

Report of CPPR-HERG event, 'How can King's support universities in Gaza?'

How can King's support universities in Gaza? Overcoming barriers and building links with Palestinian universities

On 26 June 2024, Palestinian academics from leading universities in Gaza and the West Bank were invited to King's College London to speak at an event titled '[How can King's support universities in Gaza?](#)' Hosted by the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) and the Higher Education Research Group (HERG@KCL), and supported by the School of Education, Communication and Society Research Committee, the aim of the event was to discuss ways in which King's can support universities in Gaza – at the institutional level, within our own departments and research centres, and as academics, staff and students.

Over 60 academics and professional service staff responded to the invitation, from 22 departments and 6 faculties across the College, including Arts & Humanities; Law; Life Sciences & Medicine; Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care; Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience; and Social Science and Public Policy, as well as colleagues from the King's Sanctuary Programme; Global Engagement; the Dean's Office; and Libraries & Collections. We were joined by representatives from the student encampment at King's who have been engaged in ongoing negotiations with senior management, including on the pledge to support the rebuilding of higher education in Gaza, which is also endorsed by the UCU branch. In an important win for the encampment, this pledge has now been agreed to by the College. Visiting the encampment after the event, the Palestinian speakers expressed their solidarity with the students, saying how much it has meant to people in Gaza to see students across the world taking direct action to stand up against the genocide when their institutions and governments have stayed silent. They also recognised that the students had created the space within the university for this conversation to happen.

In just a few short months the Israeli state has attempted to eliminate the entire higher education sector in Gaza. But while the buildings, libraries and campuses of all 12 universities in Gaza have been destroyed, the overriding message of the visiting speakers is that the universities still very much exist. As Palestinian academics, staff and students now struggle for the future survival of higher education in Gaza, we must ask what are our responsibilities in the international academic community to support them? How can we at King's support the survival, resilience and rebuilding of universities in Gaza? This report outlines the key messages and priorities for international support presented by the visiting speakers and the table discussions that followed.

1. Key messages and priorities for international support

The panel speakers (full biographies below) included colleagues from leading Palestinian universities, including Dr Nasreddin Elmezaini from the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban from Al-Azhar University in Gaza, and Dr Samia Al-Botmeh from Birzeit University in the West Bank, who all spoke powerfully and movingly about the current challenges for their universities and the priorities for international support. They were joined by Professor Abdel Razzaq Takriti from Rice University in the US and Omar Shweiki from Fobzu in the UK, who further outlined key principles and strategies for building partnerships between King's and universities in Gaza to

support their survival, resilience and recovery. The panel was introduced by Professor Sharon Gewirtz, Co-Director of CPPR, and chaired by Dr Helen Murray, co-convenor of HERG@KCL. A number of key principles and messages emerged from the panel discussion:

- 1.1 **The universities in Gaza still exist and are functioning:** The overriding message from the speakers was clear: our buildings and campuses have been destroyed, but we still exist. There are 12 universities, 87,000 students and 4500 university staff in Gaza. On 29 May 2024, almost 200 academics and administrators from Gaza's universities signed a [unified emergency statement](#) to affirm their continued existence and call on the world to support them 'to resume teaching, study, and research in Gaza, at our own Palestinian universities, at the earliest opportunity'. Remarkably, online teaching at some universities in Gaza has already commenced. Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban told us that over 10,000 students have enrolled for the new term at Al-Azhar University. He also described recording his own lectures along with the stream of responses he receives from students on WhatsApp. Many of his students are living in tents, under relentless bombs with no respite or place of safety, yet they are determined to continue their studies.
- 1.2 **We need to support the institutions for the future of higher education in Gaza:** It is vital to support the institutions, rather than individuals, if there is to be any future for higher education in Gaza. The speakers explained that international collusion with the idea that universities in Gaza no longer exist is the most dangerous threat of all. They highlighted their fear that individualised higher education aid through international scholarships and fellowships will only contribute to emptying Gaza's universities and consolidate their destruction, even with the best of intentions. Where possible, we must enable students and academics to stay in their own institutions by providing institutional support to universities in Gaza. The stark reality is that without immediate international support, the universities will collapse, not only affecting current students, but the future survival of higher education in Gaza, with all the consequences that has for the possibility of civic life in occupied Palestine.
- 1.3 **We must work in direct partnership with universities in Gaza to ensure their survival:** The Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza has published [key priorities](#) for international support. These include immediate support to universities in Gaza to resume teaching; scholarships and fellowships to enable students and academics to stay in their institutions; international research partnerships with Gaza universities; and public pledges to rebuild Gaza universities. The guiding principle for any initiative that seeks to support higher education in Gaza is to work in direct partnership with universities *in Gaza*. Any other initiative, no matter how well-intentioned, risks diverting resources and people away from the universities in Gaza and weakening their integrity at a moment that is absolutely critical for their future survival.
- 1.4 **KCL must not be involved in plans for new 'technical university' in Gaza:** It was reported in the [New York Times](#) that international actors are planning a new 'Technical University of Reconstruction in northern Gaza that would draw students from around the world...using post-war Gaza as a living laboratory' (New York Times, 28 April 2024). This highly controversial and disturbing proposal, led by the Portland Trust, has been linked to King's College London. It was a crucial point of clarification during the event, now confirmed on record, that this proposal has not been endorsed by senior management. The visiting Palestinian speakers were clear: any initiative to replace the Palestinian universities or bypass them in plans for the future of education in Gaza is part of the wider project of scholasticide, whether driven by Israel and/or

by members of international academic community. King's must not be associated with any such an initiative.

- 1.5 Survival and recovery of the universities in Gaza is possible with international support:** As the bombs continue to fall on Gaza, it will be a long and painful road to recovery, but the overwhelming sense from the speakers is that recovery is possible. The speakers pointed out that this is not the first time their university buildings have been bombed by Israel, indeed they have endured multiple bombings since 2008, and just as these buildings have been rebuilt before, they can be rebuilt again. Physical destruction of buildings will not eliminate the universities. Academics and students are determined to pursue their education in Gaza, and indeed are already doing so through their institutions. But if the universities are to survive, they need the urgent and immediate support of the international academic community, through direct partnerships with universities internationally, including King's College London.

2. The higher education context in Palestine

- 2.1 Building universities under military occupation:** The speakers described how their universities have been built since the 1970s, following the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem in 1968, after which time Palestinians could no longer easily travel to study abroad. The speakers talked about their own involvement in building these institutions, as students from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, and as professors in the 1990s and 2000s. Present in the room were the founder of the first faculty of Engineering in Gaza, Dr Nasreddin Elmezaini, and the co-founder of the first faculty of Medicine in Gaza, Dr Jihad Hammad. Dr Elmezaini described how in the early years, the first university in Gaza (IUG) held classes in large canvas tents, before moving to temporary structures and finally buildings. It was an extraordinary image of the resilience and determination of the universities in Gaza, and that buildings do not make universities, people do. Echoing the historic call from Gaza academics and administrators, Dr Elmezaini told us: "We built these universities from tents. And from tents we will rebuild them once again".
- 2.2 International pride and recognition:** Throughout the 1990s, the Palestinian universities consolidated and expanded, and the speakers talked with immense pride about the 'beautiful' buildings, campuses and higher education infrastructure built in Gaza, including with international development support. Palestinian universities are part of multiple international higher education associations and networks and are highly regarded in the region and internationally as centres of critical thinking, and for the professional skills of their graduates. Operating under extreme conditions across the West Bank and Gaza, including prolonged periods of military closure, army raids on university campuses, harassment and imprisonment of students, severe movement restrictions, siege, and repeated bombings of university infrastructure in Gaza, the universities have continued to advance. It is a testimony to Palestinian academics, staff and students that universities in Gaza and the West Bank are among the most highly ranked universities in the region.
- 2.3 Higher education as hope and resistance:** The speakers conveyed the immense value that Palestinians have always placed on education, through decades of colonial dispossession and military occupation, in mass exile as refugees, and under years of blockade, siege and bombs. Palestinians are a highly educated population with a tertiary enrolment ratio of 45 per cent.

Under military occupation, and in the absence of a governing Palestinian authority until 1994, the universities became leading civic institutions in Palestinian society, representing intellectual and cultural life, community support and social and economic development. As one speaker noted, the universities also carry the ‘cultural memory’ of Palestinian society.

2.4 Scholasticide as a dimension of genocide: Israel’s attempt to eliminate the higher education sector in Gaza is part of a genocidal intention to destroy the very fabric of Palestinian society. Without higher education institutions, a key pillar of the society is lost. Not only are Palestinian universities the foundation of Gaza’s social and economic fabric, providing the engineers, doctors and teachers that serve the community, they are essential to Palestinian civic life and democracy. This collective role is all the more vital for a people living under occupation and siege, with all the pressures and fragmentation that involves. The speakers referred to the history of ‘scholasticide’ in Palestine, defined by Karma Nabulsi (2009) as ‘the systematic destruction of Palestinian education by Israel’. Having discussed this long history of attacks on Palestinian universities, Dr Samia Al-Botmeh, who was joining online from Birzeit University in the West Bank, had to suddenly leave the meeting as the Israeli army were at the gates of the university and threatening to invade the campus. Shocking in its immediacy, it was an example of the routine military harassment and attacks on Palestinian universities that faculty, staff and students have endured for over 40 years. Dr Al-Botmeh later emailed to say that the soldiers did not storm the campus on this occasion but raided the student dormitories in Birzeit village.

2.5 Attempted elimination of an entire higher education sector: The speakers described how each of the 12 universities in the Gaza Strip have been systematically destroyed by the Israeli army in just a few short months. One by one, building by building, Gaza’s 12 universities were bombed from the air or detonated from ground, with libraries burnt, and campuses turned to rubble. Three university presidents have been killed, including renowned scientist, Professor Sufyan Tayeh, who was President of IUG and UNESCO chair for Physical and Astrophysical Sciences in Palestine. It is clear from the targeted nature of this destruction that the intention of the Israeli state is to eliminate the entire higher education sector in Gaza. The international academic community has a moral responsibility to act in the face of scholasticide and to respond to the call by Gaza academics and administrators to work alongside them in rebuilding their universities for the future of higher education in Palestine:

“We call upon our friends and colleagues around the world to resist the ongoing campaign of scholasticide in occupied Palestine, to work alongside us in rebuilding our demolished universities, and to refuse all plans seeking to bypass, erase, or weaken the integrity of our academic institutions.” ([Call by Gaza academics and administrators to the world](#), 29 May 2024).

3. Table discussions: How can King’s support universities in Gaza?

The table discussions were organised by faculty, including one cross-faculty table. Addressing the overarching question, ‘How can King’s support universities in Gaza?’ colleagues were encouraged to think boldly and creatively, acknowledging that not all ideas will bear fruit, but some will. Below are the notes from the table discussions presented thematically:

3.1 Establish direct partnerships with Palestinian universities:

- Colleagues talked about the importance of avoiding projects which may be well-meaning but risk undermining Palestinian institutions through marginalising or by-passing them. Everything we do must go through Gazan universities.
- Colleagues in the group hadn't realised that universities in Gaza were still teaching. They had just seen destruction and assumed there was nothing, so this was a really good piece of news.
- Group members were struck by how well academics in Gaza's universities are organised and affirmed the importance of a coordinated mechanism in the form of the emergency committee.
- Colleagues spoke of how they have been scrambling around trying to work out what to do and this gives us a clear direction.
- We were relieved to learn that KCL is not part of the Portland Trust initiative.
- Some of us have had experience of supporting students who are active on Palestine but are feeling stifled. It is wonderful to be able to show these students that there are ways of supporting universities in Gaza in meaningful ways and that our university is actually doing something to be proactive on this front. We couldn't think of a better impact from our work.
- It is a principle of King's global engagement activities that all partnerships should be equitable, responsive to what the partner wants and needs and co-designed with them; this is a core part of their ethics. Any scholarships should be geared towards building capacity for reconstruction. KCL has experience of funding scholarships for students in post-conflict regions which are conditional on the recipient returning back to the region and playing a role there. But the current situation in Gaza is different and we don't have experience of acting at a time of crisis.

3.2 Financial support for scholarships and fellowships in partnership with Gaza's universities:

- The importance of working in partnership with universities in Gaza on any scholarship schemes to ensure the funding goes into Gazan universities was an important insight which will help students involved in negotiations with KCL management to reframe their demands. We now have a clear steer about the angle to take.
- Our aim is to support scholarships for Gaza students and online links and exchanges without taking Gaza students out of Gaza's higher education institutions.
- A KCL-Gaza university scholarship programme would not only provide vital support to individual students, but would also contribute to supporting the institutions, and by extension the salary costs for Gaza academics as well, by transferring the funds for university fees directly through the universities.
- The sanctuary programme is not currently earmarked for Palestinian students. Could it be adapted to support students studying at a university in Gaza?
- Virtual fellowships was another model we could use – rather than taking academics out of Gaza (inadvertently consolidating the decline of Palestinian institutions), it would be based on supporting the academic to continue in their post but in partnership with KCL.
- Could KCL pilot some new models of partnership? KCL could potentially be a model for other UK universities to follow.
- Can we create a cross-university trust fund to provide scholarships for Gaza students and to pay the salaries of scholars (a student scholarship could be around £2k p.a.). This could be a federation allied to the Emergency Committee with an 'official' website.

- One of the panel speakers highlighted that for every scholarship located in the UK, we could fund 10 or more scholarships in a university in Gaza.
- We talked about the significance of not just offering scholarships, although there is £500,000 put aside for this purpose in the Sanctuary team. We moved on to consider whether this money could be redirected to universities in Gaza?
- Can we re-purpose the Sanctuary model of scholarship to support Gaza students to study in Gaza in a partnership between King's College London and one or more universities in Gaza? This could include exchanges, online mentoring, etc.
- A good precedent here is the British Council scheme. King's is already a member of this scheme (HESPAL) which supports capacity building of Palestinian universities in direct partnership with the institutions. This could be part of the mix.

3.3 International mechanism for transferring funds:

- To transfer funds to the institutions in Gaza, it would be helpful if there was an international mechanism that can facilitate this.
- Fobzu already has experience of transferring funds for scholarships in Gaza and there are other international scholarship programmes and sources of international funding for universities in Gaza that can be learnt from.

3.4 Research collaborations:

- Partnerships could include joint PhDs and joint research programmes supported by funding. Coordinated efforts to apply for funding for such initiatives e.g. from Wellcome etc. could be facilitated by the Global Engagement Team.
- Could we be more proactive about this and talk to some of these funders about setting up a sector-wide programme to fund joint UK-Gaza research projects and joint UK-Gaza PhDs focused on reconstructing Gaza?
- A colleague from a university in Gaza explained that they don't need servers. They are getting their online infrastructure from elsewhere and they don't need this from the UK. He said what they need are research partnerships and that is the best thing KCL can do.
- One area of research for the partnerships could be the rehabilitation of basic education. We need a unique model to research the impact of the war on children. How can we build a suitable education model that can deal with the trauma of the children?
- However, we should be thinking in systematic ways rather than small individual projects and seeking to build a large multi-disciplinary research partnership package consisting of several projects within that focusing on informing the reconstruction of Gaza.
- There is much potential at this time for multi-disciplinary research (especially on the impact of the genocide) – we can't do this without collaboration with Gazan universities.
- We need to better understand what a meaningful partnership would look like with a Gaza university. More information would be helpful, especially regarding how to initiate links between specific departments. Could this process be departmentally led, e.g. through twinning departments (formally or informally) to build relationships from the bottom-up?

3.5 Teaching support:

- Teaching support needs to be led by the universities in Gaza and the Emergency Committee has indicated that Arabic language is a requirement of international teaching support.
- Are there particular areas or disciplines where universities in Gaza need international teaching support? For example, we could offer short-term placements at King's for students

needing practical training in the absence of specialist infrastructure and equipment in Gaza, particularly in the ‘hard sciences’ and medical fields. This would of course need to be coordinated in direct partnership with universities in Gaza.

- Is there scope for more specialist online/virtual training programmes, including in medical fields, particularly when internet connection improves? This may involve specialist equipment available at King’s.
- We discussed how to support the online learning that has now commenced in Gaza’s university sector. One idea was to offer our modules so that students could complete a degree in their discipline by adding to the credits they are able to get already. This would be similar to the Erasmus scheme, where Palestine is already a partner country (although the UK has now left of course due to Brexit): <https://erasmusplus.org.uk/participating-countries3cea.html> We discussed how a scheme like this could be implemented, starting at department/ school level and then going up to Faculty?
- We also discussed joint degrees which could involve co-designing modules and mutual exchanges between KCL and Gaza students.

3.6 Public stance in support of rebuilding Palestinian universities:

- The Emergency Committee is calling for public pledges by UK universities that they will support the rebuilding of universities in Gaza. This has important symbolic value as it reinforces and communicates that the universities in Gaza still exist and that the international academic community will not tolerate their destruction.
- We discussed the vocal public support from KCL, as well as Universities UK and others, for funding Ukrainian students and universities, including institution-to-institution collaboration through the UUK-funded [TwinningUkraine](#) programme.

3.7 Coordination across King’s:

- We need to establish momentum in our departments and faculties to support Gaza’s universities (building momentum from the ground up). Perhaps put together a presentation/s or briefing note that can be presented at departmental meetings.
- Need to also find ways of connecting with and supporting colleagues who may be isolated in their teams/departments.
- We discussed how to get faculties to offer financial support to Gaza’s universities and it was noted that faculties don’t have their own financial independence. Perhaps we need a joint proposal across faculties that we can take to higher levels of the university.
- The importance of strategy and coordination of initiatives with universities in Gaza going beyond a sprinkling of individual scholarships.
- We discussed identifying a few key figures in each faculty as a loose working group to keep coordination and communication going.

3.8 Coordination across UK universities:

- Use social media to share key messages across universities and professional organisations.
- King’s has the potential to be a model that other UK universities can follow.

4. Next steps

The purpose of this event was to help catalyse discussions about how King’s can support universities in Gaza. Three overarching principles will guide next steps:

1. The universities in Gaza still exist and are functioning
2. We need to support the institutions for the future survival of higher education in Gaza
3. Any initiative to support higher education in Gaza must be in direct partnership with Palestinian universities in Gaza

Next steps at King's include:

- 4.1 A Zoom call will be organised with members of KCL global engagement/Dean's office and the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza.
- 4.2 Representatives from the student encampment are meeting with senior management (this was already scheduled).
- 4.3 Seek assurances from senior management that any project regarding higher education and reconstruction in Gaza will be undertaken in direct partnership with the Palestinian universities in Gaza.
- 4.4 Build on the now stated commitment of senior management to support the rebuilding of universities in Gaza, as negotiated by the student encampment, by identifying immediate and longer-term priorities and plans.
- 4.5 Make the King's commitment to rebuilding demolished universities in Gaza a public pledge that other UK universities and academic institutions can follow.
- 4.6 Take the lead on designing scholarship and fellowship programmes that enable students and academics at universities in Gaza to partner and exchange with King's while remaining within their own institutions.
- 4.7 Explore potential research collaborations at departmental and faculty levels.
- 4.8 Explore potential twinning arrangements at departmental levels (formal or informal), drawing on examples from [TwinningUkraine](#), the institution-to-institution collaboration model funded by Universities UK to support Ukrainian universities.
- 4.9 Explore the possibility of joint PhD programmes attached to wider research collaborations.
- 4.10 Engage in sector-wide coordination with UK HEIs and research funders, underlining principles of direct support to universities in Gaza.

5. Acknowledgements

In solidarity with all our academic colleagues in Palestine. We are inspired and humbled by their commitment to building and rebuilding their institutions of higher education, in the face of every attempt to suppress and destroy them, for the freedom and flourishing of future generations.

Our deepest thanks and appreciation to the Palestinian academics who spoke at this event and at the student encampment at the Strand:

- **Prof Nasreddin Elmezaini**, Former Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and former Chair of the Board of Trustees, Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine
- **Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban**, Dean of Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine and Member of the Board of Trustees, Al-Azhar University, Gaza, Palestine
- **Dr Samia Al-Botmeh**, Assistant Professor in Economics, Birzeit University, West Bank, Palestine

- **Prof Abdel Razzaq Takriti**, Associate Professor of History and Arab-American Educational Foundation Chair in Arab Studies, Rice University, US
- **Omar Shweiki**, Director, Fobzu, UK

Prof Nasreddin Elmezaini is a former Chairman of the Board of the Trustees at the Islamic University of Gaza, and the founder and Dean of the Faculty of Engineering at IUG. He has a PhD in Civil Engineering from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. Dr Elmezaini taught at An-Najah University in the West Bank and then at IUG in Gaza for 30 years between 1993 and 2023. His research interests include assessment of building damage and rehabilitation of university buildings.

Dr Ahmed Abu Shaban is the Dean of Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine at Al Azhar University in Gaza. He has a PhD in Water Resource Management and its Socioeconomic Implications in the Gaza Strip from the University of Hohenheim in Germany. He also spent two years as a visiting professor in the Department of Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin in the US. Dr Abu Shaban has contributed to national water and environmental infrastructure programs in the Gaza Strip and has extensive experience in designing intervention strategies for humanitarian relief, early recovery, and development.

Dr Samia Al-Botmeh is Assistant Professor in Economics at Birzeit University in the West Bank, and has served as the Director for the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University and the Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics. Her areas of interest include gender economics, labour economics, and the political economy of development.

Prof Abdel Razzaq Takriti is Associate Professor of History & Chair in Arab Studies at Rice University in the US. He has published extensively in the fields of modern Arab and Palestinian history and is also active in mobilising against the attacks on higher education in Palestine. He developed the criteria around the concept of scholasticide and is a co-founder of Scholars Against the War on Palestine (SAWP) and the World Academic Forum on Palestine.

Omar Shweiki is Director of Fobzu, a UK-registered charity founded in 1978, which works to support Palestinian higher education and build links between UK and Palestinian universities across the West Bank and Gaza. Fobzu is working closely with the Emergency Committee of Universities in Gaza to help facilitate and coordinate assistance to Gaza's universities from the UK.

This report was written by colleagues in the School of Education, Communication and Society.

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