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# Vocational Education Policies and Strategies as Perceived by Palestinian Academics and Technicians

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**ABSTRACT** This paper addresses the policies and strategies of the Palestinian vocational education, and indicates that there are differences within the perceptions of different internal stakeholders (50 secondary vocational education teachers, 50 academic secondary school teachers, 50 university faculty members and 50 technicians working in educational institutions). The study shows that placing vocational education within a comprehensive secondary curriculum is an appropriate strategy for Palestinian vocational education, and that basic education is an essential prerequisite for vocational education. The participants believe that private business should participate in financing vocational education but not be solely responsible for it. Furthermore, they felt that graduates of vocational schools should be permitted to have access to university education and community college programs without restrictions. Finally, there is agreement among the four participating groups in terms of their perceptions regarding the majority of vocational policies. Significant differences were observed among the perceptions of the four participating groups concerning adopting a range of possible policies. The controversial policies are related to restrictions on vocational education and forcing low achieving students to follow the vocational education track only.

## **Introduction**

Vocational education accounts for a small percentage (4%) of formal secondary education in Palestine. The number of enrolled students in the Palestinian community colleges decreased from 75% of the total post-secondary education in 1975, to 30 and 18% in 1985 and 1995, respectively. The number of Palestinian students enrolled in the universities in 1996 was five times greater than the number of students enrolled in community colleges. Official vocational education in Palestine is distributed amongst 15 secondary schools and a small number of community colleges (PHEC, 1995; PME, 1995).

Following the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1993, there has been a serious discussion in the ministries of Education, Labor and Higher Education regarding the ways and means of enhancing the present vocational education programmes. In order to meet the expected needs for skills and job opportunities, a number of questions arise regarding the most relevant alternatives, strategies and policies of the future of the Palestinian vocational system. This paper can be considered a part of this debate.

Studies which have evaluated Palestinian vocational education have pointed out that this educational sector faces a number of problems, including serious shortages in facilities, unclear philosophy, and supervision being spread between many governmental and non-governmental bodies (Musswady & Al-Qeeq, 1990). Vocational teachers lack experience and skills and vocational programmes concentrate on professional services and do not include professional productions (Mi'ari, 1991). In terms of student numbers, vocational education has a very limited role in the Palestine educational system and there is a need to re-examine the general objectives of this sector (Sabri, 1995). Students tend to choose vocational education for economic, social or academic reasons as a last resort. Vocational education is still seen as catering for low achieving students (Khalaf, 1977). Additionally, vocational trainees do not receive guidance or counselling before or after joining training programmes (Hashweh et al, 1996).

In addition to the unique problems facing Palestinian vocational education programmes, there are other problems and issues which are characteristic of vocational programmes in both developed and developing countries. The most important issue is related to funding. The cost of vocational education generally is considered to be much higher than academic education. Costs increase with innovations in technology, which necessitate continuous expensive modifications and the updating of training programmes and equipment. Accordingly, financing vocational education needs the cooperation of the government, training institutions and private firms. As a result, some countries use allowances for unemployment to support vocational education (OECD, 1983).

The second general issue is related to the selection of the relevant curriculum and the proper place within it for vocational education. Some researchers believe that academic secondary education should include a vocational element in order to maintain a balance between general and vocational curricula (Pascharopoulos, 1988). In addition, Rist & Schneider (1979) discuss the difficult experiences of a special school which integrated vocational and academic education, where the graduates may enter a profession or pursue higher education. Other researchers argue that introducing vocational education at the secondary school level may reduce the problem of unemployment among educated individuals in Third World countries (Abrokwa, 1995). Sharp (1996) reports that new vocational educational curricula demand new professionalism and new preparation of vocational teachers. Other general issues pertain to discussing the quality of vocational education programme and their relationship with the real work (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 1995; Hudson, 1996).

### **Vocational Education in Palestine**

The educational system in Palestine, as presented in Table I, includes 12 grades. Grades 1 – 10 are compulsory and are referred to as the 'basic cycle' and cater for 88% of the student population. While academic and vocational secondary schools (grades 11 – 12) cater for 8% and for 4% of the student population, respectively. School enrolment statistics for the West Bank in 1995 show that the total population of students was 404,776 students distributed amongst 1390

schools and 10,302 classrooms. Approximately, 79% of the Palestinian students are enrolled in public (Government) schools. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools for Palestinian refugees cover a further 12%, whilst the private sector caters for 9% of the student population respectively at the compulsory basic cycle stage. Females constitute approximately 49% of the student population of compulsory basic cycle stage, 46% of the academic secondary stage and 17% of the vocational secondary stage (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 1996).

The education system				
School stage	Compulsory 1–10 grades Number of students and %	Academic secondary 11–12 grades Number of students and %	Vocational Secondary 10–12 grade Number of students and %	Community colleges 13–14 grade Number of students and %
School system				
Government schools	295,365 (79%)	26,247 (85.6%)		
UNRWA schools	44,672 (12%)	–		
Private schools	32,489 (9%)	4,400 (14.4%)		
Total	372,526 (100%)	30,647 (100%)	1,603	8,000
Female %	49%	46%	17%	50%

Table I. Number and percentage of academic and vocational students according to the education system in the West Bank as in 1995.

Vocational education in Palestine is practised in a small number of separate vocational secondary schools and community colleges which account for only 5% of the total secondary school population. The curriculum of the vocational schools includes four majors: industrial, agricultural, commercial and nursing, linked with vocational and general educational courses such as languages, mathematics, general sciences, and social sciences. Successful secondary school vocational students earn a vocational secondary diploma, though this does not provide eligibility for enrolment in Palestinian universities (Sabri, 1995).

There are 21 community colleges, which offer both academic and vocational education. These colleges have 8000 students, half of whom are females (PHEC, 1995). Graduates of academic and vocational secondary school could enrol in any of the 40 vocational programmes. There is a plan, however, to separate vocational education from academic education in the community colleges in order to extend the academic programmes to 4 years, while maintaining the 2-year community colleges for vocational education. The vocational school graduates and the community college graduates may find it very difficult to continue their education in the Palestinian universities.

In addition, there are unofficial vocational programmes available, such as the centres operated by the Ministry of Labor. Other private centres offer, on an

irregular basis, basic training programmes, such as secretarial and bookkeeping, without skills.

### **Purpose of this Research Study**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the policies and strategies of Palestinian vocational education. The findings are based on the perceptions of Palestinian participants. Specifically, the study set out to accomplish the following stated objectives education based on the participants' perceptions:

1. To explore the present situation of Palestinian vocational education and to identify the major limitations of the present situation.
2. To indicate what are the alternatives and best strategies for vocational education, to determine the proper place (basic, secondary or post-secondary cycle) for vocational education that will fulfill the needs of the emerging state of Palestine.
3. To establish and evaluate the general policies and practices concerning the general issues of vocational education in Palestine identified above.
4. To identify differences of view amongst the participants regarding major vocational issues and policies.

### **Hypothesis**

To meet the purpose of the study, the following null hypothesis was stated: there are no significant differences between the perceptions of the four groups of participants (50 secondary vocational education teachers, 50 academic secondary school teachers, 50 university faculty members and 50 technicians working in educational institutions) in the study concerning adopting each of the listed vocational policies.

### **Methodology**

#### *Population and Sample*

There were four group of participants who were identified as some of the key stakeholder groups in vocational education in this study. These groups are:

- x The teachers of the present governmental and private vocational secondary schools.
- x The teachers of academic secondary schools.
- x The faculty members of the Palestinian universities and community colleges.
- x The technicians who are working in educational institutions.

The total Palestinian population of the secondary vocational teachers numbers 300, university faculty members numbered 900, academic secondary teachers numbered 1600, whilst the total number of technicians working in educational institutions was 150 according to 1995 statistics. The sample of the study consisted of a total of 200 participants selected randomly, 50 participants from each group of the above four groups, using the official lists of faculty members,

teachers and technicians. It was decided for cost purposes to maintain an equal number of participants in each group, though it is recognised that a stratified sample might have been more useful ultimately.

### *The Instrument*

In order to measure participant perceptions of vocational education, an instrument was developed and applied by the researcher to the sample. The instrument included a list of strategies and policies of vocational issues to be found in Palestinian vocational practices and the literature upon which the participants were asked to comment. The instrument was piloted upon ten academics. Based on their comments (which were minor), the final instrument was formulated. The instrument was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of a list of five strategies for the development of Palestinian vocational education, whilst the second part consisted of a list of 12 more specific policy options.

### *The Procedure*

The participants were asked to rank the list of “strategic statements of vocational education” included in the first part of the instrument according to their experience and perceptions. The most acceptable strategies for the Palestinian vocational education were required to be ranked Number 1 going down to the least accepted strategy that was to be ranked as Number 5. The second part of the study (policies of vocational education) was presented in the form of statements against which the respondents were to score, using five categories of a Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree (5 points) to strongly disagree (1 point), according to the list of mentioned policies of vocational education.

### *Statistical Analysis*

Responses were calculated and tabulated according to rank and percentage of the total number of participants. Thirty-two questionnaires were invalidated because of errors or omissions, which left 168 valid responses. Responses to the items in section two were tabulated according to percentages of the total and for each group of participants. Chi-squares analyses were conducted on the contingency tables to determine their significance level.

### *Results*

Based on the perceptions of the groups participants concerning Palestinian vocational strategies and policies, the findings of the study are presented in two sections: vocational programme strategies, and vocational educational policies.

*Vocational Programme Strategies*

The findings, as presented in Table II, indicate that the highest supported strategy was the location of vocational education within comprehensive secondary schools which offer academic and vocational curricula. The second most highly supported strategy was the placement of vocational education in secondary vocational schools. The majority of the participants thus believe that the secondary stage is the most relevant place for vocational education, though they were divided as preferred location, The least acceptable strategy (rank Number 5) was the placement of vocational education in the primary stage of education. This response, allied to the responses given as numbers one and two, implies that the majority of participants believe that basic education should be a prerequisite for vocational education.

Vocational strategies	University professors	Vocational teachers	Academic teachers	Technicians	All participants
Vocational education should be in primary vocational school	5	5	4	5	5
Vocational education should be in primary academic school	3	4	2	1	3
Vocational education should be in secondary vocational school	1	2	3	2	2
Vocational education should be in comprehensive secondary school	2	1	1	3	1
Vocational education should be in community colleges	4	3	5	4	4

Note: number one stated as the highest strategy; number five stated as the lowest strategy.

Table II. Priorities of vocational education strategies ranked according to group.

Separating out the responses of the different groups, the technicians believe that vocational education should begin during the basic cycle education, whilst the university professors prefer separate secondary schools as the most acceptable place for vocational education. Vocational and academic teachers selected the comprehensive secondary school as the best place for vocational education. Table II presents these priorities of the listed vocational education strategies as ranked by group.

### **Vocational Educational Policies**

As indicated in Table III, the study reveals that the majority of the participants concurred on the following four vocational policies as the most acceptable:

- x Vocational education should include academic education at all stages of education.
- x Private business should be involved in financing vocational education.
- x Internship (training in the workplace) should be a core course in secondary vocational schools.
- x Internship (training in the workplace) should be an essential part of the community college curriculum.

100mm

Table III. Average mean in favour of adopting vocational education policies according to group.

Each of the above four policies received an average mean above 4.0 on the Likert scales (agree or strongly agree), indicating the support of the participants for integrating the four policies more fully into Palestinian vocational education. On the other hand, three policy statements received an average mean of 2.2 or less (strongly disagree or disagree). The following policies thus were not seen as acceptable:



- x Vocational students should pass the general secondary academic examination when they wish to apply for admission to a university.
- x Low achieving students should be placed in a vocational track.
- x Private business should be the sole responsible for financing vocational education.

The perceptions of vocational policies by the different groups indicated in Table III, show that the funding of vocational education by private business alone was most unacceptable to the university professors. The other three groups considered that the requirement for an academic general examination of vocational students enrolling at a university was the most unacceptable policy. The right of vocational students and community college graduates to enroll at university in order to continue their studies was accepted by technicians and vocational education teachers more than university professors. School teachers accepted the policy of giving low achieving students choices other than the vocational track.

Finally, Table IV shows whether there are significant differences and a comparison among the participants groups perceptions, towards adopting each of the listed vocational education policies by using the Chi-square test. They show that there is agreement among the four participated groups regarding eight of the listed vocational policies:

- x Community colleges should admit only vocational school graduates.
- x General vocational students should be required to pass the general secondary academic examination.
- x Vocational education provision should include academic disciplines in all stages of education.
- x There should be a ceiling achievement level for university admission. Students below the ceiling grade should be enrolled in vocational community colleges.
- x Private business should share in financing vocational education.
- x Private business should not be the sole responsible for financing vocational education.
- x Internship should be a core course in the secondary vocational school curriculum.
- x Internship in the workplace should be an essential part of the community college curriculum.

Accordingly, the null hypothesis (there are no significant differences between the perceptions of the four groups participants concerning adopting each of the above eight vocational policies) has been upheld. On the other hand, the null-hypothesis concerning the other four policies has been rejected, indicating that there are significant differences between the perceptions of the four groups participants concerning the four vocational strategies of the Palestinian vocational education.

Overall, the various groups of participants broadly agreed on the general strategies and policies of the Palestinian vocational education. There was still disagreement, however, on some specific policies within the participated groups. It can be suggested that these different results reflect the backgrounds and the experience of the various groups of the participants. There are contradictory perceptions, for example, between university faculty members and technicians

towards the right of vocational secondary and community colleges graduates to enroll in universities for further academic education. In addition, there are contradictory perceptions between vocational school teachers and the academic school teachers towards the policy of giving low achievement students other choices of education.

110mm

Table IV. Test of significant difference between the four group perceptions towards adopting vocational policies.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This study sought to identify and explore the strategies and policies of vocational education in the emerging state of Palestine perceived as most relevant by four categories of stakeholder. At the moment, vocational education in Palestine is limited to 4% of the total official education, and it is the last resort for students in the secondary or post-secondary education. Unofficial vocational education conducted by the Ministry of Labor and private centres not only do not have a common curriculum, but also do not follow calendars. Vocational education in community colleges is decreasing in numbers.

This study has sought to use the perceptions of the identified sample groups (university faculty members, the academic teachers, the vocational school teacher, and the technicians) to identify the strategies and policies most likely to enhance the vocational educational sector which is an important need for the emerging state of Palestine. The study reveals that comprehensive secondary schooling is the first choice for the location of formal vocational education programmes. The idea of having vocational education within the basic cycle was not accepted by the majority of the participants. Rather, the basic cycle should concentrate on general academic education.

The results also suggest that the vocational curriculum should include a substantial portion of general education within it. Internship in the real workplace should be part of the vocational education in all stages, whilst private business should be encouraged to share in financing vocational education. Vocational students, moreover, should not be required to pass the general academic examination when enrolling at the university.

There was disagreement among the participating groups towards policies that impose restrictions upon vocational education students. Different groups were for and against:

1. The right of vocational students to enroll in all university disciplines.
2. The requirement that students with low achievement should be enrolled in a vocational school track only or to have other choices.
3. Community college graduates having the right to pursue their studies in the university without undue restrictions.

Finally, in order to enhance the vocational education in Palestine, the following recommendations are made:

1. In all vocational programmes, a substantial part of the curricula should be available for academic-type education.
2. Vocational programmes should include training and internships in actual work situations representative of the Palestinian Arab business environment.
3. The vocational education should be a major part of the comprehensive secondary schools.
4. Vocational education should be started only after the compulsory stage in the Palestinian educational system (i.e. after grade 10).
5. Vocational education graduates should be allowed access to university education, as well as the community colleges programmes without limitations or restrictions.

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