

Resilience in the Rubble: Reimagining Higher Education in Post-Destruction Gaza

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper examines the current and future landscape of higher education in Gaza following the large-scale destruction of universities and displacement of students and faculty. Drawing on the 2024 *Gaza Higher Education Needs Assessment* by swisspeace, the paper highlights the collapse of physical infrastructure, psychological trauma, and loss of academic continuity—yet also the remarkable resilience of Gaza’s academic community. It investigates how institutions adapt to crisis through online platforms, transnational partnerships, and grassroots solutions. The paper critically assesses gaps in humanitarian response, especially regarding higher education, and argues for integrating long-term academic recovery into emergency interventions. By centring Gazan voices, it proposes a vision for rebuilding higher education not only as infrastructure but as a space for healing, resistance, and future-making. This contribution calls for urgent international collaboration to support sustainable, locally driven academic resilience amid devastation.

Full paper

Since October the 7th, 2023, the Gaza Strip have went through destructive war that demolish everything in Gaza including higher education sector. As of April 2024, at least 12 higher education institutions have been either partially or entirely destroyed, including biggest universities, the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Azhar University (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024). This paper, drawing on the *Gaza Higher Education Needs Assessment* by (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024) investigates the scale of destruction, the resilience of the academic community, and future pathways for supporting higher education in Gaza.

The researchers conducted a desk review to capture and analyse the state of higher education in the Gaza strip during the ongoing war in addition, it identifies different needs and potential support mechanisms. This analysis involved examining published reports and press releases from Palestinian and international organisations, as well as conducting seven interviews with universities in Gaza, including AL Azhar University (AUG), Al Aqsa

university (AQU) and the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). Additionally, the researcher reviewed the universities' social media pages, such as Facebook.

The needs assessment offers a rare, data-informed insight into the state of higher education in a context where infrastructure, human capital, and institutional continuity have been violently disrupted. It provides testimonies from academics, students, and administrators facing displacement, trauma, and the daily challenges of survival. Over 80% of Gaza's student population has been displaced, and the physical destruction has rendered any form of in-person learning impossible for the foreseeable future. More than 94 faculty members have been killed, many others injured or missing, and more than 1300 students are estimated to have died during the conflict (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024, p.7-8). This massive loss of human capital poses critical risks to the future of Palestine's academic ecosystem.

Nevertheless, even in crises and dire situation that Gaza Strip is witnessing, the report identifies powerful expressions of academic resilience. Many institutions have shifted to emergency online learning, relying on their experiences during COVID19 and the prepared IT platforms. Furthermore, they sometimes relied on improvised access to electricity, mobile data, and support from faculty in the West Bank or abroad (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024, p. 10). These strategies and practices are signal an enduring commitment to learning, knowledge, and hope.

One of the most compelling themes emerging from the report is the disconnect between emergency humanitarian response and the needs of higher education as the massive needs of the sector different players were left uncovered. While food, shelter, and medical aid are urgent and essential, the exclusion of education—particularly higher education—from priority interventions perpetuates long-term harm. As different participants mentioned during the preparation of the report, the international actors have often failed to understand and realise the strategic role that higher education plays in recovery, psychosocial healing, and national self-determination (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024, p. 12-14). The assessment therefore calls for the integration of higher education into both emergency and long-term planning, advocating for donor recognition of academic continuity as a core component of humanitarian support.

Furthermore, the paper explores the potential of digital technologies and transnational collaborations as tools for both short-term academic survival and long-term transformation. The swisspeace report underscores the importance of partnerships with international universities, (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024,p. 18-20).

This paper also positions higher education as a site of resistance and future-making. As highlighted in the report, the faculty commitment to teach and the students willingness and efforts to learn and study reflect the Palestinian perseverance towards their existence in their land. Gaza's universities have historically served as pillars of national identity and intellectual sovereignty. Because education has great value for people in Gaza, therefore,

destroying the institutions is not a collateral damage rather a deliberate trial to eradicate people from Gaza. Rebuilding higher education in Gaza must therefore move beyond physical reconstruction. It must involve reviving curricula, fostering critical thinking, and cultivating communities of scholarship that challenge both the violence of occupation and the inadequacy of global responses (Al-Mqadma et al., 2024, p.15-17).

Based on the findings of the Al-Mqadma et al.(2024) report and Winthrop (2020), this paper suggests for a decolonial, compassionate approach to academic reconstruction in the Gaza Strip through following: the following strategies

- international academic and institutional solidarity and partnership
- long-term investment in digital and hybrid learning infrastructure tailored to crises and conflict areas;
- Supporting higher education institutions through engagement and direct contact with people who have lived experience from the Gaza Strip
- Work in coordination with a coordinated body established by universities in the Gaza Strip