tap palestine

Transforming Assessment Practices

Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices - Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education

four elements

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1. Executive Summary

This baseline study was conducted under funding from the European Commission in the framework of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building project *"Transforming Assessment Practices in Large Enrollment First Year Education/TAP Palestine"* to enhance capacity building of Palestinian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in order to improve assessment practices in first year education. Five Palestinian Higher Educational Institutions participated in the Assessment Methods Survey: namely An-Najah University, Birzeit University and Palestinian Polytechnic University located in the West Bank and Al-Aqsa and UCAS universities located in the Gaza Strip. The general coordination of the baseline study at Palestinian territories was under the responsibility of the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC), a national body operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education.

This report presents the results of a comprehensive Assessment Methods Survey and the findings of data collected through primary research on the field. The main data collection methods used in this research include focus groups and interviews conducted with first year university students, first year educators from different faculties within the same university and staff representing the Quality Units of the participant universities. Part of the research was based on participants' observation within the class, as to identify the interaction between students and professors. Limitations of the data collection occurred due to Gaza Strip restrictions that created burdens in visiting Al-Aqsa and UCAS universities, therefore, participants' observation in those universities could have been organized.

Overall more than 300 responses were received which represents a response rate of 0.5% of the total sample population. The proportion of responders was reasonably

balanced among all age groups and between genders. It has to be mentioned that age variance only applies for the participant teachers since the students age group is very specific, i.e. between 18-20 years old.

The key findings from this research are presented and discussed by following a content analysis approach that follows the time sequence of the conducted field studies. Each institution was analyzed independently within this report. A brief presentation of key findings by thematic approach includes the following: perceptions on assessment methods, feedback on teaching and learning, students' difficulties, incorporation of technology to deal with existing issues.

Perceptions on assessment methods: The majority of professors surveyed, could define the difference between the concepts of assessment and evaluation in teaching procedures. The same applies for the students who also tend to be in favor of a more formative and ongoing process that focuses on skills and outcomes. The majority of professors (61%) believe that current assessment practices are not relevant to the educational needs while a considerable 25% states that grading system discourages students' learning. However, only 36% of the professors believe that the teaching standards and outcomes meet national and international benchmarks.

Feedback on teaching and learning: The great majority (65%) of the respondents stated that evaluation of the course and the instructor is taking place on a semestral basis. Moreover, the greatest proportion of professors (83%) seem to be receptive in being assessed by their students throughout the academic term while 76% of them responded positively when asked if they deliver course evaluation reports. On the other hand, less than half (43%) receive evaluation by colleagues on their teaching material.

Students' difficulties: The two main difficulties identified from the interaction with students and professors of the participant institutions were language skills and lack of academic mindset/attitude. Indicative are the results of professors' questionnaires on whether freshmen are adequately prepared to deal with university demands. An aggregate 58% mentioned that students are not at all (18%) or slightly (40%) prepared.

Incorporation of technology: The survey results show an overall positive tendency towards adoption of technologic or innovative means and solutions. Over 50% of the professors, very much or totally agreed that online assessment could be more effective for both students and teachers. Finally, on the question whether technology and e-learning can help freshmen overcome their difficulties a total of 48% agrees very much (34%) relatively agrees and (14%) totally agrees.

This report follows a content analysis methodology for each examined institution. It is articulated in a series of chapters presenting the main summarized findings that emerged during data collection from focus groups and interviews with professors and students. A separate chapter of the report is dedicated to the visualization and interpretation of the quantitative data collected by questionnaires.

2. General educational status in Palestine

Before starting to analyze the situation in higher education, it would be rather interesting to analyze the general status of education in Palestine, which shows a mixed picture (Figure, 1). Although the population is one of the most literate in the world, the education system encounters a couple of problems: insufficient school infrastructure, lack of adequately trained teachers, and a lack of access to schooling in marginalized areas (United Nations, 2014).
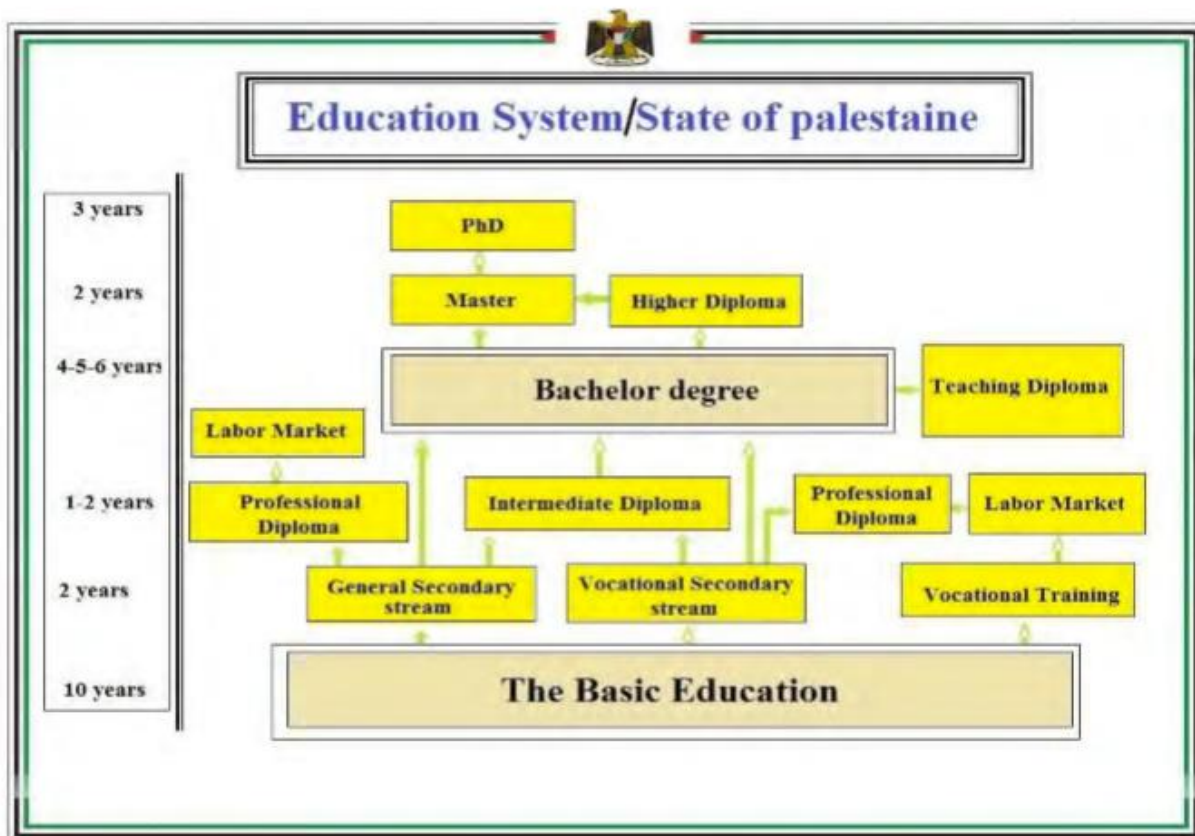
Figure 1: Diagram of education system in Palestine

Since 1948, education has served as a central means of empowerment within the Palestinian community (Save the Children Alliance, 2001). As recognized by the UN and enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, education is a fundamental human right and everyone is entitled to social and

international order in which this right can be fully realized. The latest statistics show that 96.3% of the population of Palestine is literate. Women have made great strides in literacy over the past two decades, with the rate jumping from 78.6% in 1995 to the current 94.1%. Amongst males, 98.4% are literate (PCBS, 2014).

Literacy rates are highest in the Gaza Strip, with a literate population of 96.8%, compared to 96% in the West Bank (Figure 2). Indeed, the illiteracy rate in Palestine is one of the lowest in the world. Illiteracy amongst individuals over the age of 15 (figure 1), as of the end of 2013, was 3.7%. This was down from 13.9% in 1997. Illiteracy is higher in rural areas (4.5%), compared to urban areas (3.6%) and refugee camps (3.2%). The rate is highly gendered, however, with 5.9% of women being considered illiterate compared to only 1.6% of men. Palestine has made progress in the education of women, with the rate falling substantially from 20.3% in 1997 to less than 6% at present (PCBS, 2014).
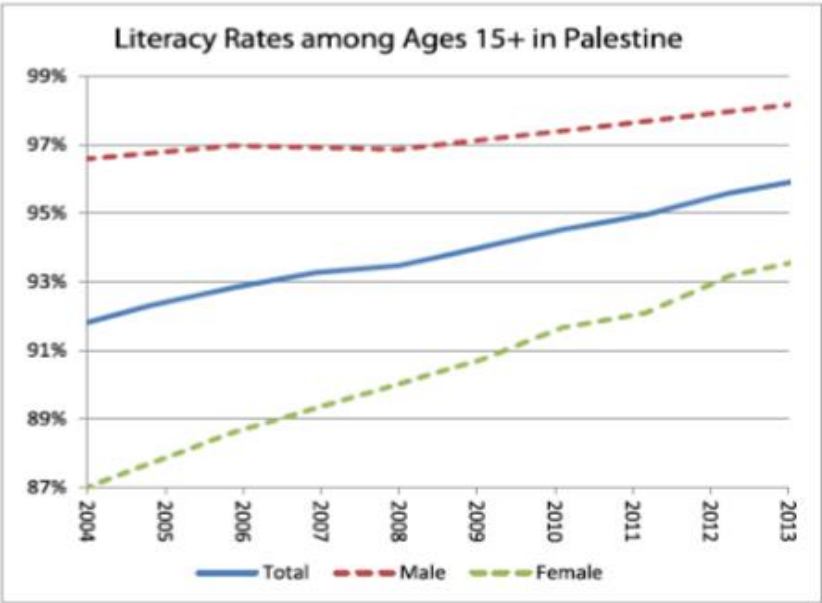
Source: PCBS

Figure 2: Literacy rates in Palestine, 2013

School enrolment amongst Palestinians is generally high (World Bank and Bisan Center for Research and Development, 2006). At the end of 2013, a total of 1,151,702 students were enrolled. More specifically, 1,009,639 at basic level (grades 1-10) and 142,063 at secondary level (grades 11-12). There are comparable proportions of males and females enrolled in basic education, though more males attend secondary school. The American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) found that 38% of children in the West Bank and Gaza are enrolled in preschool, compared to 25% for children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and 50% for the world as a whole (ANERA, 2014). As of 2013, 9.4% of individuals aged 15 years and above had not completed any stage of education, while 12.1% had completed a bachelor degree or a higher university education (PCBS, 2014).

Across all of Palestine, there has been a major reduction in dropout rates overall since the mid-1990s, but an increase, however, in recent years (PCBS, 2012). The highest dropout rates are seen at the Secondary school level. The dropout rate for males enrolled in secondary school is 2.4%, compared to 2.5% for females. In basic education, more males than female's dropout (0.9% compared to 0.5%). Dropout rates overall are lower in the Gaza Strip, which may be attributed to the larger role of NGOs and other CSOs in providing education services (PCBS, 2014).

A major barrier to the provision of quality education is the state of school infrastructure in Palestine. In 2013, there were 2,784 schools in the country. 1,842 basic and 942 secondary. There were 2,094 schools in the West Bank and 690 schools in the Gaza Strip. A study by ANERA on early-childhood education found that only four preschools are public, and 1,132 are run by non-profit organizations (ANERA, 2014). In Jerusalem, education falls under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Ministry of Education and the Municipality's Jerusalem Education Administration (JEA). Schools serving Palestinians in East Jerusalem receive disproportionately low budget allocations and suffer from more classroom overcrowding compared to other schools in Jerusalem (ACRI, 2013). A study by ACRI suggested that a shortage of more than 2000 classrooms in East

Jerusalem is the main cause of the low public-school attendance rate of only 53%. The report also found that only 6% of children in East Jerusalem between the ages of three and four years attend public preschools, due primarily to the shortage of approximately 400 classrooms.

A September 2014 press release by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) highlighted the impact of the conflict on school infrastructure: more than 180 of the 690 schools in the Gaza Strip had been damaged to the point of needing extensive construction and repair because of the Israeli attack on the Strip during the summer of 2014 (PCBS, 2014). This meant school was delayed for over 475,000 school children in the Gaza Strip, and the quality of learning environment impacted long-term. Similarly, a June 2012 ILO report about workers in Palestine called for "urgent action to address the education crisis in East Jerusalem, to cease the demolition of schools in the West Bank, and to stop the erosion of skills in Gaza (ILO, 2012).

Higher education in Palestine reveals a more promising picture. Despite economic hardship, households continue to prioritize investing in higher education for their members (Mitchell, 2009). From 1993 to 2011, the enrolment rate of students in higher education increased by 940%. A higher proportion of females are enrolling each year (Koni et al, 2012). The gender gap is narrowing and overall enrolment rates are increasing, suggesting a positive trend in higher education. There is a total of 53 accredited post-secondary education institutions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (34 in the West Bank, 18 in Gaza, and 1 Open University). These include traditional universities (9 in the West Bank and 5 in Gaza), university colleges (12 in the West Bank and 6 in Gaza), and community colleges (20 in the West Bank and 7 in Gaza). Over 300 fields of study are offered through these institutions, and over half of enrolled students are female (ACRI, 2013).

Higher degrees such as PhDs and Masters are less common in refugee camps and rural areas (Figure, 3). Major barriers exist, however, for high school graduates who would like to pursue higher education. Palestinian graduates living in East Jerusalem, for example, find it "extremely difficult" to gain admission to Israeli universities. Likewise, graduates of Palestinian higher learning institutions have "great difficulty" receiving formal recognition of their degrees inside Israel. Restrictive Israeli-imposed policies also impact higher education students, especially through preventing Gaza secondary school graduates from studying at post-secondary institutions in the West Bank (Gisha, 2006).
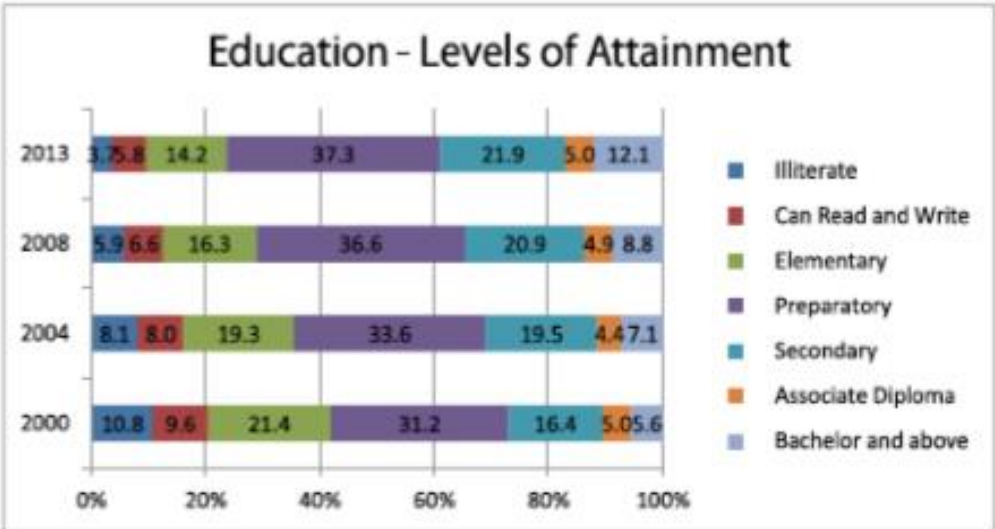
Source: PCBS

Figure 3: Levels of educational attainment in Palestine, 2013

2.1 The Higher Education System

The development of higher education in the occupied Palestinian territory is of relatively recent date. Two-year colleges have existed since the 1950s. These institutions which focus on teacher training, technical education or liberal arts, were either organized by the government or by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. It is only since the 1970s that universities came into existence. Created during the Israeli occupation, these

institutions were part of a Palestinian collective effort to preserve their identity as well as to provide young Palestinians with the opportunity to pursue higher education, after it became increasingly difficult for them to go abroad for such studies. However, the sector has expanded only since the transfer of education from Israel to the Palestinian National Authority after the Oslo Accords of 1990.

Higher education was regulated through the Law on Higher Education No 11 of 1998. This law gives every citizen the possibility to access higher education (Article 2), gives legal status to higher education institutions and provides the legal framework for their organization and management. The law recognizes three different types of institutions in higher education. These are the governmental, the public (established by Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)), and the private institutions. Most higher education institutions are public. The Council of Higher Education is responsible for drafting and enacting the rules that all higher education institutions must adopt. The ministry also provides partial support and funding to non-governmental Higher Education Institutions. The Higher Education Institutions are mostly independent but they have to follow the abovementioned law, regulations of the ministry and the Council of Higher Education (EACEA, 2012).

2.1.1 Types of tertiary education institutions

According to the Law on Higher Education, institutions can be one of the following:

- **Universities (AL-Jamiaah):** Consisting of no less than three colleges or faculties which confer Bachelor degrees or higher.

- **University colleges (Alkulliah AlJamiaaiah):** Offering academic, technical or professional programs and conferring two or three-year diplomas or ordinary or honors Bachelor degrees.

- **Polytechnics (Alpolytechnik):** They confer diplomas or Bachelor and higher degrees in professional and technical fields.

- **Community colleges (Kulliat AlMujtamaah):** Offering academic, professional or technical programs with a minimum one year duration leading to diplomas in the respective programs. The community colleges offer programs aimed at preparing a middle-level labor force, which forms the link between specialized and skilled workers. The diploma programs (equivalent to an associate degree) consist of approximately 72 credit hours distributed over four semesters. The programs offered by colleges cover many different disciplines such as management and administration, secretarial, office automation, marketing, graphic design, industrial technology, electronics, computer maintenance, dental technology, air-conditioning and refrigeration, electronics, computer technology, fashion design, etc.

The majority of the 49 Palestinian higher education institutions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are relatively young; the oldest has only been in existence for 30 years. More than 213.000 students are enrolled in these institutions. It is estimated that the gross enrolment rate for the age group of 18-24 years old is more than 25.8%. These percentages are relatively high by international standards, especially in comparison to countries in the Middle East and to developing countries in general. From the moment, the Palestinian National Authority received command of the territories, it showed great interest in the development of a vocational and technical education and training system (VTET). The VTET structure in the oPt - despite its small size - is considered fragmented with regard to the type of institutions, their objectives, supervisory and responsible parties as well as the historical background of their establishment.

In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there are hundreds of training institutions that provide short and long-term training programs. These institutions consist of vocational secondary schools, vocational training centers, private cultural centers, charitable associations and developmental institutions. Moreover, there are 23 community colleges offering different educational programs for Tawjihi graduates (RECONOW, 2016).

2.1.2 Distribution and responsibilities

Bachelor and Master programs are offered at universities and polytechnics. These can be followed by doctoral studies at university level. According to the Palestinian Law on Higher Education, polytechnics also have the right to offer doctoral degrees. So-called diploma degrees (professional programs) are offered by community colleges and university colleges. As a result of the Oslo Accords the Palestinian Ministries of Education and Higher Education came into existence in August 1994 (EACEA, 2012).

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoEHE) were merged into one ministry in 2002. Originally both subsectors (general education and higher education) had been under one ministry when the MoEHE was set up in 1994, until it was divided into two ministries in 1996 (MoEHE, 2008). At the moment, the Assistant Deputy Minister for Higher Education supervises the higher education sector while the responsibility for policy formulation related to the development of the sector rests with the Council for Higher Education which was set up in 2003. Furthermore, in order to avoid fragmentation, the planning and supervision of secondary vocational education has been put under the Directorate General for TVET.

In accordance with international norms, the Law on Higher Education No 11 of 1998 combines two approaches:
- Central national planning and supervision by MoEHE and the Council for Higher Education,
- Self-management, self-monitoring and self-control at institutional level (MoEHE, 2002).

This means that higher education institutions enjoy autonomy and self-management. They are responsible for admissions, recruitment of staff, assessment of students, granting of degrees and diplomas and the development of facilities. In addition to the Council of Higher Education, a Council for Scientific Research and a National Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance were set up. With regard to VTET, the Law also stipulated setting up a Supreme Council and an Executive Council for

VTET. Although the Council for Higher Education was reactivated in 2003, its relationship with the institutions of higher education should be better organized, structured and institutionalized (MoEHE, 2008). Coordination and cooperation between the MoEHE and the institutions, and among the institutions themselves, need to be strengthened. Management information systems at institutional level and at central ministry level still need to be improved, harmonized and interfaced and the skills of the MoEHE staff to be updated and their use for decision-making have to be further developed. Important policies and strategies approved by the MoEHE and the Council for Higher Education are not adhered to at institutional level. Institutions still do not appreciate the regulatory, planning and developmental role which the MoEHE can play and which is needed to link higher education to the needs of the labor market and socio-economic development at-large. In May 2012, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education was divided into two separate Ministries. Therefore, there is now one single Ministry devoted to Higher Education.

2.1.3 Governing bodies of the Higher Education Institutions

In terms of governance (management, supervision and funding) there are four types of Higher Education Institutions (EACEA, 2012):

- **Governmental:** The Palestinian National Authority runs and finances the governmental higher education institutions in the West Bank (Palestine Technical University-Khadoorie) and the Gaza Strip (Al Aqsa University) which are under the supervision of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

- **UNRWA:** The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for the oPt Refugees operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East and has been the main provider of basic education to Palestinian refugees for nearly five decades. The Agency provides primary and junior secondary schooling free of charge for all refugee children in the area of operations. Vocational and technical training courses are given in the eight UNRWA vocational training centers. The

Agency also runs an extensive teacher-training programme and offers university scholarships to qualified refugee youth.

- **Private:** These institutions are run and financed by several foundations, charitable societies, religious denominations, individuals and companies.

- **Public:** Most higher education institutions (universities) were set up mostly during the period of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The majority are non-profit and were originally created and owned by local charity associations and NGOs. They depend on fundraising and receive partial government funding.

- **The Vocational and Technical Education and Training (VTET) in the oPt:** These institutions are supervised by several bodies, consisting of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Social Affairs, UNRWA, charitable and religious associations, international non-governmental organizations, developmental organizations and private sector institutions. The governing bodies of HEIs are mentioned above.

2.1.4 Financing

Insufficient funding is an on-going major concern. Between 60-70 % of the operating budgets of universities are covered by tuition fees. Since there is no regularity and consistency in the payment of tuition fees, budgets of universities suffer annually deficits. The amount of USD 20 million has been allocated to higher education in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) budgets every year since 2002. In 2009, this amount was raised to USD 34 million, and in 2010 the amount was increased to USD 40 million. In 2011, the higher education budget was significantly increased to USD 90 million. However, in most cases, only around 60 % has been disbursed per year in the course of the mentioned period. Revolving funds for student loans, although of significant importance, have suffered from the total non-repayment by students and from a lack of grants from international sources and important contributions from the

national budget. Summary budget estimates of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education are as follows:

- In the structure of total expenditure, about 94 % is allocated for the payment of salaries and operational costs, and 6 % for development expenditure.

- In the development budget, capital costs constitute 72 % of the total estimated expenditure and current costs 28 % (EACEA, 2012).

2.1.5 Student contributions and financial support

All Palestinian Higher Education Institutions introduced tuition fees. However, with the assistance of various philanthropic organizations, of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, at the beginning of the university year 2001-2002, the Student Loan Fund was launched. The Ministry provides interest-free loans for students with financial difficulties. The number of recipients is determined at the beginning of each academic year. This form of financial aid is available to students at the beginning of the second semester after their admission, as long as they are able to maintain a Cumulative Average (CA) of 65 % and above. The CA is equivalent to the Grade Point Average GPA of student grades. The CA is calculated for all the credit hours that the student earned in his/her study during the academic semesters. The CA appears on the student transcript. From the establishment of the Student Loan Fund in 2000 until 2008, the amount received from donors rose to more than USD 123 million (RECONOW, 2016).

2.1.6 Licensing, quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and/or programs

The Palestinian quality assurance policy was upgraded in 2002 simultaneously with the establishment of the 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission' (AQAC) as the only authorized agency responsible for the accreditation and quality assurance of Higher Education (MoEHE, 2002). The AQAC is a governmental semi-autonomous body under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) and accountable directly to the Minister. The AQAC is a member of several international

networks for quality assurance, such as the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE). In this context, the AQAC negotiates cooperation agreements with regional and international quality agencies for the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions and degrees (AQAC, 2015).

The Palestinian QA system is based on the belief that internal QA is the basis for external QA evaluation. External QA evaluation is compulsory, and applies to public and private institutions, university and non-university sectors and all types of academic and vocational programs. Accreditation comprises of three elements and generally involves three steps with specific activities, as follows:

- **Self-assessment:** A self-evaluation process conducted by the faculty, the administrators and the staff of the higher education institution or academic programs, resulting in a report that takes as its reference the set of standards of AQAC.
- **Peer review:** A study visit conducted by a team of peers selected by the AQAC, which reviews the documentation, reviews the premises, and interviews the academic and administrative staff, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to the AQAC.
- **Decision-making:** Examination by the AQAC board on the basis of a given set of criteria concerning quality and resulting in a final judgment and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other concerned parties.

2.1.7 Admission

The enrolment and admission at all Palestinian Higher Education Institutions follow approximately the same procedures. The minimum requirements needed for students to enroll at university are:

- A General Secondary Education Certificate (Tawjihi) or its equivalent (e.g.: SAT or GCE certificates that are awarded to high school students according to their educational system) with equivalence requirements as set by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education). Student placement in the faculties depends on the completed stream (science or arts) indicated in the certificate.
- The student certificate score should not be less than 65 % in order to be eligible to apply for admission to the universities.

Admission for first-year students is competitive and is based on the composite score of the students, on condition that these scores are not lower than required for admission to a certain faculty. The composite score is the average percentage score of the General Secondary Education Certificate or equivalent and a percentage score of the last three years in high school. Some universities require an English language proficiency exam, and students are placed in English language courses according to their scores. Students can be transferred upon finalization of a minimum of 30 credit hours at an accredited university with a grade point average of no less than 70 % (EACEA, 2012).

2.1.8 Organization of the academic year

The structure of the academic year is defined by the higher education institutions themselves. The most common structure is two semesters, with the summer semester (optional) beginning in June. The duration of the academic semester is 16 weeks. Usually the first semester starts in mid-September and ends in January. The second semester starts in February and ends in June.

2.1.9 Curriculum content

The college curriculum of the new diploma program (2 years) is developed by the college, and is approved by the Ministry, if it meets the accreditation requirements. All diploma programs that are offered by colleges are under the supervision and monitoring

of the Ministry, which approves the curricula, and the organization of the general comprehensive exams. The university curricula are defined at institutional level in line with the national standards set by the Ministry and according to their course outline. The most common requirements at all HEIs are as follows:

- **University requirements:** Basic undergraduate courses, Arabic, English, and others.
- **Faculty requirements:** Introductory courses in the respective disciplines.
- **Department requirements:** Introductory, advanced and specialized courses.
- **Final project requirements in professional degree awarding programs.**

2.1.10 Assessment, progression, certification and degree

The common practice is that students receive from their professor the course instructions that include the course assessment comprising examinations (written, oral or practical), assignments, projects, tests, etc. Usually, the undergraduate course requires students to take at least two or three semester exams and one final exam. Laboratory courses may require students to take written, oral or both exams. The semester work has 50% weight while the final exam is 50% of the final grade. For the graduate course, the students take at least one written exam during the semester and the other exam may be substituted by projects, studies or research. In order to pass a course, and to graduate the requirement is 60% pass-rate for undergraduates and 75 % for graduates. The grade point average for students should be satisfactory.

Departments usually develop study plans that lead students from the time they are admitted to a university to the completion of their studies and graduation. Except for the entry level courses (those taken by students in their first year at the university), each course usually has one or more prerequisites. A student may enroll in a course after successfully meeting the prerequisite(s). Hence, students follow the study plan until completion. In some disciplines, namely medicine and dentistry, the student must pass one year in order to continue to the next. If students fail one or two subjects, they are allowed to re-sit the exams before the beginning of the following year. Only if they pass

those subjects can they continue to the next year, otherwise they have to repeat the course. For some academic programs, the study plans include practical training and in this case the university makes the necessary arrangements to secure places for doing such training. Aside from these cases, universities do not accredit any prior experiential learning such as work, community or volunteer experience.

Once a student has accomplished the requirements for a degree, the university confers the degree upon confirmation by the Council of Deans. No further approvals are needed from the Ministry or any other organization. If students obtain a Bachelor degree, they may enter the labor market or continue for a Master degree, if they meet the admission requirements. In the case of some professional specialties such as engineering, pharmacy, medicine, dentistry, law, etc., the students should register in a professional association. Some associations have further requirements such as practical experience or internship. As an example, for both medicine and law the students are required to complete supervised practical training for one year before they are allowed to practice on their own (RECONOW, 2016).

2.1.11 Academic staff

University academic staff must have Master degree or a PhD Staff; PhD holders are appointed or contracted by the university as assistant professors. They can be promoted after five years to associate professor if they meet the promotion requirements set by the university. An associate professor can also be promoted to professor after spending five years at associate level. The staff with Master degrees are categorized as university teachers and can be promoted to lecturer after five to seven years according to the university rules.

2.1.12 Research activities

Scientific research activities were initiated after 1995 because of grants received from international fundraisers. Palestinian researchers have managed to participate in several cooperation programs in the fields of technology and development, in addition to the dual programs which were set up to develop Palestinian competence. There are four main bodies which undertake research activities: Higher education institutions (precisely the Palestinian universities), governmental research institutions, NGOs and the private sector. In the Higher Education Institutions, the scientific research activities are focused on basic research. There are now sixteen scientific research centers in the Palestinian universities in the fields of agriculture, environment, water, energy and health.

At governmental level, there are some research centers such as the National Research Centre of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Management Research at the local Water Authority. Many NGOs constructed research centers which mostly focus on social studies and research. The private sector focuses on research activities on existing industries, such as the medical industry and some food industries. The HEIs have better opportunities to develop their research programs and international cooperation with European universities through the Tempus programme and other EU programs. However, it should be mentioned that research still lacks funding and a national policy for science, technology and research is required (EACEA, 2012).

3. Materials and Methods[1]

The purpose of the following chapter is to thoroughly present all the theoretical and practical elements on which the research was based. "Materials" refer to what was examined (students) and also to the various instruments, measures, equipment, or stimuli used in the study. This may include testing instruments, technical equipment, books, images, or other materials used in the research. "Methods" refer to how subjects were manipulated to answer the research questions, how measurements and calculations were made, and how the data were analyzed.

The methods section describes the rationale for the application of specific procedures or techniques used to identify, select, and analyze information applied to understanding the research problem, thereby, allowing the reader to critically evaluate a study's overall validity and reliability. The methodology section answers two main questions: How were the data collected? And, how were they analyzed?

Before trying to address the above-mentioned issues, we must first refer to the different respective components of the research. These components can be summed up as:

- Design,
- Methods,
- Participants,
- Study site description

3.1 Design

The selected methodological approach to investigate the research questions was a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. We adopted this approach following the current research trends. In recent years, the tendency to use "mixed" or combinatorial methods of research is strengthened while controversy between

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[1] *Methods: The techniques or procedures used to collect and analyze data related to a research question or hypothesis.*
Methodology: the strategy, the action plan, the process, or the design behind the selection and use of these methods and linking the selection and use of the methods with the desired results.

quantitative and qualitative decreases. Qualitative and quantitative research methods work complementarily, providing researchers with a fuller research approach when collecting and analyzing data. Four objectives are mainly pursued in a mixed methods research in education such ours:

- Combining or integrating quantitative and qualitative methods towards the best possible approach to the research problem.
- Generate quantitative and qualitative data towards a clear and deep understanding of the research problem being addressed.
- Generate quantitative and qualitative data from the same research problem that allows the researcher greater certainty in inferences, conclusions or statements which formulate its findings.
- Make more robust research by using the strengths from one research model to offset methodological shortcomings from the other. This produces more reliable research.

Below we mention some advantages of mixed research methods:

- The researcher, when using mixed research methods, can provide answers to a wider range of research questions.
- The researcher, using additional research methods, can compensate for the weaknesses of each method separately (principle of complementarity).
- Mixed research methods provide more substantiated conclusions through cross-referencing (triangulation principle).
- Combined research methods can be used to promote the universality, based on research results.
- The combination of quantitative and qualitative research can provide fuller and more comprehensive knowledge.
- The quantitative method is often called an explanatory, empirical or legislative (so called as it relates to the discovery and adoption of general laws or rules relating to a more general context) method, while the qualitative method is

defined as descriptive, understandable, proprietary (so called because it refers to the description, interpretation and understanding of situations and procedures that concern the individual) or interpretative.

The following table shows a general comparison between quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative methods	Quality methods
1. The main interest of quantitative methods focuses on the general and general social phenomenon.	1. The main interest of quality methods focuses on the description and understanding of the uniqueness of human experience, the empirical reality (biology) of the subjects, the specificity of their consciousness and their experiences.
2. The objective of quantitative methods is to explain the underlying causes of an event based on the "example": cause-cause, cause-effect.	2. The purpose of quality methods is to understand an event in the context of the whole of social life based on the example of the whole.
3. The purpose of quantitative methods is the formulation of universal laws. Social sciences are here considered to be the basis of their laws.	3. The aim of quality methods is to formulate individual laws. Social sciences are here considered to be self-explanatory.
4. The main tool of quantitative methods is quantitative analysis and measurement.	4. The main tool of quality methods is framed understanding and synthesis.
5. The dominant model is the explanatory hypothetical-didactic model.	5. The dominant model is the interpretive post-factum model.
6. Basic equipment of quantitative methods is the language of mathematics (e.g. coefficients of relevance).	6. A basic tool of quality methods is reason, dialogue and argumentation.
7. Preferred research techniques are experimental ones.	7. Preferred research techniques are communication, management, and interactive ones.

Table

According to the objectives of **triangulation design using parallel phases**, it is important to use quantitative and qualitative approaches to study in depth the same aspects of the research problem. To achieve this, we had to carefully plan the entire process of research in order to address these aspects of the problem from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. This was achieved by aligning the measuring instruments and research strategies used for the quantitative and qualitative data collection. Thus, the data analysis focuses on these aspects to obtain quantitative and qualitative data to triangulate or consider the same aspects of the problem.

To make the TAP project study a convergence study of triangulation, the researchers had to define educational procedures, build a checklist, align this to the expected educational outcomes for the first-year students and measure the performance and effectiveness of teaching and learning methods (quantitative phase).

We needed to know the experience of students during their first year of studies (qualitative approach). While conducting the study, we use quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the same aspects of the research problem. Thus, the researcher is able to intervene and explain the problem in depth from quantitative and qualitative perspectives (Figure).
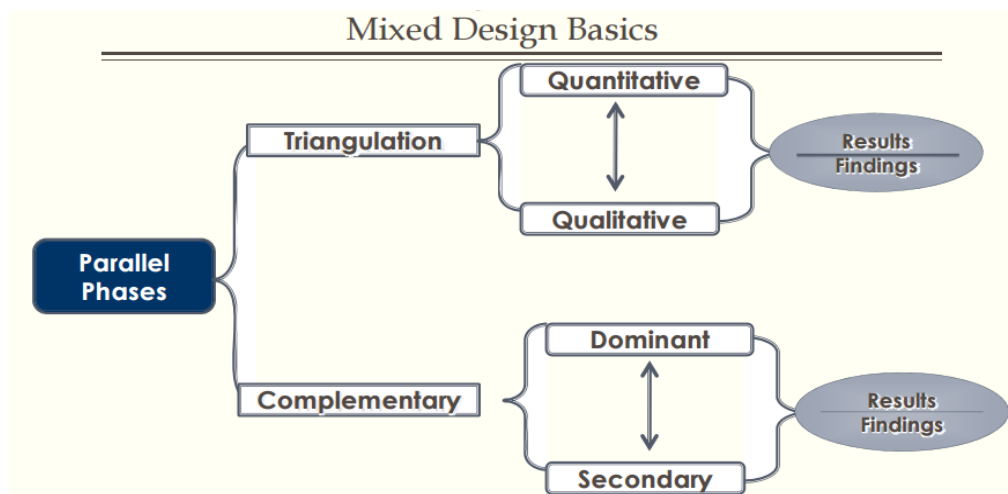
Figure 5:

3.1.1 Sampling methods

In our study, we took advantage of the pros that different sampling methods had to offer. According to every given situation, depending to any different needs and purposes, we utilized solely or combined some of the below mentioned methods.

✓ **Homogeneous samples**

This strategy selects cases that have common features to study and understand a particular subgroup in depth. In the present study, we want to study in depth - as part of a qualitative assessment - the experiences of a particular subgroup of students (first year students). Implementation of this strategy is often found in focus groups.

✓ **Criterion sampling**

The researcher who uses this strategy selects the cases which will be the sample according to a criterion, which is determined according to the objectives of his research. In our research, the major criterion was for the students to be in their first year of studies and in large enrollment classes above 45 students. Concerning the teachers, they had also to teach first year students in large enrollment classes.

✓ **Purposeful random sampling**

This strategy can be used to select the people to be included in a very small sample in order to increase the reliability of the sample. For example, in the present study, students from different faculties who participated in the focus groups, did actually join randomly by coincidence.

Thus, the focus groups did not rely on any suggestions made by the director who might have deliberately selected a group of freshmen in order to create a good impression of the university's teaching procedures during the first year of studies. It is important to note that the objective here as already mentioned is reliability, not representativeness and generalization.

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Focus Groups

The use of this method in social research dates back to the 1940s when social scientists began to question traditional methods of research and the effectiveness of individual methods of collecting research material, and to give more weight to respondents' views through non-directional approaches (Krueger, 1994). Kruger then found broad application in market research and marketing at industrialized countries in the 1950s (Dawson & Manderson, 1993). In the years that followed, it was used in conjunction with other methods, while the interest of the social sciences for focus groups was renewed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it was recognized that it can function as an important data source as well (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Focus groups are a research method of producing rich quality data through a process of interaction between group participants and a defined area of research interest. According to Krueger (1988: 18), the focus group approach refers to "a carefully organized debate, designed to draw perceptions and beliefs in a defined research topic, within a permissive, non-threatening environment." Similarly, Kitzinger (1994) points out that this method offers the possibility of access to the ways in which people think or why they think as they think. For Morgan (1998: 9), it is basically "a way to hear people and learn from them".

Focus groups are not a group interview with an interviewer who asks questions and respondents simply answer them, but it is a group discussion in which participants are asked to talk to each other about a particular subject through an interaction process that it is "vertical", i.e. interaction between the researcher and the participants, but above all it is a "horizontal interaction" between group members (Wilkinson, 1998). Interaction between group members results in lesser influence of researchers in the process and greater emphasis on participants' responses (Frey & Fontana, 1993).

The data produced by focus groups let the researchers understand the multi-level and dynamic nature of human perception as well as the fluidity, contradiction and plurality of views, feelings and experiences of respondents (Wilkinson, 1998).

In designing focus groups, the decisions taken by designers about the choice of the participants and the composition of the group are of particular importance. The most common way of selecting participants in focus groups is deliberate sampling. Regarding the general focus group's composition, the objective is to create a functional group that will produce useful research material through efficient and constructive discussions. The main conditions for creating a comfortable and productive debate are that the participants are active, interacting with each other and feeling comfortable discussing the research issues (Morgan, 1998).

Homogeneous focus groups

- Facilitate communication between participants.
- Promote the exchange of ideas, perceptions and experiences.
- They give a sense of security when expressing conflicts.
- Can result in the similarity of positions or views.

The heterogeneous focus groups

- They can enrich or motivate the conversation.
- May inspire other team members to look at the issue from a different perspective.
- May cause power imbalance.
- May lead to a lack of respect for different views expressed by some members (Robson, 2007).

The main reasons to select focus groups as a method of data generation for our research were the following:

- It is efficient, flexible and friendly.

- It enables the volume of data to be increased as it is collected / produced by many people at the same time.

- It is less time-consuming than conducting many individual interviews.

- It allows the investigation of the complexity of behavior and motivation.

- Allows to capture new ideas.

- Allows recognition of diversity.

- Some respondents prefer it and find it pleasant to engage in interviews within a group.

- Team dynamics help focus on the most important issues and act as physical quality controls when collecting data, as participants tend to control extreme views and balance each other.

- It can help empower or encourage some participants to participate in or facilitate taboo talk, since less-timid respondents can facilitate discussion (Robson, 2007; Morgan, 1998: 58-60).

3.2.2 Observation

Systematic and organized observation of individual behaviors or social interactions and processes is a method of collecting/producing data, which is particularly useful in educational research. Observation studies can be of a quantitative or qualitative nature (Patton, 1990).

Participatory observation refers to the partial or total involvement of the researcher in a research field of social life and the systematic observation of some dimensions of this field as they unfold in it (eg attitudes, relationships, interactions, etc.). This process requires the researcher to devote time, observe, listen, set questions and more generally to participate in the everyday life of people and the social context, usually for a long time (Bruman & Burgess, 1994; Hammersley & Attinkon, 1983; McLeod, 2009).

In the present study, we used the observation method as a quality data generating method. Specifically, we adopted the method of peripheral participation. Although we participated in the social context, we were not involved in the core activities of the

investigated groups (students). We played the role of the complete observer. We did not take part in the activities of the framework and we mainly adopted quantitative, structured observation methods.

Our main objective was to describe the research field, the people and the events that take place within it. To achieve this we preferred descriptive, focused and selective observations based on the nine original categories of descriptive observation distinguished by Spradley (1980):

- The outline of the natural environment.
- The material objects in space.
- The people involved and their special characteristics.
- The Systemic Social Framework.
- The activities.
- Personalized actions and behaviors.
- The goals, values and feelings in the field.
- The language used.
- Other forms of expression (ex, movement, sound).
- Interactions and ways of interacting.
- The facts and circumstances in the context.
- The time regarding the sequence of events.
- The wider social systems that may affect this field.

The main reasons to select the method of observation were the following:

- It is suitable for studying those behaviors, roles, practices, groups and organizations that are better understood and pictured within their "physical" space.
- It allows the collection/production of primary research material and rich quality data.

- It directly approaches the phenomenon under study, offering a more comprehensive view and a multifaceted understanding.
- It enables the immediate observation of processes, behaviors or events in the time they take place and as they evolve.
- It does not require expensive or complex equipment.
- It is interactive since there is a possibility for feedback from the participants regarding the data and the conclusions of the research.

3.2.3 Questionnaires

A formal standardized questionnaire is a survey instrument used to collect data from individuals about themselves, or about a social unit such as a household or a school. A questionnaire is said to be standardized when each respondent is to be exposed to the same questions and the same system of coding responses. The aim here is to try to ensure that differences in responses to questions can be interpreted as reflecting differences among respondents, rather than differences in the processes that produced the answers.

Standardized questionnaires are often used in the field of educational planning to collect information about various aspects of school systems. The main way of collecting this information is by asking people questions – either through oral interviews (face to face or telephone), or by self-administered questionnaires, or by using some combination of these two methods.

Among the types of information that can be collected by means of a questionnaire are facts, activities, level of knowledge, opinions, expectations and aspirations, membership of various groups, and attitudes and perceptions. In the field of educational planning, the information that is collected can be classified broadly into: (a) inputs to education (such as school resources or various background characteristics of schools, teachers or students), (b) learning and teaching processes, and (c) the outcomes of education (such as student achievement, attitudes towards institution, and measures of institution efficiency).

As a mechanism for obtaining information and opinion, questionnaires have a number of advantages and disadvantages when compared with other evaluation tools. The key strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires are summarized in bullet points below. In general, questionnaires are effective mechanisms for efficient collection of certain kinds of information. They are not, however, a comprehensive means of evaluation and should be used to support and supplement other procedures for evaluating and improving teaching.

The advantages of questionnaires:

- They offer respondents time to consider their responses carefully without interference from an interviewer, for instance.
- Cost. It is possible to provide questionnaires to large numbers of people simultaneously.
- Uniformity. Each respondent receives an identical set of questions. With closed-form questions, responses are standardized, which can assist in interpreting large numbers of respondents.
- Can address a large number of issues and questions of concern in a relatively efficient way, with the possibility of a high response rate.
- Often, questionnaires are designed so that answers to questions are scored and scores are summed to obtain an overall measure of the attitudes and opinions of the respondent.
- They may be mailed to respondents (although this approach may lower the response rate).
- They permit anonymity. It is usually argued that anonymity increases the rate of response and may increase the likelihood that responses reflect genuinely held opinions.

Disadvantages of questionnaires:

- It may be difficult to obtain a good response rate. Often there is no strong motivation for respondents to respond.

- They are complex instruments and, if badly designed, can be misleading.
- They are an unsuitable method of evaluation if probing is required – there is usually no real possibility for follow-up on answers.
- Quality of data is probably not as high as with alternative methods of data collection, such as personal interviewing.
- They can be misused – a mistake is to try to read too much into questionnaire results.

3.3 Field study description

In order to fulfill the questions of the research most of the field study took place at the respective universities. Data collection was conducted in Palestine during a field visit in the 3 out of 5 universities participating in this study. Data collection involved focus groups, semi-structured interviews and participant observation in large enrollment classes at the West Bank located institutions. Due to restrictions on entry into the Gaza Strip, the procedure for Al-Aqsa and UCAS universities was conducted via electronic means (Skype). Therefore, participant observation at Gaza located institutions was impossible and this constitutes the main limitation of this research.

In the following table is presented the sequence of visits and data collection to the Palestinian Universities:

LOCATION	INSTITUTION
Nablus	An-Najah National University
Hebron	Palestine Polytechnic University
Ramalla	UCAS & Al-Aqsa Universities (skype interviews)
Berzeit	Berzeit university
Ramalla	AQAC

Profiles of universities participate in data collection:

3.3.1 An-Najah National University (Nablus)

Nablus is a Palestinian city in the northern region of the West Bank, approximately 60 kilometers north of Jerusalem. Located in a strategic position between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, Nablus is considered the largest commercial and cultural center in Palestine. Since it was chartered as a full-fledged university in 1977, An-Najah has promoted the acquisition of modern knowledge whilst remaining committed to the transmission and preservation of Palestinian history, heritage and culture. Today, as the largest University in Palestine, An-Najah educates over 22,000 students and is home to 13 faculties, offering numerous undergraduate and graduate specializations.

An-Najah National University is dedicated to promoting understanding, providing the highest quality undergraduate and graduate education, and serving, as well, in scientific research. An-Najah acts as a base for sustainable development by encouraging students and the University community to assume leadership roles and to participate in serving society. An-Najah National University is a public institution whose mission is to advance learning, share knowledge and foster the skills needed in young men and women to succeed as people and professionals in all spheres of life. An-Najah also aims to instill the love of understanding in the students and to promote a culture of scientific excellence. The University strives to equip its students with the skills necessary to be productive and creative members of the Palestinian society and to compete in the domestic, Arab and international work markets.

The University is also dedicated to advancing scientific research on a global level and to meeting the community's needs by participating in sustainable economic, technical and human development. Additionally, An-Najah strives to preserve the cultural and religious heritage of the Palestinian people and to increase knowledge of this heritage.

Through offering a high quality education, An-Najah National University is promoting the development of qualified and competitive human resources. Maintaining this goal over the past thirty-six years, An-Najah has been an integral part in enhancing the capacity of local, regional and international markets.

As a leading academic institution in the Middle East, with a clear vision of progress, An-Najah University continues to maintain and improve upon its own educational standards. Through the constant training of staff and, more importantly the encouragement, education and accreditation of students, An-Najah's aspirations of becoming a leading global institution are becoming a reality (figure). There are currently around 20,000 students enrolled within An-Najah's four campuses: the New Campus, the Old Campus, Hisham Hijjawi College of Technology, Khadouri Campus in Tulkarem (which offers programs in the fields of agriculture and veterinary medicine) and An-Najah National Hospital. An-Najah is comprised of 13 faculties located throughout the different campuses, offering 79 Bachelor Degree programs, 23 Intermediate Diploma programs, 52 Graduate programs including 3 High Diploma programs in Medicine and two PhD programs in Chemistry and Physics.

Figure: "An-Najah statistics"

In addition to this, the University has libraries located in each of the four campuses containing more than 435,488 books; 180,000 of those are electronic, as well as more than 28,000 scientific journals. By utilizing the academic body and material resources, An-Najah can provide and participate in scientific research in international level and to respond to the needs of local society by offering support through a plethora of social and technical programs.

3.3.2 Palestine Polytechnic University (Hebron)

Hebron is a Palestinian city located in the southern West Bank, 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem. Nestled in the Judaean Mountains, it lies 930 meters (3,050 ft) above sea level. It is the largest city in the West Bank, and the second largest in the Palestinian territories after Gaza, and home to 215,452 Palestinians (2016).

Palestine Polytechnic University (PPU) is one of the leading polytechnic universities in Palestine. It was founded in 1978 by the University Graduates Union (UGU), which is a non-profit organization in Hebron district. The primary mission is to emphasize qualitative vocational and technical engineering education. This is achieved by providing students with practical knowledge in order to help them acquire an up-to-date experience directly related to their disciplines.

There were about 6000 students enrolled in the various areas of specialization at PPU during the academic year 2013/2014. PPU dedicates particular attention and commitment to enhance its relationship with the local community by identifying potential community priorities and needs. To this end, it promotes certain diverse services, strategies and programs to meet these priorities and needs.

In addition to the two-year diploma degree, PPU has been offering a B.Sc. degree in a number of engineering programs since 1990.PPU is officially recognized by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education and it is an active member in the Rector Conference of Palestinian Universities.

The University's mission is:

- To graduate qualified workforce able to make a positive change and fulfill the needs and requirements of the community in scientific, technological, and research fields.
- To provide innovative ideas and solutions.

- To strengthen the role of the scientific research and development in accomplishing sustainable and substantial national growth.
- To attract qualified and ranked human resources.
- To reform the university environment and atmosphere.

Furthermore, University's main objectives are:
- Assuring quality in academic programs.
- Assuring quality in administrative issues.
- Encouraging the scientific research.
- Communicating efficiently with local community.
- Achieving full financial self – dependency.
- Enhancing the university atmosphere and the extracurricular activities.

6 Master's Degree

28 Bachelor's Degree

26 Diploma Degree

1400
yearly number
of graduates

16,200+
The total number
of graduates

3.3.3 University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS-Gaza strip)

University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS) is a Palestinian academic institution of higher-education in Gaza Strip, Palestine. It was established in 1998 as a technical and vocational education College and is currently accredited by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education as a University College offering Bachelor and diploma degrees in more than 40 different distinguished technically and technologically-oriented programs.

UCAS vision is to become the leading college in the region providing distinguished training in technical and vocational education focusing on applied sciences. Their mission is to provide the various sectors in Palestine and the region with its needs for highly-qualified and skillful professionals; thus, participating in building a modernized state. The College strives to:

- Open new majors based on local and regional job markets.
- Develop the performance of our academic and administrative staff.
- Provide state-of-the-art learning facilities to our students.
- Expand and modernize our central library as an indispensable academic tool for students and faculty.
- Establish and maintain strong relations with the local and international partners through which mutual benefits could be achieved.

The University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS) was established to develop the educational process and improve the level of applied education in Palestine in order to achieve the development goals. UCAS is keen to educate its students the knowhow of being productive citizens, promote creativity through team working, free thinking and constructive dialogue in an atmosphere of objectivity and tolerance. The University is highly interested in promoting the use of the state-of-the-art technologies in education and strengthening the role of universities as beacons of creativity and innovation. UCAS offers a variety of academic programs that were carefully designed to meet the needs

and desires of students as well as the Palestinian market. In addition, UCAS provides distinguished community outreach programs and services to the local Palestinian society. Guided by a vision to be a leading College in the region, UCAS strives to shape a better educational life for a brighter future of Palestine

3.3.4 Al-Aqsa Universities (Gaza strip)

Al-Aqsa University was established in 2000 under the Higher Education Act (No.11, 1988) as an expansion of the College of Education. The University has been a member of the Arab Universities Union as well as of the Palestinian Higher Education Council since 2003. It is comprised of the following 8 faculties: Applied Sciences, Administration and Finance, Education, Media, Arts & Human Sciences, Fine Arts, Sport and Physical Education, Al-aqsa Community & Intermediate College.

Al-Aqsa University is striving to be distinguished among Palestinian and regional universities in all fields of academic studies, scientific research and community service based on the comprehensive high-quality culture. Al-Aqsa University is a Palestinian government institution of higher education which aims at preparing a person who is provided with knowledge, skills and values and having the ability of continuing education and utilizing information technology through capacity-building programs, university education, scientific research and community development and service. In the course of achieving its view, Al- Aqsa university is truly committed to Arabic and Islamic Culture and the principles of human rights which include responsibility, compliance with the rule of law, transparency, respect, tolerance, justice, equality, consolidation and participation of all concerned parties.

The university tries hard to spread knowledge and deepen its roots, and serve and develop the Palestinian community in particular and the Arabic and local community in

general, within the framework of a philosophy based on national concepts and the heritage of Arabic and Islamic civilization and tries to achieve this objective through the following:

• Enhancement of the institutional development of Al-Aqsa university through the improvement of the adequacy of the reinforcement supporting the teaching- learning process, scientific research and community service.

• Improvement of the quality of academic programs in the university through the provision of effective teaching- learning environment.

• Participation in improving knowledge and understanding as a basis of supporting the adoption of decisions and policy making, regarding the issues of Al-Aqsa university and the Palestinian community through networking with educational and research institutions and centers and civil community institutions at local, regional and global levels.

• Participation in the process of the continuous development of the Palestinian society by providing educational, training , research and consultation services as well as voluntary work, jointly with official institutions and the institutions of the civil community and the private sector.

• The development of a medium professional educational system based on distinction and proficiency, meets the developmental requirements of the community.

3.3.5 Berzeit University (Berzeit)

Birzeit University campus is located on a hill overlooking a series of hills spreading towards the Mediterranean, and is positioned on the archaeological site known as Khirbet Birzeit. The campus is located in the outskirts of Birzeit town, near Ramallah city, 20 kilometers' northwest of Jerusalem. Birzeit has moderate weather and is located 850 meters above sea level and is covered with olive trees.

There are 8 faculties (Arts, Business and Economics, Education, Engineering and Technology, Graduate studies, Law and Public Administration, Pharmacy, Nursing and Health professions, Science), offering 101 academic programs (67 bachelor programs, 30 master programs, 1 PhD, 2 diploma programes, 1 program for foreign students).

Founded on the principles of excellence and opportunity for all, Birzeit University has become Palestine's leading academic institution. It is an academic powerhouse with a clear focus on excellence that has secured its national and international recognition unparalleled with other established institutions. Birzeit University is a vibrant community of scholarship and learning that stands in the service of the country and the community.

After nearly a century, what began as a small girls' school in Birzeit town has become one of the most prestigious Palestinian university, transforming Palestinian higher education through its impact on community awareness, culture and resistance. Birzeit University has been a thorn in the side of the occupation, insisting on playing its role of enlightenment and creating a multicultural Palestinian society on the campus grounds. There, students and staff are able to dialogue and communicate, rejecting the occupation's attempts to chaperone thought and culture.

The small girls' school developed into a college under the Nasir family, particularly the late Moses Nasir, who managed and administered the school. Through the Nakba of 1948 and its deep impact on the history of the Palestinian people and Birzeit University, the school continued its educational mission. Not long after, college head Musa Nasir asked Gabi Baramki, a graduate who had just returned to Palestine after earning a master's degree in chemistry from the American University of Beirut, to help transitioning the school from a primary education institution to an intermediate college.

Among Arabs, Birzeit University was considered a renowned place of learning, funding a number of community centers and institutes, initiating more disciplines, and opening new faculties. Locally, these centers and institutes were pioneering in a number of fields, such as public health and literacy, and this became an integral part of the university's image. Today, Birzeit plays a key role in Palestinian cultural, social and

political life, a role that is expanding through the university's central location in the heart of the West Bank and its spacious campus.

Now Birzeit University's strength lies in its vast network of international relations, expressed in joint research projects and exchange programs. Visiting professors from abroad (Palestinians and internationals) come to teach many various disciplines. Immense effort is needed to maintain and expand these relationships under the present circumstances.

Birzeit University has always been keen about improving its academic programs in an effort to meet community needs, and to keep pace with global developments. This has pushed the university to develop and introduce a doctoral program in social sciences, the first of its kind in Palestine and neighboring countries, merge fields of knowledge, and offer other specialized bachelor's and master's level programs.

"Birzeit University's academic departments continue to review their curricula and academic programs to keep pace with global developments and quality standards. In this regard, I would like to refer to the long-standing academic programs that have been offered for more than 40 years, accumulating experience and knowledge. This is what makes it outstanding locally and internationally. I think that we all need to work in this direction, in order to be able to compete globally.

Moreover, the university is very committed to focusing its teaching methods on the learner, making them more effective, efficient and fun, because learning is a real pleasure. As an educational institution, we should involve our students in an interactive learning process, taking into account their character and respecting their abilities, and thus opening up students' horizons to knowledge and developing their skills.

In fact, technology plays a vital role in this transformation, as access to information is available in portable devices that are constantly carried by students and teachers, allowing our students and graduates to practice analysis, criticism and research in the midst of this vast amount of information, turning it into valuable knowledge. The university operates through its projects and partnerships, aiming to develop its

capabilities in this regard, and we are very committed to the development of this technology through faculty members and students in support of the educational process.

3.3.6 AQAC (Ramallah)

The Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission was established in 2002 as a semi-autonomous body under the Ministry of Higher Education by Ministerial Decree No (2). The decree entrusted the commission with all the Ministry's powers and privileges granted by Higher Education Law (11) of 1998 regarding the quality of Palestinian higher education institutions and their academic programs.

On 28/8/ 2012, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a decree re-establishing the Commission and granting it financial and administrative independence. This decree appointed a temporary board chaired by the Minister of Higher Education, and mandated this board to formulate a law for AQAC to regulate its operations.

Since its establishment, AQAC is the only body authorized to license HEIs and accredit their educational programs in Palestine. The Commission observes a number of important steps in the institutionalizing licensure and accreditation, including networking with similar Commissions, developing manuals and instructions for licensure and accreditation, and taking the initiative in spreading the culture of quality in higher education institutions.

The Head of AQAC is responsible for managing, planning, developing, implementing and coordinating all operational activities and related resources of AQAC, and has a Commission Council formed upon the endorsement of the Council of Ministers. AQAC's Council is composed of up to fifteen members of academics, professionals and representatives of the public sector with experience and knowledge in evaluation processes in order to ensure quality in all disciplines of higher education.

AQAC's ultimate goal is to ensure that higher education institutions are effectively positioned to provide quality education aligned with best practices and international standards in line with the socio-economic developmental needs of the Palestinian society.

To achieve its goal, AQAC works to achieve the following four main objectives:

i.   HEIs are functioning based on international standards.

ii. HEIs' capacity to monitor and control quality is enhanced and improved.

iii. HEIs in Palestine offer academic programs in line with national development priorities.

iv. Citizens, students and public have increased access to updated information on HEIs programs and quality.

4.1 General status

4.2 AQAC Research data review

An interview was held at the premises of the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission, in Ramallah, with the Head of Board Dr. Mohammed Alsubu who is serving in the position since 2006. During the interview, an explanatory introduction was made involving AQAC's role, spotlighting issues on the Palestinian tertiary education and specific objectives and responsibilities of AQAC to keep quality standards in education.

4.2.1 AQAC interview

After an introduction on general information concerning the country's tertiary education system, the interview was shifted to the national educational policy developed in Palestine. First of all, in any university the taught courses are divided in three discrete areas.

- Core curriculum

- Major core courses

- Optional or supportive courses

Core curriculum ensures common culture among students of the same institution ranging from fifteen to thirty credit hours. Usually, these classes include large number of students. Major core courses constitute a second distinction of teaching units. Normally these classes do not exceed the amount of 40 students assuring an ideal teacher to the student ratio. The third set of courses is optional/ supporting classes where students are free to choose depending on their interests. In any of the above cases, if the teacher to student ratio is not satisfactory, this program may be terminated. Such a thing, has already happened several times in the past.

Following, Dr. Alsubu referring to the typical exam-based evaluation procedure. In most cases, a standard pattern of three sequential exams is used. The two first (midterm exams) contribute twenty five percent each, and the latter, fifty percent to the final grade.

Moving to issues that surpass the boarders of academic institutions, conversation focused to students' employability. Unemployment increases, given the high quantity of students graduating yearly and the local labor market's low absorption rate. Three significant measures are adopted by AQAC in order to face low employability of Palestinian students. These may be listed as next:

- Diversification of taught disciplines

- Internationalization

- Encouragement of using ICT means

In first place, an issue that was mentioned is the fact that exact same disciplines/ programs may be taught in two institutions located within a short distance. One counter measure against this event, is avoiding replication of already existing programs. To

achieve its goal, AQAC had to cut off licensing of identical programs. Also, internationalization played major role towards confrontment of unemployment. By offering summer courses Palestinian universities attract foreign students and increase academic mobility. This measure exceeds to faculty members too, allowing Palestinian students to become keen with different cultures and teaching methods. A third adopted measure is the use of ICT tools in the educational procedure, providing students with valuable computer skills.

An additional and important step AQAC has taken (mainly against unemployment), is bridging academia with labor market. In this way, it is demanded from the students to have an internship in private or public sector before their graduation.

Concerning course design, AQAC is responsible to deliver specific guidelines to universities. ACAQ is focused on expected learning outcomes for each academic program in order to meet with the demands of the labor market. When a proposal for a future program is submitted to AQAC for evaluation or accreditation, it has to be accompanied with a list of specific promised outcomes. If these outcomes do not match with the general requirements, then the implementation of the program is not approved. This would constitute a first level of quality assurance.

Moreover, quality has to be assured throughout educational experience, taking into account both human and technical factors. Apart from monitoring infrastructures like equipment in laboratories and human personnel AQAC also focuses in other aspects. An important undertaken measure is strengthening the relationship between local community and university. Promoting positive interaction with actions like addressing practical problems of the local society increases proposed quality. This interaction may also apply as an external and indirect form of performance evaluation coming from the different stakeholders of the community.

Quality evaluation is defined in two separate levels, institutional and program-specific. The first one is considering university as a whole entity. Institutional accreditation includes all shareholders like the board of trusties, the director, vice presidents, deans,

chair persons, students, teaching and learning environment, educational resources (libraries, laboratories etc.). In general, it is referred to anything that affects the teaching and learning procedure. Mainly, this kind of accreditation is implemented for new institutions to be established.

Program-level evaluation is happening under a more frequent basis (four to five years, depending on the program's length). There are also included short check-up visits within unspecified and not regular occasions. These might involve interviews with professors, students or student unions. Aside from this, there is not offered any further quality assurance on different level.

As this study is mostly concentrated on first year students, the interest on how their achievement is monitored raised. The information extracted was that AQAC has not developed any particular approach for freshmen. A certain amount of freedom is offered to universities on how knowledge and skills are delivered. Consequently, an expected outcomes approach may serve as an indicator for students' performance and teaching efficiency. Strict guidelines suppress not only genuine creativity but also innovation and this is the reason to try diminishing narrow instructions.

It is stated that as far as universities and professors compromise with the general rules, their independence is granted. If a professor does not take action towards achieving the desired learning outcomes, he or she receives a verbal reproach. There are not any additional preventive or institutive actions over than and above that.

Concerning professor evaluation, there is offered a two-way evaluation. This procedure involves both students and administration. First of all, students are entitled to provide their feedback on professors' performance completing questionnaires. This is happening in most of the cases once the semester has come to its end. Although questions may vary from one institution to another the main issues are covered anyhow. The second well established procedure of teaching evaluation is coming from administrative level. In this instance, the Chairman of the department is liable to the Dean. It is a much more trustworthy procedure that ensures solid and reliable remarks.

Closing with AQAC's duties, it was reported that these include reexamination of the provided courses. Once a program design is submitted to AQAC there is the possibility for universities to revise a 10 % of its content every year. This action ensures that programs are up-to date and aligned with the modern educational trends and demands. In this spirit is also orchestrated the incorporation of technology and ICT tools within all educational processes.

4.3 Participants

The research focused on the opinions of two main groups: students and teachers of the participant institutions. In addition, internal staff representing the Quality Unit of each respective institution participated in this research. Representatives of the Quality Unit of each institution were also asked to elaborate on the existing evaluation and assessment practices of each university.

In the research, the student representation concerned first year students who made their transition from the schooling system and secondary education to higher education. This is an important component that needs to be considered due to the differences in learning methods, the educational environment and the changes in attitude between teachers at high school level and university professors. Due to movement restrictions within Palestine, the focus groups with students and professors of UCAS & Al-Aqsa University and interviews with the Quality Units were held via skype.

5. Institutionally established practices & Quality Assurance

Institutional structures have been established according to the Ministry of Education and international standards. In accordance with the international directives of the Higher Education Institutions and in order to achieve the quality assurance and the status of Palestinian Universities, the Quality Assurance Units have been established and tasked with following-up and keeping pace with the quality assurance affairs and academic

development to secure access to academic and scientific levels which enable it to compete with the local and regional universities. Quality Units at the participant universities have been established in coordination with the Ministry's standards.

The Quality Unit is responsible for developing courses and curriculum standards and is cooperative with labor market stakeholders to incorporate present trends into curricula design. The Quality Unit of each university has the administrative capacity to improve teaching and learning standards and to monitor the administrative processes as well. It has two major parts. The Quality of education and the Quality of administration. The Quality Unit aims to improve weakness in administrative level if necessary.

On Educational level, the Quality Unit has applied a course quality assessment. At the end of each semester, professors are asked to submit online a detailed report of the course. Each professor should form a detailed report of the course online, including the course syllabus, credits, textbooks, references, course content, copy of the highest degree, sample of average, weaknesses of the course and recommendations on how to improve it. In addition, the Quality Unit runs a general evaluation for whole Bachelor and Master programs, in the end of each program.

In 2016, the course syllabus template has been extended, with an additional section referring to adopted assessment methods. Professors are obliged to mention the blend of employed methods during their courses. Furthermore, teaching quality is maintained by the Quality Committee of every Faculty. These committees are directly cooperating with the Center for Teaching and Learning. Their main goal is to examine two teaching aspects: use of ICT tools and utility of assessment methods. At the end of the academic year there is a comparison between different approaches that Faculties have adopted.

Academic policies are the responsibility of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Quality Units together with the Vice President for Academic Affairs are responsible for the quality of the academic programs and for evaluating teachers' performance. In regard to courses' overall quality assurance, this duty mostly encumbers the

University's Quality Unit and the Vice President of Academic Affairs. Methods to assure that each course fits with the overall outcome objectives of the program are taken such as mapping of the academic program (organic and technical), evaluation on the program's specifications and teachers' evaluation. In case that teachers receive negative evaluation about their performance, the Vice President for Academic Affairs in cooperation with the Dean of the Department are responsible to verbally instruct and advise the professor. There is an additional formal mechanism to inspect that short of incidents.

Additionally, a 65-hour training is provided for new coming professors occupied on any educational level. The training is mandatory and includes issues as: syllabus design, action research, methods of teaching in higher education, use of ICT tools and assessment methods. This means, that every professor has received the same instructions and shares the identical teaching culture with his colleagues no matter what year students he/she lectures. A further process held to assure high performance and teaching quality is the ordinance of trial period teaching. An academic can only become a lecturer after completing three continuous years and receive positive evaluations. In this way, it is guaranteed that academic personnel do not lack teaching skills.

In addition to the above-mentioned measures, there is the yearly debriefing conversation. Senior teachers conduct a six-hour-long roundtable discussion. It is consisted of three equal in time intervals, each dedicated to the following issues: learning, teaching and assessment. In any case, it is under universities' policies to provide teaching freedom on the teaching methods employed. This ensures independence and flexibility for the professors to continue their duties in autonomous and unbiased modus.

A complaint system has been developed to provide students with the opportunity to report any problems or complaints his/she thinks are relevant for academic improvement. Each student has a 3-day deadline to send his/her complaints or dissatisfaction about his mark in case he/she wants to be improved. It has been

reported that a peer evaluation system throughout the semester is highly considered in order to introduce improvement and achieve a high-standard educational system.

The Quality Unit receives a general feedback from graduated students, every year up to five years after their graduation. In this way, they are informed about their job affiliation and in general keeping track about career process and achievements after graduation. That interrelates graduation with successful employment and access to the labor market.

Finally, concerning the policy and the processes that have been developed to provide clear and transparent standards of entry for prospective students finishing secondary school to university, it was mentioned that it is vital to inform students about the job potentials. It is vital for engaging students more to university environment, to identify their learning needs and provide constructive information at secondary school level through multimedia and open events about university programs by providing a complete and detailed university course agenda. However, specific policies addressed to 1rst year students have not been designed at this level. This fact creates space for further improvement as it was mentioned earlier. Among those policies it was favored the provision of incentives to professors that invest on improving students' skills.

Assessment practices:

At the beginning of the semester all professors hand over a hard copy of the course description to students. This is accompanied by a verbal introduction to the main learning outcomes, the utilized assessment methods and the adopted grading system. There are general and specific courses, with the first ones to consist a core curriculum, common for all undergraduates. The distinguishing difference between those two regarding course design -and subsequently its description- is that professors have the

freedom to form their own teaching policy for each specific/specialization course they lecture.

Palestinian Universities do not have a specific matrix for 1rst year education although they have a complete and organized matrix for all university years. Neither specific assessment policies have been created to be oriented to first year students. The standard approach includes two semestrial exams. Over the past years, it has been instructed that a variety of assessment methods needs to be employed in order to follow recent academic trends. Freedom on the chosen assessment methods is guaranteed for professors after the permission of the Head of the Department.

Concerning the assessment processes, workload, quantity and type of assessments varied by professors and courses. Most instructors follow the traditional student assessment practices that include a final exam. The standard university policy gives the instructors the right to dedicate 2 credit hours in class teaching, distributed among lectures, participations and some team-work assignments. The remaining credit hours are for online learning via Moodle, social media or other online tools which allow for interaction between students and teachers.

Some instructors prefer to use other methods of assessment, like practical-based projects which count for 25 or 30% of the final mark, depending on course and university. Project-based assignments usually involve team-work between different groups that allow students to interact between themselves and their professors developing as well their presentation and communication skills. Other assessment methods involve written reports or the traditional written exams at the end of each semester. Besides the exams, students are expected to carry written assignments or papers as additional means for their assessment. Assessment is based on other methods, as well, including oral exams or dissertation. In-class participation is also ranked as priority component of the assessment plan. The grading system is based on a gradual approach and combination of different assessment methods with the results of the final exams. Depending on the course, assessment can be based on practical assignments and projects that provide a gradual applicability of knowledge. These

methods varied largely on number of students for each class. Assessing large enrollment classes can be challenging so final written exams is a much preferable method for some professors.

Students find that a mixed evaluation system that combines other elements besides exams and assessments should be taken into account. Hence, revision tests after each class could help students revise and reflect on what have been taught. Practical project assignments are also much more preferred than final written exams because they can reflect the skills and critical thinking of the students rather than requiring memorization. A negative component that was discussed, was that first-year students are not assigned with many project assignments. Their performance evaluation is mainly based on three written exams mostly at the end of the semester and the academic year. Others are not adequately prepared for the exams and that influences their academic performance. Nevertheless, students are not in favor of this system, neither find it a fair way for evaluating their performance.

Another component that was discussed is the trust building between professors and students which influences the assessment processes and students' performance. A fundamentally strong relationship between professors and students can easily reflect its advantages throughout the semester. It makes the students' assessment easier and more accurate while acts supportively to their self-confidence. This gives the opportunity for higher academic performance and puts aside the outdated evaluation methods (e.g. grading solely based on final exams). Assignments, laboratory courses, quizzes, several exams and project based learning are just some examples of contemporary assessment methods utilized. Of course, there were mentioned incidents of students' tendency to feel attached to traditional assessment methods. In order to face that kind of obstacles, professors prefer to directly address students and motivate them to carry on. It was stated that most of the times students respond efficiently to their academic responsibilities.

It was sensed that students are notably skeptic towards new methods of assessment. The opinions varied on whether they would be willing to participate in an online course or adopting contemporary assessment practices. However, they tended to be in favor of anything that escaped the paradigm of the typical/ traditional lecture type course. They referred to group works and in-class presentations as skill gaining schemes. This was supported with arguments referring to group projects not only as intriguing procedure but also as a way to advance competency. Being exposed to new challenges increases not only their capacity but may also boost up their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Problem solving, critical listening, analytical and/or abstract thinking are some crucial skills for learners to cultivate in order to cope with their future studies. This fact makes obvious that more holistic and complete assessment methods need to be employed in tertiary teaching procedures. Professors made clear with their statements that they actually move towards this very direction by adopting more flexible and innovative assessment methods. Overall, professors expressed a merely satisfactory -leaning to positive- impression concerning students' achievement. However, what was discussed is the limited time that often professors have in trying to use other type of assessment and teaching materials. Some of the professors stated that although they want to use e-learning tools and organize their material online or use other types of assessment, they spend much time in changing their first-year students' mentality. Thus, different opinions were presented about using alternative assessment practices among faculty professors.

Evaluation practices:

The major mechanism to ensure teaching quality is achieved through questionnaires answered by students on a semestrial basis. Evaluation of teaching practices is structured through an online evaluation system and is conducted as an on-line survey covering a variety of matters connected with the teaching and learning procedure. To achieve higher level of objectivity, students have to submit their feedback prior to receiving their grades. Professors have access to feedback information only by the time grading procedure is completed. The feedback is in online format and compulsory for all students. If one does not fill in the questionnaire, will consequently not be able to view

his or her marks. On the other hand, the middle term feedback is not mandatory for neither professors nor students. There are also reported some actions to the direction of improvement of the procedure. This happens in order to get more trustworthy responses. In some cases, students appear to hastily and carelessly fill in the questionnaires. For that reason, the questionnaire design got stricter with questions that allow cross validation. This led to more accurate and confident assumptions on the teaching process.

The academic staff in the end of each course, consists by 18 questions that try to focus on the tools and techniques the professors use during the class such as: "Did the professor use technology?", "Did he/she include everybody in his teaching?" etc. As a result, professors receive the total evaluation according to these percentages:

- 40% $\rightarrow$ Students' evaluation
- 30% $\rightarrow$ Head of department
- 10% $\rightarrow$ Dean
- 15% $\rightarrow$ Scientific research evaluation
- 5% $\rightarrow$ Contribution to community (Course evaluation)

Some professors stated that in order to measure the impact of teaching, the final results of the exams should be considered, that depict the level of achievement and students' learning in the class. Therefore, collecting feedback from students' exams is a clear indicator of a professor's success in delivering the teaching material. Evaluation deriving from students is also constructed in an informal environment, and it was considered important in order to consider students' opinion about the course and evaluate their comprehension of the teaching material. Building trust with the students is a very important component to assess their learning and improve teaching.

An informal procedure also exists within the teaching system. That is based on informal visits by a professor to another professor's class evaluating his/her weaknesses, strengths or proposed alterations etc. Professors can see the results and receive suggestions to improve all the teaching weaknesses, with letters (appreciation letter,

satisfactory letter, unsatisfactory letter). The appreciation letter is directed to professors which have contributed to the academic community and are highly valued for their teaching and actions. Similarly, the satisfactory letter documents the progress of satisfaction that a professor has achieved during the academic year. The unsatisfactory letter has a purpose of monitoring the teaching quality and takes the form of "warning" for the professors. If a professor has received 3 times in a row, unsatisfactory letter, he/she should meet the Quality Unit for further directions. There are no professor assessment policies during the semester. If students have issues they can informally contact the Head of each department and report their problems.

According to the students, most of the times not significant changes occur considering the evaluation results. Students are not highly convinced that their feedback can actually cause a difference on the issues they confront. Even in cases of negative response they did not witness any significant change to the teaching procedure. What it was also stated is that some professors do not realize that an attitude change is required and that is necessary for improving assessment practices.

The evaluation becomes, in other instances, simply an inconsequential step just before accessing the grade results at the end of the semester. In addition, there is a final year evaluation whereas students are given the opportunity to evaluate all aspects of teaching (lecturers, teaching methods and assessment, textbooks). In this way, there is the possibility to collect all freshmen responses and produce a final outcome. Informal evaluation by students in teaching styles and methods is also encouraged, as it helps professors to reconsider the teaching style.

The idea of evaluation during the semester seemed appealing for both students and professors and there where even some professors who gave this opportunity for their courses. Additionally, students leaned positively to the solution of an application allowing evaluation used individually from each one's smartphone. One of the recommendations that was made by the professors was the use of an online

assessment tool in Moodle platform, especially for large enrollment classes. Finally, a customized evaluation policy for 1rst year education students is necessary due to the fact that freshmen come from a totally different educational background and are used to learning methods from high school that are much more differentiated than university's independent learning.

Students' evaluation on teaching and course content:

Professors specified that improvement in course delivery and adopted practices is necessary in yearly basis. Therefore, not only teaching methods need improvement but also course delivery and adopted practices need to progress. Updating teaching material can also enhance learning and contribute in providing knowledge that is aligned with the requirements of the education nowadays in international level. Similarly, professors need to be further developing and build upon their knowledge and get updated information in order to transmit them to their students during course delivery. As it was stated "some professors teach the same things for 15 years while education and society have been progressed". There is a clear intention from instructors to acquire up-to-date knowledge attending the current academic progress and advancements.

A very important role on the evaluation of teaching and learning procedure is coming from students. The official evaluation policy has the form of online evaluation questionnaires that students are required to complete in order to access their marks at the end of the semester and the academic year. Evaluation is anonymous but feedback collected cannot always be valid due to the other factors that influence students' responses. Students may evaluate their professors based on the positive or negative image developed about him/her and how the class has been constructed i.e. interactive, engaging and stimulus, boring etc. Students may also evaluate based on sympathies towards specific professors, and/or final marks. This process is often seen as boring or unimportant for students who choose to mark randomly. Apart from the semestrial surveys, in the last year of studies it has been introduced a final questionnaire-based evaluation consisting of six separate segments. Students are also being given the

opportunity to evaluate their professors in an informal way by asking questions such as: "How do you see the course? What is your opinion about the book?" etc. Despite the fact that evaluation happens to improve the situation, little difference has been documented by the students, which creates disappointment and general dissatisfaction.

Challenges identified in first year education:

Different aspects of the students' life were discussed including learning difficulties that can affect students' academic performance in various ways. Specific difficulties were also indicated by students during their 1rst academic year. Among the most discussed were the adaptation levels of students coming from different backgrounds to the university system. The transition from high school to university can be challenging when moving from a very structured system and schedule to a more hectic and independent where students need to be self-disciplined and self-organized. In high school, students are not provided with thorough information about the university faculties, subjects and courses in order to understand the possible career choices and what is closer to their personality.

Another issue that students brought up, was that they lack orientation about university courses, policies and university life. This creates problems in adapting at university life and requires skills like life and time management that students found particularly difficult. For example, organizing their schedule according to different classes, get oriented around university premises and faculties takes time to organize. Even to develop social relations and learn how to communicate your ideas within class and present arguments. Consequently, students even after entering university, drop-out university or change course programme and that affects them and their families both personally and financially. On the other hand, some students do not feel guided concerning specific courses' objectives, their studies in general and furthermore their forthcoming professional career. This is not a general assumption and is only valid for a limited number of students. It is greatly dependent on the field of studies each student

attends and the related labor market. Often parents, as well, are not informed about career possibilities and often "push" their children to choose course and career paths related to advanced social status such as professors, engineers, lawyers etc.

The main problem identified was the language barriers and comprehension of courses terminology taught in English. Language command and comprehension levels was another main component that students focused on since they found themselves inappropriately prepared to adapt in this new learning situation. Since classes are delivered in English and Arabic, a number of students face difficulties in following lessons and meet student demands' including class participation, assignment and exams when held in English language. The majority of courses are offered in English, including books, materials, textbooks and exams which are in English, affect their academic performance. Therefore, students insisted that they need more help to improve their communication skills and expression, rather than their grammar knowledge. The fact that students also struggle to follow their teachers' lectures should not be underestimated.

Learning a foreign language at school level differs in style and purpose than at the university. Some 1st year students stated that they would consider dropping out their studies due to high pressure and demanding academic schedule. What it was clearly mentioned was the learning differences between high school and university. In high schools, English language teaching is focused on grammar and vocabulary and students do not learn terminologies that they are going to use later at the university, neither practice orally. In contrast, at university level, students are required to express themselves in English, write exams and assignments, participate in class and make presentations in a language other than theirs. This creates burdens in their adaptation to the university life during first year education.

However, students' language issues do not leave undisrupted the teaching procedure. After attending English courses throughout their school years, once into the university, Palestinian students find themselves unable to interact efficiently. As a professor stated "students come from classical education to critical education" and often the

achievements are not satisfactory. Consequently, language problems are reported to negatively affect students' achievement. The desired results are not reached and in several examples learners face great difficulties to keep up with the lecturer's pace. It was even proposed that professors should actually force students to use English more and more. Another very important notice was made concerning selection criteria of students' enrollment. It has been observed in the past, students with high admission scores to perform poorly just because they lack basic communication skills in English. That is also related to comprehension of lectures and students participation in the class.

In order to face these issues, professors report that they stopped concentrating solely in language courses. Instead, there was an attempt to engage learners while teaching core curriculum courses as all of them are taught in English. Students not only have to attend the courses in English but also to communicate orally in this language. Eventually, skills like reading, listening and speaking are finally practiced and developed. However, there still exists a proportion of professors arguing that greater attention has to be paid in language courses.

Another important notice was made related to organizational matters and more specifically the courses' scheduling. Time and transportation are serious issues and students pursue to optimize and manage them in an effective way. As a student, indicatively, pointed out the workload is unequally distributed in the weekly program. There have been days with overlapping courses and others with long time gaps between them. It has also happened courses to be consecutively arranged counting to eight hours of lectures in a single day. This case appears to emerge during the exams period too.

Communication between teachers and professors was characterized impersonal by some students. That affects trust building levels and personal interaction during the class. What was reported is that students learning experience within the class is mostly aligned to traditional teaching methods and lecturing while methods like team-working are rarely applied. These results in low focus and interest levels and a concentration of many questions related to the course. However, students have the possibility to contact

and interact with the professors through social media and can pose questions or solve any other issues.

Students also underlined the presence (at least in some courses) of a grade oriented mentality. They stated that they would like to enjoy more the learning procedure without being solely concerned about the final grade. Instead, they want to focus more on skills and conceivable learning outcomes. It is important for students to increase capacity and strengthen their skillset rather than going after high grades. They proposed a different grading system based on percentage for every separate course aspect.

Another interesting finding was that students in some cases show low interest for the course. That was mainly supported by the fact that professors tend to lecture in a systematic (by the book) approach. This makes students easily lose their attention and course attendance becomes less attractive. A number of students stated that some professors lecture without giving further space for discussion or explanations, while other professors employ a variety of teaching methods like surveys or presentations or other assignments. A feeling of dissatisfaction was raised about the lack of engaging activities that could stimulate critical thinking and promote skills development such as communications and presentation skills. In fact, the majority of students show appreciation to teachers that employ a variety of teaching methods. Group projects, assignments and distant learning appear to be more engaging and stimulus for the students. In addition, the use of social media and internet platforms contribute in students' motivation and positive attitude towards both the course and the instructor.

Besides, all the learning difficulties that identified the major problems for students of Gaza universities was the limited mobility possibilities outside the country and the region that created hectic learning environment for all. These students cannot participate in complimentary activities that can contribute to their skills development such as student mobility schemes, youth exchanges or to have access to unlimited books and study material. All those issues create serious problems in personal development of students from Gaza based universities.

Use of ICT methods in teaching and learning

Technology undoubtedly emerges as a decisive factor aligned to learners' achievement growth. ICT tools are also referred to possess a supplementary role in teaching and learning procedure. Concerning the usage of technology and social media, professors tend to place themselves clearly in favor. Google classroom, twitter, Facebook and furthermore customizable modules (like e-class) and applications appear to regularly serve the teaching and learning purposes. Instructors achieve connection and further interaction with the class via social media and on-line platforms achieving both engagement and performance growth. Connection between theory and practice has been done through technological means in some faculties as it was stated.

In general, there is no specific way formally or institutionally imposing the incorporation of particular means. They are mainly used in a combinative and supplementary way to the in-class teaching practices. Remote access to materials or automated evaluation of online exams (e.g. multiple choices) may be considered as typical examples of the advantages technology provides. The use of technology is first and foremost based on professors' and learners' specific needs as well as course's special demands and objectives. ICT tools have the ability to increase students' potentiality and competency while expanding their future skills.

Students were also in favor of deploying ICT methods in teaching and learning. Moreover, they are keen on following e-learning requirements especially when they differentiate the teaching style. Social media (Facebook) are widely used in some disciplines for communication with the professor who uploads questions, articles and other material. As it is effortlessly presumed, social media may also strengthen bilateral communication between teacher and learner. In this matter, we conceive them as supporting means of the relationship between both parts of the educational process. Social media consist a great opportunity for less formal but more frequent and responsive communication. They can be complementary to traditional in-person meetings during the (obligatory) announced office hours. Finally, students are keen to use new ICT methods and e-learning platforms if that helps to improve their general

learning experience and make classes more interactive. Flipped classroom is a method that is being used at some universities.

Students' participation in the class:

The participant observation within a real class environment presented particular interest in order to understand the levels of interaction between students and professors. Different lectures were attended in both English and Arabic language. Lectures were held in smaller classes and in large amphitheaters with larger number of students. What was observed was that the teaching structure was based on teacher-centered approach either with the use of whiteboard notes, students' books and oral conversation or pure lecturing.

From the observation, it was documented that interaction between students and teachers was more effective in smaller classrooms than in large lecture hall classes. The use of books, notes and oral conversation was more engaging than lecturing and more stimulating for students thinking. In large lecture halls, there was observed less interest in following the lecture and it was more difficult for students to remain focused for the whole duration of class. Participation was prominent for some students who were asking questions. However, the challenge seems to be to find a way out to engage all students without exception.

6. Questionnaires' Analysis

As it is mentioned before, this research is based on both qualitative and quantitative data. The manifold nature of the study's topic suggested a thorough exploration of practices, procedures and relations inside the Palestinian university. In order to address the study's objectives, the Greek delegation had to rely also on data collected by online questionnaires. The questionnaires consisted of five successive segments and nearly thirty open or closed-ended questions. The questionnaire design was intending in not only to reveal tendencies but also to detect mutually exclusive replies within same submission, ensuring reliability.

There was a planned division of correspondents depending on their role within the educational procedure. This means that professors and students were inquired on the same issues from different perspective. The used questionnaires had substantially the same structure and context. Consequently, this gave the opportunity to the researchers to spot contradictive responds on specific subjects.

Important reason to incorporate questionnaires in the research was not only their ability to spotlight split opinions but also the cost efficiency and time-saving advantages. Questionnaires also allowed reaching a high number of respondents in a relatively short period of time, while quantifying and visualizing the answers was notably easy. Lastly, surveying teaching personnel and students of the participant institutions was the most appropriate method to deliver an objective representation of reality.

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A total of 130 responses were collected by professors from all the participant institutions coming from diverse faculties and fields of study. The majority of the respondents were male and almost proportionally distributed among every university. Concerning the teaching experience which is highly related to the age of participants there was noticed a satisfactory degree of variance ensuring absence of age discrimination. Apart from age, gender and institution related information; the demographics segment also included more specific questions. After a general observation, the distribution of participants into different faculties/ colleges/ department was satisfactory.

Chart 1. Gender distribution

The below demonstrated pie chart clearly shows the distribution of male and female respondents. Although the gap between genders may seem of considerable width, this

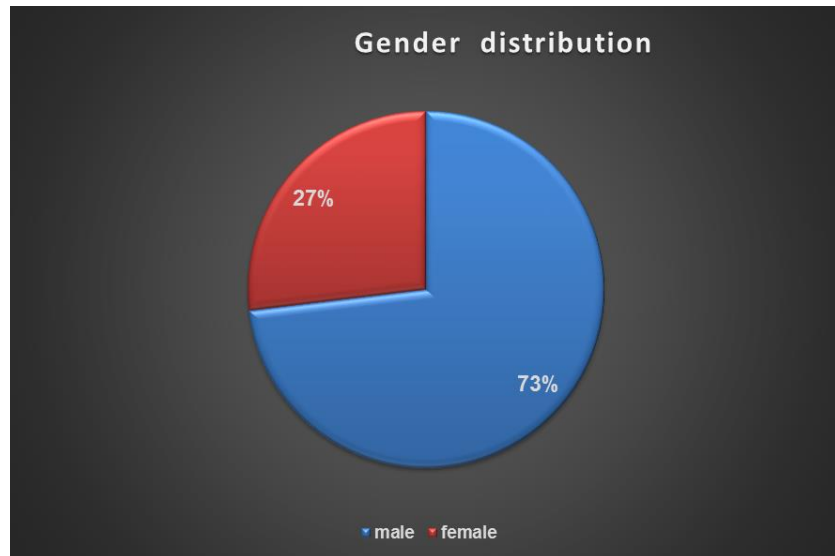is the ratio that roughly applies to our samples population accordingly with the provided figures[2].

Gender distribution

Chart 2. Institution distribution

The pie chart below shows in which institution our survey's participants study. From a total number of 134 participants, the highest percentage of them (21%) studies in Palestine Polytechnic University. An amount of 20% equally corresponds to University College of Applied Science, Birzeit and Al-Aqsa Universities. An-Najah National University holds the fourth place with a 13%. Every other answer is included in the aggregate figure of 6% of the total answers.

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[2] State of Palestine Ministry of Education & Higher Education (2015- 2016). Higher Education Statistical Yearbook
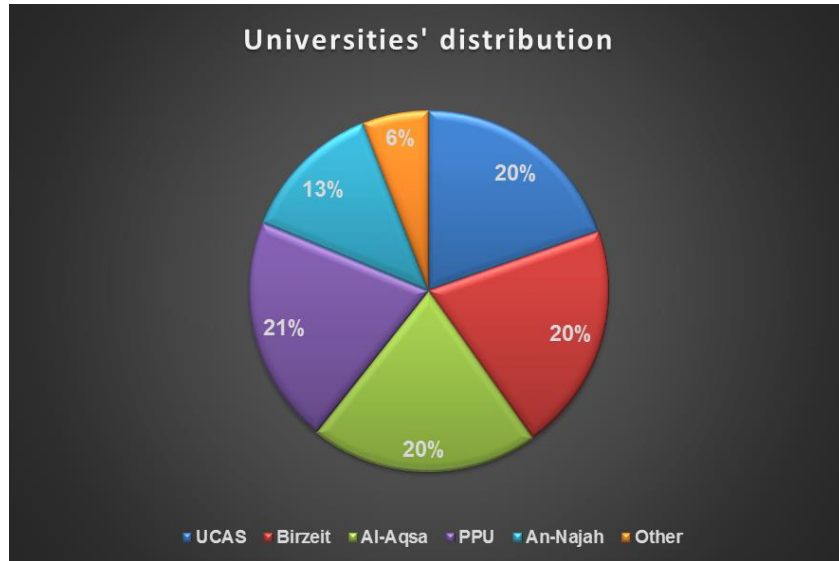
Chart 3. Faculties' distribution

The diagram below shows how the participant professors are distributed in each faculty. Applied sciences and sciences hold the two first positions with a shared percentage equal to 42. Education and humanities are coming after both scoring 10% of the total answers. Management and Finance, Literature, Engineering and Arts follow with percentages of 9%, 8%, 6% and 5% respectively. The sum of teachers not represented by any of the above-mentioned faculties reaches a 10% of the whole.
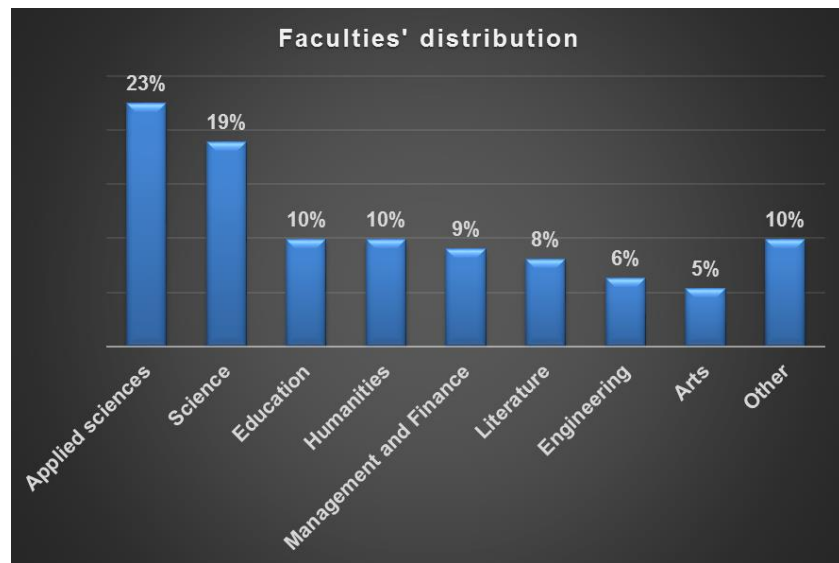
Chart 4. Individual preference on assessment practices

Continuing to the main research questions below is presented the pie chart of the aggregated professors' replies. The professors were initially asked: "What type of feedback do you use to assess students' learning?" The results are presented in chart 4. We are able to notice that teachers tend to mainly trust and therefore elaborate more traditional assessment methods. Those would include final exams, in-class discussion and written assignments with respective response rate of 17%, 16% and 14% respectively. It is evident that contemporary assessment methods have to make their way up to professors' preference list. Electronic feedback, achievement file, rubric or peer assessment seem to serve as second class options where they should play major role.
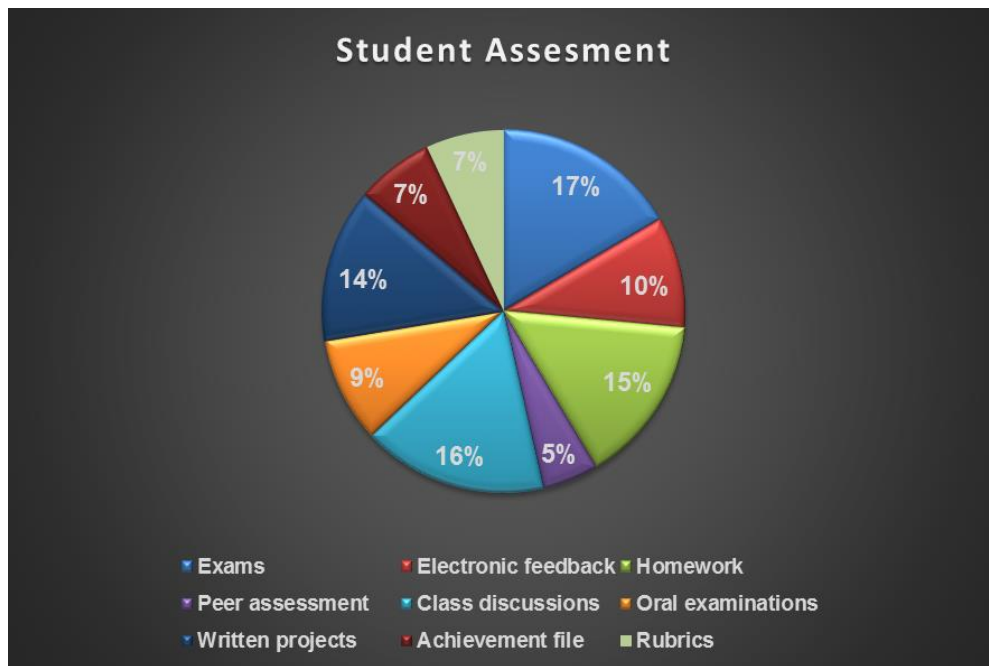

Chart 5. Institutionally established assessment practices

Following the questionnaires' sequence, here are presented the results on what assessment practices are generally used for, to most of the universities. Again, long-established methods relying on marks continue to remain popular among teachers. Both

in the open and closed-ended section of the questions the majority agrees on following the conventional teaching route.

Nevertheless, the presence of different voices is not being overlooked. The exceptions to the rule stand out making clear that another tendency exists towards a modern perspective. Professors are bringing on the table gamification of education and digital, customizable classrooms.
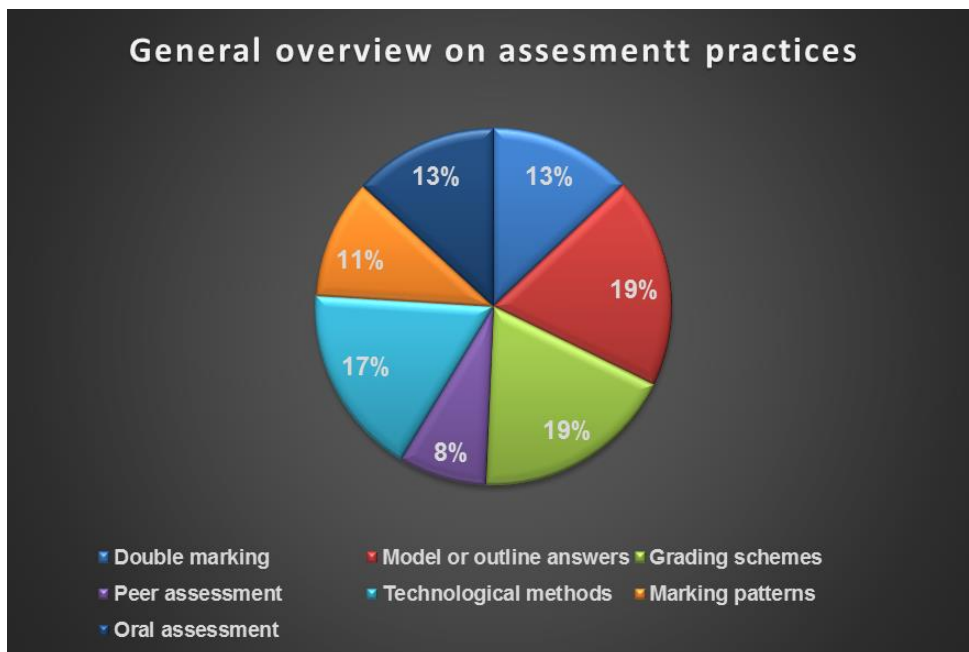
*Charts 6 and 7. Learning outcomes and Personalized assessment*

Furthermore, professors stated with an astonishing majority of 99% that when assessing freshmen, they focus on intended learning outcomes of the course. Unfortunately, the percentage of them adopting specific assessment practices to respond to individual student's needs was characteristically low. Only a 6% of our sample responded in favor of the argument.
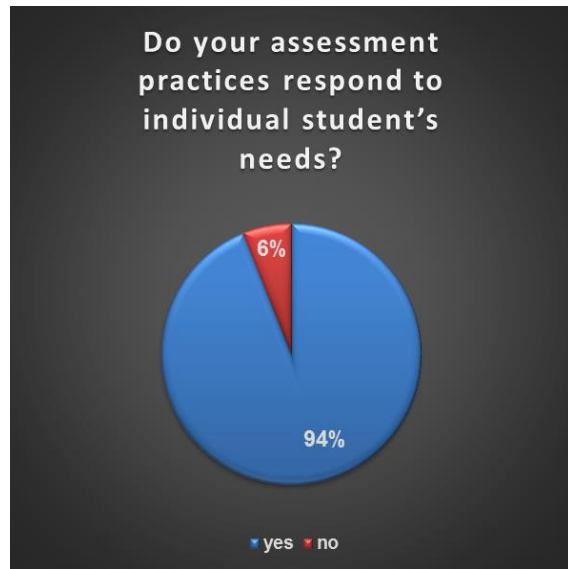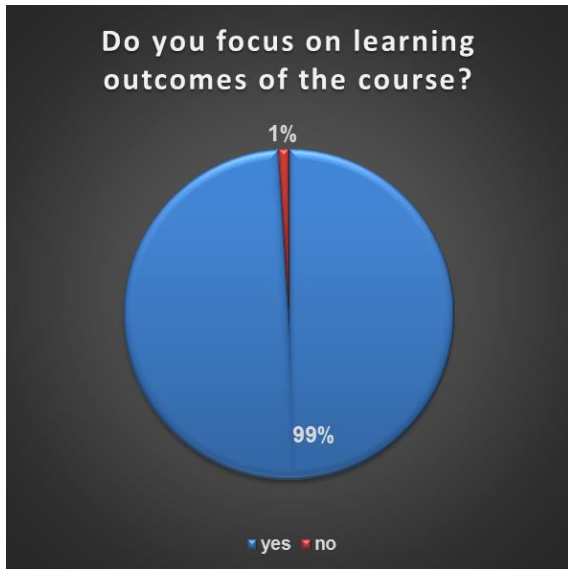
*Charts 8 and 9. Conception on assessment methods*

Moving on with the data investigation, it can be noticed that a noteworthy percentage of professors (78%) agree on the statement: "assessment practices to your university focus on learning outcomes and assist in achieving the learning goals" and a vast majority of 90% also agrees that: "assessment methods and tools in your university focus on how students learn".
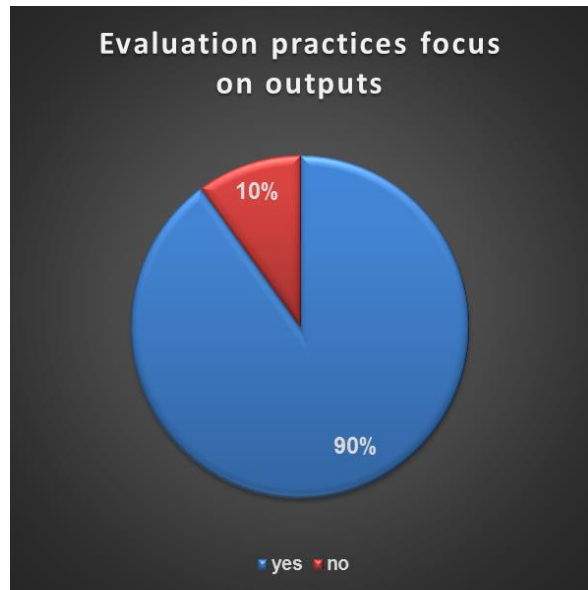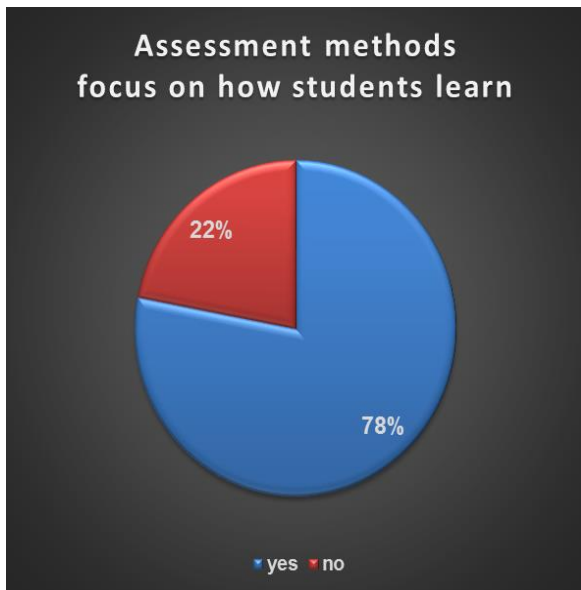
Some really interesting findings should be considered especially related to matters like relevance of assessment practices to educational needs and effectiveness of the teaching materials. Although the majority of respondents believe that the employed assessment methods are not aligned to the direction they should be, 9 out of 10 state that teaching material is actually effective for its purposes. In addition, it is also pointed out that the grading system is discouraging for most of the students. This indicates a discrepancy between means and targets. If the rating of the educational material is objective then there is need for the assessment practices to be re-evaluated.

The learning and teaching procedure consists a fairly complex and versatile topic. When dealing with such a matter, every possible feedback that could be collected should not be ignored. Thus, emerging contradictions or even clear statements of professors on problematic situations are valuable findings. Fortunately, there was the opportunity to also collect comments.

Are current assessment practices relevant to educational needs?

39% yes
61% no
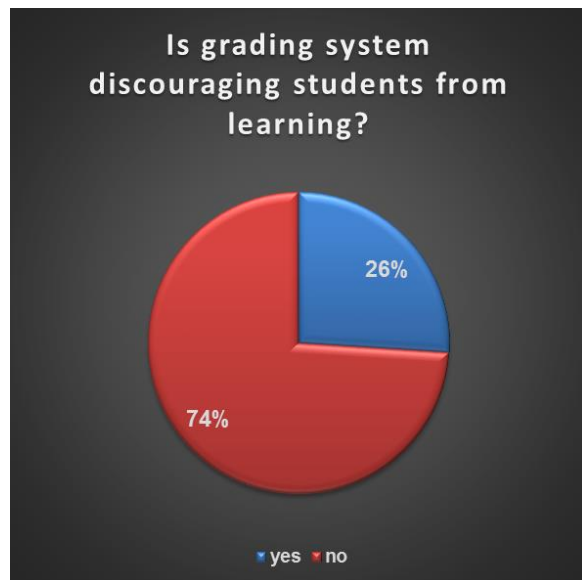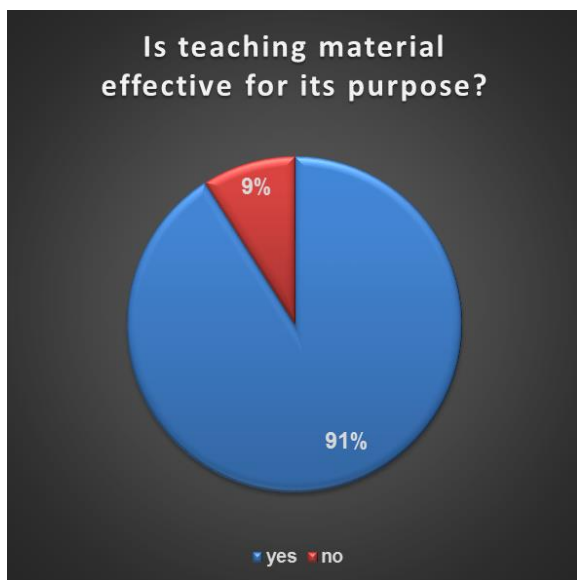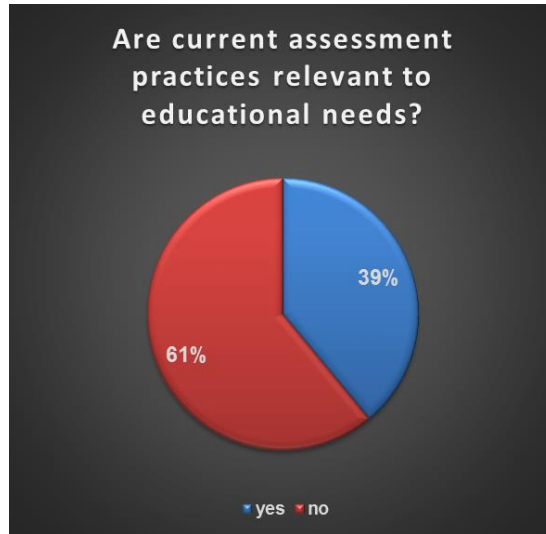
Charts 13, 14. Feedback frequency on teaching and Fellow evaluation

An issue of undoubtful importance is the one regarding professors' feedback on their materials and incorporated teaching techniques. The case that applies to the existing situation might be summarized as following: semestrial evaluation on teaching (65%) while most of the professors do not evaluate each other's materials (57%).

How often do you get feedback on your teaching and assessment methods?

Never	At the end of the year	Every semester	Monthly
8%	18%	65%	9%

Do your colleagues evaluate your teaching materials?
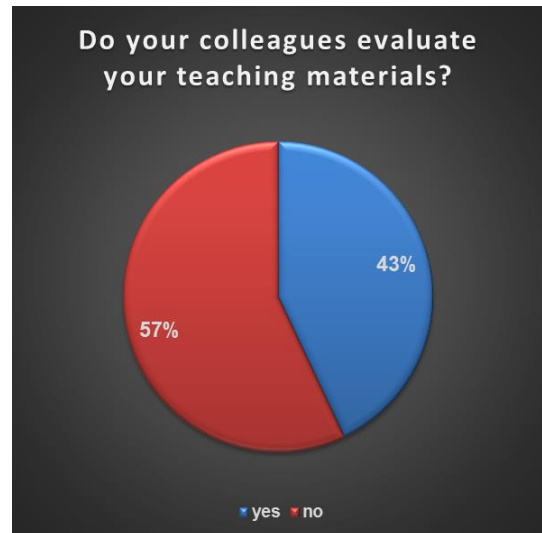
43% yes
57% no
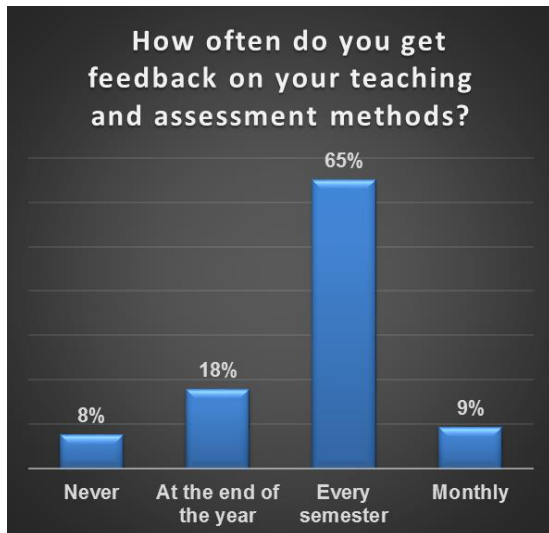
Chart 15. Course evaluation

A remarkable 83% of the respondents agree in being evaluated by their students not only at the end of the semester but at least a couple of times within academic year. They are open in the suggestion of being assessed throughout the semester. Such an action could only be possible with the contribution of technology. Easily accessible smartphone applications, could allow this kind of procedures to take place. An ongoing assessment of teaching could allow real-time commenting on several aspects of the delivered course. Moreover, it could encourage and strengthen bilateral communication between teacher and learner which is another highly desirable outcome.
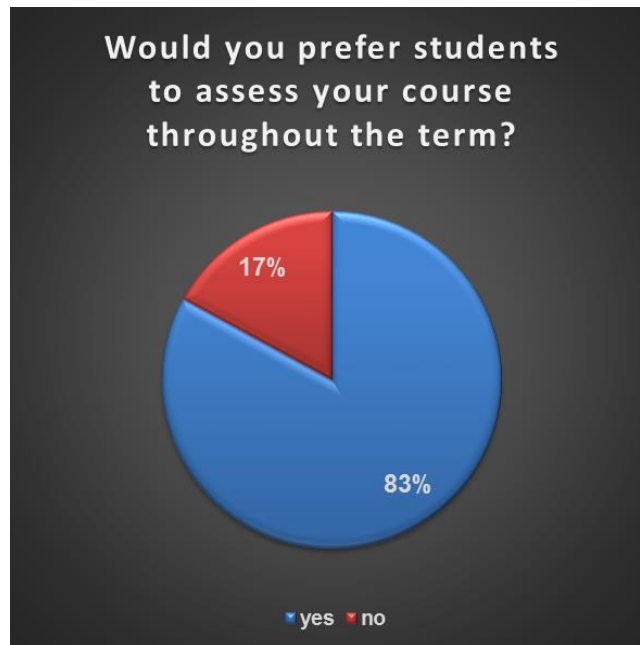
Charts 17, 18. Course evaluation and Quality benchmarks

Following, we are able to observe that the three quarters of the professors are actually delivering reports on their course evaluation. This step is crucial when it comes to program design or redesign because it constitutes a formative document to be taken into consideration by the university's quality unit and administration. Based on these results it can or not be judged either the curriculum compromises to national and international quality benchmarks or if it fits the educational needs.
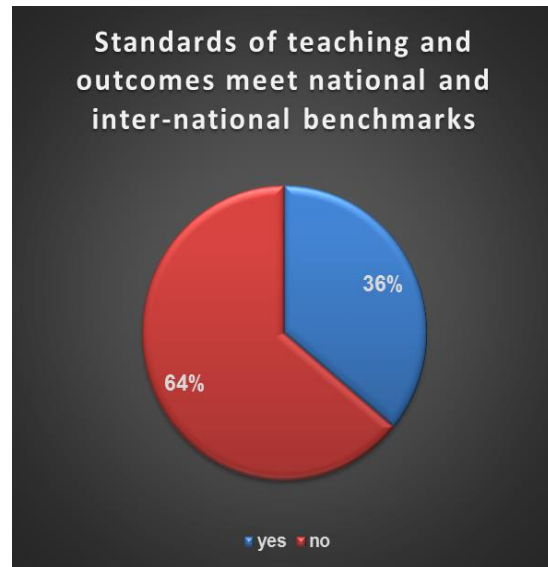
Chart 19. Freshmen academic condition

Moving on, the survey focused in monitoring students' difficulties. Specific weaknesses had already identified at the beginning of this research and during the qualitative data collection. It was later by the collection of the quantitative and the questionnaires results that this became more apparent. Over 60% of the professors believe that students are not at all or poorly equipped with skills and knowledge coming to university.
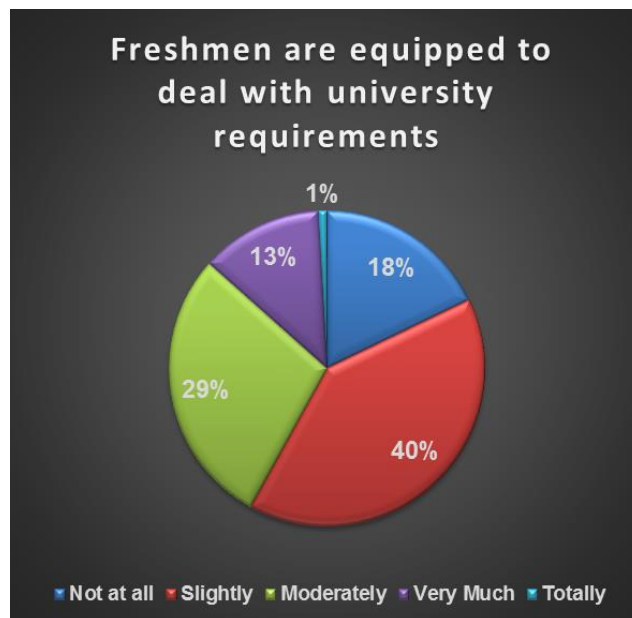
Students get used to the specific learning mentality during school life and it takes time and effort to adjust to their new obligations and learning environment. One other major aspect of this matter is also reflected in their mindset and behavior during the first year of studies.

Chart 20. Teaching challenges

Affirmative to the formerly mentioned are the answers concerning the challenges of teaching freshmen. It is obvious that students strongly carry their school attitude. In measuring the effect in percentages around 40% of professors stated that the main difficulties they face are low learning motivation, excuses to avoid workload and complains about grades. A small amount of professors stated that they find learning resources, conflict management and dominant students moderately difficult challenges when teach first year students.

Challenges you face teaching first year students

	time management	finding learning resources	conflict management	irrelevant arguments	dominant students	low learning motivation	students' excuses	grade complaints
Not at all	15%	20%	30%	19%	34%	5%	5%	4%
Slightly	34%	35%	34%	36%	36%	14%	18%	29%
Moderately	30%	28%	24%	22%	25%	32%	35%	26%
Very Much	18%	13%	11%	17%	4%	32%	31%	25%
Totally	3%	5%	1%	6%	2%	17%	11%	15%
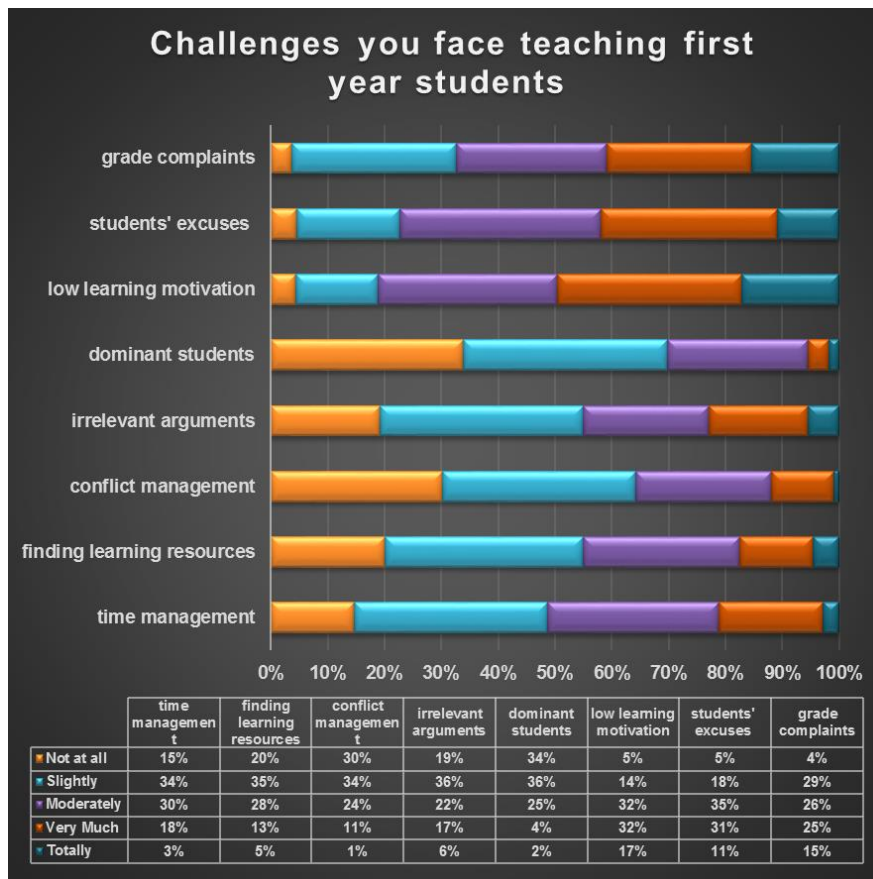
On the other hand, technology and e-learning could held overcoming specific difficulties for first year education students. Professors tend to believe that technology affects teaching positively. Among them 34% believe that technology and e-learning can help "very much" to overcome freshmen difficulties, while about 60% of the respondents stated that it is relatively possible to improve freshmen learning using e-learning.
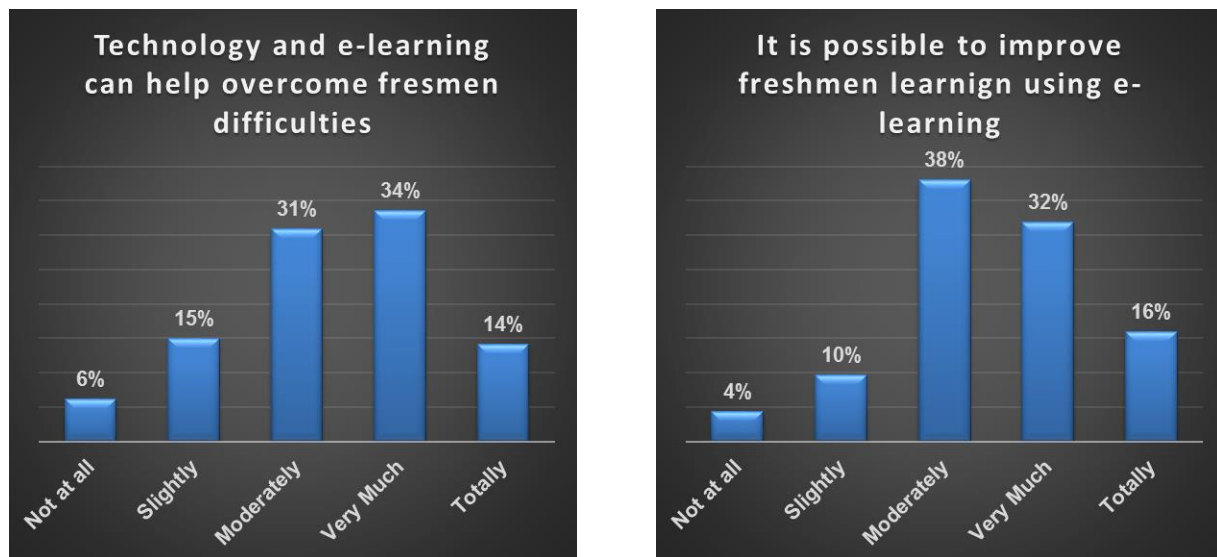
Chart 23. Teachers' preference on educational means

On the following chart is presented an overview on teachers' preferences towards different educational means. Synchronous on-line learning (like electronic seminars) receives the lowest acceptance while 40% of the professors place it under: "not at all" rating. It is also accompanied by options like Moodle, computer training and e-learning. These answers consist an unexpected fact not only based on previous responds but also relying on statements made during the interviews and focus groups.

On the other hand, class discussion receives the first position as the most favorable mean counting a distinguishingly high percentage of 37%. It is followed by solutions like project learning (31%), individual or group assignments (29%), library research and

lectures (both scoring 27%). The most neutral stance is observed in online discussions (45%), e-learning and self-learning (39% and 38% respectively).

Overall it becomes apparent that professors are mostly in favor of conventional options like: in-class discussion, individual or group assignments, lectures, project-based learning and library research. The aforementioned methods accumulate high positive preference rankings (above "moderately"). This may be considered as a sum of "totally" and "very much" responds. Isolating these responds can make our argument more obvious.

- **In-class discussion 85%**,
- **Lectures 75%**,
- **Individual or group assignments 72%**,
- **Project-based learning 64%**
- **Library research 60%**

The results can be reviewed analytically. Among the most preferable methods for teaching 37% of the respondents stated that they find **class discussions** totally preferable for teaching and 46% find them preferable enough (very much). The second most popular teaching method is **project learning** that was preferred by 31% and very much preferred by 33%. Third method in a raw that has been indicated by 29% as totally preferred is **individual or group assignments**. Very much preferred has been for almost half of the sample, 46%. On the other side, some methods are not popular at all, and have concentrated low percentage of preference. Electronic seminars have been viewed as "inappropriate" for teaching by 42% of the respondents, following by synchronous on-line learning as stated above. In addition, computer training also presents dissatisfactory levels along with Web 2.0 technological tools for about 20% of the total sample.

Most preferable for teaching
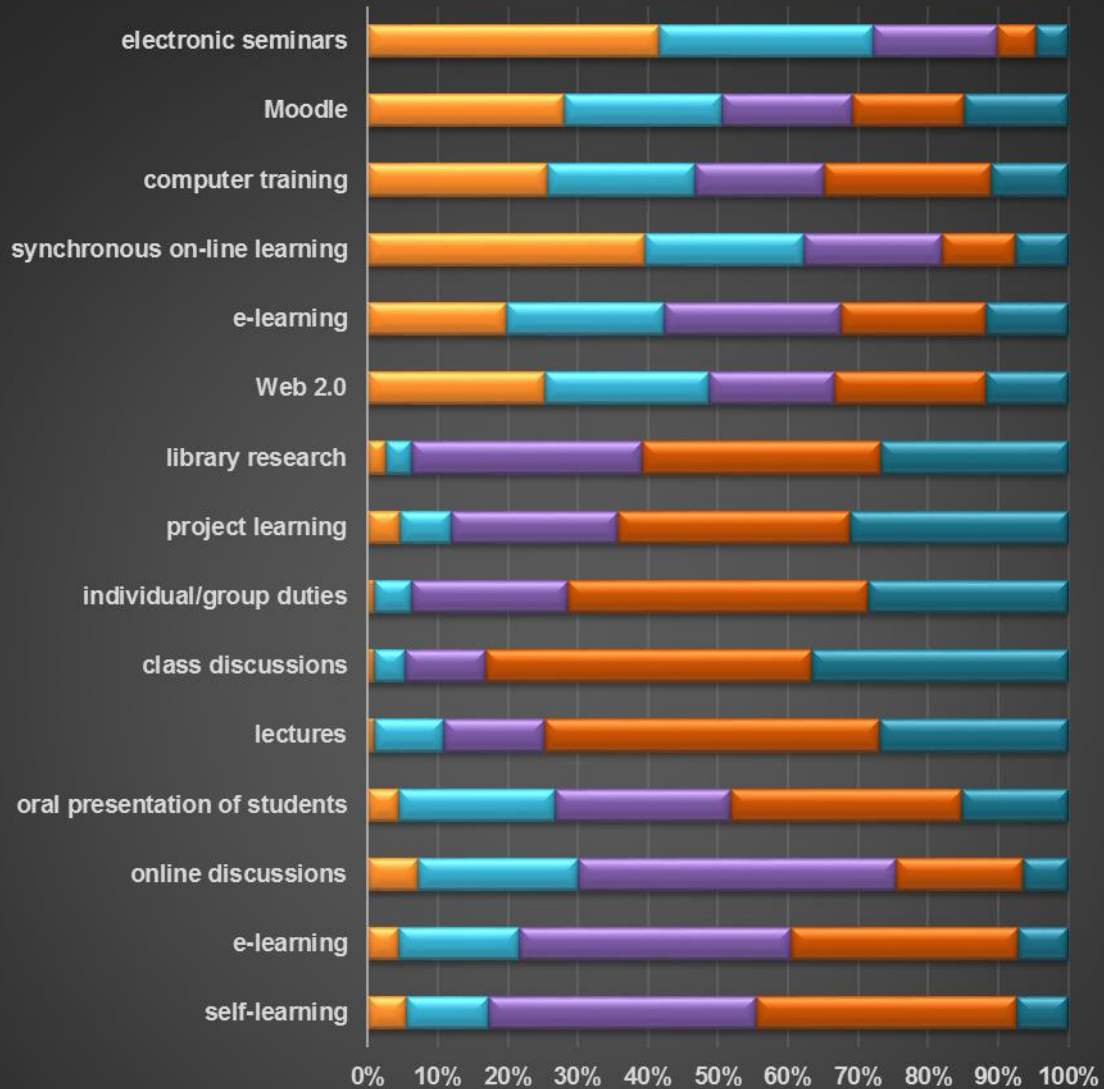
	self-learning	e-learning	online discussions	oral presentation of students	lectures	class discussions	individual/group duties	project learning	library research	Web 2.0	e-learning	synchronous on-line learning	computer training	Moodle	electronic seminars
Not at all	5%	5%	7%	4%	1%	1%	1%	5%	3%	25%	20%	40%	26%	28%	42%
Slightly	12%	17%	23%	22%	10%	4%	5%	7%	4%	23%	23%	23%	21%	22%	31%
Moderately	38%	39%	45%	25%	14%	12%	22%	24%	33%	18%	25%	20%	18%	19%	18%
Very Much	37%	32%	18%	33%	48%	46%	43%	33%	34%	22%	21%	10%	24%	16%	6%
Totally	7%	7%	6%	15%	27%	37%	29%	31%	27%	12%	12%	8%	11%	15%	5%

6.2 Students' Questionnaires Analysis

The secondary research analysis was based on surveys that were conducted in the form of online questionnaires distributed at university students of all five participant Universities. The total number of answered questionnaires were 298. However, there is a disparity since participants have not responded on a number of questions. The results are analytically presented in the following charts.

1. Chart 1, Completed questionnaires per gender

Chart 1 below, shows how the baseline study's two main target groups are being represented in the sample. From the total number of the university students questioned, 66% were female and 34% were male. The percentage isn't balanced since the female percentage has a 32% declination from the male percentage.
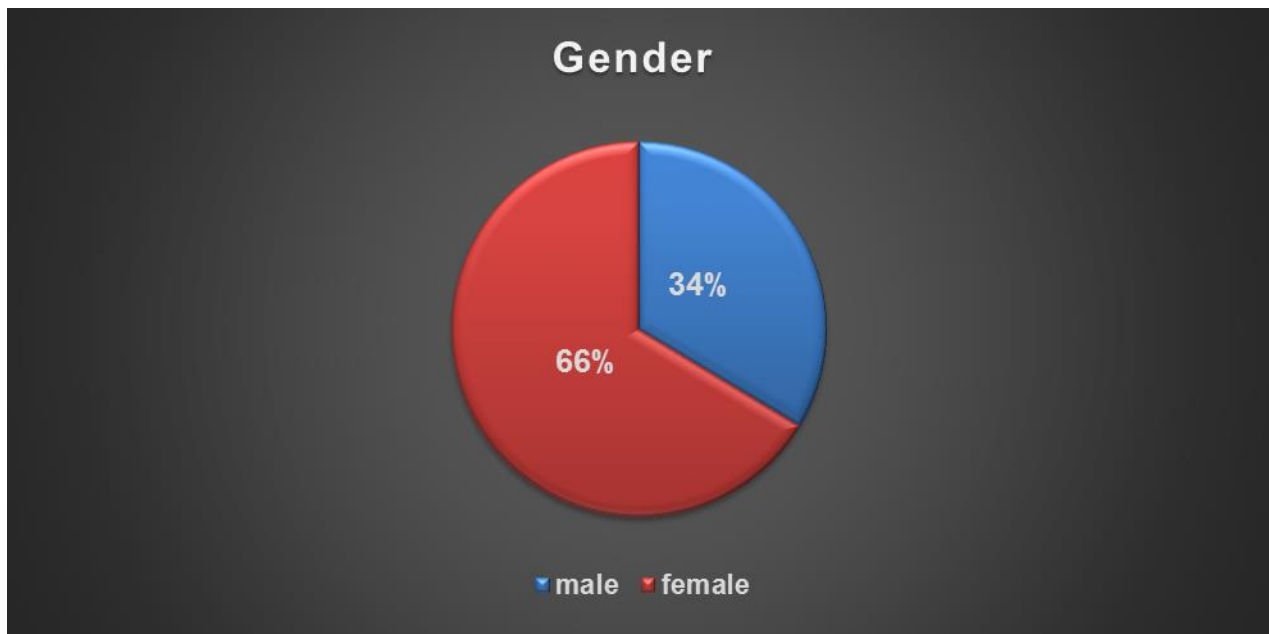
2. Chart 2, Institution in which participants study

Chart 2 below shows in which Institution most participants study in. From total number of the participants, the highest percentage of 45% studies in Al-Najah National University, 16% in Palestine Polytechnic University, the 14% in Birzeit University, 12%

in University College of Applied Science, 11% in Al-Aqsa University and a small remaining participant's percentage studies in other universities such as Al-Quads and Hebron University. The percentage again is not balanced since university students from Al-Najah University answered more questionnaires than university students from other institutions.
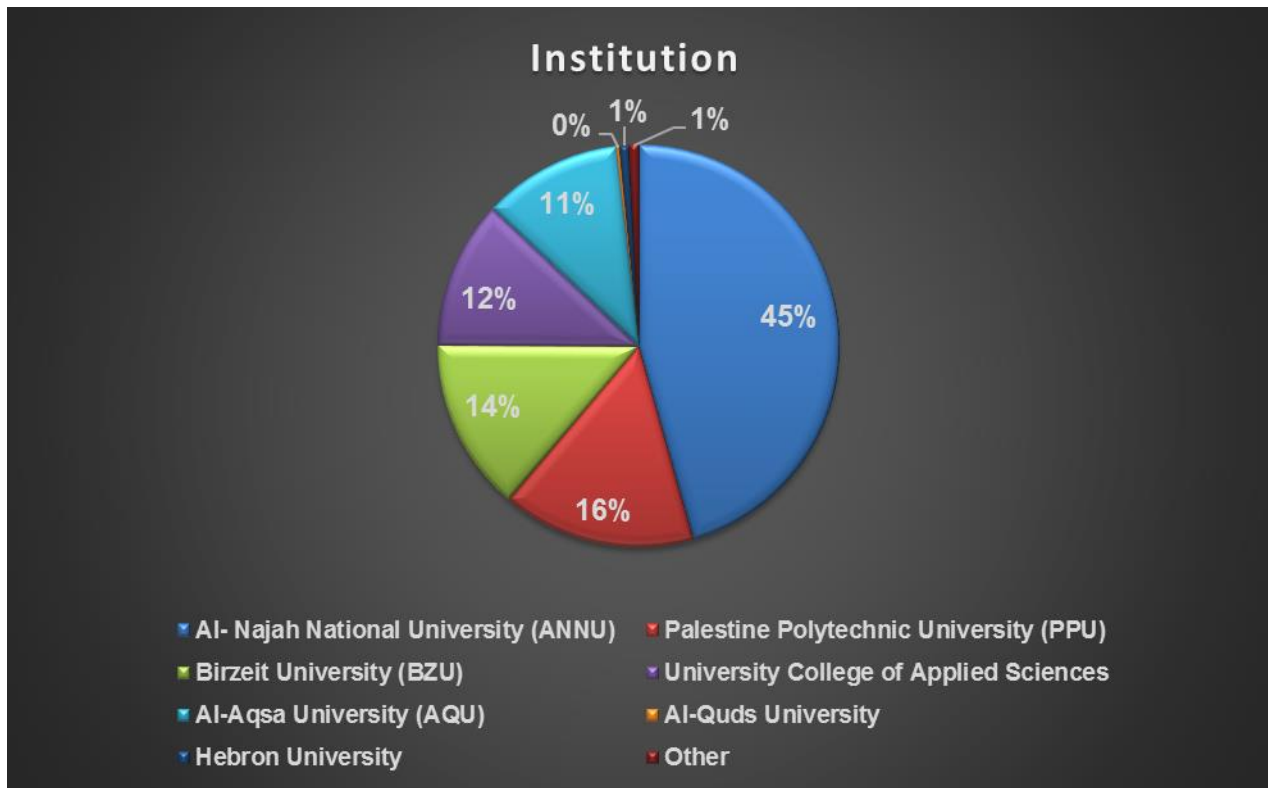
3. Chart 3, Semester of Enrollment

Chart 3 below, shows which semester most participants enroll. From the total number of the university students questioned, 71% are enrolled on 1st semester and 29% on the 2nd semester. It is obvious that most participants answered this questionnaire according to their 1st semester university experience and it is vital to keep this into account.

Semester of enrolment

29% — 1st semester
71% — 2nd semester
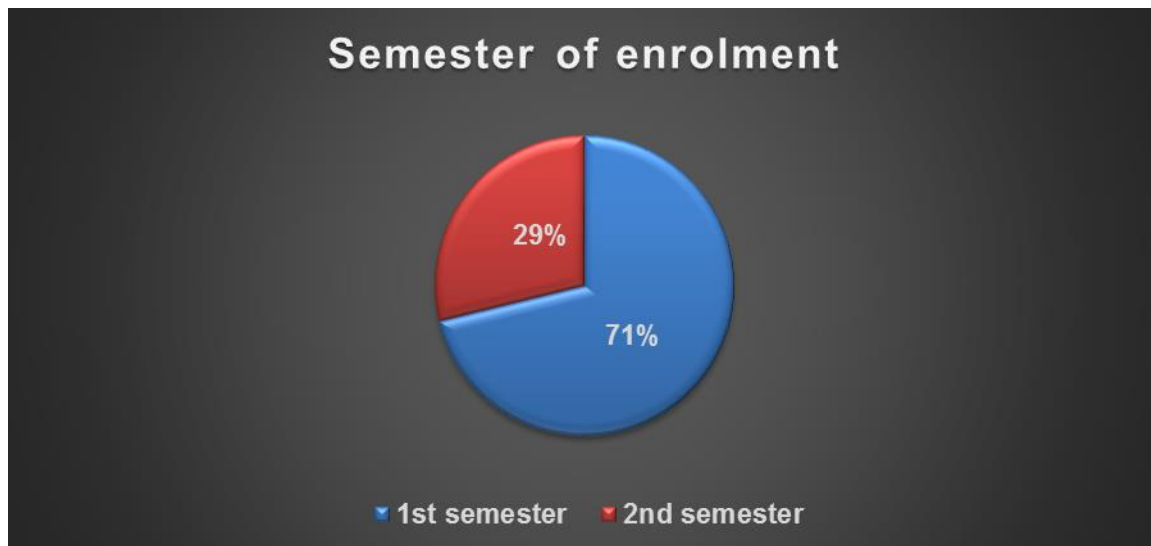
4. Chart 4, University Faculty

As demonstrated by Chart 4, the greatest percentage of respondents 27,3% represents Medicine and Health Sciences University Faculty. Second largest group is the Engineering Faculty, 26,27%, followed by participants from Arts Faculty, 9,55%, from Education Faculty, 11,94%, and Applied Sciences, 8,19%. The remaining 16,75% presents other faculties, such as Humanities, Administration and Finance, Architecture, Finance and Business Administration, Civil Engineering, Foreign Language Department etc.

Faculty

Engineering	Medicine and Health Sciences	Arts	Education	Applied Sciences	Other
26,27%	27,30%	9,55%	11,94%	8,19%	16,75%
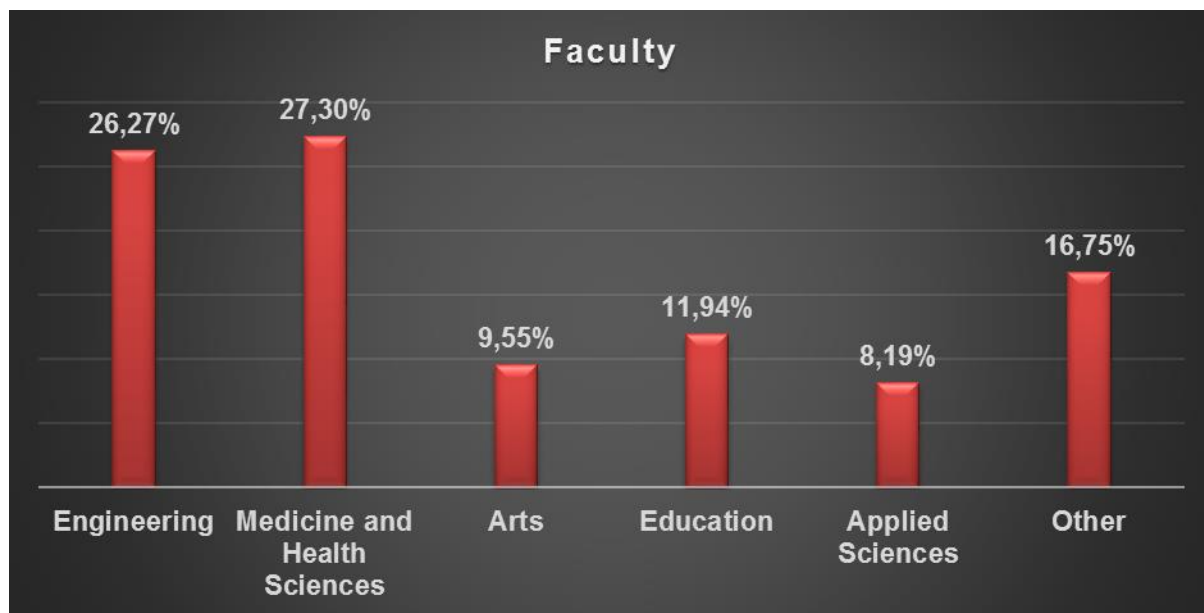
5. Chart 5, Course of study

Respondents are coming from a variety of courses and present great disparities, as shown in Chart 5. The majority of respondents 51,48% study in a variety of courses: English Language and Literature, Civil Engineering, Architecture, Basic education, Accounting, Biomedical Sciences, Medical Sciences vital, Cars, Building Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Technology Management, Interior decoration and design, Biotechnology, Sociology, Doctor of Pharmacy, Psychology, French, Electric Power Engineering Technology, Revival of Biotechnology, Neighborhoods-Biotechnology. As a result, it is obvious that participants come from a wide institutional course range.

However, there was a high percentage of participants, 26,46%, that didn't specify the course that they attend. Keeping into account from the previous chart (Chart 4), that most participants were from Medicine and Health Sciences Faculty, the participants percentage of 7,56%, attend Human Medicine, 6,18%, Medical Imaging and 3,78% Medicine Laboratory. The remaining 7,9% attends Computerized Information Security Engineering, which was the second highest Faculty in the previous chart (Chart 4).
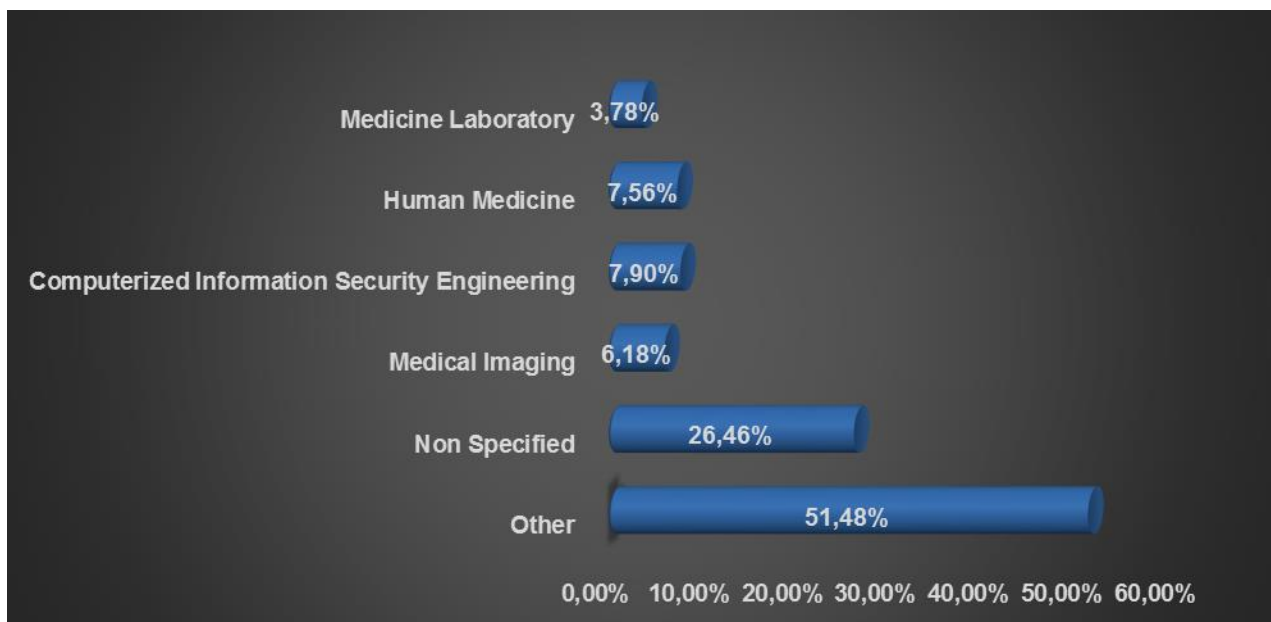
6. Chart 6, Preference in Learning methods

As demonstrated by Chart 4, participants moderately prefer autonomous learning with a quite high 49,39%. Next highest group 36,20% they do prefer e-learning and 35,61% in class discussion, as well as students' presentations for about 32,41% of the respondents. It is very important to mention that students want to experience a variety of learning methods including online discussions and project-based learning.

Preference in Learning methods

	Autonomous learning	e-learning	Online discussions	In class polling	Lectures	In class discussion	Individual Assignments	Project-based learning	Bibliographic/library research	Students' presentations
Totally	7,90%	10,00%	6,25%	27,93%	21,72%	13,69%	14,93%	10,03%	10%	14,13%
Very much	20,61%	28,96%	14,23%	30,00%	27,93%	18,49%	15,97%	22,49%	14,82%	19,31%
Moderately	46,39%	36,20%	32,29%	31,37%	31,72%	35,61%	32,98%	30,79%	30%	32,41%
Slightly	18,21%	18,96%	30,55%	8,96%	13,44%	22,60%	23,61%	23,18%	27,58%	23,44%
Not at all	6,87%	5,86%	17%	1,72%	5,17%	9,58%	12,50%	7,26%	17,24%	10,68%

7. Chart 7, how would you rate your knowledge or ability in the following?

The chart below indicates that participants have a total 38,22% ability to uses Web 2.0 tools, followed by 17,93% computer training and 14, 18% can use Moodle platform. The highest percentage of respondents reported moderate ability in use of ICT tools such as 29.01% e-learning systems, 34,25% Moodle and 32,41% computer-based training tools. The important fact here is that "Not at all" percentage rate is quite low, which means that students are capable to use new technology in everyday life and in their university system.

Knowledge or ability to use the following

	Web 2.0	e-Learning	Computer-based training	Moodle	A/synchronous learning
Totally	38,22%	14,04%	17,93%	14,18%	8,90%
Very much	29,01%	33,56%	34,48%	16,60%	16,78%
Moderately	29,01%	36,30%	32,41%	34,25%	29,45%
Slightly	6,14%	13,35%	10,00%	21,10%	30,47%
Not at all	3,07%	2,70%	5%	13,84%	14,38%
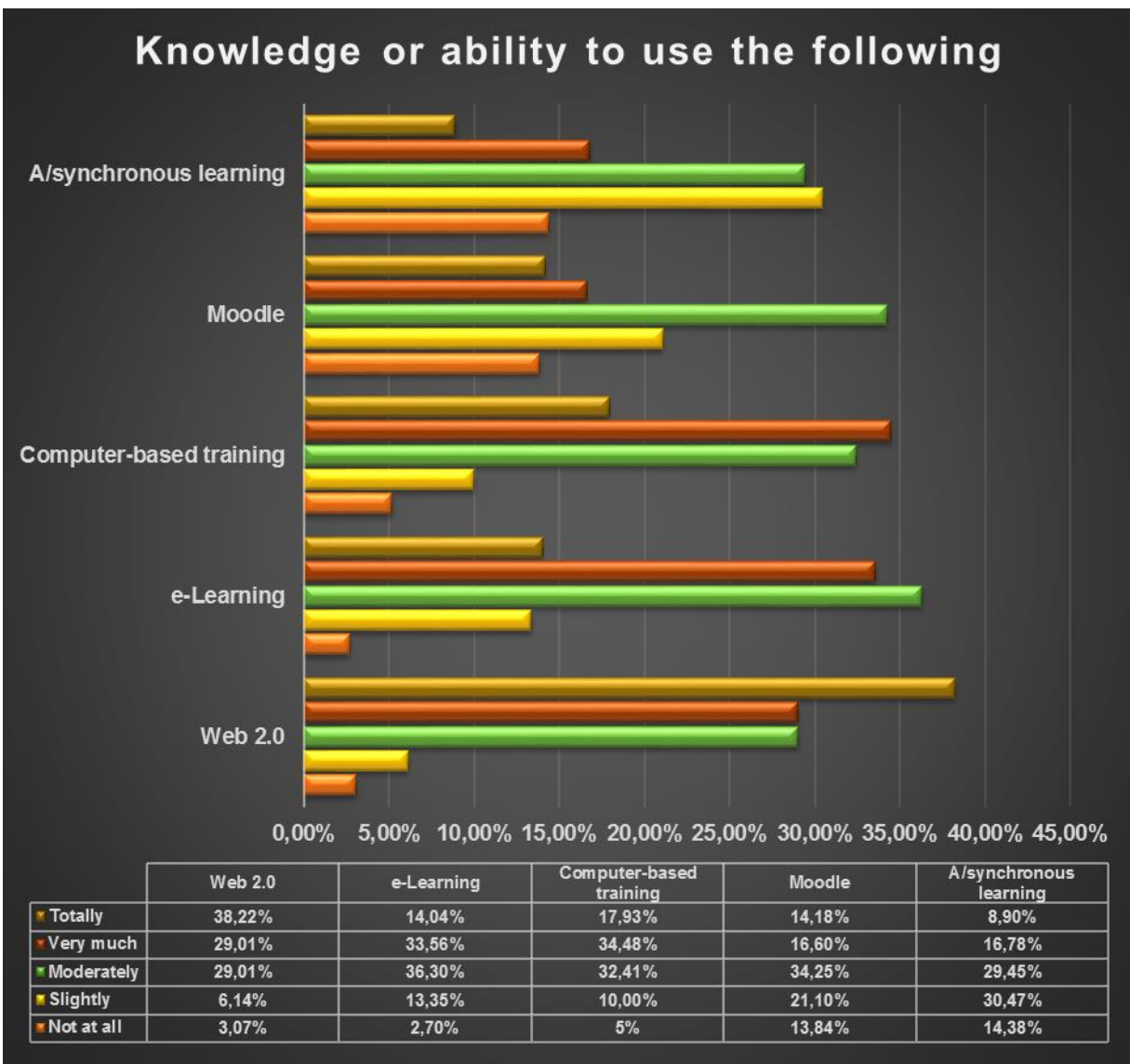
8. Chart 8, Have you used any of the above online learning tools during your first year at the university? Please indicate.

Respondents generally stated in a great 84%, that they have used all previously mentioned (chart 7), online learning tools. Also, most of them indicated in which have a higher user experience:

- ✓ E-learning
- ✓ Moodle
- ✓ Social networks
- ✓ e-mail
- ✓ e-class
- ✓ Facebook Google classroom
- ✓ Online learning systems
- ✓ YouTube lectures
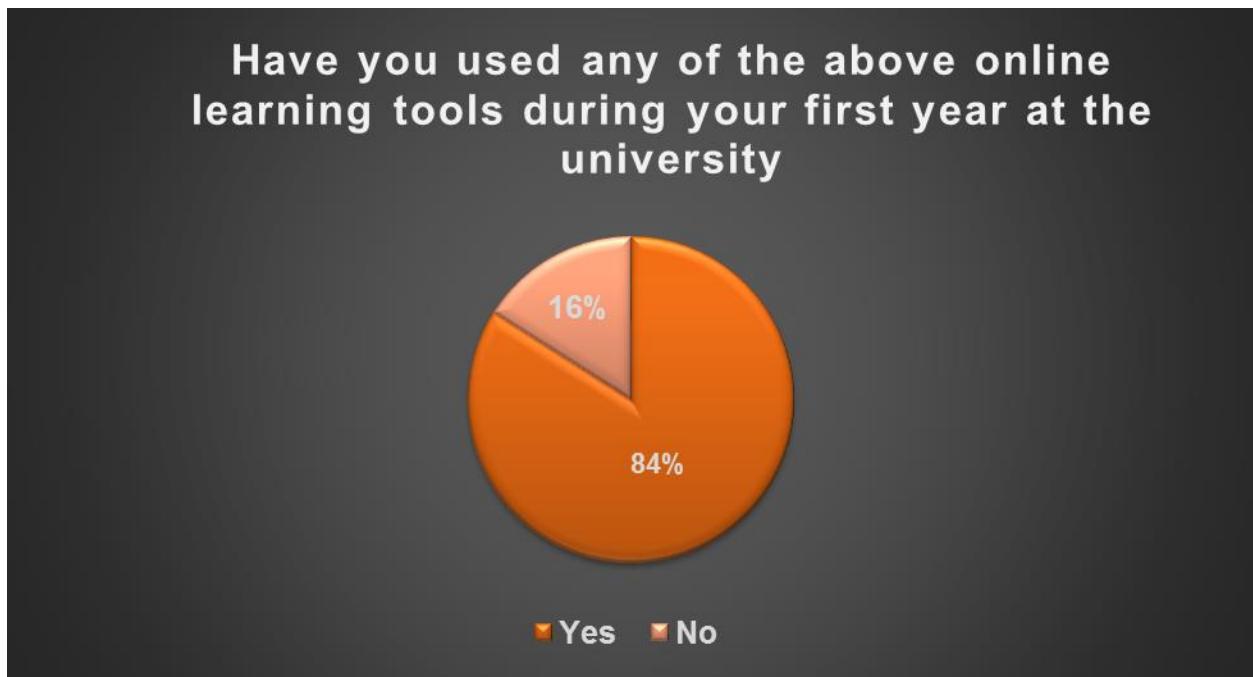
9. Chart 9, Assessment Practices

Chart 6, shows the percentages assessment practices that participants have experienced during their first year in University. It is obvious that most students have been assessed by taking paper exams with great discrepancy of 65,18% rating totally. A 14,04% of the respondents stated that have totally experienced in-class discussions and 13,01% individual assignments. A smaller number of respondents have moderately 44,25% experienced peer reviewing and about the same percentage has experienced other assessment practices such as online tests, individual assignments and oral exams.

There is a great disparity concerning assessment practices that participants have experienced in a very low rate. For example, 46% has not experienced at all "online discussions" and 44,32% has slightly experienced online tests. These are the higher percentages that should be mentioned since they lead to important conclusions concerning the practices that professors choose in order to assess their students' progress.

	Paper tests	Online tests	Online discussions	In class discussions	Peer reviewing	Individual assignments	Oral exams
Totally	65,18%	1,03%	2,07%	14,04%	3,83%	13,01%	3,09%
Very much	22,18%	3,43%	5,88%	28,42%	44,25%	22,94%	7,90%
Moderately	8,53%	14,77%	17,64%	33,90%	22,64%	28,42%	15,12%
Slightly	2,73%	44,32%	28,37%	18,15%	38,67%	29,10%	0
Not at all	1,96%	36,42%	46%	5,47%	25,43%	6,50%	43,29%
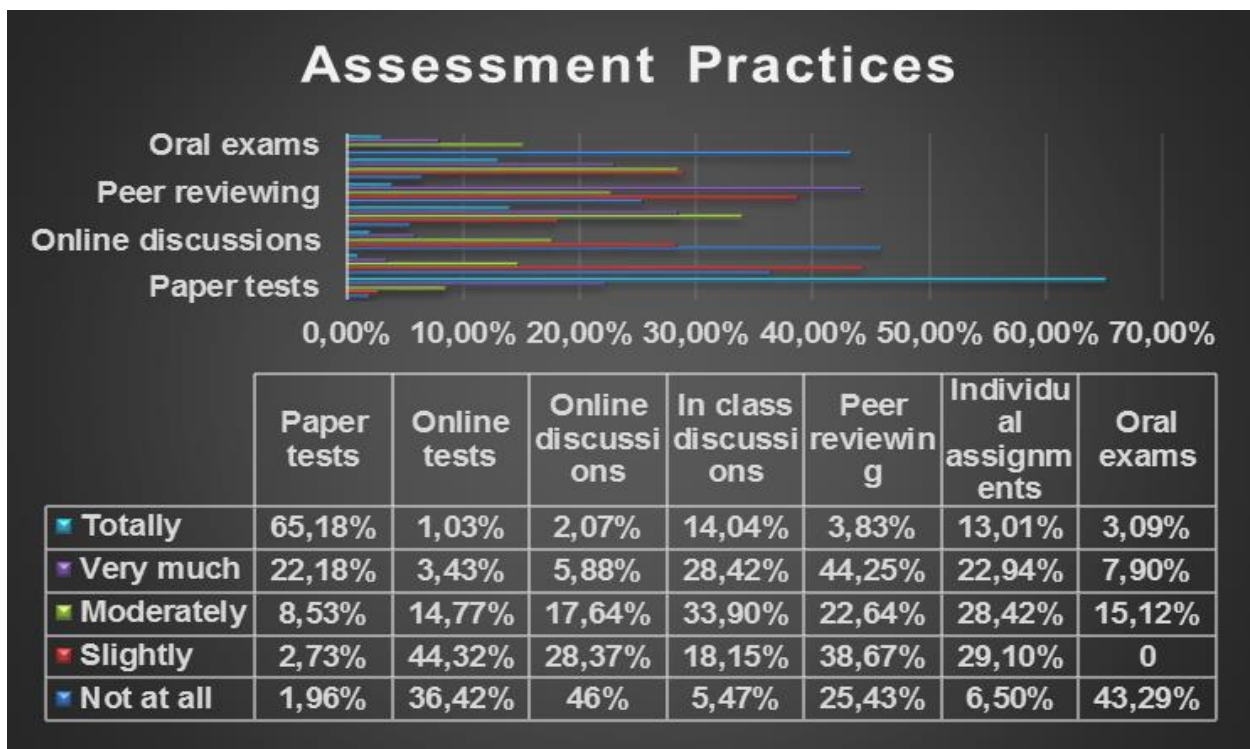
10. Chart 10, Percentages of whether current assessment practices assist in achieving the learning goal.

Overall, the participants demonstrated that most of them, have a neutral opinion by 46,40%, on whether current assessment practices assist in achieving the learning goals. The most important point here is that there is a slight difference between the 21.60%, who agree and the 15,10%, who disagree. So, the participants view in this point differ. Considering that only 9,30% of respondents stated that they agree with the current assessment practices, that indicates that improvement in this area can largely contribute the learning goals.

Current assessment practices assist in achieving the learning goal.

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 7,60% | 15,10% | 46,40% | 21,60% | 9,30% |

11. Chart 11, Participants opinions whether University's grading system is fair or not

According to the chart, there is again a high percentage of 34,20%, where students keep a neutral position concerning the fairness of grading system. Only, 4,10% agree that the grading system is fair while 27,40% disagree and 17,10% strongly disagree. This indication leads to the conclusion that the grading system needs further changes

and a more balanced approach that will include different assessment methods which would evaluate different student skills.

Grading system is fair or not?

- Strongly disagree: 17,10%
- Disagree: 27,40%
- Neutral: 34,20%
- Agree: 17,10%
- Strongly Agree: 4,10%
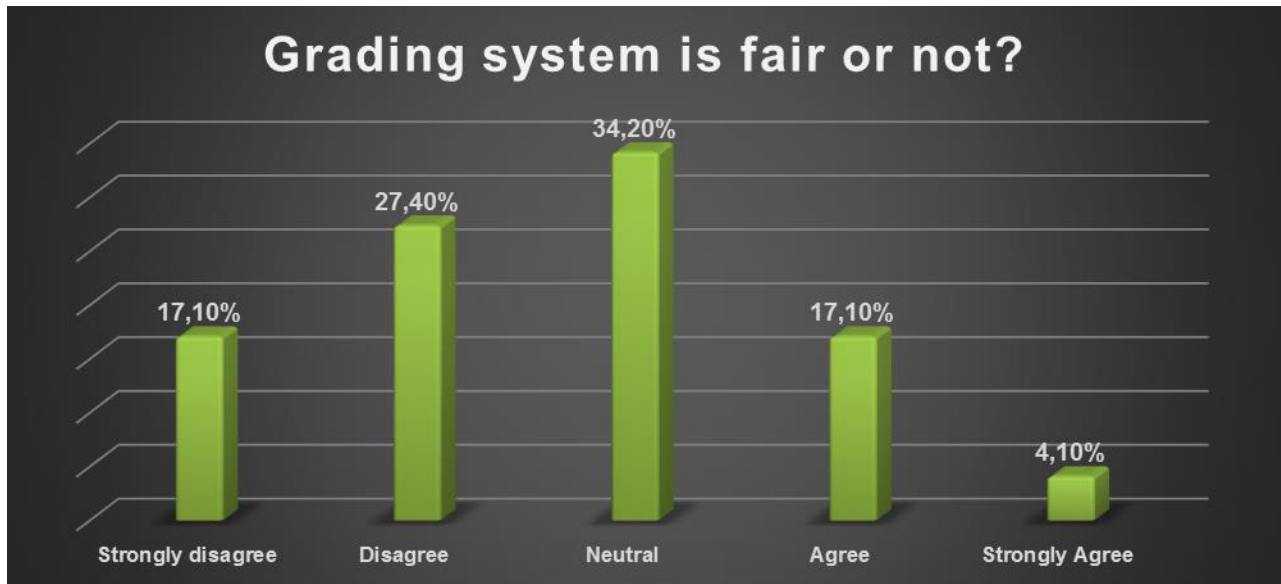
12. Chart 12, The effectiveness of educational courses contents

Concerning the effectiveness of educational courses contents and curricula, there is as well a high percentage of 38,60%, where students keep a neutral position. Furthermore, there is a slightly difference among the participants who agree 27,60% and 21,20% of those who disagree with the effectiveness of educational courses contents. It is obvious that not all participants have yet a clear image whether courses content is effective or not, while there is again a division among correspondents.

The effectiveness of educational courses contents
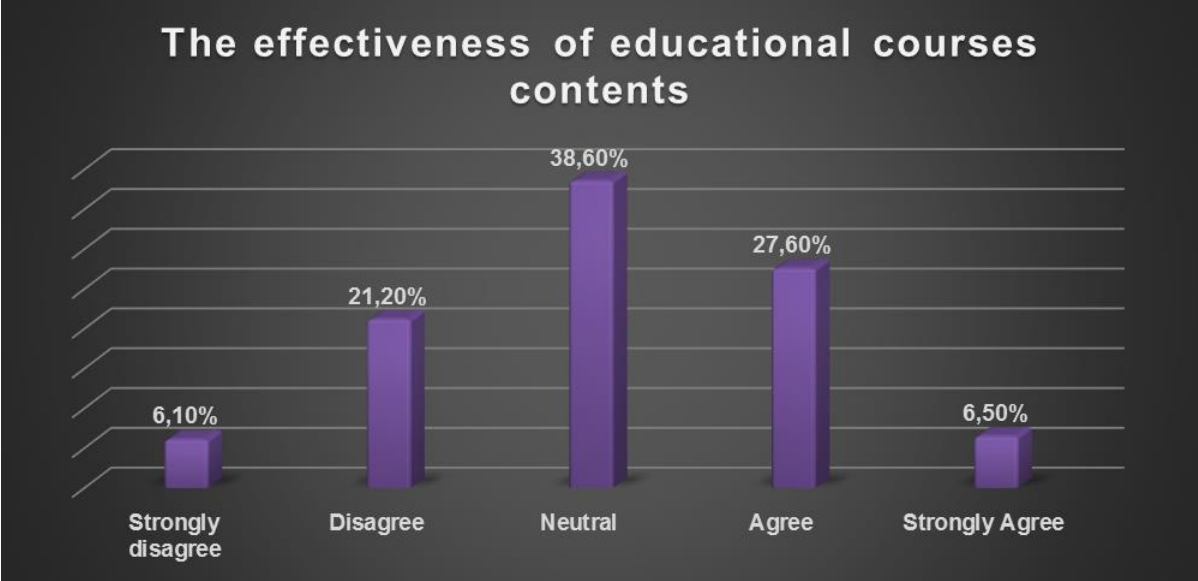
13. Chart 13, Suggest alternative assessment methods

It is worth noticing in this chart that although the majority of participants in previous responses were neutral on the effectiveness of the assessment methods, at this point expressed their strong will to suggest changes concerning the assessment methods. There is a higher proportion 74% answering "Yes", in contrast to the lowest 26%, who answered "No".

Suggest alternative assessment methods
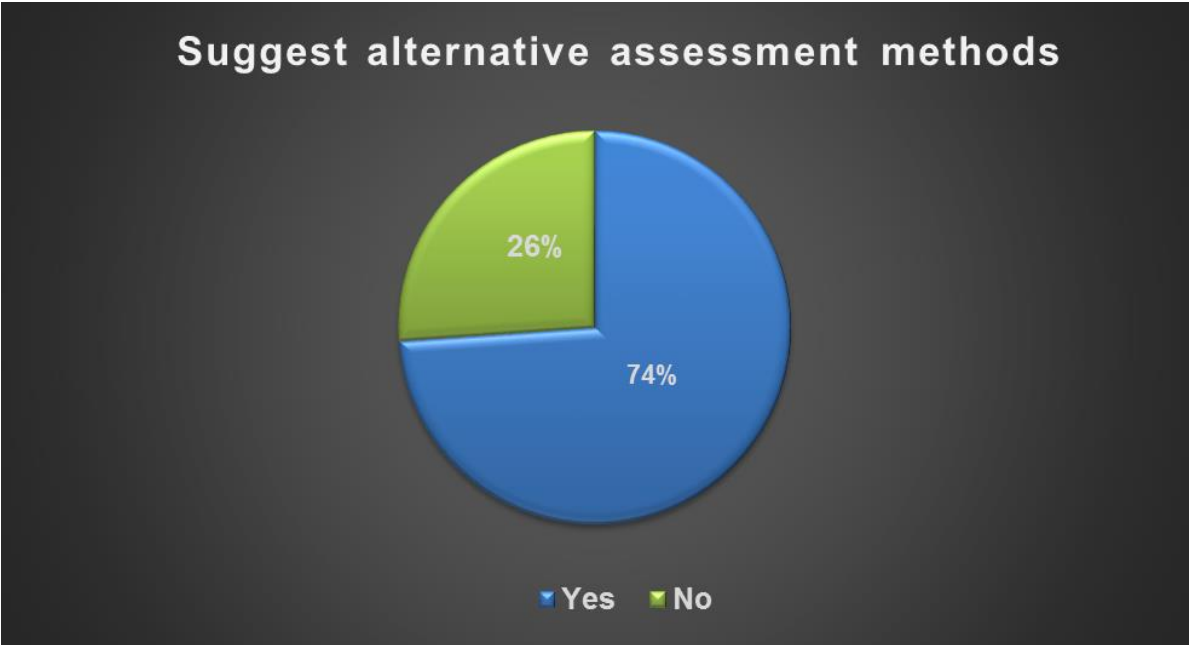
14. Chart 14, Are there any teaching methods that you did not find suitable, and how do you think it could be improved?

Respondents were generally negative to the suitability of the teaching methods, with a high 70%, in contrast to the 30% who answered that they don't find any unsuitable teaching methods. Participants who answered "Yes", pointed their opinions on the topic. Some of their statements worth mentioning and very important for the final conclusions are listed below:

➢ "Power Point presentations and more practical methods".

➢ "Indoctrination routine. Education should be centered on the learner and not the teacher…! Give a chance to the student".

➢ "High explanation speed and lack of understanding. I do not recall that there are not suitable ways".

➢ "I see in some of the courses raw memorization methods without focusing on understanding. Only study and memorize them for the exam. After exam, everything has been forgotten by the student. And that is not beneficial for science studies. Therefore, teaching should be more focused on understanding in order to absorb the information and make use of them in public life. Before hiring somebody should be tested his ability to deliver information and provide easy explanations and also to show interest in sciences.

➢ A better explanatory style and interest in sciences in practical and not only theoretical way. The courses are basically theoretical. Thank you..."

➢ "Traditional education is one of the worst methods without conversations" (Take what science tells):

1. The final exam for most of the material depends on written exams that are based on memorization and this is unacceptable due to the amount of information that needs to be absorbed and students do not like it. Because in case that was allowed to use a reference from the students' book in the

exam, to resolve many of the required questions, that would depict to the real life example. If for example I had a case to solve in law I could refer to books or search the Internet, and therefore could solve the case but I might not be able to resolve this in the exam. In brief what it should be required is: evaluate the student's understanding and perception not his memory, and so I would recommend using an open book with a way to give time enough to resolve the questions.

2. The best is to use of e-learning and modern technology in education and traditional education.

3. I suggest a very significant increase on the practical and applied knowledge to the benefit of learning and how to apply them to the ground rather than theoretical knowledge, which we get and write it in the exam and then simply forget, because will not use in practice and will not be applied in order to be preserved in our minds.

4. The educational institution should organize field trips and visits to the institutions and the relevant specialization centers, as well as workplaces in real working environment and to facilitate communication between students and those institutions; it will enhance and expand its capabilities and horizons and increase their aspirations and hopes and give the necessary opportunities, work experience.

5. a. Moodle must be improved since it's very difficult; b. We do not receive notifications when something new occurs, where you must open it to check a new upload (does not give notices within our institution's educational application); c. Moodle is not an effective means of communication between students and teachers, contrary to what people think, professors or administration (it does not even provide the opportunity to chat with professors; d. You must explain enough to students on how to deal with it (after improvement) or provide with comprehensive explanation of examples".

- "Moodle system is not very effective, so that almost more than half of the students do not even enter. It has not been used as a major or effective, so it will be better if could be changed this system to something better so that leads to students to use it periodically.

- "Educating students need to be changed starting from changing the perception of the nature of education mechanism and why we learn and how we develop our capabilities".

- "Students who do not have previous knowledge in courses take lower grades and vice versa ... students should be informed in advance for the content of the courses before registration and not long after registration.

- "E-learning is either missing or is bad, you must design courses that can be taught through the computer and so on".

- "Difficult examination methods.

- "Assessment examinations must evaluate the student orally and not in theory".

- "Methods of teaching methods followed the university is based on the indoctrination process without the involvement of the student teaching process by giving him the duties and functions of the research".

- "There are some people they have no Internet connection or electricity is not available".

- "Using illustrations and formats to increase the student's understanding and therefore the ability not to forget".

- ➤ "Relying on the large number of books can sometimes be improved, for example, by using the download courses in Moodle but may not suit everyone".

- ➤ "Use pdf oral explanation".

- ➤ "Method of indoctrination. They neglect of the student's role in the interaction of the work is worth the need for the participation of student research and provide presentations constantly".

- ➤ "Written exam paper…Replace part of the exam with project marks and individual or team-work, or oral examination".

- ➤ "Preferably writing on the board and more clarity by giving students an opportunity to express his opinion and arrange materials more preferred to facilitate access to information".

- ➤ "Making first year as successful evaluation rather than giving marks".

- ➤ "Classroom discussions to be based on agreed readings between the professor/ his students and the style of narrative explanation".

- ➤ "Not only conservation but use of more effective methods such as videos, photos, models and rely on knowledge and understanding".

- ➤ "I suggest the adoption of research other way as a means of assessing students' level instead of paper or oral exam".

- ➤ "Exam paper, improved by replacing collective descriptive activities or the student himself to search for this information".

Consequently, it is pretty clear that university students seek for new teaching and assessment methods. They want to participate in more practical activities in order to improve their skills. They point out as well the necessity of oral exams, online assessment policies and effective online systems. In general, participants present

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through their proposals, new ideas, new methods in which initiatives will be given to students in a student-centered teaching environment.
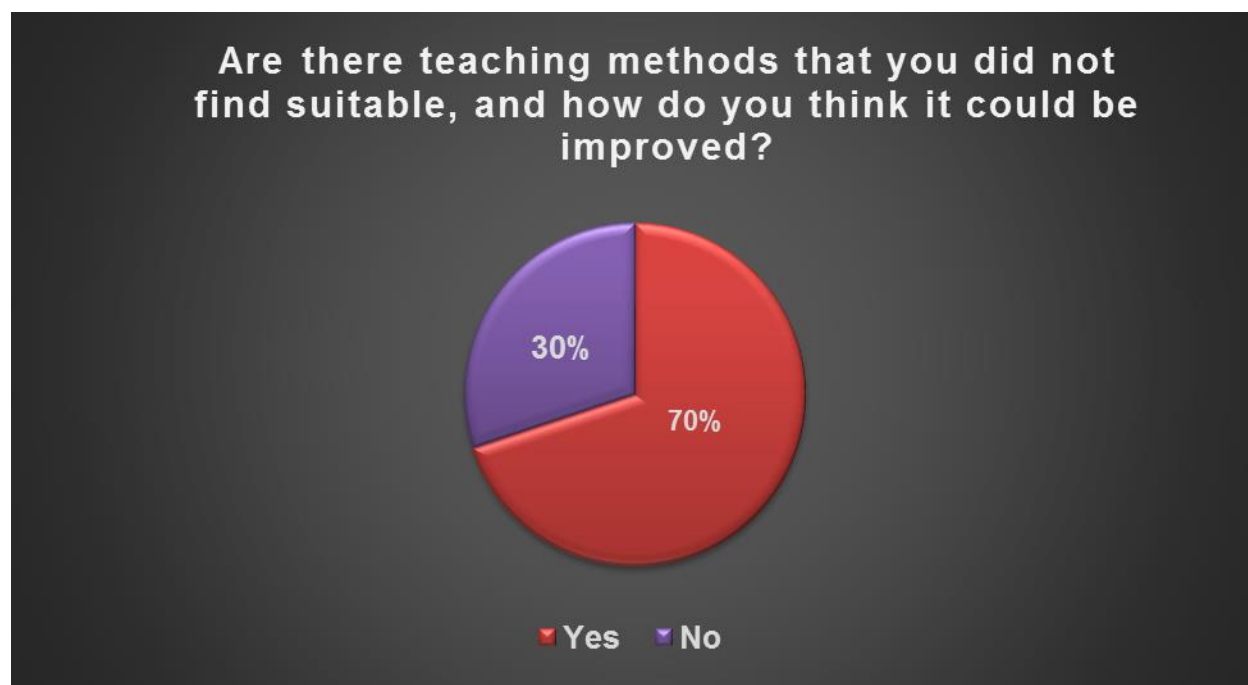
15. Chart 15, At which point in the semester have you evaluated the teaching and learning practices?

In general, teachers' evaluation is held at the end of the semester as 64,23% of respondents answered. However, there is a 18,75%, stated that they evaluated their professors during the 2nd month of the academic year. But, the most remarkable is that there is a significant 11,80% that are not been given the opportunity to evaluate the educational system at all.

Teacher and Learning Practises Evaluation

	1st month	2nd month	Only at the end	Never
	5,20%	18,75%	64,23%	11,80%

16. Chart 16, If you evaluate the teaching and evaluation methods for teachers, what are the aspects that you have evaluated.

A great number of the examined sample 87,95 indicated that evaluate the lectures, followed by 86,78% that evaluate teaching practices and 71,85% the assessment tools. Interaction with students is also evaluated as stated 82% of respondents. Similarly, teaching material, assessment tools, assignments, class dynamics and subjects' curriculum.

Aspects that participants evaluate.

	Teaching practises	Assessment tools	Interaction with students	Teaching material	Lectures	Assignments	Subject's curriculum	Class synamics
No	13,21%	28,41%	18,11%	23,44%	12,04%	30,85%	36,49%	32,11%
Yes	86,78%	71,58%	82%	76,55%	87,95%	69,14%	63,50%	67,88%
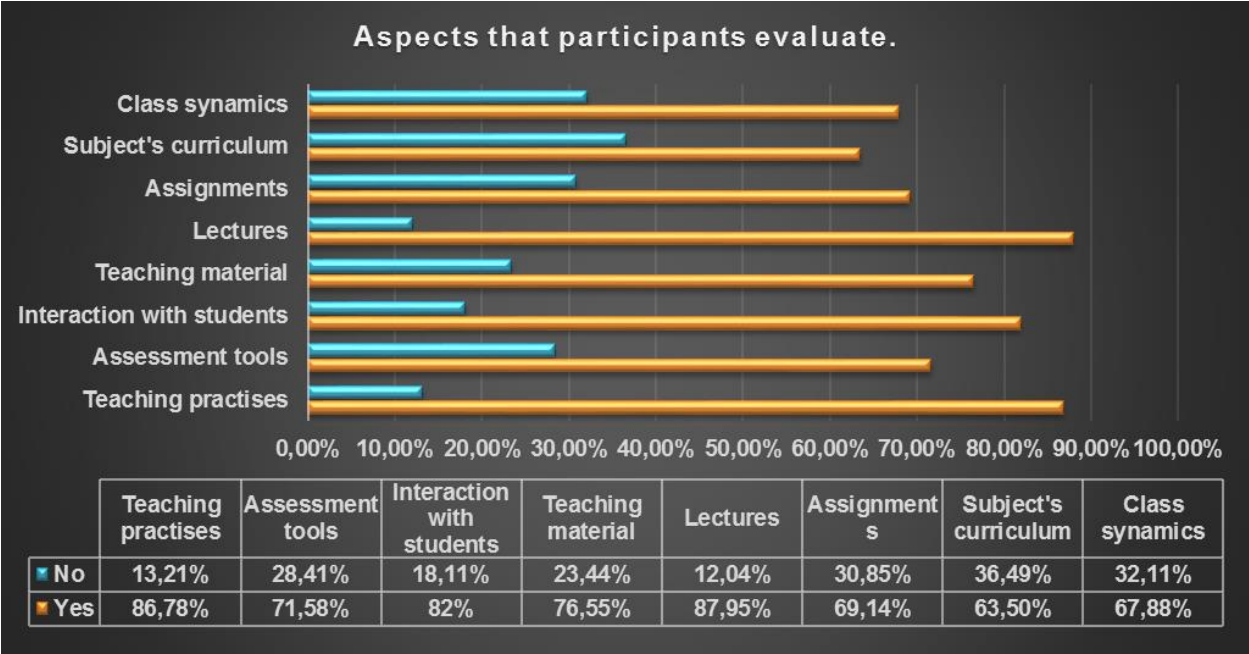
17. Chart 17, Teaching methods that participants have experienced at their Faculty/university

Among the respondents, many of the responses expressed that they have experienced "Totally", well explained courses, 52,52 and use of examples, 36,08%, in a "Very much" rate. What is worth mentioning here is that participants have moderately experienced other teaching methods such as, interactive teaching, 44,48%, students' participation, 40% and 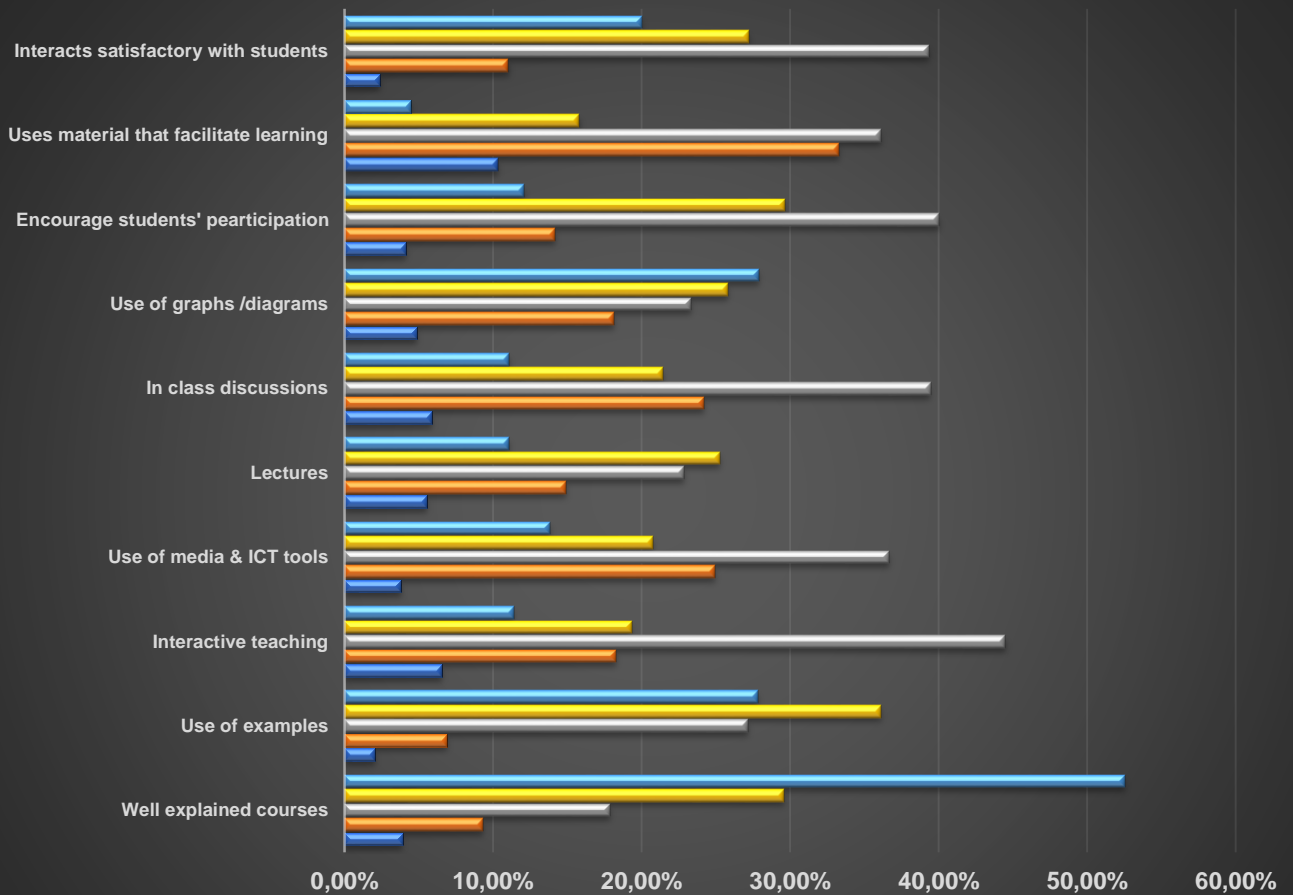in class discussion, 39,44%. However, encouraging is the fact that only a very few percentage of students have never experienced all the teaching methods indicated. This is an indicator that shows a variety of teaching methods to have been used at the examined universities.

Teaching methods that participants have experienced at their Faculty/university

	Well explained courses	Use of examples	Interactive teaching	Use of media & ICT tools	Lectures	In class discussions	Use of graphs /diagrams	Encourage students' pearticipation	Uses material that facilitate learning	Interacts satisfactory with students
Totally	52,52%	27,83%	11,37%	13,84%	11,07%	11,07%	27,87%	12,06%	4,46%	20%
Very much	29,57%	36,08%	19,31%	20,76%	25,25%	21,45%	25,78%	29,65%	15,80%	27,24%
Moderately	17,89%	27,14%	44,48%	36,67%	22,83%	39,44%	23,34%	40%	36,08%	39,31%
Slightly	9,33%	6,87%	18,27%	24,91%	14,87%	24,18%	18,11%	14,13%	33,30%	11,03%
Not at all	3,89%	2,06%	7%	3,80%	5,53%	5,88%	4,87%	4,13%	10,30%	2,40%

Teaching methods that participants have experienced at their Faculty/university

	Well explained courses	Use of examples	Interactive teaching	Use of media & ICT tools	Lectures	In class discussions	Use of graphs /diagrams	Encourage students' pearticipation	Uses material that facilitate learning	Interacts satisfactory with students
Totally	52,52%	27,83%	11,37%	13,84%	11,07%	11,07%	27,87%	12,06%	4,46%	20%
Very much	29,57%	36,08%	19,31%	20,76%	25,25%	21,45%	25,78%	29,65%	15,80%	27,24%
Moderately	17,89%	27,14%	44,48%	36,67%	22,83%	39,44%	23,34%	40%	36,08%	39,31%
Slightly	9,33%	6,87%	18,27%	24,91%	14,87%	24,18%	18,11%	14,13%	33,30%	11,03%
Not at all	3,89%	2,06%	7%	3,80%	5,53%	5,88%	4,87%	4,13%	10,30%	2,40%

18. Chart 18, Are there aspects that you don't like in teaching methods or schedules followed in your university? How do you think it can be improved?

Totally, 78% of the respondents stated that there are aspects that they don't like in teaching methods, in contrast to the 22% who answered that there are not. Participants, who answered "Yes", pointed their opinions on the topic.

Some of their statements worth mentioning and very important for the final conclusions are listed below:

➢ "Provide exams meaningfully and not in order to distract the student".

➢ "Change the methods of evaluation used".

➢ The examination system should take into account the students' levels".

➢ "Yes, it can be improved through changing the style and application of teaching methods in a way to enjoy science, not just read and memorize it and assume that the students acquired many skills. And to take into account that it happens that a professor explains something and then in the exam that is completely

different. I wish to take my words into consideration and thank you for your attention".

➢ "The only thing most important is the method of assessing students through the exam paper this method can never reflects the understanding and intelligence of the student because it depends on the pressure in the limited time and tension, especially in the practical courses they do not evaluate the student's understanding".

➢ "Sterile exams do not represent the critical level of students but teachers deal with students and judge them through this."

➢ "Moodle system is very weak compared to google classroom that supports interaction".

➢ "Follow the style of conservation with students, and a lot of possible practical application to facilitate the understanding of the students".

➢ "High university fees, which stopped me from completing the second chapter in education and I hope to discuss this matter with the college".

➢ "The method of memorization is very boring. Please raise students' attention during the lecture for them to ask questions".

➢ "Yes, there are some aspects such as the use of advanced technology in education."

➢ "The need to force the students to visit the library for scientific research".

➢ "Always used traditional methods of education and continuous discrimination among students".

➢ "Better to focus more on research in all material".

➢ "Giving large amounts of information in lectures can be improved by reducing the amount of information given".

Conclusions and recommendations:

This research has reached very interesting outcomes related to the assessment practices at first year education at Palestinian universities. Quality standards and approval of courses are defined at Palestinian Higher Education by the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission under the supervision from the Ministry of Higher Education. Quality Assurance Units have been developed in all universities to set quality policies in academic, administrative, scientific and community level. Achieving excellence is among the aims of universities to delivered effective education according to the international standards. Adaptations occurred depending on courses and students' preferences often based on consultation with external stakeholders to reflect different opinions involving labor market representatives.

Universities follow the same line concerning assessment policies for first year students that are mainly designed in the form of internal evaluation based on different methods such as final written exams, projects, tests, projects etc. Some instructions prefer to use other methods of assessment, like practical-based projects which count for 30% of the final mark. Project-based assignments usually involve team-work between different groups that allow students to interact between them and with the professors developing as well their presentation and communication skills. Other assessment methods involve written reports or the traditional written exams at the end of each semester. These methods depend on the course and number of students for each class. Evaluating large enrollment classes can be challenging so final written exams is much preferable method for some professors.

Similarly, evaluation of faculty members is continuous and is achieved through online questionnaires in all examined universities. The online questionnaires are a compulsory procedure for students to achieve access to the final grades and often do not reflect the subjective opinions of students. That is controversial because the majority of students stated do not pay particular attention when filling the online questionnaire or evaluate the professors based their judgment on sympathies and interpersonal relations and not on teaching methods. Informal evaluation by students in teaching styles and methods is

also encouraged, that helps professors to reconsider the teaching style. Therefore, what it was also stated is that some professors do not realize that an attitude change is required and that is conflicted with the general purpose of improving assessment practices.

Informal procedures for evaluation are also applied in specific universities that include peer-reviewing and informal students' feedback about teaching methods and teaching material. Information about new course including detailed description on course syllabus, learning outcomes, evaluation methods, assessment procedures, projects and the grading system is given through the orientation days at the beginning of each academic year. That aims to prepare students about their learning experience at university and appraise their expectations.

Teaching methods varied by course and professors. According to the focus groups conducted with professors, conventional teaching methods like lecturing, in-class discussion, assignments and at a certain extent projects are among the most preferred. Certain professors encourage the participation in extra-curricular activities such as community-based projects and volunteering that can develop students' skills and engage them in socially-related activities.

Use of technological means in teaching is widely used in all universities; therefore particular universities provide more incentives to professors in using alternative teaching and assessment methods than others. The most commonly used are Moodle platforms, social media, internal online systems, PowerPoint presentations etc. Modernized ways of communication such as Facebook groups and forums are also widely used to help students connect with their professors.

Although, all universities have integrated online systems a respective number of professors who participated in this research do preserve their strong preference on traditional teaching methods and view e-learning or online seminars and Web 2.0 technologies with a certain level of obstruction. Others stated that lack of time is a certain burden when trying to incorporate new technologies in the teaching practices.

Hence, in general professors stated that are willing to emphasize on new teaching methods if that could help students to develop critical thinking and other important skills. Some of the professors stated that although they want to use e-learning tools and organize their material online, they spend much time in changing their first-year students' mentality.

Several difficulties have been identified by professors of all respective universities. The main difficulty that mentioned was the transition of freshmen students from secondary education to university that follows differences in teaching and learning approach. Freshmen students are used to the teaching systems in high schools which depends on reading and memorizing, without focusing on comprehension and analysis. As a result, freshmen students face great difficulties trying to integrate to university learning practices involving independent thinking. The issue of foreign language it was also raised as the main challenge for freshmen, since students come from a different educational system, where are not given the opportunity to learn English properly. That affects their participation in the class especially considering that the majority of classes are taught in English.

As the results showed, students' opinion is conflictual in relation to the professors. Students generally focused on the varied teaching methods employed which differ from course to course and is based on professor's initiative. Different teaching styles involved from traditional lecturing to use of modern technology and practical applications which were much more preferred by students. Students tend to prefer blended teaching methods that make classes more interactive and stimulate critical thinking, group discussion and team work. It was clearly indicated that practical projects and real-life examples offer much more meaningful knowledge than traditional lecturing that prevents students from staying focused for the whole class duration.

Students' evaluation in those cases often based on exams or assessments but most of them times in-class participation, presentations or group-work does not evaluated to lead to the final mark. Students find that a mixed evaluation system that combines other elements besides exams and assessments should be taken into account. Hence,

revision tests after each class could help students remember and reflect on what have been taught. Practical project assignments are also much more preferred that final written exams because they can reflect the skills and critical thinking of the students rather than requiring memorization. A negative component that was discussed was that first-year students are not assigned with many project assignments. Their performance evaluation is mainly based on three written exams mostly at the end of the semester and the academic year. Another important issue that was raised is that the schedule of final exams sometimes overlaps so students need to leave an exam incomplete and rush to sit in another. That leads to serious problems since students only have a second chance to pass the exam.

Beyond the scope of this research was the identification of specific challenges related to first year students. The main issue commonly pointed was the language barriers and command of English language especially related to comprehension of terminology taught in English. Since almost all courses are offered in English including learning material such as textbooks, presentations and exams include in-class participation that consequently affects academic performance. A further problem indicated was the transition from the structured system of secondary education to a looser educational system such as the universities. Students face adaptation problems during the first year related to self-organization, time-management, independent study that prevent them from fully integrate into university life.

The most concrete recommendations are presented here:

Among the issues discussed through the data collection process, was recommendations that made by students and professors. It was remarked that student achievement can be improved through exercise of indications, included in courses' outlines. There were mentioned several employed assessment practices. Few of the pronounced examples were: individual exercises, case studies, methods to connect theory and practice, run projects individually or in groups.

It was stated that measures have to be taken during the last months of high school in order to manage similar issues. Setting a direct collaboration between HEIs and high schools towards the development of a common strategy to prepare students. Such a condition could be achieved with preliminary/preparatory courses for the forthcoming university students. One of the main goals would be to defy their passive stance towards learning making them feel more engaged to the overall procedure.

Students' request:

- Use of an online assessment tool especially for large enrollment classes;
- Customized evaluation policy for 1rst year education students is necessary that will consider that freshmen come from a different educational background and learning methods;
- Introductory or orientation classes at high school level or in the form of summer school would provide great information and will be a great assistance to students to get important decisions regarding career options and courses adjusted to specific personalities;
- English classes that are more focused on practical aspects could help students to improve their academic performance; Summer classes oriented to academic English and terminology involving practical assignments would definitely advance academic learning;
- The transitory period from secondary education to university should be taking into consideration so extra assistance and orientation to be given to students;
- Evaluation of professors' performance should be taken into account when structuring courses or assign classes.
- Introductory or orientation classes could help students to get informed about the university policies, the faculties and job opportunities. That could take the form of an orientation course at high school level or as a summer course to prepare students take important decisions.

General remarks that were made by the Quality Units regarding the improvement of the assessment methods were:

- Reducing the number of written exams
- Having a control policy over grades
- Changing current evaluation policy by forming quality committees which they will be independent and specifically informed about each department.

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