.

### ***Current status***

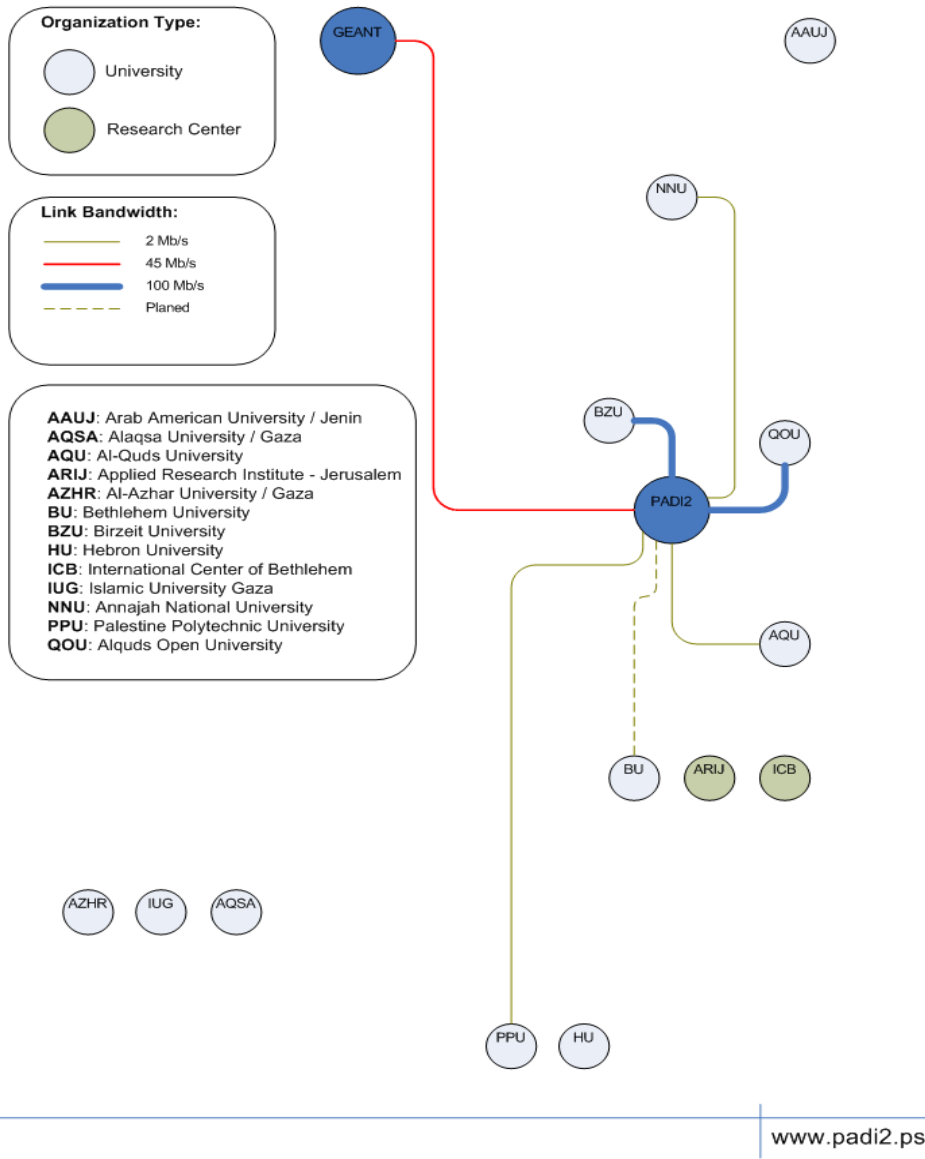
In Palestine this line is so far shared by five Palestinian universities. **The line is hosted by Al Quds Open University (QOU) over fiber optic line and connected with DS3 card on Cisco 7206VXR router in the main back bone.**

The universities joining and sharing the line are:

- 1- Al Quds Open University is connected to the main router with Fast Ethernet 100 Mbps.
- 2- Birzeit University connected to Al Quds Open University with a Microwave link with capacity up to 100Mbps.
- 3- Al Quds University is connected with E1 line 2 Mbps.
- 4- Al Najah University is connected with E1 line 2 Mbps.
- 5- Polytechnic University is connected with E1 line 2 Mbps.

## PADI2 Backbone Topology

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### **Main output**

Utilizing Eumed-Connect provides the following:

- Improving the infrastructure for using e-learning courses and virtual libraries.
- Sharing resources between Palestinian universities.
- Connection to research and education networks in 30 European countries
- Access to the commercial Internet (optional service, terms and conditions apply).

### ***How it increased Cooperation with other universities in Palestine:***

The infrastructure provided by the Eumed-Connect project enables Palestinian universities to:

- Prepare e-courses for students from different universities thus access can be shared by different students from different universities.
- Organize Video conference meetings for the benefit of both students and academics.
- Organize virtual classes.
- Enable Video streaming systems.
- Empower the open and distance learning.
- Share of Resources i.e.( e-libraries).
- Train both students and instructors.

### ***Obstacles***

- Financial support.
- Future plan for better utilization of the line.
- Awareness of the importance of the line for the future development of higher education and cooperation between universities and research centers.
- Weak communication infrastructure in Palestine, and if available it is expensive.
- Occupation and political instability.

### ***Sustainability***

The EUMEDCONNECT network was originally contracted to operate up to June 2006, but in January 2006 its funding was extended to July 2007. Options for continuing to operate the network beyond this date are being discussed by the project partners and with the European Commission, and there is a possibility to extend to 31 Dec-07. Palestinian universities are approaching donors and governmental bodies to help with payment for connection fees. They are also checking the possibility of getting revenues for the work being done using the line.

Due to the financial problems facing Palestinian universities, only QOU and Birzeit fulfilled their financial obligations. They submitted a proposal to the Palestinian government to help sustain the line and the government in response paid 35,000 USD; the rest of the fees were paid by the two universities.

## **Rufo Project**

RUFO (InterUniversity Network for Open and Distance Learning) is a TEMPUS-MEDA project (JEP-2153\_2004), supported and financed by the General Directorate of Education and Culture of the European Commission (end of 2005 – end of 2008) and coordinated by Cnam (Paris).

RUFO's purpose is to create an interuniversity network in Palestine for the development of individual and collective competences in the field of open and distance learning, in connection with European networks. Palestinian participants are Al-Quds Open university, Al-Quds University, Al-Najah National University, Birzeit University and Palestine Polytechnic University. The European partners are Basque University, CNAM, ULB and lille -1.

## ***Main output***

The project attempts to adopt 5 local pioneering-projects of ODL (Open and Distance Learning), based on a certain methodology and on terms of reference. The main outputs can be summarized as follows:

- Develop individual and collective competences.
- Consolidate the methodological tools that are specifically needed for ODL projects
- Produce recommendations for academic training in Palestine
- Create an interuniversity network
- Supervision and control of the project's progress

The RUFO project aims at helping Palestinian actors constitute an interuniversity network of competences, link with European experiences and interact with similar European interuniversity' networks. This can be made possible via setting up multiple competences, organizing thematic training sessions, starting a formalization process of particular experiences in order to render them "transferable", and setting up a collective expertise framework.

Networking deals with ODL as a new emerging multi-disciplinary theme. It must allow going through an analysis process in order to reflect on its role in the study programs of Palestinian universities and to propose professional training in this field in order to meet with an increasing demand at the national and regional levels.

## ***Current Status***

During the first Phase and the second Phase, QOU has participated in all workshops and study visits to Europe. The main objectives of these workshops which attended by large number of attendances from all Palestinian universities and European experts, were to construct the term of references, evaluation criteria and project proposals. At the end of this stage the term of references, evaluation criteria and 5 project proposals were produced and officially finalized.

The steering committee of RUFO project and the European partners have agreed on their meeting that took place on Wednesday 27th of September 2006 to develop a training program that helps facilitate the implementation of RUFO project and achieving its objectives and outputs. QOU hosted part of this training in their campus

at ICTC center in Ramallah and different experts from QOU in the field of WEB Design and Academic portals participated in the training. At the end of the training programs, the participants were able to design, develop, deliver and evaluate e-enabled professional and university courses.

### ***Obstacles***

Following the political changes that occurred in Palestine during last year and the difficulty for the Palestinian Ministry for Higher Education to take charge of the contract with CNAM concerning the activities of the project being developed in Palestine, the Palestinian Steering Committee asked the European partners to postpone the project and asked the University of Birzeit to take up this management for the coming phase. The project will end on Feb, 2009 instead of Sept., 2008.

Due to the constraints and difficulties mentioned above which are mainly management and financial issues, it was difficult to arrange workshops, meetings for the various groups.

### ***Sustainability of the project.***

RUFO objectives and outputs rightly fit within the mission of QOU and addressed its needs. The various actors involved in the designing and the concrete implementation of the projects can contribute positively to the e-learning development at various institutions. They can participate in the development and to the validation of the projects aiming at training ODL actors in Palestine.

## ***Conclusion***

The needs of the Palestinian higher education institutions are considerable and it is obvious that, without assistance by the international community, they cannot be met, and their teaching and research can not reach the standards of excellence required to enable them to play their full role in the self sustainable development of the Palestinian people.

The PEACE Program which is supported by UNESCO and by the European Commission are some of the institutions that has taken care of cooperation between Palestinian universities and European counterparts, as well as with American universities. This cooperation has created an opportunity to strengthen relations between Palestinian universities themselves.

Al-Quds Open University, the leading open and distance educational institution in Palestine has been partner to some of these projects. One of he tangible results was the strengthened relations with fellow universities in Palestine including administration, staff and student cooperation.