



Policy Brief

The Role of World Universities at Times of War and Crisis:

Widening Participation and the Reconstruction of Higher
Education in the Gaza Strip (Occupied Palestinian Territories)

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Dr Mona Jebril (August 2024)

Summary

Considering that Israel's ongoing war on the Gaza Strip in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) is having a devastating impact on the Gaza higher education (HE) sector, where all Gaza's universities have now been destroyed (partially or completely), it is imperative that world universities respond to this crisis by showing global academic solidarity with Palestinian staff and students from the Gaza Strip, both those who remain in Gaza, and who are abroad. Universities, worldwide, should take proactive steps to contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza's HE as soon as the situation permits. But what exactly could universities do, and how?

In this policy brief, I explore the different ways that universities could respond to the crisis in the Gaza Strip, and how to do that. Drawing on my interdisciplinary expertise in this area, I put forward some strategic and actionable recommendations for world universities to consider for implementation. I conducted two large-scale academic studies on the Gaza Strip; firstly on [Gaza's universities under occupation](#), for my PhD degree at the Faculty of Education (2012-2017) in Cambridge; and secondly, on the [political economy of health in the Gaza Strip](#), as part of the [R4HC-MENA](#) project at the Centre for Business Research, again in the University of Cambridge. Previously, I worked as a teacher in Gaza's public schools and a lecturer at two of Gaza's universities, as well as in other roles in the Gaza education and HE sectors. I benefit from these experiences to put forward ideas that are agile and which could be adaptable to universities' various departments and actors.

Given the current situation of the Gaza Strip, which [the UN International Court of Justice \(26th of January 2024\)](#) has ruled as, at least, plausibly a genocide, I urge policy makers at world universities to escalate efforts to support Palestinian staff and students from the Gaza Strip, as a matter of urgency, and to contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza's universities. These responses could be political, humanitarian, academic and pastoral, or all together, as all these are interrelated. But in order to achieve a maximum impact, that is meaningful, there is a need for world universities to go beyond symbolic gestures of help and adopt a deep approach to thinking about the support initiatives, taking into consideration, the real-world challenges of the Gaza Strip.

World Universities' Responses are urgently needed

In my PhD research on “Academic Life Under Occupation in the Gaza Strip”, I explored the experiences of educationalists (lecturers and students) at two of Gaza’s universities, from past to present and future. The research looked into ‘de-development’, which, due to decades of occupation, has been characteristic of the Palestinian context, particularly in the Gaza Strip (Roy, 1995). Previously ‘de-development’ has been framed mainly in economic terms as “a process which weakens the ability of an economy to grow and expand by preventing it from accessing and utilising critical inputs needed to promote internal growth beyond a specific structural level” (Roy, 1987, p. 56). Findings from my educational research indicate that a structure of ‘de-development’ in the Gaza Strip extends to the Gaza HE sectors, while my political economy of health research shows that it extends to the Gaza health sector as well).

De-development on the level of Gaza’s universities is manifested in a simultaneous process of construction and destruction, that is both external and internal to educationalists (Jebriil, 2021a). For example, external challenges may include repeated wars, siege, and restrictions on mobility, while internal challenges to educationalists are represented in traumatic exposures, a positionality of helplessness, and constant de-humanization due to decades of Israeli occupation and control (for more details, see Jebriil, 2021a). Realising that destruction is an everyday fact on the ground in the Gaza Strip, the research suggests that, in order to overcome the structure of ‘de-development’ at Gaza’s universities, it is necessary to increase the weight of construction in relation to that of destruction. But under occupation, war and siege conditions, Gaza’s universities cannot achieve this alone. That said, “there is a need to connect [Gaza’s universities] to a lifeline, that is, international sources of academic and personal support” (Jebriil, 2018, p. 274). However, any international projects and initiatives of support, should be tailored to the context and experiences of Gaza’s universities rather than aimed at “cultural invasion” (Freire, 1996, p. 133). Thus, working in mutual co-operation with Gaza’s universities and Gaza’s academic communities is essential to achieve impact that is meaningful, and that can be sustainable to the future.

That said, in this policy brief, I will, firstly, provide some context to Gaza’s universities, showing how historical and political changes, affected the experiences of HE in the Gaza Strip overtime; secondly, I will point out how Israel’s ongoing war on the Gaza Strip, since the 7th of October 2023, is impacting the Gaza Strip, including Gaza’s universities’ staff and students, with devastating consequences that are increasing in intensity, as I am writing this piece; and finally, I will highlight what universities could do to support the academic community of the Gaza Strip both those who are inside and those who are currently outside the coastal enclave, and to contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza HE.

Higher Education in the Gaza Strip: a background

Historical and political turbulences in the Palestinian context have shaped HE in the Gaza Strip. The difficult circumstances of occupation and refugeehood have emphasized for Palestinians the importance of education. That said, “Palestinians perceive education a means of survival through

which they can achieve mobility and financial security, but also pride and psychological assurance” (Jebril, 2018, p. 15). For them, education is also a means of resistance to occupation and siege (Tahir, 1985 in: Jebril 2018, p. 15). This has made Palestinian staff and students strive to pursue HE even as they faced extreme conditions and challenges. Below is a brief account which gives a background on how, between construction and destruction, Gaza HE has developed overtime.

The Gaza Strip is reportedly one of the oldest sites in the world dated back to 3200 BC (Roy, 1995). It is a small geographical area of 365 km² (141 sq mi), looking over the mediterranean sea. Despite its limited geographical size, this area has witnessed successive patterns of destruction and disposition by several occupations (Roy, 1995). These include the Ottoman Rule (1516-1917), the British Mandate (1917-1948), the Egyptian Political Administration (1948-1967), and the Israeli occupation and siege (1967-present). During all these occupations, controlling the agenda and conditions for education was viewed as important to ensure the subjugation of the indigenous population of Palestinians (Jebril, 2018).

The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli occupation, since 1967, that is for 57 years, and continuing. Today, the overwhelming majority (approximately 74%) of the population in the Gaza Strip, which is about 2.3 million, are displaced Palestinian refugees from Al Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe) of 1948. Prior to the establishment of the first university in the Gaza Strip, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, as similar to other areas of the OPT, sought to study in neighbouring Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and Gulf countries, through available scholarships or/and support from their social network. Less often, they were able to pursue HE in foreign countries such as the US or the UK. Within intensified Israeli restrictions, and changes in the internal context of the Arab host countries, possibilities for Palestinians to pursue HE abroad have become increasingly limited, necessitating that Palestinians would look for alternatives at home. The Islamic University of Gaza was therefore, established in 1978, starting from tents, under conditions of Israeli occupation.

Although all Palestinian universities in the OPT have emerged after the start of the Israeli occupation in 1967, the Israeli occupation has not supported these universities, academically or financially, nor has it created favourable circumstances for their operations (see: Al Haq-Affiliate, 2005; Anabtawi, 1986; Murray, 2004; Ramsden et al., 1993; Sullivan, 1988). In fact, with the first Intifada in the Gaza Strip erupting in 1987, Palestinian academic staff and students have become routinely exposed to harassment, detention, frequent delays on road barriers, and the closure of their university for a prolonged period, in some cases for several years, by the Israeli occupation authorities. Nonetheless, Palestinian academics and students strived to pursue their HE, even under life-threatening conditions. Relying on community solidarity, they created alternative spaces for education, for example, turning mosques and student and staff homes into classrooms, placing university biological material and lab equipment into their homes temporarily to use them for teaching during the closure periods, and arranging study groups by geographical area/street, to adjust to different kinds of restrictions by the Israeli occupation.

After the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), once exiled in Tunis, was permitted by the Israeli occupation to return to rule the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, forming the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The first Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education ever was established in 1994. This was followed by an

expansion of Gaza's universities, vocational colleges and educational centre. Palestinians drew mainly on local expertise from graduates of Arab and foreign universities, who have set the tone for the development of HE, opening new and specialised degrees in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The Palestinian-Israeli peace process has proved to be a flawed process, causing more violence, and leading to Al Aqsa Intifada (Second Palestinian uprising) in 2000. Afterwards, Israel, in 2005, implemented a 'disengagement' of settlements in the Gaza Strip. With this, it was thought that Palestinians would become the independent rulers of the Gaza Strip and therefore, solely responsible for establishing prosperity for the Palestinian state in the enclave. In reality, however, Israel maintained control over essential resources for Gaza's development such as electricity, water resources, PNA's taxes which pays for employee salaries and other civil services, as well as stifling Gaza's economy by increased restrictions on exports and imports, and separating Gaza from the West Bank and the global market (For more details, see Jebril, 2021b).

In 2006, Hamas – a competitive political and armed group to Fatah – won the Palestinian elections through a democratic process, forming the new government for the OPT. However, this victory led to a Hamas-Fatah violent fight, which eventually resulted in a government schism, with two ruling regimes: the Fatah-dominated PNA in Ramallah (the West Bank), and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Hamas government was met with international sanctions, in addition to several tightened restrictions from Israel, which included imposing a devastating siege on the Gaza Strip by air, land, and sea (2007-present). Gaza's economy has become further "besieged and fragmented" (Jebril, 2021b, p. 42), increasing Gaza's dependency on foreign aid, but this too, has become less available in effect of international sanctions. Consequently, the state of 'de-development' has exacerbated, leading to a deterioration of all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip, including Gaza's HE.

The siege conditions have undermined the functioning of Gaza's universities in several ways: they have restricted the mobility of lecturers and students, who became unable to join international academic conferences and professional development opportunities, for fear of a sudden closure of the Rafah border crossing (Gaza-Egyptian point), or to be investigated or even jailed on the Beit Hanoun (Erez Gaza-Israel) crossing. This also discouraged international academic visits and exchanges to the Gaza Strip, leading to the enclave being a significantly under-researched area. The siege also affected the capacity of Gaza's universities by diminishing expertise, and a causing a lack of essential library, technological and scientific material and equipment. Shortages of fuel have led to interrupted services, transportation challenges, and blackouts of 6-12 hours on daily basis. Consequently, achieving academic tasks such as preparing teaching material, using power point, and studying for exams, have become a real struggle.

The rising unemployment rate, particularly among young people has exceeded 67% per cent (Jebril, 2021b, p. 44). This has affected students' motivation as they felt frustrated watching graduating students before them not finding jobs for several years. Conversely, the competition over scarce job opportunities, and the general frustration students experienced because of their isolation from the global HE context, made Gaza's students (and lecturers) increasingly favour localised and instrumentalist approaches to teaching and learning. Conditions of poverty have limited families' abilities to educate all of their children, so often prioritizing males' education over that of females,

given the traditional society of the Gaza Strip (Jebriil, 2018). The inability of families to pay for tuition fees affected the development of Gaza's universities, as a key part of their funding was largely cut off.

Since only 2008, the Israeli occupation has launched 5 wars (in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2023-present) on the besieged coastal enclave, which is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, with nearly half (47.3%) of the population under the age of 18. The repeated wars resulted in disruption of university study, displacement, and severe damages to universities' facilities, and depletion of the already scarcely available equipment and resources in the Gaza Strip. These wars have also inflicted physical and mental harm on the academic community. Conducting interviews with both students and staff on their war experiences for my PhD research, I found that despite their efforts for resilience, lecturers and students in Gaza continued to experience trauma, fear and nightmares whenever they passed by destroyed buildings or remembered the sounds of bombardment. Some also suffered from a sense of fatalism and helplessness (Jebriil, 2018), which continued to affect their consciousness.

In conclusion, Palestinians faced a myriad of challenges under siege and occupation. Yet, they remained steadfast in their pursuit of education and HE. According to, UNISON (2024), "Palestinians have some of the highest literacy rates and highest per capita PhD rates in the world, as stated by Hussam Zomlot, the Palestinian ambassador to the UK. In fact, Palestinians are also reported in the literature to have a higher educational attainment than most Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Jebriil, 2018). They hold a long-running reputation as the world's "best educated refugees" (Irfan, 2023).

Israel's ongoing war on the Gaza Strip and its universities

Since 7th of October 2023, Israel has launched an unprecedented war on the Gaza Strip. The brutality of this war has caused multiple humanitarian catastrophes to civilians in Gaza. In its ruling of 26th of January 2024, the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) found it, at least, plausible that Israel is committing a genocide in the Gaza Strip (International Court of Justice, 2024). This genocidal war included an attack on Palestinian education and HE. Just within the first 100 days of the war all the universities (approximately 11-12 universities) in the Gaza Strip were destroyed, in full or part, by Israel's bombardment (Desai, 2024).

In fact, "the attack on Palestinian education, educators and cultural knowledge isn't new, but it has reached horrifying new levels" (Desai, 2024, p. no pagination), affecting not only universities, but all the educational and cultural structures in the Gaza Strip, as well as the "custodians" of knowledge (Desai, 2024, p. no pagination). For example, mosques, churches, cultural centres, libraries, and Palestinian archives in the Gaza Strip were bombed. Included in this destruction are expensive educational and technological resources necessary for the development of the Gaza HE sector.

Many lecturers and students were killed, detained, sustained life-changing injuries, or endured unimaginable suffering and psychological torture as they went through experiences of loss, starvation and displacement. There is "no distinction here between physical and psychological torture. While the methods of torture may differ, subjectively the experience of severe pain and suffering for the victim is one and the same" (Shehadeh, 2015, p. 287 in: Jebriil, 2018, p. 180). Some university academics,

administrators and students have evacuated the Gaza Strip for their safety and the safety of their families. This loss of expertise is expected to pose additional challenges for the reconstruction of Gaza's universities.

A UN Development Programme (UNDP) assessment (May, 2024) estimates that this war “could reduce levels of health, education and wealth in the territory to those of 1980, wiping out 44 years of development” (Burke, 2024, p. no pagination). It states that just clearing the Gaza Strip of the rubble (which was at almost 40 million tonnes at the time of conducting the assessment) may take up to 15 years, counting this based on a fleet of more than one hundred lorries (Burke, 2024, p. no pagination). Gaza's municipality spokesperson and PhD researcher, Asem Al Nabeh, has contested some aspects of this assessment, in an Arabic video¹ circulated on Leblad (@lebladnet) Twitter account on 22nd July 2024. Al Nabeh argues that the process of clearing the rubble could be achieved within one year or less, with accelerated financial and heavy equipment assistance from the international community. In this case, Gaza could work with a substantially fleet than the 100 lorries assumed by the UNDP, also taking into consideration the availability of unemployed workers in the Gaza Strip who would be willing to work in this field. From another perspective, people's desperate needs for homes, their resilience, their previous experiences in war and reconstruction, and their deep connections to their cities that were destroyed, should not be underestimated, as these could contribute positively to workers' energy and commitment.

The reconstruction of Gaza's universities is expected to be a long-term process, although universities may operate in alternative ways to cope with the reality of the situation. In fact, efforts seem to have already started in this direction, for example, a few of Gaza's universities were able to communicate with their academic communities through social media channels, arrange online teaching, in collaboration with other universities in the OPT, and even hold viva voce examinations for postgraduate students in tents. These efforts remain extremely limited in their reach and capacity. Under the current war conditions, they are surely unsustainable. But what they signify is the persistence of Gaza's universities through their academic communities, who are determined to rebuild Gaza's universities and reconstruct HE for the current and new generations of Palestinians. Realising the huge scale of destruction, their attempts for educational resilience at this time, cannot succeed without global academic solidarity, Gaza academics and university administrators addressed an open letter to the world, saying:

“We call upon our colleagues in the homeland and internationally to support our steadfast attempts to defend and preserve our universities for the sake of the future of our people, and our ability to remain on our Palestinian land in Gaza. We built these universities from tents. And from tents, with the support of our friends, we will rebuild them once again” ...(Gaza Academics and Administrators, 2024).

¹ Link: <https://x.com/lebladnet/status/1815265521379504437> (accessed 24.07.2024).



For world universities which are considering supporting the Gaza academic community and the reconstruction of Gaza's HE, my PhD research could offer a starting point. It can act as a memorandum of understanding on the Palestinian university experience in the Gaza Strip, since it combines both the local and international perspectives of HE (For more details, see Jebril, 2018). My CBR report on *The Political Economy of Health in the Gaza Strip* could also offer useful insights into the context for HE in the Gaza Strip (see Jebril, 2021b). There is an inherent relationship between education and health. For example, Gaza's universities are essential suppliers of medical expertise in the besieged enclave, particularly as the Gaza Strip has been experiencing a trend of brain drain due to the deteriorating living conditions. Under repeated war circumstances in the Gaza Strip, capacity building of local expertise is essential. Conversely, health services strive to provide the care needed for the Gaza academic community, in order to enable them in turn to contribute to the Gaza society and its universities.



In May 2024, Al Azhar University held a thesis defence for psychology Master’s student Tamer Salah Abu Mousa, in a tent. Mousa’s thesis is entitled: “The Psychological Immunity as Mediating Variable Between Psychological Stressors and Achievement Motivation among Educational Counsellors in the Southern Governorates of Palestine. (Photo Credit: Ayesha Alli. Circulated on Twitter for public use with attribution).



A medical student in the Gaza Strip taking his board exam in the reception and orthopedic department in one of Gaza’s hospitals (15. 07. 2024). One of the examiners in this picture (second from left) is Dr Mohammed Abu Salmiya, Head of Al Shifa hospital who was detained by Israeli occupation forces in this war and released after more than seven months (Usher, 2024, p. no pagination). (Photo Credit: No Known Attribution- Shared on Twitter for Public Circulation).

So, what can world universities do to support the academic community of the Gaza Strip and the reconstruction of Gaza's universities, and how?

Universities' contributions could span political, humanitarian, academic and pastoral roles in supporting Gaza's HE and academic community. But for the sake of simplicity, this policy brief will discuss the recommendations under two main categories: (I) strategic recommendations, and (II) actionable recommendations. It should be noted, however, that there are elements across these that are interlinked, and therefore, the reader is advised to approach all points thoughtfully and creatively. To illustrate with one example, providing fellowships for Palestinians could serve two aims at once: supporting world universities' widening participation, as well as strengthening the production of scholarly knowledge on the OPT.

I. Strategic Recommendations

Firstly, strategic recommendations: (I.A) widening participation to the academic community of the Gaza Strip:

I.A.1 university's response: a clear and consistent approach

World universities are expected to adopt (and communicate) a clear approach which reflects how they see their role as HE institutions at times of war and crisis. That said, with Israel's ongoing war in the Gaza Strip, there have been growing calls on world universities to respond by taking measures such as boycotting HE institutions implicated in the war, disclosing any investments the universities may have in arm companies and their supporters in the industry, divesting from these sources, and reinvesting, instead, in the reconstruction of HE in the Gaza Strip. These calls, however, have been so often confronted by confusing rhetoric and action on the part of world universities. This confusion could partly be linked to a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the idea and role of a university, which remains a contentious issue. The confusion might also reflect some complex underpinnings that affect policy and decision making regarding the implementation of such measures on the ground.

In principle, whatever approach a university chooses (e.g. neutral, political, or plural), this should be consistent. For example, if a university adopts a neutral stance on wars and crisis beyond their country of origin, then this stance should be applied in the case of both Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as Israel's war on the Gaza Strip. Universities which responded to the invasion of Ukraine by taking measures including issuing statements of condemnation, divesting, and cutting ties with Russian institutions, have been harshly criticised by global student encampments regarding their lack of responses towards Israel's war in the Gaza Strip. This is taking into consideration ICJ ruling which

declared Israel's war on Gaza as, at least, plausibly, a genocide, and therefore, at a higher intensity than the Russian war on Ukraine, which prompted world universities' responses previously.

Applying double standards puts world universities in a position where they might be perceived, by both their academic communities and the public, as government-led, complacent and hypocritical. Members of these universities from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly those who have their loved ones in the Gaza Strip, could also feel racially discriminated against. This could be counterproductive to universities' efforts towards achieving equality and widening participation. In order for world universities to maintain their reputations as academic institutions of higher learning and gain wider trust in their mission and judgement, a clear approach toward responding to war and crisis, that is consistent, is crucial.

I.A.2 Scholarship schemes: from symbolic gestures to real-world engagement

It is commendable that some world universities have initiated scholarship schemes specifically aimed to support Palestinians, in the face of the current war in the Gaza Strip. Some preferred to take a neutral approach by including such opportunities as part of wider academic schemes for students from conflict-affected areas. These efforts, while not Gaza-specific, are also desperately needed for students from the Gaza Strip and beyond. Practically, however, both forms of scholarship initiatives could be useful to applicants from the Gaza Strip who are already abroad or have managed to evacuate (in cases where relevant visas were granted). But the students who remain in the war circumstances in the Gaza Strip might find it almost impossible to apply to these opportunities. Without offering adequate support to Gaza-based applicants, these university scholarship schemes remain very limited in their impact and outreach. As such they could be perceived as symbolic gestures, rather than actual HE support for people from/in the Gaza Strip at this critical time.

Universities' enhancing of their understandings of Gaza applicants' circumstances is important. It would enable them to make necessary adjustments, of the kind for example that would encourage the students to apply for these scholarship opportunities. For example, with the destruction of about 80% of Gaza homes and university buildings, world universities should anticipate that Gaza students may not have access to their earlier academic certificates and transcripts. The displacement and war conditions could also mean that students may not be able to secure a reference letter or, sit for an English Language Test, whether in person or online. Taking these factors into consideration, universities could, for example, think of alternative or temporary ways of assessment. Universities could also discuss using diplomatic means to open exit routes for winners of scholarships to join their studies, despite the continuation of war (possibly, in similar ways that those with dual nationalities were allowed to evacuate from Gaza). Without these discussions and facilitations taking place, students would not be able to join in scholarship opportunities, even if they were made available in principle. It is understandable of course why world universities may find it difficult to engage with these real-world challenges in the Gaza Strip. But there must be ways to do that, without compromising the quality and excellence of world universities. Unless universities start to work in this direction, their plans of widening participation remain symbolic, falling short of addressing the needs of applicants in war and conflict zones.

I.A.3 Inclusivity: working together for ‘positive’ equality

Equality is at the heart of inclusion, but it is not one size fits all. Nowadays, there are a variety of efforts by world universities that aim to include a diverse international student/staff body in their communities, including those from the Gaza Strip. But inclusiveness is a “community outcome that results from methods of inclusion that utilize diversity as a resource” (Dörffel & Schuhmann, 2022, p. 1120). This means that inclusiveness cannot be achieved without active participation by members of the community whom this inclusiveness aims to serve.

To explain this further, inclusiveness is usually defined as “the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure” (Cynthia Smith, no pagination). It is “an outcome of a process of inclusion”(Trattng, 2021, p. no pagination). However, “the use [of the terms of inclusion, diversity, and inclusiveness] today is a rather successful method to corral all people considered ‘coloured and others’ into one enormous stall” (Cynthia Smith, 2020, p. no pagination). In this case, international students, or slightly more specifically, students from conflict-affected areas should be the focus of university action. There are commonalities, and differences between these groups, as well as within each group. The type of differences of interest to this policy brief are those arising from the specificities of the troubled contexts, mainly, by war, conflict and occupation. To overlook these differences is to sweep the hard work of the process of inclusion under the carpet. These differences will continue to exist and influence these members of the academic community, possibly affecting their roles, interactions, and performances at the universities, to various degrees. While negative equality works to disguise the differences for the sake of apparent harmony, “positive equality” emanates from world universities acknowledging the differences and addressing them through active participation from members of their communities in concern, informing the strategies, structures, practices and processes of universities’ work, particularly, in relation to war and crisis, that are directly related to their contexts.

Secondly, strategic recommendations: (I.B) supporting the reconstruction of Gaza’s universities:

I.B.1 Building sustainable collaborations and partnerships with Gaza’s universities

A collaborative approach and equitable partnerships are essential to ensuring the success and sustainability of international efforts towards supporting HE sector in the Gaza Strip. As discussed above, Gaza’s universities suffer from a simultaneous process of construction and destruction, that makes establishing a lifeline of international solidarity from world universities is essential to their development. Over the past decades, however, partnerships and collaborations with the OPT including the Gaza Strip have been mirroring the fragmentation of developmental initiatives, which have been criticised for their limited scope, replication, a top-down approach and therefore ineffectiveness to achieve sustainable impacts. This is mainly due to occupation and siege conditions which affect all aspects of Palestinian life, undermining their work for developmental change and

implementation. The restrictions on mobility to and from the Gaza Strip have also rendered this area as significantly under-researched, and so international initiatives related to HE may be based on knowledge that is detached, technical and outdated.

There are challenges involved in working for collaborations and partnerships with Gaza's universities. Nonetheless, it is important that world universities make serious efforts in that direction. This will bear fruit of mutual benefit. On the one hand, it could demonstrate world universities' global solidarity and commitment to worldwide learning, as well as supporting HE for Palestinian students and staff under an occupation, which an ICJ ruling of 19th of July 2024, has declared to be unlawful (Al Jazeera, 2024; Siddique, 2024). Having collaborations and partnerships with Gaza's universities would also ensure a better reach for world universities to this area, enabling them to conduct multidisciplinary research on the Gaza Strip, and to respond to war and crisis as they happen. On the other hand, these efforts will be, in turn, enriching to the academic experiences at world universities, connecting them to local expertise, and networks, challenging of homogenic perceptions on this occupied and besieged area, and empowering world universities' initiatives towards widening participation, decolonisation, and global peace and social justice at home, with comparative and critical insights.

I.B.2 Reclaiming Knowledge on the OPT: encouraging Palestinian academic production

Ideas and debates arising from indigenous communities, such as Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, enhance our understandings of societies and constitute a tremendous resource contributing to a globally connected system of knowledge (Connell, 2007). Strengthening Gazan universities' capacities for academic research requires democratising access to global resources and expertise, establishing collaborations and partnerships, empowering researchers with necessary skills, trainings, and opportunities, and protecting Palestinian academic freedoms in the global HE sectors, as well as amplifying their underrepresented voices within the mainstream.

That said, during the 21st century, there has been a growing realisation of how global dynamics of power, knowledge and democracy affect our imaginations of societies (Connell, 2007). Within a context of overdominance of metropolitan Northern narratives, the so named, Southern perspectives are often disregarded by mainstream systems of knowledge (Connell, 2007). In order for world universities to be truly cosmopolitan HE institutions, they must encourage Southern engagement in Knowledge production, opening spaces for equal sharing, where "the experiences and perspectives emerging from the South have to be fully acknowledged and might correct, complete, amplify or supplement existing [knowledge,] where necessary" (Connell in: Keim, 2010, p. 108).

In practice, however, the production of knowledge by Palestinians on their experiences have often been discouraged by both their own circumstances, and a structure of global North dominance at world universities. That said, in the Gaza Strip, there have been systematic restrictions on Palestinian academic scholarship by the occupation conditions, including the lack of access to essential library, laboratory and technological research, and a context of complicated mobility for academic researchers and experts at Gaza's universities, as explained earlier. But Palestinian academic scholarship has also been discouraged by some of the most liberal world universities for various reasons. To illustrate with one example, Else & Brismes, (2023) indicate that in universities which

adopted the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, “those researching and teaching about the history and the current situation in Israel- Palestine have been targeted with false accusations of antisemitism” (p.6).

World universities must take tangible steps to “problematize global centre periphery-relationships [...and] to analyse the functioning of the metropolis as the global centre” (Connell in: Keim, 2010, p. 108). Palestinian academic production both at Gaza’s universities in the OPT and beyond should be encouraged and supported by world universities.

II. Actionable Recommendations

In this section, I outline some actionable recommendations for supporting the following: **(II.A)** the Gaza academic community, in the OPT and abroad; **(II.B)** an inclusive context at world universities; **(II.C)** the reconstruction of Gaza’s universities; and **(II.D)** Palestinian academic production.

Actionable Recommendations: The Lists (II.A & II.B)

II.A.: Supporting the Gaza Academic Community	II.B. Creating an Inclusive Context at World Universities
II.A.1 Supporting students and staff in the Gaza Strip through offering the following:	II.B.1 On the governance level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Scholarships (and exit routes) on undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels ▪ Educational schemes for hosting students whose studies have been interrupted due to the war ▪ Outreach and widening participation initiatives to inform and support applicants’ admissions to the above opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Issuing a clear statement on the university’s approach regarding its role at times of war and conflict ▪ Ensuring that consistency in universities’ approaches is achieved and that their practices of consistency are worked out in equitable ways that are positive, i.e. critically accounting for any difference or variance in contexts ▪ Liberating university strategies to be independent from formal and informal lobbying pressures, as much as possible

<p>II.A.2 supporting Gaza displaced academic and administrative staff</p>	<p>II.B.2 On the academic level</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fellowships for displaced academics and postdoctoral researchers ▪ Contract-based or permanent employment opportunities for displaced administrative staff. ▪ Contract-based or permanent employment of graduates who just finished their studies at world universities and yet remain stuck due to war conditions ▪ Upskilling opportunities in training programmes related to research and administration (e.g. software packages, English academic writing, research methods, entrepreneurship) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protecting the academic freedom of speech and expression in campus including its communities' right for peaceful assemblies and protests regarding the situation in the OPT. ▪ Rejecting the adoption of any definitions or agreement that aim to intimidate the academic scholarship and basic freedoms for university members from the OPT ▪ Establishing a university activist resource centre to support creating research impact through means of advocacy (e.g. to advocate for the end of the war and the reconstruction of Gaza's universities) ▪ Expanding decolonisation projects, to include decolonising the structure of university spaces, the challenging of colonizing narratives, empowering marginalised voices, and standing up for social injustices
<p>II.A.3 supporting officially employed and affiliated staff from the Gaza Strip at world universities by providing the following:</p>	<p>II.B.3 On the administrative level</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wellbeing and counselling support relevant/tailored to the situation in the Gaza Strip ▪ Humanitarian fund and support regarding arising caring responsibilities from the situation in the Gaza Strip 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowing who your university members are, by each university collecting basic and nonsensitive data on its community (with their consents) for its confidential internal use, as relevant, (e.g. numbers, names, affiliations, type and degree of conflict experienced, possible hazards, and possible means of support in those contexts) ▪ Commissioning evaluative research to explore the successes and failures of various university and HE support schemes related to conflict-affected population, and lessons for improvement

- Bridging research fund or/and work placements, for those whose job searches were affected by circumstances beyond their control (e.g. increased censorship on Palestinian research and freedom of speech limits job opportunities of specialised researchers in the field, particularly at times of war), and who may not have the option of going back to their home in the OPT
- Preparing university services to be able to respond at times of war and conflict (e.g. flexibility in processes and functions such as devising ways of assessment, and admissions that are suitable to war situations, where traditional methods may not be possible. (e.g. relevant trainings and information sessions to tutors, supervisors, counselling service staff, and professional service staff)
- Building university academic and administrative teams' knowledge, particularly those involved in admissions, on possible differences in cultural practices, related to their work (e.g. cultural ways of writing recommendation letters, and degree and level related scoring) to ensure equitable admissions and evaluations for marginalised students, including those from the Gaza Strip.

Actionable Recommendations: The Lists (II.C & II.D)

II.C Supporting the Reconstruction of Gaza's Universities

- II.C.1. Investing in the process of physical reconstruction of Gaza's universities (e.g. supporting labs, libraries, and the technological infra-structure)
- II.C.2. Establishing joint research projects and equitable partnerships with Gaza's universities and other universities in the OPT
- II.C.3. Initiating programmes of academic exchanges with Gaza's universities and other universities in the OPT
- II.C.4. Sharing expertise and resources (e.g. access to academic lectures, mentorship, journal subscriptions, and specialist material and equipment)

List (II.D) Encouraging Palestinian Academic Production

- II.D.1. Establishing a Palestinian Studies Centre at world universities
- II.D.2. Starting academic and research posts which require expertise in the Palestinian context
- II.D.3. Organising events, seminars and conferences related to the OPT
- II.D.4. Inviting speakers from the OPT to participate in events at world universities, in person or online
- II.D.5. Inviting academics' contributions on the OPT in published books, and journal articles
- II.D.6. Inviting universities in the OPT to lead on book editing and journal special issues
- II.D.7. Initiating research funding calls on topics directly related to the OPT context
- II.D.8. Offering research grants for Palestinian researchers who, in many ways, have been systematically denied opportunities of academic and career progression.
- II.D.9. Collaborating with Palestinian academics and researchers on developing joint grant applications, and encouraging them to participate as investigators or co-investigators in these projects

II.D.10 Offering undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate courses (and scholarships and fellowships) on topics related to Palestinian studies

II.D.11 Providing mentorship opportunities for Palestinian researchers, that would be useful and would encourage them to learn and develop as scholars, particularly for those academics and students early in transitioning from working in the OPT to a global HE context.

II.D.12 Encouraging donor investment in Palestinian academic scholarship, e.g. through fellowship establishment.

II.D.13 Supporting Palestinian researchers for translating their research into policy and practice that would support the development in the OPT, from inside and outside the OPT.

II.D.13 Building and Facilitating networks which connect academics and scholars in the OPT, and the diaspora, with international scholars and communities of learning.

II.D.14 Supporting academic visits by international scholars to Gaza's universities for joint research work.

In Conclusion

Drawing on two pieces of academic research on the Gaza Strip, which I have conducted for my PhD and Postdoctoral Research at the University of Cambridge, as well as benefiting from my first-hand experiences in the Gaza Strip, this policy brief has provided a background to Gaza HE between construction and destruction, and how Gaza's universities were impacted by the Israel's ongoing genocidal war on the Gaza Strip. Against this background, the policy brief has considered the role of world universities at times of war and crisis, outlining some strategic and actionable recommendations on what universities could do (and how) to support the academic community at Gaza's universities, and the reconstruction of Gaza HE. I urge policy makers to take on board as much as possible from these recommendations and engage in translating them in ways that can create a meaningful and sustainable impact. Contrary to the generally held assumption of HE as a luxury in contexts of instability, for Palestinians under occupation, HE is existential, giving the Gaza Strip strength and horizon for a better future, as soon as this war ends. But as I write this, many excellent students, and hardworking scholars in the Gaza Strip have been deprived of their universities, and of their HE. World universities' responses to this war and crisis in the Gaza Strip are urgently needed.

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