



**Access Equity
Diversity and Inclusion
in Higher Education**

Higher Education in the Gaza Strip

Policies, Quality, Access and the role of NGOs

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GAPS
GLOBAL ACCESS TO
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
Connecting the Unconnected

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1. Introduction

Like many secondary educational systems around the world, in the Palestinian educational system, students study for three years of secondary education after finishing nine years of school.

The first year is a preparatory year where students take different courses from all subjects. In the second year and third years students have the chance to choose their preferred area of study.

There are two main categories for secondary education. First: Academic branch: where students choose between Art or Science streams, Second: the Professional branch: where students choose between Industrial, Agricultural, Commercial, Nursing, or Hospitality¹.

At the end of the third year, students are required to go through the General Secondary Education Examination “Tawjihi” in order to earn the Certificate of General Secondary Education that makes them eligible to enrol in post-secondary education institutions in Palestine or abroad.

In Palestine in general and in the Gaza strip specifically, the main postsecondary education degrees are; diploma, bachelor, master, and PhD degrees.

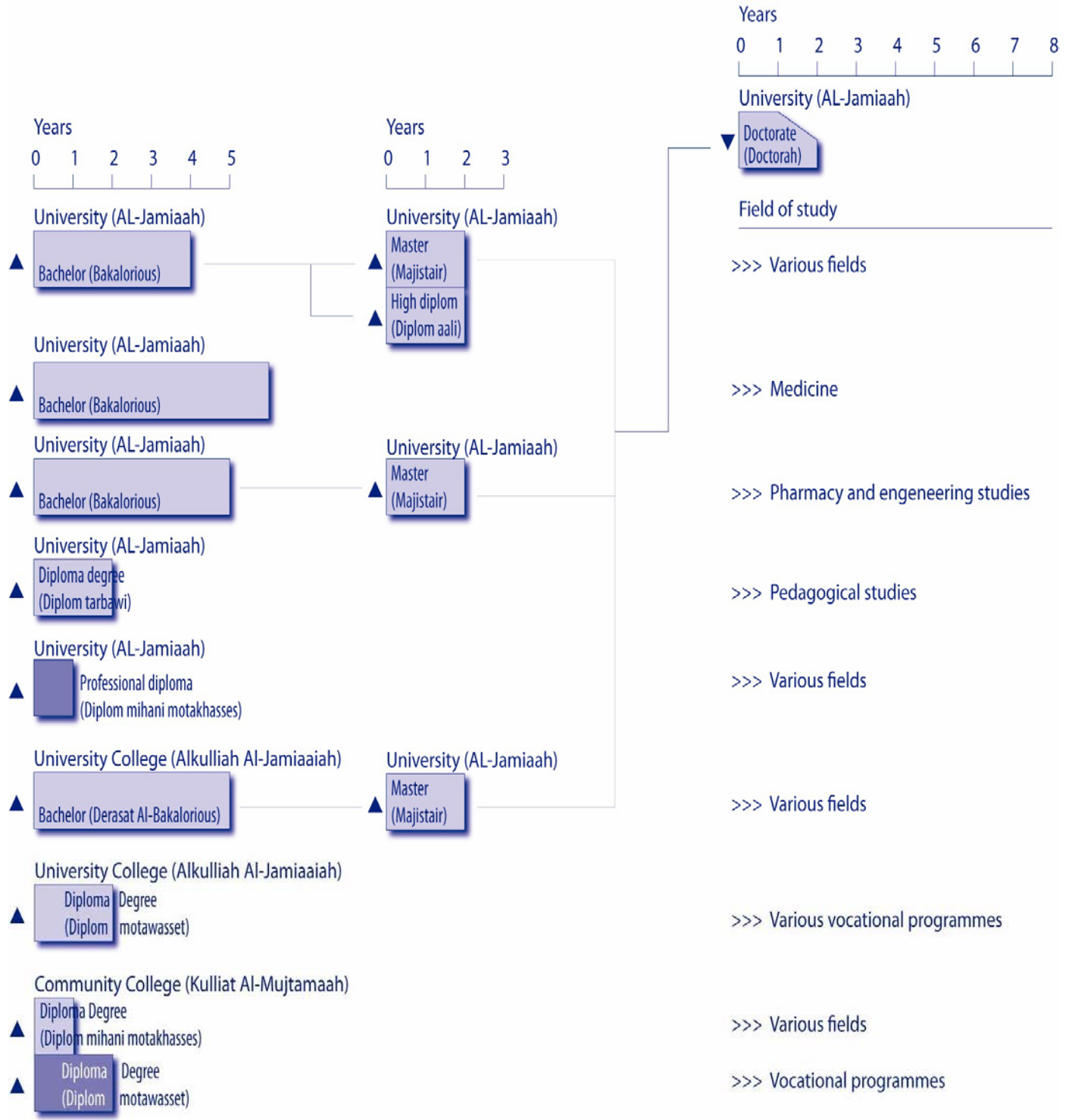
There are 213,973 higher education students in Palestine (2010/2011) and 49 Higher Education Institutions (HEI), 14 of them is in the Gaza Strip according to the latest available statistics from the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education².

The higher education system is structured as the following figure³ illustrates:

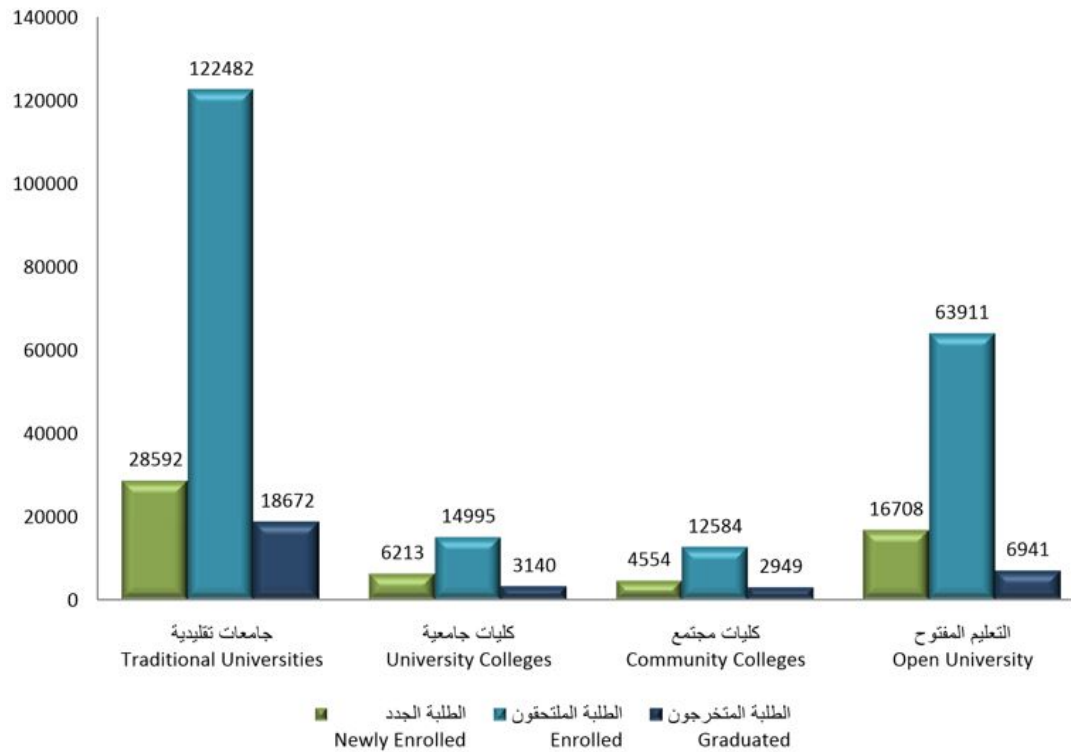
¹ The Palestinian Educational System, Ministry of Education, Palestine, <http://www.mohe.gov.ps/ShowArticle.aspx?ID=181>

² Ministry of Higher Education, Facts and Figures, <http://www.mohe.pna.ps/FactsAndFigures.htm>

³ Higher Education In The Occupied Palestinian Territory, Tempus, October 2010

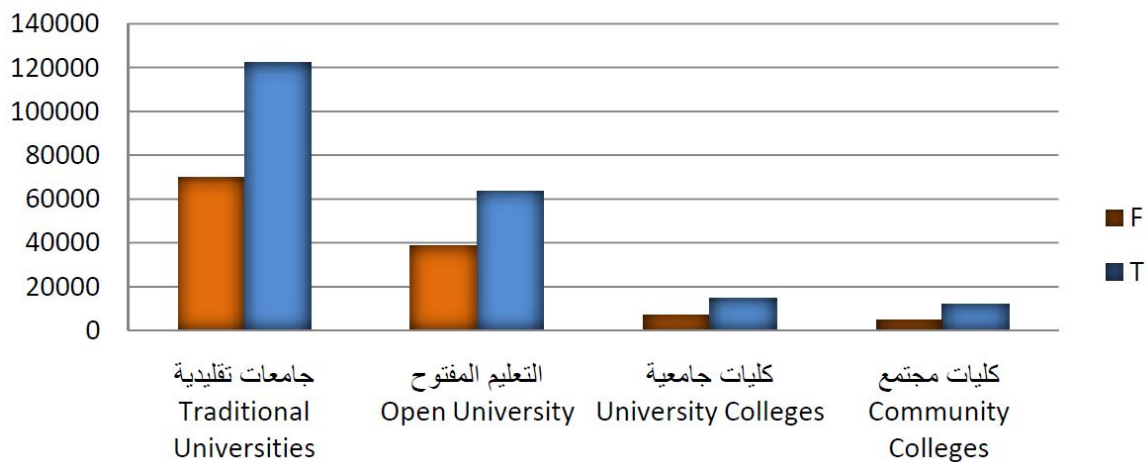


The following figure shows the distribution of the Palestinian HE students between HEIs in Palestine at the end of December 2011⁴:



The following figure shows the Gender Distribution of Enrolled Students HEIs in Palestine at the end of December 2011⁵:

Gender Distribution of Enrolled Students at H.E.I. by Gender



⁴ Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Palestinian Higher Education Statistics 2010/2011 <http://www.mohe.pna.ps/List/Daleel/Matweyeh2011.pdf>

⁵ Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Palestinian Higher Education Statistics 2010/2011 <http://www.mohe.pna.ps/List/Daleel/Matweyeh2011.pdf>

This report will try to investigate the reality of higher education in Gaza strip by:

- *Identifying the specific policies undertaken by government* to ensure fair and equal access for post-secondary education in Gaza Strip/Palestine.
- *Identifying the problems that face the students* who are willing to enrol in post-secondary education and are incapable of doing so.
- *Identifying what are the most under-represented groups* in HEIs
- *Examining the situation of NGOs* who are offering support for students who are incapable of accessing post-secondary education

Trying to identify these, consideration should be given to the following facts:

1. Gaza is a small (360 km²) and heavily populated area (1.6 million people)
2. It is a racially homogeneous society where all of the population are Arabs
3. Half of Gaza population is female and half is male
4. Islam is the major religion in Gaza Strip with 3000 Christians only
5. Most of the Gaza Strip area is rural; therefore the family system is very strong and influential and farming is widely spread among residents of these areas
6. The majority of Gaza population comprises refugees
7. 40% of Gaza population live in poverty

These facts influence the character of higher education. The report will try to highlight the most significant policies for higher education in Gaza strip, the kind of challenges it faces, the under-represented groups and the role of NGOs in supporting post-secondary education.

2. Post-secondary Education Policies in Palestine

In this section, the main governmental policies for higher education will be identified using the officially available resources from MoEHE.

In 2008, the Palestinian National Authority and through the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) launched a plan called “Education Development Strategic Plan 2008-2012”⁶. According to the plan, the main higher education policies for the ministry are as following:

1. Education for all: Higher Education institutions will be expanded and new governmental institutions will be established in order to increase enrolment opportunities for secondary school graduates.
2. Gender: additional measures will be taken to bridge any remaining gaps between females and males in enrolment and completion rates at all levels and in all kinds of education. More women will be encouraged in employment in education at all levels, especially in higher decision-making positions.
3. Poverty reduction: Special attention will be given to the poor. Scholarships and student loans and aid schemes will be increased and directed at poor students.
4. Students with special needs: MoEHE had started a process to include students with special needs in educational institutions at all levels during the implementation of the first five year plan. Additional efforts will be made in this regard, especially in better equipping preschools, schools and institutions of higher education in order to provide these students with better services and respond to their special needs.
5. Focus on quality: Although major achievements have been made in enrolment rates, the quality of education at all levels is still inadequate. Improvement of quality will be a major focus in the coming period. A major effort to improve the quality of higher education will be made, including encouraging research.
6. Relevance and link to socio-economic development: A special focus will be put on linking education, especially post-secondary education, to the labor market(s) and to the needs of society.
7. Science and technology: The study of science and technology will be improved, with special attention to the expansion of the utilization of information and communication technology in education at all levels and computer-related studies.

⁶ <http://www.mohe.gov.ps/Uploads/admin/5yp2.pdf>

8. Role of the private sector: Private investment in education will be encouraged by MoEHE at all levels and in all kinds of education especially in higher education
9. Improving partnerships: Coordination and cooperation with UNRWA, NGOs, the private sector and international development partners will be enhanced.
10. Capacity for planning and management: A strategy for training in relevant areas will be developed, implemented and linked to incentives for trainees.
11. Decentralization and restructuring of MoEHE: A systematic move towards decentralization will be undertaken, building on experiences gained during the situations of emergency when local education authorities had to make decisions to face arising challenges and problems.
12. Jerusalem: Education in Jerusalem will receive special attention.
13. Geographical Unity: Due to the current situation of Gaza Strip, MOEhe will not neglect Gaza Strip; it will cover the needs for Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank (including Jerusalem).

These policies were planned to be adopted in the Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank, but due to the political division, little work has been done to achieve these policies in the Gaza Strip. Due to the political situation, wars, and the six year blockade, no real effort was made to establish a framework of action on the Gaza strip to fulfill the plans of the Palestinian National Authority.

3. The Problems Faced By Students

The data included in this section is based on interviews with 12 Palestinian higher education students in the Gaza Strip. They are from lower or middle class families. Their answers reflect their own experience and their perspective on higher education in general in the Gaza Strip. These are the questions used in the interview:

1. What are the challenges that you faced trying to enrol in postsecondary education? (while in the Gaza Strip)
2. What are the challenges that you think students face while trying to enrol in postsecondary education? (while in the Gaza Strip)
3. What is your major? How old are you? Do you wish to study abroad?

According to the interviewees, the most significant problems the students face when enrolling in higher education are:

Financial problems

Mahmoud is currently working as a farmer and he is an advocate for the farmers' rights in the Gaza Strip. He wanted to go to agriculture school after he finished his High School Diploma. Due to his father's economic condition, he was unable to pursue his goal and alternatively, worked in farming with his father in order to support his family. Mahmoud is just one case of thousands of Palestinian students whose parents are unable to pay for their college fees and cannot support their studies.

Abeer is a business administration major. Abeer said, "The main challenge that I faced trying to enrol in postsecondary education was the economic condition". Abeer now works as a project coordinator at the Arab Center for Agricultural Development.

Due to the increased unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip (28.4%⁷) it is becoming more difficult for students to fund their studies.

There are many supportive funding mechanisms, such as the higher education Students Loans Fund, funds by NGOs, scholarships, and bank loans. Still, these funding mechanisms are all directed to funding school fees and not living expenses, thus leaving the students with the problem of self-financing their living expenses. It is worth mentioning that, loans are payable directly after graduation with one year of "allowance period" to repay the loan. Most students find it difficult to do so as it is almost impossible to get a job as a recent graduate.

⁷ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Labor Force Survey 2012, 2012
http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_LFSQ2e_2012.pdf

Unavailability of specialization

Due to many restriction HEIs in the Gaza Strip are not able to offer the academic programs the student might wish to pursue. Therefore, many Palestinian students find themselves forced to continue their study abroad.

Saleem is a genius Palestinian student. He wanted to study engineering, but was looking for a specialization that the HEIs in Gaza Strip did not offer. Saleem has just finished studying Civil and Mechanical Engineering at Oxford University and he is about to start his master degree.

Ahmed wanted to study his PhD in computer science. Such degree is not offered by the HELs in the Gaza Strip, so he had to travel abroad to continue his graduate study. Ahmed said, "Unless I get a scholarship outside of the Gaza Strip, I will not be able to continue my studies."

Eman was passionate about Fine Arts and she wanted to study in such field. When she finished her high school, she discovered that such major is not offered by any HEI in the Gaza Strip. Eman ended up studying English Literature as she founded the closest major to her passion.

Quality of education

For economic and administrative reasons imposed by the occupation and the political situation, the quality of higher education in the Gaza Strip is not satisfying for many students.

Many students find it more convenient to study abroad to get the quality of education they want.

Abeer argues that, "High school students lack the knowledge about what they want or what major to select that fit the needs of the market and the majors do not match the needs of the students and the needs of labor market. Also, the curriculums taught for students are not appropriate (up-to-date) with the daily developments that happen in the world."

Majd, a business administration major, stated, "From personal experience I think the main challenge in postsecondary education in Gaza is the lack of an updated educational system that is flexible and adaptive to ongoing changes." She added, "Universities in Gaza focus on theory and neglect practical side. They improve credits but they discourage creativity. They teach but do not involve. They talk about freedom of speech, but do not provide a single opportunity to understand or practice it."

Gender constraints

Abeer had an interesting take on the role of gender in pursuing postsecondary education. She said, “as a female there is a list of prohibited or less likely majors I am expected not to study such as vocational majors, some engineering specializations, journalism, mechanical and vehicles related majors, and of course any computer or information technology related majors.” She added, “This list might vary from one family to another, but in general females are motivated to study arts majors and avoid scientific majors.” She concluded, “This list is also affected by the family level of education as it is most likely to find more educated families more welcoming to their female members to study a scientific major while less educated families advocate their female members to study arts majors.”

Restrictions on movement

Many Gazan students are willing to go the West Bank in order to pursue their degree, but due to the occupation restriction on the movement of Gazans to the West Bank they were unable to do so.

Jehad wanted to study at Birzeit University, but was unable to get an Israeli permission to get to the West Bank. In 2008, he tried to travel to Malaysia to study political science, but was unable to travel because of the Israeli siege that caused the closure of the borders with Egypt. As a result, he enrolled to study business administration at a local university. Jehad now is pursuing his PhD in Historical studies at New York University in the United States.

All the interviewees agreed that generally, the fragile condition of higher education in the Gaza Strip is caused by the occupation, the political division between Fateh and Hamas in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the economic blockade enforced by Israeli occupation on the Gaza Strip, and the weak administration. They all showed interest in pursuing their studies outside the Gaza Strip.

4. The Role of NGOs

The information in this section is taken from a policy paper produced by the Teacher Creativity Centre in Ramallah in 2011. The paper is entitled “Assessing the Educational System in Palestine: An NGO Perspective, Context, Problems, Challenges and Policy Recommendations⁸.”

This policy paper aimed to assess the current educational system from the perspective of local NGOs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories⁹. It included an assessment of the achievements and the challenges of higher education in the Gaza Strip and the role NGOs play in this sector. Interviews were also undertaken with several key NGOs personnel and leaders.

According to the paper, there is a weak coordination and cooperation between the MoEHE and local NGOs in developing the national education strategic plan and there is a larger emphasis by MoEHE on working with INGOs and international experts. The reason for this attitude from the NGO’s perspective is the MoEHE lack of interest because of their distrust for NGO’s capability, transparency, and ability to build a viable partnership.

It is evident that NGO’s see that a non-hierarchical exchange needs to take place between both to facilitate greater support, negotiation, understanding and involvement between the two, and is also the only way to legitimize the role of various actors in Palestine and unify the development agenda in which work projects are strengthened, sharing a vision of togetherness rather than competition.

The paper argues that NGOs see that there is a need for a more cooperative relationship and partnership with the MoEHE. This partnership should work in parallel with MoEHE efforts to address the challenges of higher education in Palestine in general and in the Gaza Strip in particular to resolve them and develop a better educational policy to support the improvement of higher education.

⁸ For the full policy paper document:

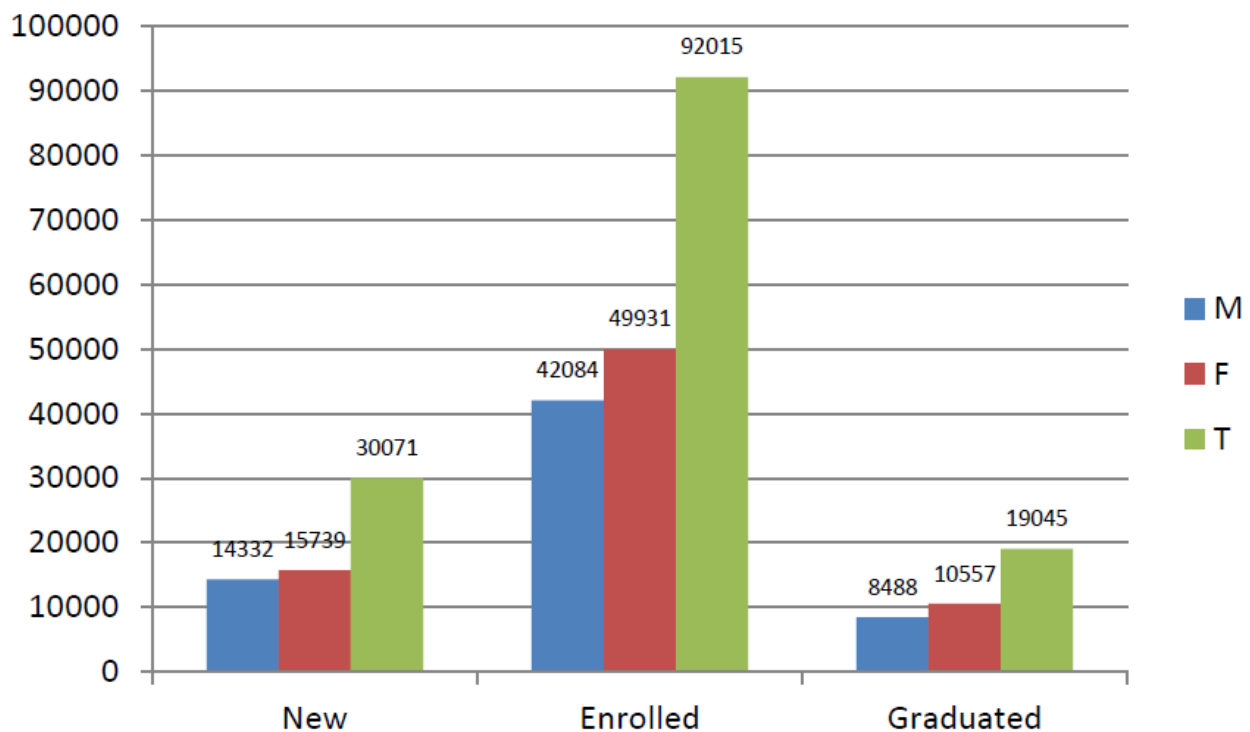
<http://teachercc.org/functions.php?action=files&table=pubs&ID=21>

⁹ Teacher Creativity Centre, Assessing the Educational System in Palestine: An NGO Perspective, 2011, p.5

5. Under-represented Groups in HEIs in Gaza Strip:

The most two under-represented groups in HEIs in Gaza Strip are female students and students from rural and marginalized areas. Because its population is racially homogeneous (all are Arabs) and there is an overwhelming religious majority (99% are Muslims), Gaza does not have under-represented groups based on religion or race.

In general, the number of females enrolled in higher education in Gaza Strip is equal to the number of males. From the Gaza Strip Statistics Book (2012/2013), the following chart illustrates the distribution of new, enrolled, and graduate students in Gaza Strip in 2013 according to gender:



As the figure shows there is relatively higher female rate of participation than for males. This gives one indication of gender equality and leads us to conclude that females students are well-represented in HEIs in Gaza Strip.

However, investigating the majors in which women are enrolled reveals interesting facts.

First, it is noticeable that the number of new, enrolled, or graduated female students in Science majors is remarkably lower than the number of males. For instance, in the Islamic University in Gaza, 76 males are newly enrolled in their graduate programs of engineering while only 17 females are enrolled in the same programs, most of them in Architecture majors. Also, in their

undergraduate engineering programs, 300 males were newly enrolled but only 201 female students. On the contrary, the number of female students who are newly enrolled in the undergraduate Arts programs at the same university outnumber the number of males. Roughly, 400 female students were newly enrolled in the Arts School at the Islamic University but only 125 male students. This is just one example, but in other universities in Gaza the numbers are larger and show the tendency of females to enrol in Arts majors. This is basically because females are expected to work restrictively as teachers and this is the most socially acceptable job for females in Gaza Strip.

Secondly, the number of female students enrolled in medical, laboratorial, and pharmaceutical majors is greater than the number of male students. In the Islamic University (which has the largest medical, laboratorial and pharmaceutical majors) the number of female students newly enrolled in medical sciences majors is 167 while 30 male students are newly enrolled in the same majors.

Generally, after the completion of an undergraduate degree, the number of female students enrolled in a graduate degree programs is lower than the number of male students. According to the statistics book, 747 male students are enrolled in a graduate program in Gaza Strip but only 422 female students.

The reason for these statistics is simple - culture. Females are mainly seen as homemakers. If a female is to get a job it should be as a teacher, a nurse, or anything thing else that does not consume a lot of time or involve a lot of interaction with males.

While the female students' under-representation might sound severe, students from both genders who live in rural areas especially next to borders and in small villages are even more severely under-represented. There are no specific statistics available, but two interviewees illustrate this issue.

Mahmoud Abu Kabreet lives in the border area to the east of Al Mosader village. He said, "In the borders area most children do not go to higher education after finishing school. They usually work with their parents in farming as postsecondary education is not perceived as important for their lives." He added, "Also, families are not that rich to support their children to go to school in that areas as the transportation cost to get to school is high because they live in marginalized areas with weak transportation infrastructure."

Jehad Abu Salim lives in the rural part of Deir Albalah city. He claims, "People in the rural areas such as mine, do not care much for postsecondary education because family is the core supporter for the children and they usually work in farming. Therefore, getting a degree will not help, according to them, in enhancing their children's life, and thus, it is not promoted."

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

In order to overcome the burdens that prevent the development of HE in Gaza, a number of actions should be taken:

1. Creating incentive programs to support female students enrolment in Science which includes lower the entry requirements for female students and dedicated scholarships.
2. Developing a national strategic plan for developing HE best practices to increase the quality of education offered to students in HEIs in Gaza Strip
3. Establishing “Excellence Centers” for quality education in HEIs to improve the quality of courses, staff, and student skills
4. Increasing the standards for new HEIs to gain accreditation for their programs and requiring the already existing ones to adopt quality development plans to sustain their accreditation
5. Forming a student-led organization that provides assistance for HE students in Gaza Strip by offer educational support, financial support, and intensive extra-curricular activities to help students overcome the burdens of HE.

The overall challenges that shape higher education in Gaza Strip, like some other areas of the world, are the limitation of financial resources available for students, the relatively low quality of programs offered, the gender differences in study choices, the absence of realistic governmental policies towards promoting HE quality, and the weak participation of NGOs and other civil society organization in setting HE policies and promoting post-secondary study.

In terms of under-represented groups, females are likely to be found in smaller numbers in scientific majors and students from rural areas are usually less interested in pursuing higher education, which is reflects in their limited enrolment. Other religious groups, such as Christians, have no problem in enrolling in HEIs in Gaza Strip, although many of them prefer to travel abroad for education.

The Israeli occupation is one of the greatest challenges that face the development of HE in Gaza Strip and in Palestine in general. In one way or another, the difficulties and the obstacles the occupation creates make the developmental policies worthless and unachievable. Although this report does not address how the political atmosphere has damaged higher education in Gaza Strip, it is worth mentioning that the political situation in Palestine does not help progress and therefore, higher education is expected to keep suffering, if not worsening, in the next five years.