



Building Academic Links with Palestinian Universities

Summary Report of the *Overcoming Barriers,
Building Links: Supporting Access to Higher
Education for Palestinians* workshop, March 2023

July 2023

This report is intended as a tool to support UK academics, higher education institutions and UK-based students to build academic links with their colleagues at Palestinian universities. It summarises and builds on the findings of a one-day workshop in London, ‘Overcoming Barriers, Building Links: Supporting Access to Higher Education for Palestinians’ hosted by Fobzu and Dr Mark Griffiths of Newcastle University in March 2023, the culmination of a four-year British Academy funded research project on Israel’s visa regime and its impact on Palestinians.

UK and Palestinian academics, practitioners and policymakers came together at the National Education Union to take stock of the present challenges facing Palestinian higher education, identify resource and capacity gaps, and discuss approaches to advancing academic collaboration between academics and their institutions in the UK and Palestine, taking as the point of departure the international engagement framework set out by the British Academy this year:

International collaboration and mobility are essential to knowledge production, the strengthening of research capabilities, and the fostering of global cultural understanding...Engagement across geographic and disciplinary boundaries, as well as across various communities of knowledge and practice, enables better responses to the complex and interconnected questions that face societies today. It encourages the development of new ideas and approaches, and promotes scholarly exchange for the common good.

[The British Academy International Engagement](#), 2023

There is a long tradition of collaborative and mutually beneficial initiatives between universities in the UK and others internationally, including those in Palestine. Yet the histories and practicalities of these collaborations are not widely known, and therefore potential learning from these experiences is often lost to those seeking to create new such links. To address this gap, this document includes a list of existing examples of successful case studies which are intended to provide helpful models for academics considering developing UK-Palestine collaborations. This guide also sets out the avenues for further research and work required to facilitate academic collaborations in the future. The final section lists the resources and support available to those looking to establish UK-Palestine academic collaborations.

This guide is produced will be reviewed and regularly updated; we encourage readers to contact us with feedback and suggestions for additional content for future editions.

1. Background and Context

Many current Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Palestine were established during the 1970s, when universities in Bethlehem, Birzeit, Nablus (An-Najah University), Abu Dis (Al-Quds), Hebron and Gaza began awarding degrees. Meanwhile, Palestinians living in exile as refugees post-1948 were served to varying degrees by universities in their countries of exile, while those who remained in what became Israel in 1948 attended Israeli HEIs.

From their inception, universities in Palestine were hampered by the fragmentation suffered by the Palestinian people at large and subject to oppressive measures imposed by Israeli occupation authorities. This included prolonged periods of closure, violence against students and staff, financial restrictions and the isolation brought about by limits on freedom of movement that hinder international collaboration and engagement. This has set back learning, hindered institutional development and had severe repercussions for students and academics, particularly those who have faced routine harassment, arrest, detention, torture and sometimes death at the hands of Israeli military forces (for up to date information see the website for the [Right to Education Campaign](#)). The American Anthropological Association Task for on Engagement with Israel/Palestine published a [report](#) in 2015, which provides a comprehensive summary on infringements of Palestinian academic freedom.

In recent years, Israel's visa regime has tightened with an escalation in the denial of visas to academics considered 'foreigners' by Israeli law. Many of these are Palestinians who do not hold Palestinian identity cards or Israeli citizenship. In 2018, the Palestinian Ministry of Education recorded that [more than half](#) of Palestinian universities were being negatively affected by visa refusals, delays and denials of entry to academic staff. On 20th October 2022, Israeli military authorities issued [new procedures](#) for entry and residence in the occupied West Bank. The regulations impose full control by occupation military authorities over higher education institutions in the West Bank and introduces new, arbitrary requirements on lecturers and students holding foreign passports who wish to teach and study in the UK. This recent development marks a significant advance in the international isolation of Palestinian higher

education. Birzeit University has warned that the new measures put “Palestinian Universities under siege and divests them of basic control over their academic decisions”.¹

2. Principles of Academic Exchange and Collaboration

In this context, international collaboration in its various forms has been a valuable source of support for Palestinian HEIs and an essential means of overcoming the international isolation that Palestinian universities experience. These links and initiatives are based on principles of international exchange that inform the visions of education promoted by universities globally.

This vision rests on the status of universities as sites of international education and knowledge exchange, as articulated by the British Academy’s approach to international engagement, through which students can gain access to an intellectual world not limited by political borders. It is also a principle of mutual support among universities, with the sharing of both expertise to improve students’ learning and of experience as a means of advancing research beyond the limited capacity of a single university, for the benefit of humanity.

3. Existing Initiatives and Support

There are a variety of forms of collaboration and exchange currently in place between UK and Palestinian academics and HEIs. An outline of some of these different types of initiative, along with successful examples of such work are as follows:

- **Joint Academic Partnerships**

- Research, in partnership with al-Marsad (an NGO based in the occupied Golan Heights) that [resulted in the publication of an important book on the topic](#).

¹ <https://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/call-action-birzeit-university-rejects-israeli-measures-against-academic-freedom>

- A two-year long project based at LSE in collaboration with academics at Birzeit that explored the [impact of gendered adverts on Palestinian society](#).
- A research collaboration between LSE and Birzeit academics into the [infrastructures of care in Palestine](#) during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Investigation into [munitions use and public health](#) conducted by academics at Newcastle University working with Friends of the Earth Palestine.
- A research project by academics at Birzeit and LSE on the [regulation of everyday life under Israeli occupation in Palestine](#).
- Research conducted between An-Najah and Northumbria Universities [into the effects of house demolitions on young Palestinians](#)
- A [project on sectarianism](#) that involves academics from Lancaster University and An-Najah.
- Collaboration between public health academics at Birzeit and King's College London on research into [health and conflict](#).

● Scholarships for Palestinian Students

A number of scholarships exist to support Palestinian students studying at UK universities. The links below provide information on some of the main schemes specifically for Palestinian students, alongside many others available to international students more generally. While a number of these are state-funded, many institution specific scholarships were the outcome of academic and student initiative:

- The British Council - Palestine and the Palestine Community Foundation have provided a list of some of the scholarships available [here](#) and [here](#).
- [Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinian Students \(HESPAL\)](#): scholarships for Palestinian students are available through the HESPAL schemes funded by the British Council in collaboration with British HEIs.
- [Chevening Scholarships](#) are offered by the British Government for Palestinian students to undertake a one-year masters degree at any UK university.

- There are also scholarships available at Cambridge University (through the [Said Foundation](#) as well as a dedicated fund at [Churchill College](#)) [Durham](#), [Goldsmiths College University of London](#), Oxford University (through the [Rhodes Scholarship](#), the [Said Foundation](#), the [Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies](#)), [Oxford Brookes](#), [Sheffield](#) and [St Andrews](#).
- It is also important to note that since Brexit, Palestinian students are available for UKRI Research Council doctoral scholarships, often with a sponsored visa.

- **Support for Academics to visit Palestine:**

One of the best ways of building academic links with Palestinian universities is to visit directly and learn about the situation on the ground. Some of the ways of doing this are:

- The [Palestine-UK Academic Links Seminar](#) is a pilot programme organised by Fobzu designed to advance academic collaboration and mutual understanding between UK and Palestinian higher education.
- The [Council for British Research in the Levant](#) (CBRL) offers grants to support academic research in Palestine, including Network Partnership Awards, which support the establishment or development of research partnerships in the humanities, social sciences, and related disciplines between UK researchers and counterparts in the region, including Palestine.

- **Discipline-based Initiatives:**

- [Scientists for Palestine](#) is an initiative of scientists and academics based in the United States and the UK and seeks to support the teaching of science at Palestinian HEIs. Its work includes running advanced science schools in Palestine, providing resources and opportunities for Palestinian students, and the Bisan Lecture Series.
- [Insaniyyat: the Society of Palestinian Anthropologists](#) work on a number of initiatives to support Palestinian anthropologists.

- [Librarians and Archivists with Palestine](#) are an international network working on a variety of solidarity projects.
- [UK-Palestine Mental Health Network](#) is a group of mental health professionals, among them many academics, dedicated to supporting mental health care and study in Palestine.

- **Institutional Twinning:**

There is a long tradition of twinning initiatives between UK universities and student unions, and those in Palestine. The purpose of this is to provide a framework for engagement between institutions, including regular updates and calls, visits, scholarships, academic exchanges and awareness raising of the challenges of Palestinian HEIs.

Twinning initiatives are best tailored to the priorities of the prospective partner institutions and developed in liaison with Palestinian universities. The [Britain Palestine Friendship and Twinning Network](#) has accumulated a lot of experience and expertise in this area. For more information or to be put in touch with colleagues at Palestinian universities, please contact [Fobzu](#).

- **Other forms of collaboration:**

There are many other ways to work and engage with Palestinian HEIs, this can include:

- The authoring of joint research articles
- Supporting Palestinian researchers by providing access to journals and online databases
- Providing short-term residencies for Palestinian academics, such as this: <https://fobzu.org/projects-fobzu-oxford-writing-residency/>
- Mentoring Palestinian students and academics to get journal articles published
- Creating space in existing academic programmes for short-term study abroad opportunities for Palestinian students

- **Funding opportunities**

Academic institutions in the West Bank and Gaza are eligible to be recognised partner institutions for UK Research Council funding (AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, STFC). Palestine is an ODA-recipient state so can also be included in calls that require ODA partners.

4. Avenues for Further Research and Development

This document provides an overview of some existing initiatives, but there is considerable scope for more substantial and longer-term academic links to be established. This is a collective effort which further initiatives and research and can help facilitate.

The following is a summary of some of the recommendations of the *Overcoming Barriers, Building Links* workshop:

For Academia and Civil Society to:

- Create a directory with information on Palestinian research projects which UK-based academics can contribute to or support, as well as a database with contact details of key academics and university development offices.
- Provide a guide for undertaking academic research in Palestine, including ethics guidelines and information on how research can contribute to long-term development of Palestinian academic life.
- Establish a steering committee and annual workshop dedicated to promoting academic links, discuss best practice and take forward recommendations on improving academic collaboration.
- Establish capacity and resources to provide dedicated advice and guidance on building academic links, from the initial inception stage through the programme development.

To Demand of the UK Government and public funding bodies:

- Ensure adequate funding and access for Palestinian students and academics, and for collaborative projects with Palestinian academic institutions so that Palestinian higher education is a full and equal member of the international academic community.
- To place pressure on Israel to lift restrictions on Palestinian institutions and end harassment and violence against academics and students, so that Palestinians can fully exercise their right to education and academic freedom.

5. Further Links and Resources

The following reports provide further information on Palestinian higher education:

- 2015 Report by the [American Anthropological Association](#) on the Association's links with Palestinian HEIs.
- 2019 [Arij/SIDA](#) Study of Higher Education and Research in Palestine.

6. Getting Involved and Support Fobzu can Offer

The establishment of links with Palestinian universities may not always be straightforward for those unfamiliar with initiating such projects. However, if you are thinking of doing so and would like more information, we would be happy to put you in touch with organisations and individuals who can share their experience and best practice.

If you would like support with any of the recommendations above, Fobzu may be able to assist you with resources and introductions. Moreover, if you have experience of establishing successful academic links between Palestinian and UK universities, we would love to hear from you.

Please contact Fobzu at fobzu@fobzu.org.

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