

# Meeting the Requirements of the Modern Times through Development of Interdisciplinary Programs in Social Science: the Experience of the Masters Program in Democracy and Human Rights at Birzeit University\*

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## Abstract

*The paper is an attempt to answer the following question: to what extent can interdisciplinary programs enable higher education to achieve a qualitative leap, and accordingly, what are the necessary conditions for such a leap? The paper is guided by the experience of the MA Program in Democracy and Human Rights, which was founded as an interdisciplinary program at Birzeit University in 2000. Specifically, the paper examines an empirical case study of graduates of the program conducted in 2007, which carried out an assessment of the impact of the program on the behavior of the graduates and the social, political, and cultural attitudes embodied in their world-views and ways of life, through examining the changes in their respective realities and status in the Palestinian society.*

*The study under review is premised on the assumption that the capacity of an educational program to influence its students constitutes the criterion of its success. Believing in the urgent need for social change and modernization, we consider the examination of the motivation for such change among graduates as the means for answering the initial question regarding the necessary qualitative leap and its prerequisite conditions. In other words, in conceptualizing this qualitative leap, there needs to be a review of the contribution of a program to the “development of rebels who are able to take a stance critical of society and to work for change” (Hashweh, 2004, 16) and who have a “sense of responsibility towards public issues” (Baber 1988, 174). Accordingly, this paper seeks to show that an interdisciplinary approach to university education is more effective in achieving the goal of social change.*

*In addition to this study, and in order to demonstrate the proposed hypothesis, this paper will use an analysis of social needs and how to meet them. Social change is linked to a vision of society and the role of the individual therein. Hence, it is not possible to support students in building a holistic vision of the world through programs that limit analysis and vision to a specific field of knowledge. Moreover, there is an urgent need to find ways of linking educational programs to daily experience, outside the scope of acquiring employment skills.*

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## I. Introduction

This research paper is an attempt to answer the following questions: To what extent can interdisciplinary programs<sup>2</sup> allow higher education to realize a qualitative leap? What are the necessary conditions to achieve that leap? Knowing that the capacity of study programs to influence learners into following the planned direction constitutes a benchmark of success for these programs, is there agreement with those who believe that a process of societal change and modernization is more than necessary? In addition, if intellectuals should play a central role in this process, then examining the drive for change among graduates of the academic programs in social science offers an answer to the problematic areas discussed in this research paper. This is because the extent of measuring the performance of academic programs goes beyond the university and engulfs graduates' performances, positions and practices. Moreover, by examining how far the program contributes in «educating rebellious individuals, capable of having a critical eye looking at their society and acting for change» (Hashweh, 2004, p. 16), as well as in «raising their sense of responsibility towards public issues» (Baber, 1988, p. 174), are the central elements in this answer.

Our first hypothesis is that any possible examination of academic program outputs aimed at triggering a societal change is mostly limited to developing a conviction that playing an active role in society is a necessity, and to empowering the graduates to use their skills of criticism and analysis in order to rationally determine their [change-related] objectives. Having the conviction to make change come true, necessitates a critical perception (a must for any intellectual), which requires a capacity for abstraction. The prevailing trends (which are targeted by change advocates), be it a scientific trend or a political regime, constitutes a system often based on expressions and conceptions that guarantee its reproduction, with limited changes which are at best an enhancement of conditions serving those concerned with its survival.

«One task of the intellectual is the effort to break down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication» (Said, 1996-b, p. 12 -13). In order to break this vicious cycle, that is the reproduction of the prevailing trend, there is a need for projects that nurture critical thinking, according to Edward Said. These are projects that are characterized by a reciprocal mediated nature, which means that they position themselves, with intent, at cross points that are open to criticism in the continuous systematic discourses. However, each program proposes new knowledge themes as a minimum (Said, 1996-A, p. 54). Said noted that this task requires «organic intellectuals» (according to the concept of Gramsci in his «Prison Notebooks»). They are distinguished as being «actively involved in society, meaning they constantly struggle to change minds and expand «markets» unlike «traditional intellectuals»

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<sup>2</sup> These are programs that intend to integrate several knowledge disciplines into a new discipline on the contrary of multidisciplinary programs that combine several knowledge disciplines with teaching by respecting their independence at the level of the curriculum and the boundaries. The interdisciplinary programs try to respond to the relatively new scientific, professional and social needs left aside in the classical knowledge disciplines. They are also considered as a means to go beyond the problematic of having different knowledge and practical domains tackled in different disciplines. For instance, teaching human rights is considered an example of a knowledge domain having introductions in many disciplines including, Law, Philosophy, Political Science and Education. Moreover, delving into this domain necessitates a level of knowledge in issues pertaining to other disciplines such as, Economics, International Relations, Environmental Science and other. Multidisciplinary programs can often rely on professionals (other than academics) in teaching, research and program conception. These programs also tend towards a larger interaction with the society than programs conceived around a single knowledge field.



(such as teachers, priests and civil servants) who seem to be «doing the same kind of work year in year out» (Said, 1996-B, p. 22).

Our second hypothesis is that it is the multidisciplinary approach to higher education which is more effective in achieving the targeted change in society. This hypothesis emanates from the fact that societal actors, capable of making the change come true, can assume this role because they can break the cycle of stereotyping and prejudices that, as Said explains, imposed by short-sighted patriarchal hegemony (Said, 1996-A, p. 58). This is easily achievable through multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches, where it is possible to create (or innovate) new curricula to study and analyze different phenomena, related to the researchers' goals and not their position (often determined by the field to which they belong). In addition, this hypothesis is based on the conviction that the necessary vision for believing in change can only be reached in the context of the social actors' vision of their position in the world according to a certain world view of their own. The latter enables them to conceptualize the starting point from which they will set off for change, and determine its goal. Said says that there's a need for crossing more frontiers and for inching towards more intervention in the systemic intersected activities (Said, 1996-A, p. 58).

As for the third hypothesis, it stipulates that the student-instructor partnership in defining the educational program is a precondition for societal change emanating from the program. This hypothesis does not eliminate the leading role of instructors and doesn't mean, in any case, to run after market requirements (the labor market or the latest trends). Instead it means to guide students in their research towards their true practical and individual interests in order to be able to use the academic space to mold their critical and creative side in their daily situations.

The colonial condition has led to a distortion of the will of the Palestinians who are forced to put the issue of national liberation on the top of their priorities regardless of their backgrounds and interests. This situation has created an imbalance between the different aspects related to the democratic structure and thus, to the procedural aspects of democracy, which are directly related to sovereignty and to the shape of the state. Therefore, national liberation became for many Palestinians a fundamental demand which comes before dealing with inequality and social injustice, and is thus one of the intended results of building a democratic regime. Therefore, we will try in this paper to examine the attention given, by graduates, to the socio-economic aspects of democratic life. This is because in our view, this attention reflects a change compared to prevailing patterns, and is far more complex and abstract in the current Palestinian context. On one hand, paying attention to the different aspects of social justice means abandoning the psychology of being victimized and in despair, which has been nurtured by the colonial condition over the decades. This attention also reflects the ability of the program's graduates to conceptualize the next step after the liberation process on the national agenda imposed by the colonial condition. While the balance between «the chaos of struggle» and «the order of the state» is still inching towards the first, the ability to reflect on the «order of the state» requires a vision capable of extracting one's self from the current reality of the battlefield in order to be able to imagine the construction process amidst the operations of destruction.

## II. Methodology

### 1. The case studied in this paper

In order to examine the motivation and the ability to contribute to change in line with the hypotheses listed above, it is possible to use indicators related to the desire of change, to the

conviction that change is necessary, and to acting for change. It is also possible to use indicators related to critical thinking, the ability of abstraction, and the possession of analytical skills.

This paper examines this issue based on a specific case study, the experience of a Masters program in Democracy and Human Rights (the program), which was founded as an interdisciplinary program at Birzeit University. Specifically, this paper is based on an empirical study conducted in 2007 covering the graduates of the program. It sought to establish an impact assessment of the learning process on the graduates in terms of their behavior and their social, political and cultural positions, as well as how the learning process is ingrained in their world view and lifestyle<sup>3</sup>.

The Masters program in democracy and human rights was established in 1999 to fill the need for responsible national academics in the public sphere, and specifically in education, civil society, and law enforcement agencies. This was at a time when the Palestinian society was hoping to successfully build national Palestinian institutions in preparation for statehood.

The program was designed to combine democracy and human rights in a single interdisciplinary program and to be a mediator between the research-based Masters (aimed primarily at training research academics), and an «executive» Masters program (aimed at supplying institutions with qualified and active cadres). Moreover, in order to combine the two parts of the program (democracy and human rights), and its orientation (research and practical), the program was designed to address the main concerns topping the agenda of those interested in the issues of democracy and human rights in the contemporary world, as well as to focus on aspects of particular importance in Palestine in those days. Hence, the curriculum focuses on the issues of freedom in their various aspects and manifestations as well as elections, transitions, political culture, education, citizenship, social justice, international human rights law, international humanitarian law, criticisms of democracy and criticism of the new colonial political (ab)uses of human rights.

In the curriculum, the Arab dimension seems obvious through the existence of special courses. These deal with the reality of democracy and human rights in the Arab world, the study of the Arab constitutional systems in the context of their protection of human rights principles and the nature of political regimes emanating from these constitutions, and so on.

In order to activate the research branch, the program was designed to encourage students to do research and engage in cooperative programs with other universities. As for activating the practical branch, in addition to the program, an outreach unit was designed to connect with the community. Its main goal is to interact with institutions and key individuals in the process of building a political system and defending and preserving human rights, so that students could get familiar with the practical aspects and daily practices related to the issues which they are exposed to during the learning process. The outreach unit had an overloaded agenda and ambitious objectives. In addition to keeping students in touch with everyday life, it was expected that students' contact with the institutions of civil society would improve their chances of getting jobs upon graduation and that being in contact with political figures would mold their skills, so as to form groups of pressure, change or networking, etc. These elements lead to promoting discussion in classrooms, linking theory to practice, and paying attention to daily issues. In addition, the issues are dealt with through theory and analysis, and ultimately, used as topics for research papers presented by students as part of the requirements. Furthermore, these topics, after passing the test of real debate, can become an important part of the mechanisms used

<sup>3</sup> The author already presented the results of this empirical study from another point of view in his paper entitled «The impact of teaching democracy and human rights on the nature of integration in the political life» in: Al-Sayyed M. (ed.). 2009. P.p. 209 - 298. (Arabic).

to determine research projects that must be dealt with in the program. This is as a mechanism involving teachers and students in research work to promote the research part of the program. One of the motivations behind this ambitious design of the program was recognizing the need for faculty development based on the features of the program, i.e. creating a group of professors who will be able to meet the requirements of an interdisciplinary program rather than a multidisciplinary one. The vision was to develop a new research field at the university, rather than follow the curriculum which is «a set of isolated isles» taught by professors from those disciplines that intersect in this program: philosophy, law, political science, education, sociology, and economics.

## 2. Indicators

The research focused on two main topics: first, the world view<sup>4</sup> in the broader sense; second, political involvement which is considered as all activities destined to contribute to a change of a political nature. Amongst these activities, we mention participating in demonstrations, being interested in circulars and newspapers, following political events, and voting in general elections (Katz, et al. p. 2001, 412). In addition to these two topics, other criteria were taken into account such as to have a critical view and a sense of responsibility towards society and the public sphere. It was because of the nature of the case study, and the restrictions imposed by the data used, that the issue of democracy, and the tendency towards it (the quest for democratization) was adopted as an example of desired change. In this context, the involvement of graduates in political life and in civil activities, their interest in societal activities and the public sphere, and any other factor that would enable them to contribute to a change incarnating the principles of democracy, will be seen as an indicator of the program's success in contributing to the education of «intellectuals».

## 3. The Respondents

During the field research, the number of graduates in the program in February 2007 amounted to 77 female and male graduates, who enrolled in the program between 2000 and 2004, and graduated between 2002 and 2007. Among them, males accounted for 58%, keeping in mind that the research assistant and the field researcher were able to interview 49 of the 77 graduates. The respondents' ages ranged from 24 to 52, with an average of 34 and males accounted for 54% of them. They enrolled in the program between 2000 and 2004, and completed graduation requirements between 2002 and 2007. They also spent an average of 3 years to conclude the program. There were 69% of the respondents who lived in cities, 27% in villages, and 4% in refugee camps. The income of 76% of them ranged between \$500 and \$1400, while 4% of them had an income lower than \$500, and 20% of them gained more than \$1400. These students had obtained a bachelor's degree (BA) in different disciplines according to the following distribution: Social Sciences (Political Science, History, Economics, Geography, Sociology, and Journalism) 41%; Psychology, Education and Social Service 18%; Languages 20%; Sharia and Islamic Studies 4%; Business Administration 2%; Law 10%; and Science 4%.

<sup>4</sup> Since the term is uncommon in Arabic discourse, it was defined in this paper's questionnaire as: a concept reflecting how an individual perceives the existence and all surrounding elements, close or far, as well as how he/she views the present and the future. This perception is often expressed through: ideology, faith, religious belief (or disbelief), optimism, pessimism, an absolute conviction in freedoms and a system of values (the vision of morals, law, customs and traditions) as well as a scientific vision based on causal relations.

The respondents are active in the three sectors: the public sector at 33%; civil society at 36%; and the private sector at 31%.

The characteristics of those enrolled in the program, in terms of age, social status, ability to compete, and willingness to take initiatives, which is evident since they joined this program, are all positive assets. In fact, these characteristics indicate that they are capable to contribute in bringing about societal change, or at least in playing an active role in the development of the socio-political life. The top factor that reinforces these assets is that the respondents have a clear orientation which expresses their desire for change. In fact, 67% of them said that they share a genuine interest in the issues of democracy and human rights, which was their first motive when they joined the program.

It is also noteworthy that the specificity of respondents, by being under occupation, but at the same time also active participants in a political system «in the making», imposes on the results of the research additional determinants. The latter constitute, in addition to a tendency towards democracy, a tendency towards freedom, which is just as important and indicative. However, it is necessary to recall here that in the context of the general atmosphere in Palestine (the resistance) that the tendency towards liberalization becomes the product of the extremely limited educational process. Moreover, an altered perception of resistance with its methods and concrete objective and an awareness of the restrictions imposed by the colonial condition, are the best indication of the impact of the education process on learners. For this reason, analyzing how graduates perceive the colonial condition and its end will be one major focus of this paper in addition to the two above-mentioned axes.

#### 4. Field Research

A research questionnaire was designed to conduct 45-minute interviews (on average) over the phone, with the program's graduates. The questionnaire was divided into several sections and tackled the private sphere (with its related personal, family and direct social environment components), the public sphere (political life and civil work), and the professional sphere.

In addition to basic data about the respondents, the questionnaire tackled the issues of their knowledge, skills, values and practices and tried to explore their priorities through questions about the importance of democracy and human rights principles and political development issues. This was done primarily using a scale of four degrees (very important, important, insignificant, and not important at all).

The methodology adopted in the questionnaire resided primarily in comparing the graduates' situation and perceptions before and after entering the program, so as to avoid the methodological difficulties which would have resulted from the need for control groups if the research was to take a different turn.

Among the factors that are usually taken into account in similar studies, we mention the economic situation of the respondent's family, his marital status, environment, social background and class. For these factors are strongly linked to the interest in political issues and engagement. In addition, it is well known that all forms of education foster political engagement. Thus, it is common to include in such studies a group of other programs to validate the impact of the studied program. However, the mentioned questionnaire was not large enough to examine all these aspects, and the size of the studied group did not allow the statistical analysis of such data. Moreover, political involvement has a key specificity in Palestine. This is expressed in contradictory ways, of which the growing general political apathy in society is not the least important.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we decided to take into account all of the variables and to focus

on two factors to discover the features of this program. The first consists in analyzing the change occurring among the same individuals in order to neutralize factors related to the environment and background, and then asking respondents about their appreciation of the program's role in bringing about change (if ever that happened). The second factor was to examine the issue of critical thinking. This is an issue which was clearly noted through interviews with students enrolled in the program (did not yet graduate) along with students in other programs who have studied courses in this program, and among a concentrated group of respondents. Hence, it was clear that what distinguishes this program, from the students' viewpoint, is its strong critical thinking compound. Since critical thinking is largely indicative of the desire for change, we accepted the assumption that examining the program's impact on students reasonably reflects, from this perspective, the impact illustrated through the questionnaire.

In addition to the research questionnaire, a number of undergraduate students enrolled in the program attended various meetings in order to identify their motives for entering the program and to examine some of the results of the field research conducted on graduates, so as to get a comparison. In addition, students from other programs who studied courses in this program were also interviewed for comparison purposes as well.

A section of the questionnaire was reserved to allow respondents, by answering the open-ended questions, to evaluate the program and make observations about it.

In the context of the research methodology, it is important to note that the author of the program could be biased, for he is one of the founders of the program, and a member of the Program Council since its inception. Although I am personally convinced of being impartial in my research, I, nonetheless, believe that the reader should take the author's impartiality into account.

### III. Field research data

Initially, before delving into the details of the search results, it would be appropriate to examine some of the data contained in the answers to the questionnaire, which can shed some light on the hypotheses of this paper and some of the constraints that were discussed above. The answers included a repetition of some observations, among which, an expression of imbalance between the theoretical and practical (applied) aspects of the program and the lack of linkage between the two sides. This observation has been accompanied by similar observations such as the lack of practical elements in the program (practicum), or the need to organize the involvement of students in practical training (i.e. internships) focused on gaining and molding practical skills as well as the lack of field visits.

I believe that these observations point to three issues related to our topic. First and foremost, the desire to act (activity) and a sense of insufficient non-applied knowledge (change). Second, a handicap in the program structure which should be rectified (this goes beyond the scope of this paper). Third, graduates are not convinced of the importance of impartiality (which will be referred to again as we shall see).

According to some answers to other questions, the need for practical skills has been emphasized. In fact, graduates indicated that the program left a great impact on them in the field of research skills (received a grade of 78)<sup>5</sup>, then theoretical understanding (74), followed by political analysis

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<sup>5</sup> The analysis adopts a score for each index according to the following equation: the grade = (the percentage of those who consider the topic of question to be very important\* 100) + (the percentage of those who consider the topic to be important\* 67) + (the percentage of those who consider the topic to be of little importance\* 33).

(68), and finally practical skills (50). It is also noteworthy that research skills are in fact practical skills for those who intend to work in the academic sphere. As for the others, who intend to work outside the academic institution, they felt the need for a practical background.

It should be noted that the respondents were aware of the most important targeted outputs of the interdisciplinary Program. Specifically, 63% of the respondents indicated that they would rejoin the program if their aim was to promote their critical thinking. They also expressed that the most important aspects in promoting this is the quality and content of courses (received a grade of 94), then free discussion and debate in the classroom (93), followed by the efficiency of the faculty (90), then the personality of the course's instructor (85), teaching method (83), program management (80), and eventually grades (56).

### **1. Limited theorizing ability**

While the first two factors (relating to the desire to act, and the willingness to make changes to the structure of the program) seem obvious, the third factor (related to abstraction and theorizing) indicates that, in conjunction with other discussions with the respondents, trust in «theorizing» is limited. Thus, we find that the motives for change are available, just as the desire, but the vision remains unclear. Although the respondents believed (having followed the program) that they now master their research skills more than other skills, they did not strongly feel that research work could constitute a practice in itself. This is the case even though a significant number of them work in the area of research in one way or another. Moreover, the proportion of active workers among the respondents was 98% (and the other 2% chose to remain inactive). Those working can be classified in the following professions: Educators, 17%; workers in educational administration, 10%; Administrators, 15%; Information and Public Relations, 17%; researchers and information analysts, 10%; fieldworkers, researchers, and practitioners in social service, 8%; political assistants (assistant to a political figure), 8%; agents in the security services, 6%; lawyers, 4%; liberal professions, 4%; and other (including members of the Palestinian Legislative Council), 4%.

I think that the lack of a clear vision creates the feeling of futility, although there are ways for action and the issue of vision is reflected again in the observations made by the respondents. This was about the need to deepen the partnership between students and faculty, and the need for discussion forums and workshops. Moreover, the program provides a higher degree of partnership than other programs in the university and in other Palestinian universities. As a matter of fact, 55% of respondents reported that they had participated, in one way or another, in a debate about the program presentation's content and nature at the university. A further 67% said they have done so through the periodic meetings between the program's administrators and the students, while 30% expressed that they had also participated, but through discussions with the program's professors. Another 26% participated through the management of the program, and 11% through evaluation using the website of the University. It is difficult to explain the repeated observations about this partnership other than by the gap between students' active role in this partnership, and their feeling of being unsatisfied of what is offered. Anyway, the students' desire to contribute to the program's development reflects their conviction of being able to act, as well as a successful detachment from learning approaches based on «lectures» shows that they are persuaded by this approach.

### **2. A «Traditional Organic» Intellectual?**

Contrary to the perception that intellectuals are either organic or traditional, the graduates of the program believe that it is possible to include the role of an organic intellectual in that of a



traditional one. In fact, 37% of the respondents indicated that the program had a great impact on their work, whereas 53% of them considered this impact as strong, 8% considered it weak and 2% said the impact was never felt. In addition, 94% of the respondents indicated that they had already raised the issue of human rights in the workplace. On the other hand, 29% pointed out the modification of their tasks and/or functional responsibilities after graduation, with 86% of them who believe that this modification is linked to their enrollment in the program, and 92% of those believe that the change is linked to the program's content.

The possibility of combining the two «contradictory» attributes could be summarized in the conviction of possibly playing a limited role in bringing about change. This is only imaginable in the context of a strong recognition of the distribution of roles in society, and the acceptance of this distribution. I think that what explains this «contradiction» is a combination of political alienation due to the Palestinian situation, and the important role played by the educated youth in the institutions, where they belong and work. Thus, they play the role of an organic intellectual in the micro-society that they can significantly influence, and content themselves with the traditional role in a society where the scope of influence seems to be narrower if not blurred.

### **3. The attributes of graduates capable of bringing about societal change**

It is easy to note the graduates' maturity in terms of their ability to positively interact with the community. In fact, 94% of the respondents said that the program impacted their ability to accept different viewpoints. Also, 96% of the respondents are convinced that an individual (or individuals) has a significant role to play in bringing about change within the community.

#### **a. World view and the status of the respondents in it**

Regarding the impact of the program on the graduates' world view and their perception of their own stance, 92% of them said that their world view has changed after attending the program. In addition 87% of them indicated that this change reflects a better knowledge of democracy and human rights, while 9% said that this change only reflects a better knowledge of the field of human rights, and 4% stated that it only reflects a better knowledge of democracy. Moreover, 94% of the respondents declared that their interest in the issues of democracy and human rights had increased since they first entered the program.

When asked about the nature of the occurring changes (in an open question), the respondents said their views changed in a number of areas, including:

- General understanding: some respondents indicated that they have a better understanding and are more aware of their surroundings, and they realized the importance of certain aspects of change, such as the economic one. In addition, they have become more interested in politics and international relations. Some respondents also pointed out that their views had become more inclusive, and more pronounced, and that they had gained a better defined vision of the future.
- Customs and traditions (in terms of role and status): respondents said they are convinced of the need for balancing out customs and traditions, on the one hand, and freedoms on the other. They also evoked the need to rid and free society of certain customs. Some respondents also indicated the existence of certain problematic areas in customs and traditions concerning the freedom of women, for example. Some said they have been able to distinguish between moral values, customs and traditions.
- Freedoms and rights: respondents said that they gained greater understanding of the issues of freedoms and rights, and they now believed more in achieving them. One of them said he realized that «freedom is a whole, take it or leave it». Others noted

that they gained greater and deeper understanding of the issues of rights, pointing out aspects which caught their attention after entering the program such as children's rights. One respondent stated that he can presently notice «gender discrimination in the workplace», and that he now understands «the meaning of the right to work and its relation to society and individuals' viewpoints». Another respondent pointed out that he gained «an absolute faith in freedom, by respecting principles, establishing them in a righteous way and respecting diversity.»

- The position of ideology, rationality, causality, analysis and criticism: some respondents talked about a loss of confidence in ideology, and an orientation towards an analysis of reality in a scientific manner. This being a scientific and rational perspective to analyze things and an enhancement of the ability of criticism as well as a distancing from acquired facts and pursuing truth (which remained veiled) according to one respondent.
- The difference between theory and practice and between reality and hope: the respondents said they became more deeply aware of the gap between practice and theory in the application of human rights. They were also pessimistic about the application of the principles of democracy and human rights in the absence of international justice. They also noted a clear favoritism of the super powers and in the presence of a colonial background, the application of international law. Hence, they realized the need for change at the global and national levels. They also evoked, repetitively, the need to improve the legal framework to protect and preserve these rights.
- Religion: some referred to an internal debate about the relationship between religion and freedom and the distinction between freedom of belief and freedom of religion, for example.

Thus, it seems clear that the world view of the graduates became more extensive. They found themselves compelled to identify their position in daily situations in a responsible manner (i.e. they feel responsible about their positions and do not believe in the need to follow common perceptions or choose from them).

#### **b. Responsibility towards public issues and the tools to assume that responsibility**

Expressing the feeling of personal responsibility towards the community is the most important factor enabling individuals to continue to work for change. The results of the field research show encouraging signs in this regard. In fact, when asked about their different ways of expressing themselves on the issues of democracy and human rights, the respondents' first answer was discussing with others within their entourage (received a grade of 78), then participating in conferences, workshops and lectures (69), writing and publishing (64), and finally, appearing in the media (49).

The respondents consider that the most appropriate ways to transfer or disseminate the principles of democracy and human rights in the community are first, outreach and education (received a grade of 93), followed by being a «role model» (88), and establishing these values through laws (80).

#### **c. Critical orientation and distancing from common patterns**

The results of the survey indicate that students were able through the study to acquire perceptions related to democracy and human rights, which are different from the prevailing pattern that is marketed by the media and institutions involved in promoting democracy and human rights. When respondents were asked about the extent to which some concepts holders are of a democratic essence, the separation of powers came up first (with a grade of 98), however, periodic elections came in the sixth place (88), free market economy came in ninth



(59), while accountability ranked second (95) and, social justice and equality came third (91). As for participation in decision-making and freedom of information and expression, they came in fourth place (90). Finally, individual freedom ranked seventh (85), and public interest ranked eighth (83).

When respondents were asked to choose only one concept which expresses the essence of democracy, 31% of them chose social justice and equity, 18% chose the separation of powers, 14% opted for periodic elections, and 12% selected accountability, whilst the other concepts got a rate ranging between 2% and 6%. This shows that the procedural conception of democracy, adopted by many writers and thinkers studied by students did not seem convincing to them. Moreover, 74% of the respondents said their interest in democracy stems from political and social spheres, while 14% responded that their interest emanates from the social sphere, and 12% said it emanates from the political sphere, which is in contrast to the prevailing paradigm. The same phenomenon can be observed as for the respondents' position on human rights issues. Hence, when asked about the importance of some of the principles of human rights and international humanitarian law, the respondents confirmed that the issues associated with colonialism ranked first, although the survey was conducted in a period of recrimination of the internal Palestinian scene. Thus, the right to life came in the first place (with a grade of 98), then came the protection of civilians, prisoners and the wounded (96), followed by preventing genocide and ensuring punishment, and abolishing time limitation for war crimes and crimes against humanity (93). The second set of questions revolved around social rights, with right to social security, and the right to education in third place (93 - the same grade obtained by the issues of preventing genocides and war crimes). As for the third set, it was related to civil rights, with the freedom of belief, opinion and expression, as well as freedom and security in the fifth place (90), then came the right to a fair trial and the prevention of torture in the seventh rank (89). This was followed by economic rights, with equality, the right to work and equal pay for equal work (88). As for the protection of personal space and freedom of movement, they came in tenth place (84). In addition, freedom of association and the right to property came in the twelfth place (78), and the freedom to marry without any restrictions due to race, nationality or religion for both sexes ranked last (70).

Having a sense of responsibility towards society was apparent in this part. In fact, when respondents were asked about their (personal) priorities, protection of personal freedoms came up first (with a grade of 95), followed by national liberation and education (94). Political participation ranked fourth (88), and health fifth (84). Democratization came in sixth (82) and income seventh (80). We believe that having different priorities, the conceptual ones and those related to personal preference reflects an awareness of societal needs in terms of social responsibility not selfishness. This constitutes an important component of success in any societal work needed for change.

The whole picture becomes clear when we see priorities change once respondents are reminded of the problematic situation, related to the importance of the democratic character of the Palestinian system under occupation. In fact, when respondents were asked to classify different elements in the current context according to importance, national liberation ranked first (with a grade of 97), followed by combating corruption (93), then by improving the economy (88), and the democratic transformation came last (74). It is noteworthy in this context that respondents evaluated the necessity to accompany the democratic transformation process with the national liberation process and graded it 86. Moreover, 36% of the respondents consider that the violations of human rights committed by the Palestinian Authority and by Israel are at the same level of seriousness.





## **4. The socio-political activities of graduates**

### **a. The impact of the program on the graduates' activities and status**

84% of the respondents considered that the program granted them distinctive skills compared with other colleagues at work who did not join the program. As for the impact of these skills, it was greatest regarding social status (with a grade of 77), followed by the profession (73), then personal life (69), and finally political activity (61).

Moreover, 63% of respondents said that the program opened up new horizons for change within the community, and 20% of them responded either «no opinion» or «I do not know».

Additionally, 84% of respondents said that the program contributes to building the students' theoretical and practical capabilities. There were 37% of them who indicated that these capabilities are cultural ones, 29% pointed out that they are social, and 12% noted that they are professional. Another 12% indicated that these capabilities are political. Finally, 10% said, these capabilities are related to many fields.

### **b. Engaging in political life**

39% of respondents declared that they have no political affiliation, while 90% said that they encourage others to political participation, and 78% of them reported that they are engaged in political life. 22% of those who do not consider themselves as involved in political life seek to become so. According to data provided by this research, 81% of the graduates participated in the recent legislative elections, 79% participated in the presidential elections, and 65% in local elections.

59% of the respondents reported that they are engaged in voluntary organizations. Of these, 51% are members of human rights organizations, and 14% are members in unions. 55% of all the members said their membership was voluntary, while 10% of them are staff members, and 35% are members who regularly participate in relevant activities. It was 86% for those who declared that they take part in other forms of voluntary activities, a third of which was rights related. 37% of these activities are in the social sphere, and 23% are in the cultural field. Furthermore, 94% of the respondents encourage others to engage in voluntary work.

## **VI. Conclusion**

### **1. General remarks**

Data provided by the results of the questionnaire support the hypotheses of this paper (elaborated above) to varying degrees. This is because the program hasn't achieved its full potential yet, in terms of results and student numbers, but also because of research limitations and the parameters that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

These data show that it is possible to contribute to the creation of an effective change nucleus in society through higher education. Likewise, skills which are necessary for activating the role of youth in social change aren't gained through one discipline, but lie in building individual capacities and convictions which confirm that change is possible. The data indicated that the means adopted by the group of respondents are characterized, most importantly, by relying on the graduates' personal qualities not their specialization.

This research, although limited, indicated clearly that the group of graduates surveyed had a clear vision of changing priorities in the context of various tasks preceding change (though the tasks are interlinked). Liberation comes first, followed by living in dignity, including freedom and the economic situation, and then comes the procedural issues (although respondents are aware that these issues are a priority in the political system). From my point of view, this classification sheds



light on a sense of responsibility towards society. Furthermore, it reflects a certain ambiguity regarding the necessary practical steps to bring about change.

Many respondents were uninterested in theorization, which explains the previously mentioned ambiguity. This is related to the program's imperfections on the one hand, and to its nature, which is dominated by the operational aspect, on the other. However, this is also related to the respondents' social and intellectual maturity.

It is important to clearly note the imbalance in the respondents' system of priorities. Despite the fact that the respondents are well aware of the need to distinguish between the priorities in different contexts, they are undoubtedly aware that it is unacceptable to remain in a state of "schizophrenia" concerning the priorities, i.e. changing positions according to each case. However, in this conclusion I consider that the colonial condition leads necessarily to this dichotomy and creates a state of false consciousness as a defense mechanism against the feeling of being incapable of achieving change, despite desire, readiness, and having a [clear] goal.

## 2. Field research results

The following is a summary of what we believe is the hypothesis supported by field research results among those hypotheses mentioned in this research:

First, it can be said, with a certain degree of confidence that the program contributed to the training of organic intellectuals, in the sense that it provided them with a model of an analytical and critical environment convinced of the viability of change. However, the program made little achievement in terms of the students' abstraction ability, which is primordial in order to regroup various tasks in one agenda without falling into the trap of "destroy[ing] the achievements of the past to be able to build upon them". Nevertheless, if one considers the nature of the respondents' political engagement, limited success in training organic intellectuals is clearly noted. In fact, although the level of involvement of the program's graduates in the political life surpasses the average, this involvement is characterized by some reluctance which is typical to traditional intellectuals. Concerning the sense of partnership with their teachers, graduates consider themselves as "organic students" in the program.

Secondly, concerning world view, it can be concluded that the program has succeeded in promoting the adoption by its students of a critical, flexible and rational world view that is enlightened and not paternalistic.

Thirdly, the results, mentioned above, show a great deal of graduates' involvement in societal activities aimed at change. Moreover, it is clear that they are trying to play a leading role in the community in various areas related to their work, their profession, their role as citizens, and activists. This means that they feel responsible towards public issues, and are using all available tools to achieve this purpose.

Fourth, the data show that the multidisciplinary introduction provided students with significantly larger creative contexts than those that could be provided by an introduction geared towards the legal and technical aspect of human rights defense, for example. This, of course, does not underestimate the importance of the technical aspect or its necessity. Nevertheless, activity opportunities associated with individual skills and qualities, remain more likely to adapt to societal tasks than activities limited to one technical or professional field, which may have been one of the prevailing pattern's most important means of auto-defense.

## 3. Discussion

As noted above, the sense of responsibility towards society and the public sphere, and rationality

are the key features of the position of any active intellectual who seeks to bring about societal change. However, the need for these qualities to be in synergy in order to bring about change does not mean they are equal, or that they are isolated from the socio-economic context. In the case of the Arab world, which continues to suffer under neo-colonialism, it is worth paying particular attention to the concept of rationality and rational choice (which is one of the most prevalent mental justifications for the democratic choice) in terms of meaning and significance of rationality, as well as its comprehensive human definition. The concept of rationality is linked to two modern and contradictory heritages. One is the embodiment of eurocentrism which is capable of playing a neo-colonial role if it is treated in a non critical way (ultimately, rationalism becomes synonym to market liberalization, to the adoption of the [irrational] consumerism, and to the prevalence of what can be described as the “culture-value approach” on the expense of other life and political system necessities, despite all the racial motivations embedded in it). As for the second heritage to which the concept of rationality is linked, it is the heritage of enlightenment, where the majority (i.e. with the ability to assume responsibility) is the central concept of rationality that becomes, in this context, a critical cognitive requirement, for decision-making and being responsible for these decisions.

If we compare this multidisciplinary program with the traditional programs, which provide attendants with a knowledge system and specific skills, it is clear that the program’s graduates have acquired skills (non-systemic) designed by this program to help convince them of the necessity of change, and of their capacity to contribute to it. The program also aims at helping them adopt the values of democracy, human rights and freedom in a profound and complex way, which can only be achieved through a single discipline. How can one imagine the position of someone studying democracy from the perspective of political science without addressing its economic and social aspects?

In particular, it is important for students not to emphasize the political and procedural aspects of democracy (and the political system in general), for this could be an important achievement in the Palestinian case in which the desired prospective state is a dream of the public. A state with characteristics embodied 15 years ago in a peripheral structure (the Authority), which seemed generally ambitious to the youth.

The secret of the mentioned dichotomy can be summarized by the fact that the graduates’ priorities, according to their own words, reflect, in fact their individual priorities as well as the colonial reality they live in. Clearly, all priorities fade away when there’s a need for achieving the national liberation missions. Furthermore, according to the research data, we can’t say that the respondents have shown a significant change compared to fellow graduates of traditional programs, in terms of leaning towards a different vision of resistance, various means and objectives (although we do not exclude it).

Although respondents recognize the intersection of the different tasks, it is difficult to explain the prevalence of national liberation issues, without analyzing these issues by dismantling the repercussions of the colonial structure on those living under occupation. For they are prisoners of a colonial reality that established an integrated and interrelated system, affecting everyday life, laws, education, roads, geography, employment opportunities, taste, priorities in life, and finally, what might be called the “colonization of minds”. One of the manifestations of the latter, which is rarely argued, resides in the emergence of a pseudo consciousness among those living the colonial condition. This pseudo consciousness is created by community members through different ways and forms. One of which lies in trying to rationalize the confrontation that is losing, day after day, its rationality (in the context of rationality associated with Western modernity, whereas its utility



becomes gradually less pronounced). This is true although this rationality becomes every day more reflective of individual humanness (in fact, the inability to bear repression and oppression and trampling on human dignity under occupation, gets exacerbated with the increase of these phenomena and through time).

The occupier continuously works on depriving the occupied people from all means of resistance, except those which lead, when used, to the destruction of both parties. Thus, the occupier attempts to make resistance so expensive so it would become meaningless (i.e. irrational). Hence, the occupied faces two choices: either losing all sense of humanness (dignity), by accepting the colonial reality, or resorting to options which do not seem to any vigilant analyst feasible or beneficial. Those living in these conditions understand instinctively that the solution for this dilemma lies in the establishment of a new awareness system which allows working on the creation of a new reality. Certainly, this is a practical way out, and would have been effective if it were not so wrong.

Reviewing the results of the field research exposed in this paper, must raise questions about the reasons for the low degree of conformity between the respondents' values and their political and social development. I think there are two potential interpretations for this phenomenon, which could be combined. The first is related to the pseudo consciousness referred to earlier, and which constitutes a desirable perception of reality combining the great ambitions of a people yearning for freedom, and despair of recurring defeat. As for the second interpretation, it is the establishment of a set of values, which have found their way into the minds of the Palestinian youth in their quest for surpassing the enemy. This was achieved through moral superiority.

In conclusion, we believe that problems facing students at Birzeit University are not limited to them, even those associated with the colonial condition. Despite their intensity, these problems are not unique. In fact, all the countries of the "Global South" suffer from the repercussions of their colonial past on their "marginal" present. Hence, youth suffers from alienation and "schisms". Therefore, multidisciplinary programs which do not add disciplinary isolation to political and economic isolation, and which allow graduates to innovate using their own tools instead of the disciplinary tools that they do not make, have additional benefits nowadays in the higher education system in the Arab world.

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