

TRANSITIONS TO WORK: Integrating Career Guidance into Palestine's Universities

The Youth Entrepreneurship Development (YED) program is a five-year, US\$15 million initiative funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) West Bank and Gaza Mission. YED's goal is to improve employability and entrepreneurship opportunities for young Palestinians, ages 14 to 29, by partnering with public, private, and civil society sector institutions. Through strong partnerships with local Palestinian youth-serving institutions, the program supports high-quality, results-oriented, and sustainable livelihood initiatives to address the needs of Palestinian youth.

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The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. Founded in 1990, IYF builds and maintains a worldwide community of businesses, governments, and civil-society organizations committed to empowering youth to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. IYF programs are catalysts of change that help young people obtain a quality education, gain employability skills, make healthy choices, and improve their communities.

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TO SUCCEED IN LIFE, UNIVERSITY STUDENTS NEED MORE THAN A DEGREE. They need to know about the career options available to them and how these mesh with their interests and talents. They need to know which sectors of the economy are growing and how this impacts their career plans. And they need to develop the essential life skills that employers seek, and gain relevant experience for the workplace. Recognizing that far too few Palestinian university students had access to comprehensive career guidance services, the Youth Entrepreneurship Program (YED) began taking steps to fill this gap in 2010.

A five-year program of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), YED pursues a multifaceted approach to improving employability and entrepreneurship opportunities for young Palestinians, ages 14 to 29. Its efforts to strengthen career guidance services have focused on nine university partners who, in turn, work with thousands of students.

Career guidance services are relatively new in Palestine, with most launched over the last decade at the secondary school and university level. Within universities in particular, services have typically been delivered through alumni centers housed within the external relations or student affairs departments. As a result—and in the absence of sufficient planning and preparation—graduates often found themselves in professions that did not match their interests or skills sets.

Prior to the introduction of new approaches through YED, those career guidance centers that did operate provided very limited services to a small number of students. Such services were often delivered by external providers, without a careful assessment of the university environment and student needs. “Before YED, we did whatever donor programs came in to do,” said Fadi Sweiti, Program Coordinator at the Palestine Polytechnic University (PPU) in Hebron. “We didn’t really get involved in the activities.” Dima Shahrour from Sharek Youth Forum confirmed, “Before, [career guidance] centers couldn’t organize themselves, had no clear vision, and were donor led.”



Over 2 years, more than 2,100 students at 9 universities have benefited from quality career guidance services.

YED sought to change this by working in partnership with career guidance centers within universities to identify student needs and start building a long-term vision for how these centers could operate effectively and sustainably. YED did this by exposing universities to the gamut of services they might provide based on its international experience, and then working with career guidance centers individually to determine the appropriate suite of service offerings given each group's resources. YED also leveraged its relationships with international entities, including Microsoft, Silatech, and others, to ensure the availability of quality career guidance tools and services.

As a result of these efforts, over 38 counselors have been trained in career guidance, who have, in turn, supported 2,216 university students in receiving career guidance services over the past 2 years.

A FLEXIBLE, ADAPTABLE APPROACH TO IMPROVING CAREER GUIDANCE SERVICES

YED pursued a comprehensive approach in its work with nine universities to strengthen the capacity of career guidance centers and the services offered to students. Support was provided in one or more of three ways. First, direct grants were given to universities, or NGOs operating in universities, through which career centers participated in YED's capacity strengthening process and received funds to implement activities. Center staff worked hand-in-hand with YED to develop strategies and to integrate trainings and activities designed to meet the holistic career guidance needs of students.

For other universities, centers co-implemented services with youth-serving institutions (YSIs) receiving YED grants. In this way, long-time Palestinian YSIs such as the Sharek Youth Forum, Leaders, and Palestine Information and Communications Technology Incubator (PICI) worked through the centers to provide career guidance activities to youth, and through their work, trained up

staff with relevant knowledge and skills. These experiences included career days and entrepreneurship programs at the centers, as well as career assessments offered universities that did not have staff trained in these issues. The co-implementation model allowed universities to "learn by doing" and gain exposure to career guidance activities that they could implement in the future.

Finally, capacity-building activities were made available to all universities, which included:

- Introductory training on career guidance services at universities that covered basic competencies needed for career counselors
- Training of counselors on Tamheed, an on-line psychometric assessment tool
- Workshops in the areas of employability, service learning, grants management, and monitoring and evaluation
- Training of Trainers (TOT) for *Build Your Business*, an online entrepreneurship training program
- TOT for *Passport to Success*®, IYF's signature life skills training program

As these activities were implemented, YED focused on the sustainability of the centers by encouraging the training of staff within the universities, preferably in more than one office, and providing free licenses or sub-licenses for training materials and career guidance service tools. This was especially true for Tamheed, with its parent organization, Silatech, giving all universities who were trained a free sub-license to use the assessment. Furthermore, through extensive relationship building with university management and other offices (e.g., IT centers, academic faculty), buy in for the centers increased, which enhanced their sustainability over the long run.



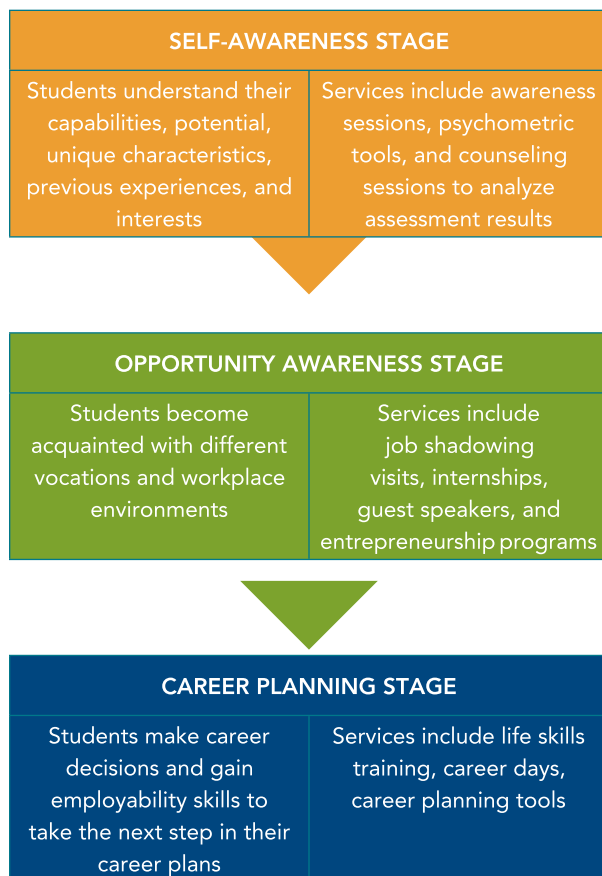
Competencies for Career Counselors*

IYF's capacity strengthening for career counselors focuses on providing them with knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- **Career Guidance Theory and Practice:** Counselors demonstrate knowledge and application of career guidance theory and models.
- **Helping and Facilitation Skills:** Counselors demonstrate ability to communicate with, support, and advise job seekers as well as facilitate successful career guidance sessions.
- **Labor Market Information and Resources:** Counselors demonstrate knowledge of updated information of labor market and employment trends, and education and training opportunities.
- **Career Services Management:** Counselors demonstrate ability to plan, implement, and evaluate career guidance services.
- **Employability Skills:** Counselors demonstrate knowledge of and ability to teach job seekers various employability skills such as networking, job search techniques, CV and cover letter writing, and interviewing.

* Taken from IYF's My Career, My Future training package for counselors

Stages of Career Guidance Supported by YED



* Excerpted from IYF's Reference Guide for Career Development Facilitators adapted for the Middle East context and made available in Arabic.

WORKING WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The centers were encouraged by YED and partner YSIs to make inroads with local companies, inviting them to participate in career days, to make guest appearances, and to accept interns, trainees, and fresh graduates for entry-level positions. These partnerships took a variety of forms. Palestine Ahlyeh University College (PAUC), for example, hosted workshops between HR managers and students on qualifications to enter the job market. The Palestine Technical University in Kadouri (PTUK) sponsored visits to large companies such as Paltel Group, PADICO, and the Palestinian stock exchange.

To date, over 250 agreements have been signed with the private sector. As the career guidance program has grown, centers report that private sector interest has increased, with significant funding leveraged for support of the program in the form of matching stipends for internships and employer training of youth on site. As Ihab Abu Markheyeh from Jebrini Dairy and Food Industries describes, “[Our partnership] serves both purposes—it helps us get good employees and it helps the youth.”

IMPACT OF QUALITY CAREER GUIDANCE ON STUDENTS, UNIVERSITIES, AND EMPLOYERS

YED's support of the career guidance centers has been felt among students, university administrators, and career counselors, as well as among external public and private

stakeholders. Several universities report an increased demand for services, particularly related to soft skills training and support in CV writing, mock interviewing, and more extensive internship programs. As Dr. Nitham Diab from the Arab American University in Jenin (AAUJ) notes, “Our grads would enter the job market not knowing how to write CVs; we bridged the gap between the theory [they learned at the university] and the labor market ... Now, they can write, they can talk in interviews. When they go to interviews for scholarships, for example, we see the difference between those who trained and those who didn’t in the way they answer, the way they understand questions, the way they present themselves.” AAUJ staff has also received thanks and feedback from the youth. “They feel there’s someone following up on them,” said AAUJ career counselor Bilal Al Ashqar. Activity on various universities’ center social media pages has also increased, resulting in over 2,000 responses per posting for some centers.

Others have commented on changes among staff at the career guidance centers. As Mr. Ayman Sultan from PPU said, “The biggest impact we’ve seen is that now we have staff that can work with youth consistently.”

This has affected both the universities as well as the YSIs with whom they work. As Dima Shahrour from Sharek points out, “It has changed our philosophy, our way of thinking, the way we work with universities, the time we’ve invested, our resources, and our exposure to other programs.”

Universities are beginning to recognize the impact that centers can have in supporting their bottom line. As Khaled Shana’a from PAUC/CDCE-I notes, “The administration is seeing that it’s worth the effort. They’re seeing the effect on students and, in turn, the reputation of the university.” University presidents are starting to interface

with centers to learn more about career days, their interaction with the private sector, and other key activities.

CAREER GUIDANCE IN ACTION: PALESTINE POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

A prime example of how career guidance centers have developed through YED comes from Palestine Polytechnic University (PPU). Started in 2012, PPU’s alumni center initially focused on job placement assistance for graduates. Through grants and other support from YED, its activities expanded, with funding used to train staff from each college on a variety of career guidance issues, including assessments, life skills, and entrepreneurship. In fact, PPU is one of the few universities to have certified trainers in all three areas. As Fadi Sweiti, PPU’s Career Center Program Coordinator, puts it, “YED helped us come up with a work plan and now we have training materials, trained staff, and connections.”

The center also coordinated with academic advisors, faculty members, and local companies to form or expand linkages between the educational system and the private sector so that students can plan their academic experience according to labor market needs, and companies can, in turn, rely on the university to provide easy access to capable graduates. Sweiti continues, “We’ve become a resource linking the private sector with students.” These efforts have reaped benefits for the center, for the students passing through its doors, for the university administration, and for the private sector partners it works with. Companies are now asking to participate in internship and training programs and are requesting greater numbers of students.

As Ihab Abu Markheyeh from Jebrini Dairy says, “When we need trainees or staff, Fadi [from PPU] is the first person we call. Working with PPU saves time and searching and training ... He sends individuals that match my needs. If they didn’t, we would have stopped after the first experience.”

Through PPU, 1,090 students have received career guidance support, with over 500 youth placed in internships. Furthermore, in a sample survey conducted by YED, 100 percent of students interviewed said they would recommend the center’s services to others. Says

That universities are taking responsibility for helping grads find a job represents a significant change in how they see their role.

— Samer Salameh, Director of Employment Office,
Palestine Ministry of Labour



Abeer Abu Gheith, the center’s career guidance counselor, “[The services] affect the students. We’ve seen grades improve and fields of study change for students. Graduates get jobs or start internships.” Furthermore, demand for center services has grown. Staff comment on the increased activity and presence students have in the center now, and how many graduates continue to come to the center for support. “We’re responding to a real need,” Abeer continues.

As a result, the university has committed to keeping center staff that have been trained and has become the primary gatekeeper for all the university’s employability and entrepreneurship programs. According to staff, the university administration sees the center as a means of fulfilling its responsibility to help students with jobs, and this, in turn, helps the university’s reputation with the local community, with the private sector, and with potential new students.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Despite these successes, universities continue to face challenges in providing effective career guidance programs. As Dr. Mohammad AlMbaid, IYF Country Director, says, “We’ve really only touched the surface of what can be done.” Many of these challenges stem from the dynamics of working within the universities themselves. The size and structure of administrations within Palestine’s universities make it difficult for them to institutionalize change quickly, which poses a barrier to flexibility and the ability to update and respond to new

challenges and emerging needs. This is due to a variety of factors such as limited budgets, lack of knowledge among faculty about the private sector, and bureaucratic hurdles. Universities such as PAUC have begun to work around this issue through the establishment of an NGO under the umbrella of the university (CDCE-I), although this solution may not be feasible for every university.

Resource limitations also pose a challenge, with most career centers managed by a staff of three people or less operating within constrained budgets. As a result, staff are forced to make choices about the types of services they can provide. YED is beginning to address this issue through developing online tools and websites that reduce the amount of one-on-one interaction needed and through exploring delivery of a diverse menu of services to respond to increased student demand.

Finally, there is need for broader and institutionalized linkages between university centers and the private sector. Despite the growing coordination between both groups, staff comment that these links are not as consistent or multi-faceted as they could be, being focused mostly on job placement. There is a need for the private sector to be consulted in academic planning so that students are trained according to market needs.

IYF has taken steps to address such challenges and hopes to continue engaging stakeholders at multiple levels to expand the reach of career guidance in Palestine.

Forging Partnerships for Sustainability: Tammayez

To support career guidance within universities, YED helped form the Tammayez program, a three-way partnership between PADICO HOLDING, Sharek Youth Forum, and IYF. Based on the needs of potential employers for soft skills from their employees and access to human resources, the program helps career centers organize site visits to companies and local community organizations, through which they design and implement local social initiatives. Launched by the Prime Minister, the program has trained over 400 students at 7 universities. Through Tammayez, PADICO is the first private sector company to offer cash to support the career guidance of young people in Palestine.

LOOKING AHEAD

To deepen the program's impact, YED is in dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and other key stakeholders to better link career guidance services within secondary schools with efforts at universities, thereby institutionalizing the continuum of services that can be offered to young people. The Ministry of Labour (MOL) is supporting these efforts through the development of a policy and national strategy for career guidance and forming a national committee to oversee its implementation, of which the universities are key members.

Furthermore, IYF has partnered with Microsoft and Silatech to develop Ta3mal, an online platform that would provide career guidance tools to centers and students across Palestine. Tamheed is a key part of this effort, and Silatech has committed resources to support its development. Through the initiative, IYF and its partners will provide training to centers on how to use the Ta3mal platform sustainably in the future.

In addition to these efforts, there are a number of recommendations that stakeholders can implement to support the sustainability of the career guidance centers.

For universities, it is imperative that senior level administrators take a close look at what human and financial resources can be allocated to the centers, and further develop staff capacity to operate them. Universities need to recognize that the empowerment of these centers is ultimately a reflection of the university's relevance and value add to communities and students, encouraging further investment in the university from outside stakeholders.

The centers themselves can be strengthened through:

- Diversifying services and creating linkages with other university offerings (e.g., academic advising, social counseling) to help relieve resource constraints. Such investment will result in centers being able to selectively choose programs and trainings that are conducive to the needs of students.
- Obtaining the most recent and updated labor market information and utilizing it in the guidance process.
- Creating, updating, and maintaining a database and a follow up system to track and continue to support youth.
- Involving the private sector in the provision of career guidance and employability services through the career centers.
- Engaging the public and private sectors in the creation of partnerships to support those career services offered.
- Lobbying the public sector to increase its financial support for career centers.

Programs supporting career guidance can ultimately be more successful if they can build upon existing initiatives within institutions. It is also recommended that donors consider co-funding, or supporting career guidance efforts that receive investment from within the universities, in order to encourage the sustainability of programs.

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