



# Keeping

## Palestine's education hopes alive

“ Especially in Palestine, it is easy to lose your material possessions. Education is the only thing you can keep. ”

Muna Aghawani, graduate of Birzeit University, Palestine

This poignant comment sums up why students in Palestine keep on attending schools, colleges and universities under conditions that most people would regard as unendurable. The Palestinians have always placed a high value on education, and for many students, giving up on their studies would be like relinquishing hope in the future. But for a huge percentage of them, learning the lessons is the easy part. Since the outbreak of the present Intifada in 2000, the situation has been steadily worsening for Palestinians, with almost 4,000 killed and over 29,000 injured in sporadic violence in the West Bank and Gaza. With

houses, schools, clinics and roads all affected by the indiscriminate destruction, infrastructure in general is in tatters. However, the education sector has been particularly badly affected.

The buildings of the Palestinian Authority Ministries in Ramallah, including the premises of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, have been destroyed, along with office equipment, computers and data storage facilities. Consequently, the whole Palestinian education system has effectively been thrown into disorder. The educational sector's central disarray, however, is probably exceeded by the problems of its pupils and

◀ Al Quds University, the only Arab university in Jerusalem.

▶ Using the university library.

▼ Graduation day. Education is highly prized among Palestinians.

students. The Intifada has left many people unemployed, forcing entire families into poverty. Indeed, more than 75 percent of Palestinians are now officially classified as poor. Besides this, most areas are subject to stringent curfew and movement restrictions that disrupt economic activity and prevent access to social services, schools and universities. Physically unable to reach their places of tuition, more than half of all students in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have had their studies interrupted, and the financial hardship has left many without the means of paying their fees.

So pressing is the crisis in Palestinian higher education that the first grant to be drawn from OFID's Special Account for Palestine (see box), was a sum of \$2 million to provide financial support to Palestinian universities and students. Announced in December 2002, the grant represented OFID's contribution to a joint emergency program initiated by a group of Arab aid agencies to coordinate and increase assistance to Palestine. Other institutions involved include the Arab



Photo Credit: Al-Najah University



Photo Credit: Al-Najah University

Monetary Fund, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, and the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development.

The money was used to provide grants to nine non-governmental, non-profit universities to cover the tuition fees of over 85,000 needy students during the 2002-2004 academic years. The scheme helped universities to continue providing educational services, while at the same time ensuring regular class attendance.

Universities also received an allocation to help set up a revolving credit fund to help poor students defray their living expenses. The credit is paid back in small monthly installments once the beneficiaries graduate and start their careers. This helped over 12,000 students meet their living expenses.

Building on the early achievements of this project, OFID in September 2004 contributed a further \$2 million for a second phase, to run over the 2004 to 2006 academic years.



Photo Credit: Al-Najah University

▲ This relaxed campus scene belies the fact that Palestinian students face an uphill struggle attending universities.

OFID has been assisting Palestine since 1979, but after the second Intifada began in 2000 the situation in the area deteriorated so fast that humanitarian and development assistance was required on a much larger scale. In November 2002 therefore OFID started its 'Special Grant Account to Address the Needs of Palestine.' Endowed initially with \$10 million, the special account has accelerated social and economic assistance to the beleaguered inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza.

The initial resources were replenished with \$15 million in 2004, and by another endowment of \$15 million in June 2005. Since its inception the account has extended grants for 44 projects ranging from the rebuilding of damaged homes and the purchase of equipment for the overstretched and under-funded local hospitals, to a micro-credit scheme and a number of social and capacity-building projects.

The Special Grant Account for Palestine remains an important OFID aid channel that provides relief from destitution and poverty and encourages sustainable social and economic growth in the region. New projects are currently in the pipeline to boost the Palestinian people's chances of a more protected future, economically and socially.

In addition to operations financed from the Special Account, OFID had previously extended more than \$18.1 million in grants to Palestine for a number of emergency assistance schemes and a wide range of development projects that supported, among others, hospitals, and maternity and pediatric clinics, together with rehabilitation and vocational training centers and universities.