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Student Engagement: Attitudes of Educators at Palestinian Universities-Gaza

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Abstract:

Student engagement is a concept in pedagogical research that has been under the spotlights in recent years. In advanced countries, students' curiosity, attention, participation, and psychological and behavioural investment in learning have long revolutionised the process of learning and teaching. However, the researchers have not found any study investigating the pedagogical practices related to engagement in an Arab setting. This study explores the attitudes of Arab Palestinian educators towards student engagement in higher education in Gaza Strip. It also reports on the real experiences they went through in a bid to enhance student engagement in their classes. The researchers collected quantitative and qualitative data to elicit the attitudes of the lecturers and identify the best techniques to engage students. The researchers conducted four focus-group interviews to collect qualitative data on the best methods to enhance student engagement in higher education. After processing the quantitative data collected by questionnaires, the researchers found that the level of agreement by educators on student engagement was high. Of the many techniques proposed, group work, flipped class, problem-solving, KWL, and 10+2 are the most effective. The study concludes that student engagement is an important, investment-worthy requirement for higher education. Finally, the researchers recommend that lecturers should implement the active learning methods in their classes.

Keywords: Student engagement, higher education, pedagogical practices, active learning

اتجاهات المدرسين الجامعيين نحو عملية مشاركة الطلبة في الجامعات الفلسطينية - غزة

المخلص:

في السنوات الأخيرة حاز مفهوم مشاركة الطلبة على الاهتمام في البحث التربوي. وفي العالم المتقدم أدى الاهتمام بدراسة مشاركة الطلبة واستثمارهم النفسي والسلوكي إلى إحداث ثورة عميقة في عمليتي التعلم والتعليم. ومع ذلك لم يجد الباحثون أي دراسة تبحث في الممارسات التربوية المتعلقة بدمج ومشاركة الطلبة في البيئة التربوية العربية. وتهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف اتجاهات المدرسين الجامعيين الفلسطينيين تجاه مشاركة الطلبة في التعليم العالي في قطاع غزة، واستطلاع وجهات نظرهم حول التجارب الحقيقية التي مروا بها في محاولة لتعزيز مشاركة الطلبة في محاضراتهم. وقد جمع الباحثون بيانات كمية ونوعية لاستنباط وجهات نظر المدرسين وتحديد أفضل التقنيات لإشراك الطلبة، وتبين بعد معالجة البيانات الكمية التي تم جمعها من خلال الاستبيانات أن مستوى اتفاق المدرسين على مشاركة الطلاب كان مرتفعاً. تسلط هذه النتيجة الضوء على استعداد المدرسين لتطبيق تقنيات جديدة لتعزيز مشاركة الطلاب على الرغم من التحديات التي تواجههم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك أجرى الباحثون أربع مقابلات مجموعات بؤرية للمدرسين لجمع بيانات نوعية حول أفضل الطرق لتعزيز مشاركة الطلاب في التعليم العالي، ومن التقنيات الأكثر فعالية المقترحة: العمل الجماعي، الفصل المعكوس، حل المشكلات، طريقة (أعرف، أريد أن أعرف، تعلمت)، و 10 + 2. وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى أن مشاركة الطلاب هي مطلب هام وجدير بالاستثمار في التعليم العالي. وبناء عليه يوصي الباحثون بضرورة قيام المدرسين الجامعيين بتطبيق أساليب التعلم النشط في محاضراتهم.

كلمات مفتاحية: مشاركة الطلبة، التعليم العالي، الممارسات التربوية، التعلم النشط

Introduction:

The prime goal of higher education institutions is teaching and graduating students, who are capable of bringing about change for the better in their society (Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 2016). To this end, academic systems should give room for students to best utilise their skills in analysis, critique, problem-solving, and decision-making so that they can become critical and creative thinkers in their communities. This goal should prompt educators to reconsider the relationship with students and address an important question: To what extent can lecturers consider students as partners in planning a course and taking relevant decisions? A follow-up question is: To what extent can lecturers trust the students' level of thinking and preparedness to learn? If answered positively, the two questions will encourage educators to use new teaching methods to involve students and create richer educational experiences where students are more active and engaged. In an area of protracted crises like Palestine, more interactive educational practices are overwhelmingly needed to strengthen students' psychological and behavioral investment for learning and prepare them for the real world.

Student engagement is an academic pursuit that not only is an individual responsibility but also requires institutional policy to encourage such endeavors. At the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), the Academic Excellence Unit works to enhance the academic environment for lecturers and students by promoting modern teaching methods, given that the long-term goal of the Unit is recognizing such new methods as part of the educational system at IUG. The Unit also organizes training courses to introduce the newest and most engaging teaching techniques to educators. Of the many specialised courses conducted, the Academic Excellence Unit organized a training program entitled: "Developing Pedagogical Practices in the Palestinian Higher Education" sponsored by Finland and known as FinPal e-Training Program. Started in 2018, the first round of the Program aimed to train trainers who are academics at IUG in educational practices in cooperation with Tampere University, Finland. The academics attended 190 hours of training that focused on modern instruction methods in higher education, and they designed and implemented a training program, "Excellence in Higher Education", to transfer the knowledge and expertise they had acquired to other colleagues working at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip. In the second round, sixty-seven academics from several Palestinian universities and colleges attended 60-hour training. After being divided into five groups based on some criteria, the trainees had an unparalleled opportunity to interact and discuss the best educational practices with fellow academics. They also had to complete follow-up activities and tasks via Moodle, an e-learning platform. The training program covered four main themes: "(1) Student learning and engagement, (2) Designing learning processes and environments, (3) Special features of teaching in university, (4) Expertise in academic teaching in higher education." (FinPal Project Website, 2019). The new teaching techniques, which the trainers were introduced to in the first round of the FinPal training, were implemented in the training sessions. It is noteworthy that the researchers of this paper worked as trainers in the advanced training program, "Excellence in Higher Education".

Student engagement is a relatively new concept as a research theme in pedagogical studies. It has been a major focus for researchers to investigate the link between increased engagement and the quality of educational outcomes (Appleton et al., 2008). In Palestine, Excellence in Higher

Education was the first-of-its-type training program that placed student engagement as a major theme in the training. In the first sessions of the training program, the academics' viewpoints on the best educational practices in higher education varied. Some believed that an educator is the primary source of information in a learning setting, thus restricting a student's role to memorizing, answering class questions, or doing homework. But others advocated for promoting innovative teaching techniques that boost student engagement in the educational process to improve learning outcomes, thus agreeing with Coates (2005), Graham et al. (2007), and Pascarella et al. (2010). While going through the literature on engaging students, the researchers found no Arabic study handling this topic, although the same theme is under the spotlight in pedagogical studies worldwide.

That student engagement is a new concept viewed differently by educators has encouraged the researchers to carry out their study. Further, the very term itself, student engagement, seems to be confusing and undefined to the majority of academics in Palestinian universities. Still, some question the applicability of new student engagement methods in very crowded classes, given that universities do not interfere to impose a particular teaching/learning methodology. A common misconception among university educators is that student engagement is merely how active the student is inside the classroom itself.

According to many experimental studies conducted at different educational settings, student engagement has proved to have a positive impact on learning outcomes helping students efficiently understand the course content and acquire the necessary skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Equally important, Excellence in Higher Education sees student engagement as a method to develop teaching in higher education. Therefore, the connection between student engagement and better academic teaching prompted the researchers to elicit the participant academics' attitudes towards student engagement to conduct a pioneering study and share the findings. This research is a study conducted in an Arab setting. It will enrich the literature about student engagement by identifying the attitudes and highlighting the experiences of educators working at Palestinian universities towards student engagement. This research will be translated into Arabic and hopefully published in local media outlets and sent to the academic affairs offices of Palestinian universities so that more academics get familiar with student engagement, its methods, and its impact both on the students' quality of learning and the process of teaching.

Research context

Palestinian universities were first established in the 1970's on local and national initiatives. Most Palestinian universities are non-profitmaking education institutions that enjoy independence in management and recruitment. They mostly started with a few majors in education, humanities, and science but developed immensely to include engineering and medicine. There are 18 Palestinian universities, 6 of which are in the Gaza Strip. In the academic year 2018-2019, there were about 218,126 students in several different majors. In the same academic year, about 45,722 students graduated from these local universities (Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2019). These universities provide mostly affordable education for students, many of whom, especially in the Gaza Strip, live on incomes below the poverty line, mainly due to the Israeli occupation and siege. The local universities have been made easy for those who cannot travel due to Israeli restrictions and closures to join the department they want. Palestinian young women particularly found in these universities the chance to develop themselves personally and professionally. The local universities have contributed actively towards developing the Palestinian community, raising awareness, and equipping their students with the necessary knowledge and skills, thus providing the local, regional, and even global labour markets with highly skilled graduates. However, Palestinian universities have suffered immensely primarily due to Israeli occupation and human rights

violations: many students and teachers cannot easily and regularly reach their classes, many are arrested for student activities, and some universities were closed and even bombed. As Israel occasionally restricts movement and travel and even sometimes entry of books and university equipment, universities suffer financially, classes get crowded, students remain teacherless, experts cannot visit or lecture, and teachers lack the necessary training that could have been acquired by travelling and exchange programmes (Badr et al, 2016). Therefore, some universities have resorted to online training for their staff in order to train their lecturers for the kind of circumstances Palestinian universities suffer from. For many, modern teaching methods that focus on engaging the students and making them an essential part of the learning process are key to keeping up with the development taking place in the field of higher education.

Review of related literature

The concept of student engagement is new to education, but it has been substantially developed and changed over time (Coates, 2006). There is no consensus among scholars on the exact definition or nature of student engagement. Earlier studies provide more behavioral definitions for the term 'engagement'. In the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's, for example, student engagement was considered the 'Academic learning time'. In other words, it is the amount of time a student spends while being engaged in an academic task that s/he performs with high success," (Fisher et al., 1976). Astin (1993) correlates the hours spent per week studying with student involvement in the learning process, on the other hand. Moreover, engagement has been recently seen as a multifaceted concept. It is a complex process that has been linked to belongingness, motivation, community, and other concepts (Coates, 2006). Assuming its multidimensional nature, other scholars acknowledge both behavioral and psychological elements of engagement and define the concept as the efforts to learn and the values on learning (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007).

One of the most famous definitions of student engagement was proposed by Hu and Kuh (2001), who define student engagement as: "The quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes." Highlighting the behavioral aspect of engagement, the scholars maintain that engagement is all about 'efforts' exerted to achieve the learning outcomes, with no clear responsibility delegated to either a learner or an institution. Nevertheless, Krause and Coates (2008) propose that engagement is "the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes." Kuh (2009) developed the definition of engagement to "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities." In this definition, the word 'efforts', which was vaguely introduced by Hu and Kuh, is expanded to include learning outcome-oriented endeavors made by both students and institutions that finally lead to more active involvement in the learning process. A more comprehensive definition was proposed by Coates (2007) who described engagement as a 'broad construct' covering academic and non-academic aspects, such as active learning, participation in academically challenging activities, engagement to enhance educational experience, formative communication with lecturers and staff, and feeling of being supported by the university.

Other definitions of engagement focus more on the learners' attitudes towards education, with no clue pertaining to the role of an educator offered. According to Barkley (2010), two concepts can relate to student engagement: passion and excitement. All in all, student engagement from a modern perspective means both a student being motivated to learn and involved in engaging learning activities or, in other words, it involves both physical and mental involvement in the learning process that could include helping design the course and its activities and even evaluation (Matthews, 2016).

Student involvement in learning is vital to academic achievement. The more the students are engaged, the better the attainment is (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Fredricks et al., 2004; Willingham et al., 2002). Teaching quality primarily depends on effective learning that enhances student participation in the learning process (Q. Wang & Pomerantz, 2009; Chen, 2005; Osterman, 2000). Therefore, the major shared benefit of enhanced engagement is increasing the learning outcomes and quality of education. For Coates (2006):

The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities ... In essence, therefore, student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high-quality learning.

Having agreed that engaging students is a shared responsibility between students and academic and nonacademic staff to contribute to the intellectual and personal growth of students (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Gray & Madson, 2007; Kuh & Gonyea, 2005), scholars believe that higher education organizations should focus on engaging students to achieve a good-quality education and thus gain better academic reputation and higher revenues (Coates, 2005). Other than better learning outcomes, academic institutions customize their teaching methods to promote student engagement and thus reap many benefits including (1) maximizing student retention and reducing drop-out cases (Krause, 2005), (2) achieving social justice and equality by increasing success rates in heterogeneous classes and for inadequately prepared students (Kuh, 2009; Harper, S. R., & Quaye, 2009), (3) enhancing curriculum relevance by creating a learner-centered classroom (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009). In the past few years, (4) student engagement has become a competitive advantage for universities to attract new students, provide them with academic satisfaction, and create opportunities to grow (Trowler, 2010).

Student engagement has been redefined by higher education institutions to enhance the intended learning outcomes, so the styles of engaging students vary. The most recent studies count 'student engagement' as a multifaceted concept. In the 1990's, the understanding of engagement was broadened to cover not only behavioural aspects, or physical efforts but also the psychological dimension. Finn (1993) drew a distinction between the two dimensions of the concept. He described engagement as a combination of participation and identification. For him, participation is the students' behaviours indicating involvement in classes, such as physical attendance, responding to the teacher, and participation in learning activities. On the other hand, a student's sense of belonging to and identification with the school or college is the opposite side of the coin, and students should show psychological enjoyment and attachment. Both forms are equally important, but the latter is contingent upon the former, as Finn (1993) suggests.

However, research conducted by Fredricks et al. (2004) highlighted that engagement is a 'multidimensional construct' that has three forms: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. While the first two dimensions are not so much different from the two-faceted concept proposed by Finn (1993), cognitive involvement is a form of 'investment in learning' that enhances a student ability to respond to complex learning situations and "flexibility in problem-solving, preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure." The three distinct styles of engagement jointly make up a dynamic process that can positively influence attainment (M.-T. Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Study questions

This research looks to answer the three following questions:

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: What are the attitudes of educators working at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip towards student engagement?

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: What are the most effective techniques to enhance student engagement in higher education in the Gaza Strip?

RESEARCH QUESTION THREE: What are the factors that have encouraged educators to use teaching techniques which enhance student engagement?

Significance of the study

The importance of the study can be summarized in two points:

First, the study sheds light on a central topic in higher education institutions in the Gaza Strip i.e., the contributions of students to and their active engagement in the learning process. Although this topic has been thoroughly studied in Australia, the USA and Europe, few studies have tackled this issue in the Arab world. Therefore, this research paper aimed at investigating student engagement in an Arab setting, Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip in particular.

Second, this research paper focuses on the application of the proposed methods in an Arab setting—it is one of the first studies that focuses on enhancing education, student engagement, and teaching methods at Palestinian universities. The researchers anticipate that this study will enrich literature about student-centred educational techniques that can be used in the Arab world.

Limitations of the study

This research has the following limit:

- Human limit: A group of educators at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip
- Spatial limit: Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip, namely the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University, Israa University, and the University of Gaza.
- Time limit: The study tools were applied during the first and second semesters of the academic year 2019/2020.

Methodology

The study uses the mixed-method approach that incorporates qualitative and quantitative data into research. The researchers used the quantitative approach to detect the educators' attitudes towards student engagement and illustrated them with figures reached after processing the data collected. On the other hand, the qualitative approach was used to identify the most effective methods to engage students from the perspective of the educators. The purpose of using the mixed-research approach was collecting quantitative and qualitative data to help the researchers understand the research theme adequately.

Study sample

The research looks at a group of educators teaching at several Palestinian universities as a case study and provides experimental evidence on the most effective methods to enhance student engagement by studying and reporting real, hands-on pedagogical experiences of the participant educators who applied the innovative teaching techniques in their classes during the first semester in academic year 2019/2020.

Sixty-seven Palestinian educators working at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip are the sample studied in this research. The same educators first participated in the training offered in 'Excellence in Higher Education project'. Fifty-two academics belong to the Islamic University of Gaza, and the others work at the Al-Aqsa University, Al-Azhar University, Israa University, and the University of Gaza. The variables of university and specialization were not considered in this study, as these were not equally presented in the sample studied. Qualitative data were collected from the mentioned 67 academics.

However, qualitative data were collected from four focus groups, each consisted of eight academics who have participated in the mentioned training programme.

Research Tools

The study used two tools to collect data: questionnaire and focus-group interviews. The researchers prepared a questionnaire to identify the attitudes of lecturers working at several Palestinian universities towards student engagement.

The questionnaire consisted of three domains about student engagement in academic and non-academic activities, which were (1) student involvement in curriculum design, (2) contribution to building up experiences, (3) and participation in assessment and giving feedback.

Relying on the training material for Excellence in Higher Education Program and the experience at FinPal Project, the researchers prepared the drafted questionnaire. Additionally, they took advantage of the literature and relevant previous studies for the same purpose. To test the validity, expert academics with long experience in research and teaching at university reviewed the first version of the questionnaire and recommended some changes. And the researchers modified the questionnaire based on the referees' recommendations. Regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, the researchers used Cronbach's alpha test to measure the internal consistency. This alpha coefficient score for all domains is 0.887, suggesting that the questionnaire has a high internal consistency validity.

Table (1): Alpha coefficient score for every category corresponding to the study tool category

Category	Number of items	Coefficient Cronbach's alpha
Student involvement in curriculum design	6	0.821
Contribution to building up experiences	7	0.742
Participation in assessment and providing feedback	7	0.821
Total	20	0.887

The Likert (five-point) scale was used to determine the attitudes of educators at Palestinian Universities in Gaza towards student engagement techniques. The study tools categories were given values from 1-5 to interpret the results, as shown in the following table.

Table (2): The values of the arithmetic mean corresponding to the study tool categories

Rank	Level of agreement	Arithmetic mean	Relative weight
1	Very low	From 1-1.80	From 20% to 36%
2	Low	From 1.80 to 2.60	From 36% to 52%
3	Intermediate	From 2.60 to 3.40	From 52% to 68%
4	High	From 3.40 to 4.20	From 68% to 84%
5	Very high	From 4.20-5	From 84% to 100%

Regarding the second research tool, the sample was divided into four focus groups to answer the second and third questions of the study. Each focus group consisted of eight academics, who were interviewed for two hours. During the interview, the educators presented the teaching methods

they applied in their classes that, according to their observation, enhanced the student engagement in and off classes.

Implementation

The researchers obtained the participating academics' approval on responding to the questionnaire. The participants were also asked to accept that the data collected would be used for research purposes and will be treated with confidentiality. Then, the researchers distributed the questionnaire to identify the academics' attitudes towards student engagement. After collecting the data, the filled-out questionnaires were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to get the results. Following this step, the researchers interpreted and judged the results by arranging the mean scores for the domains and the mean score for every item based on the rating scale used.

Four focus group interviews have been held to obtain detailed information about how to engage students and what are the factors that motivated students to be actively engaged in the learning process. The researcher obtained a written, signed permission from the participants to record the two-hour-long interviews. Then, the researchers transcribed the recordings, and the answers were qualitatively analyzed, in preparation for releasing the research findings.

Discussion about the findings

1- What are the attitudes of academics at Palestinian universities towards student engagement?

To find out the participants' attitudes towards student engagement, the researchers computed the mean scores, standard deviation, and relative weight. Results of these statistical techniques are shown in table (3) below.

Table (3) shows the mean scores, standard deviation, and relative weight, in addition to the rank of each topic and the total score.

No.	Category	Mean	Std. deviation	Relative weight	T-value	P-value	Rank	Level of agreement
1	Student involvement in curriculum design	3.58	0.60	71.60	7.922	0.000 *	3	High
2	Contribution to building up experiences	4.25	0.41	85.00	24.63 6	0.000 *	1	Very high
3	Participation in assessment and providing feedback	3.95	0.55	79.00	13.99 3	0.000 *	2	High
Total		3.94	0.42	78.80	18.15 5	0.000 *		High

As shown in the previous table, the level of agreement by academics on student engagement is high, with a relative weight at 78.80%. The researchers consider this result a positive indicator that student engagement is accepted and desired by academics at Palestinian universities.

Furthermore, it highlights that educators seek to make real change in higher education by moving towards active, student-centered teaching methods.

It is also notable that the level of agreement on student involvement in curriculum design is higher than the agreement on student participation in assessment and providing feedback. Such findings show that student engagement in educational activities is accepted and goes in line with the major job of an academic institution, which is educating and transferring skills and experiences to prepare students for the future. Although high, the relative weight of student participation in curriculum design is the least agreed upon by the participants, at 71.6%. The researchers believe that such a relatively low percentage is because students rarely get involved in determining the course objectives, choosing course content and learning activities, and setting the assessment methods. Student participation in assessment and providing feedback, the third domain, scored a high level of agreement with a relative weight at 79%. The figure is high because the Academic Affairs Department at the Islamic University of Gaza requires students at the end of each semester to assess the courses via an online questionnaire.

Regarding the analysis of the questionnaire domains, it is as follows:

Table (4) Student involvement in curriculum design

No.	Item	Mean	Std. deviation	Relative weight	T- value	P-value	Rank	Level of agreement
1	I prefer discussing the course plan with students at the beginning of a semester.	3.74	1.15	74.80	5.270	0.000	3	High
2	I believe that students can participate in setting the course concepts.	2.82	0.81	56.40	1.799	0.077	6	Intermediate
3	I trust students' ability to prepare the course objectives.	3.02	0.90	60.40	0.270	0.788	5	Intermediate
4	I accept changes on the course plan proposed by students.	3.62	0.86	72.40	5.915	0.000	4	High
5	I support student engagement in taking decisions related to their education.	3.95	0.82	79.00	9.483	0.000	2	High
6	I believe that student engagement in setting the class rules enhances their sense of responsibility.	4.32	0.68	86.40	15.923	0.000	1	Very high
	Total	3.58	0.60	71.60	7.922	0.000*		High

As shown in Table (4), the relative weight of the items under the first domain ranges from (86.4%) to (60.4%). The sixth item, "I believe that student engagement in setting the class rules enhances their sense of responsibility", scored the highest relative weight, indicating that academics are aware of the importance of the university life to prepare students for shouldering their responsibility in the professional life. Therefore, they think student participation in putting forward

the class rules enhances the sense of responsibility and belonging and thus secures a more comfortable academic environment. Moreover, it is noteworthy that items three and four had the lowest scores. Both are related to administrative duties, such as planning the course, setting the course concepts, and preparing the objectives, which are a major part of a lecturer's duties in higher education.

Table (5) illustrates the analysis of the items under the second domain: contribution to building up experiences

No.	Item	Mean	Std. deviation	Relative weight	T- value	P-value	Rank	Level of agreement
1	I think that traditional lectures are boring and have limited outcomes.	4.20	0.84	84.00	11.71 7	0.000	2	High
2	I believe that student engagement in classes enriches educational content.	4.65	0.50	93.00	26.63 8	0.000	1	Very high
3	I support the use of teaching methods that rely on student activities in class.	4.67	0.50	93.40	27.14 0	0.000	4	Very high
4	I encourage students to get information by themselves.	4.29	0.67	85.80	15.75 7	0.000	7	Very high
5	I believe that students are qualified to work independently on in-class and out-of-class academic tasks.	3.43	0.83	68.60	4.223	0.000	3	High
6	I encourage students to propose new ideas, and I appreciate their initiatives.	4.34	0.64	86.80	17.15 8	0.000	6	Very high
7	I accept students' ideas and answers even if they are untrue.	4.17	0.71	83.40	13.47 7	0.000 *	2	High
	Total	4.25	0.41	85.00	24.63 6	0.000		Very high

The second domain, contribution to building up experiences, scored a high level of agreement with a relative weight at 85.00%, while the score for the items ranged from (68.60%) to (93.40%). Furthermore, this high score reflects the conviction that such traditional methods are not that effective in the age of technology and intercultural communication. The findings also highlight that academics realise the needs of students and the impact of student engagement in in-class and out-of-class activities.

Table (6) Participation in assessment and providing feedback

No.	Item	Mean	Std. deviation	Relative weight	T- value	P-value	Rank	Level of agreement
1	I support student engagement in evaluating the performance of an academic.	3.86	1.05	77.20	6.701	0.000	6	High
2	I appreciate the students' evaluation of educational content and teaching methods.	3.88	0.91	77.60	7.893	0.000	5	Very high
3	I think that students are the best to evaluate a course.	3.04	0.93	60.80	0.395	0.694	7	Very high
4	I encourage students to provide ideas to develop courses frankly and openly.	4.26	0.72	85.20	14.227	0.000	2	Very high
5	I think that students' opinions are positive feedback.	4.34	0.64	86.80	17.158	0.000	1	High
6	I utilize the students' opinions to prepare remedial and improvement plans.	4.19	0.67	83.80	14.382	0.000	3	Very high
7	I am keen to provide feedback to students about their performance regularly	4.07	0.70	81.40	12.511	0.000	4	High
	Total score	3.95	0.55	79.00	13.993	0.000*		Very high

The third domain, participation in assessment and providing feedback, achieved a high level of agreement with a relative weight at 79%, while the scores of the items under this domain ranged from (60.8%) to (86.8%), indicating that lecturers understand that students play a vital role in evaluating the course content, keeping in mind that they are the ones who keep direct contact with lecturers.

2- What are the most effective techniques to enhance student engagement in higher education?

To find out the most effective techniques to enhance student engagement in higher education from Palestinian educators' perspectives, the researchers conducted a semi-structure interview with four focus groups which were held with the lecturers who joined the second round of the FinPal Training Program organised in August 2019. The interviews were carried out at the end of the first semester in the academic year 2019-2020. The interviewed academics were asked to report on their experiences during the semester and how they had taken advantage of the training. They noted that the techniques applied in the training sessions were unique, for it is the first time to be adopted in such an integrated, comprehensive way following organised, scientifically supported steps. This is of great significance since many studies urged teachers to use more than one interactive teaching method to guarantee sustainable student engagement (Collaco, 2017).

The following table illustrates the teaching techniques used by the participant educators to enhance the student engagement in and off classes. The researchers listed them in order according to the percentage of the redundancy of answers in the focus-group interviews. While being interviewed, the 32 academics reported the results of their teaching experiences following the application of new teaching methods that they were introduced to in the training program.

Table (7) Teaching techniques to enhance student engagement

	Technique	Frequency	Percentage
1	Discussion with and consulting students on the course content and teaching methods	29	%90
2	Online communication	27	%84
3	Instructors' and students' feedback (reciprocal feedback)	26	%81
4	Active learning methods and techniques (Groupwork, flipped classes, problem solving, KWL technique, open discussion, and 10+2 technique)	25	%78

Note: The said techniques are thoroughly explained below.

In the focus groups, the lecturers listed some of the most effective methods they adopted to increase student engagement in their lectures.

Discussion with and consulting students on the course content and teaching methods

The educators reported that discussing and consulting students at the beginning of the semester about the course objectives, content, activities, and assessment methods, in addition to taking into consideration any changes proposed by students were of considerable significance. They think that their communication with students on learning styles and involving them in the teaching and assessment activities boost the sense of responsibility, belonging, and commitment towards education. Furthermore, this technique improves motivation towards and interaction with learning. One of the participant lecturers reported: "This is the first time for me to discuss the course plan with my students. Such an activity gave them a chance to participate in planning the classes, tell their expectations about the course, and express opinions about the course content, learning activities, teaching methods, and assessment criteria. I was surprised by the students' ideas and their level of awareness. It was an encouraging experience from my viewpoint." Another lecturer described the first class saying: "I chatted with my students about the importance of involvement in the learning process and their level of understanding of engagement and its methods. I clarified the concept of active engagement and its links to the learning process. Then, I presented some methods of in-class student engagement."

Online communication

Contact with students via online platforms facilitates student-teacher and student-student communication and gives both learners and educators more time and space for interaction. Online communication is essential to shy students who feel overwhelmed in the classes. The lecturers believe that the lecturing time is very limited and insufficient to involve all students, especially with classes that have large numbers of students. Some students may not have the chance or the courage to take part in in-class learning activities due to large numbers of students. Therefore, the lecturers relied on online means of communication, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to keep in touch with students, answer their questions, and give them an equal chance to participate, especially the passive ones.

Instructors' and students' feedback (reciprocal feedback)

Feedback received from and given to students or instructors interchangeably motivates all persons involved in the learning or teaching processes to work hard and boost the performance following spoken or written comments. Students should be encouraged to do self-evaluation to the progress they make by the end of a chapter or semester. Furthermore, regular reports from students (after each chapter, in the midterm, at the end of the semester) on the teaching methods, course content, and the educator's performance are a major drive to adapt to the best pedagogical practices in a learning setting.

One of the participant lecturers confirmed that he "puts faith in students". He said: "I trust the ability of students to evaluate and judge the learning and teaching processes. They can do this better than any other party involved. The students' participation in evaluation and feedback sharpens the critical thinking skills towards the methods and practices of their lecturers." Another educator said: "The notes and impressions of the students were pivotal and effective. I believe that it is the major drive to change my way of instruction in the future."

Active learning methods and techniques

According to the interviewed instructors, the most effective methods to engage students in learning activities were the following:

1- Groupwork

The educators reported that students could do the tasks more effectively and efficiently when they work cooperatively. Besides, lecturers should encourage students to work as a team in and out of the class to plan and accomplish some tasks. At the end of every groupwork task, lecturers should give students the chance to present their tasks in class. And tasks should be evaluated jointly by students and lecturers.

2- Flipped class

This method depends on providing the content to students before the actual class as a video or an audio recording, while the educator and students only discuss and share ideas about the content in class.

3- Problem-solving

This teaching method emphasizes that problems are essential for learning and teaching processes. It aims at sharpening students' ability to face difficult real-life situations by challenging them to solve some problems. Using this method, students are first introduced to a problem and then encouraged to put their previous knowledge into practice by hypothesising and then examining some solutions. In the end, students pick the most appropriate solution to solve the problem. This can be done either individually, in pairs, or in groups; activities that require discussions and different opinions are better when carried out in groups.

4- KWL strategy

It is a method of instruction that directs students to brainstorm their information about a specific topic. Then, students fill in the table with the information they have recalled. Such information falls into three categories: What I know (K), what I want to know (W), and what I have learnt (L). The knowledge they have is classified under the first column, questions about the topic are put in the second column, and their new knowledge or what they have learnt falls into the third column.

5- Debating or open discussion

While applying this method, a teacher proposes an issue about the lesson. Then s/he asks students to discuss this issue by arguing for or against different viewpoints. Students are encouraged to provide

evidence on every idea they argue for or against. Finally, the students judge the opinions and arguments of others involved in the debate.

6- 10+2

Using this technique, an educator explains a point in detail within ten minutes. Following this, s/he gives students the chance to ask questions or make comments in two extra minutes. The class moves on to another point after the two minutes.

3- What are the factors that have encouraged educators to use teaching techniques which enhance student engagement?

The table below shows a set of factors that encouraged the participant educators to use new teaching techniques to enhance the student engagement. These interviewees' answers are put in order, from the highest to the lowest score, according to the redundancy of answers in the focus-group interviews, in which they reported their first-hand teaching experiences after having attended the training program at IUG.

Table (8) Factors that enhanced educators to use teaching techniques to engage students

	Technique	Frequency	Percentage
1	Willingness and preparedness to change for the better	31	%46.3
2	Faith in the abilities of students	28	%41.8
3	Positive responses from students	26	%38.8

The interviewed lecturers reported that their efforts to engage students were desirable, planned, and mentored. Although they used to encourage students to participate before the training, the situation was different in this semester due to the following reasons:

Willingness and preparedness to change for the better

The lecturers have the motivation to change and improve their teaching methods. They also desire to replace the traditional techniques that create a boring learning environment with modern learning requirements. The participant educators confirm that content-centered teaching approaches have many disadvantages and drawbacks, the first of which is the lack of focus on life skills because they permit very little student involvement. On the other hand, they believe that active learning methods give room to a bigger number of students to participate.

Faith in the abilities of students

The lecturers put faith in the abilities of their students who, according to the participants, are qualified to occupy a major role in the learning process and take the lead in making headway in the teaching-learning experience; therefore, educators should give students a hand to unfold their potential by engaging them.

Positive responses from students

The impact of student engagement in the first lecture was so notable that most students prepared for the next lecture. The educators noticed students' enthusiastic reactions to many of the newly applied methods and expected more to be used by lecturers in classes, for such methods facilitated their in-class activity and allowed them to discuss their ideas and experiences openly. The interviewed educators noted that varying the methods of instruction led to an increase in the number of students engaged. The lecturers realised that student engagement had increased students' sense of commitment and belonging to the courses and to the university. One lecturer commented

saying: “The students now feel they are an active part influencing the course of the classes and their objectives and outcomes. They feel they are real partners in the teaching-learning process rather than passive recipients.”

Conclusion

This is a unique study conducted in an Arab setting. It examines the attitudes of educators at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip towards student engagement. The study also identifies the most effective methods to engage students based on the participant educators’ experiences after applying the new methods they were introduced to in the FinPal Training Program organised during the first semester in the academic year 2019/2020. The research sample consisted of educators who belong to different Palestinian universities and colleges. Based on the scale prepared by the researchers, the level of agreement was high, an indicator of the educators’ preparedness and desire to adapt to the new active, student-centered teaching techniques. The research also reports some effective teaching methods proposed by participant lecturers like participation in planning and evaluation, giving feedback, flipped class, debating, cooperative work, KWL, and e-learning. Although the present study is limited in its scope, it still shows the willingness of Palestinian academics to positively adapt to new teaching methods especially in terms of student engagement. These academics are ready to shift from the traditional understanding of the student engagement concept which mainly focused on in-class participation and answering the homework to a larger understanding that also includes the active cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement where teachers and students work together to design the course, its contents, and even its evaluation.

Based on the experience of educators at FinPal training program, the literature review, and questionnaire on academics’ attitude towards student engagement, and reporting by some educators, the major findings of the study is that student engagement, albeit demanding sometimes, is a vital, investment-worthy requirement for higher education. Moreover, the study shows that active learning methods are not restricted to teaching in schools but are applicable in academia and require the involvement and encouragement of students to participate in in-class and out-of-class activities. The study concludes that the process of change in university teaching methods calls for involving students as partners rather than passive recipients and providing the lecturers with continuous up-to-date training.

Recommendations

Having conducted the research and collected qualitative and quantitative data about student engagements at Palestinian universities in the Gaza Strip, the researchers recommend the following points:

- 1- Generalization of the experience across Palestinian universities in the West Bank and organisation of similar training programmes in active methods to engage students in academia.
- 2- Review of the of the Evaluation Form of the Academic Educator Performance used by the academic affairs departments at Palestinian universities. Student engagement should be a major part in the evaluation form.
- 3- Organisation of regular workshops and training sessions for academics working at different Palestinian universities to share experience and expertise about the active teaching methods.
- 4- Review of course descriptions at Palestinian universities to ensure that teaching methods focus on student engagement.

- 5- A meta study about the methods to enhance student engagement at universities across the Arab world.

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