

Why aren't Arab Universities excelling?

Bethlehem University celebrates its 35th anniversary with an initiative to establish a Prize for Excellence

By Nafiz Rifae

Head of Bethlehem University Alumni Union

nafizrifae@buildpalestine.org

This year Bethlehem University celebrates the 35th anniversary of its founding. The university is an inspiration not only in the quality of its academic research but also in the role it has played in Palestinian history. Bethlehem University enjoys a formidable reputation among other Palestinian institutions of higher education.

The founding of the Palestinian universities in the 1970s came during a critical political decade. The Palestinian resistance movement was growing stronger and Palestinian students served as its back bone. The pressure from the occupation forces at the time was enormous. Israeli authorities used every excuse to prevent Palestinian students from studying at other Arab Universities. It was a ploy to curb their politicization and to prevent them from joining organized Palestinian resistance abroad.

It was at this time that the occupation forces agreed to grant licenses to establish several universities inside Palestine. These universities had to face many challenges, notably a lack of funding and resources. To deal with this challenge, and to meet academic standards, the universities worked hard to attract professors from abroad, and to gain credibility among students who had to believe they were enrolling in establishments capable of granting them internationally recognized degrees and diplomas.

I would like to pay tribute to the early pioneers of Palestine's universities, especially our late professor Dr Anton Sansour who died before he was able to realize his dream of seeing Bethlehem university shine on the international stage.

I remember in 1980, the students staged a strike against the university's administration demanding that they appoint an Arab president. This was a condition if Bethlehem University was to be recognized by the Union of Arab Universities, which would have allowed graduates to apply for public sector jobs in the Arab world. Dr Sansour spoke to us and it strikes me how relevant his words are today. He said: "It is not important that we are recognized by the Union of Arab Universities. What is important is that we work to establish ourselves as an institution of academic excellence, like the American Universities of Beirut and

Cairo. The Union of Arab Universities did not recognize them but they have asserted their presence and imposed themselves through their merit and academic achievement." He added that Bethlehem University should aim to outshine both of these other universities.

We should recall his words, today. We are in desperate need of his vision. Thirty five years have passed since Anton Sansour's dream was established and eleven more since he passed away. Bethlehem University currently has no one who can drive it forward with the same vision and commitment.

This year Shanghai University published a list of the best 500 universities in the world. There was not one Arab University on that list. Not the famous Al Azhar, not Ain Shams, not Damascus University or Baghdad or Al Zaituna, Jordan or Beirut, not even a Palestinian University. Not even Bethlehem University! Why? Here I am slightly biased. I feel I have the right. I may have been reconciled if at least one other Arab or Palestinian university was on that list. Why do they not have a place among the best? I asked this question but found my answers dispiriting, so I went back to the time when Palestinian universities were created, from when they took their first faltering steps to the time when they managed to establish themselves as durable institutions, a permanent part of the Palestinian landscape. The task seemed impossible but they managed to withstand the challenge and earned their right to exist. They persisted despite the lack of resources and they sent their roots so deep into the ground that they could no longer be removed.

Statistics shed light on the issue. Today we have more than 6000 PhD holders working as professors at these universities. This number provides an indication of our potential for academic publications and for scientific research. Our economy and our political establishment are shaky. One could argue that the practices of the occupation and the imposed isolation played a critical role in this state of affairs. You may agree or disagree with these excuses. But the universities are a critical case. The weakening of our universities threatens a crisis in Palestinian society.

The fact that six Israeli universities got on the Shanghai 500 best universities list while we remain outside is unacceptable. There are no excuses. We need to raise these questions with all our university professors. Our writers, intellectuals, business people and other high achievers need to be engaged more proactively with this issue: Where are we now? What have we produced in culture, literature and science?

We can expect setbacks but we need to build our reserves of intelligence, or face being swept away. This is why I look back to the days when our universities were founded, when the occupation forces agreed to grant licenses to prevent students from travelling abroad and joining the resistance forces. The tables turned as the new universities became the bastions of the Palestinian national movement. These universities were the crucibles of political awareness, creativity and resistance which culminated in the first intifada in 1987. This was a special time for Palestine, a time of cultural achievement and a well-conceived resistance movement against the occupation. The universities were the launch pads of this movement. They served as thinking-factories which, together with the prisons, produced a revolution. Both society and students had an acute political awareness and were working to oppose the occupation.

The dream of freedom was born and matured within the walls of these universities through countless festivals, strikes and conferences.

I wonder where this spirit has gone? Where is that heightened awareness, the debates, the engagement? The foundations were laid then but what has happened since? I often ask people this question but the answers I get tend to be vague. What should we do now? Do we need to raise our old dear pioneers, professors and students out of their graves?

Our universities have produced not hundreds but thousands of high achievers who now occupy sensitive posts in the Palestinian society. They are members of parliament, politicians, economists, businessmen and successful employees. This is why mental isolation, defeatism and underachievement are so unacceptable.

I am not alone in wanting our universities to reclaim their souls but we are going to have to work to achieve that. I insist on my right to dream that Bethlehem University one day takes its place in the 500 best universities in the world. To do this we need a little of Anton Sansour's spirit, a little of the strength of his dream, alongside committed professors who want to persevere and give back to our society. We need to instill a spirit of competition among our universities and push them to reach for the stars. For if we do, if we excel, if we manage to win a place among the best we also win a piece of the sun that will light our people's way to freedom.

This is an invitation to all businessmen and women, to those who want to be remembered and to leave their mark on history. Join us in shaping our future through supporting the prize for excellence in scientific research, best literary work and best achievement. We have the capacity to manage this initiative and we are ready to work to form a credible jury to judge this prize.

We intend to organize a yearly festival to award these prizes with the vision that, one day, they will enjoy the same status among Palestinians as a Nobel prize or an Oscar.

We are launching this initiative in the hope that it will provide a horizon for our national pride. It is a dream not only of mine but of many friends who share these ideas, who want to support open competition and see rewards for merit and achievement. The idea is to establish a joint committee of Palestinians from around the world to judge this prize and give it the distinction it deserves, so that it truly becomes a stamp of creativity and excellence.