Decolonizing Knowledge Production

Report Executive Summary

This report presents the finding of the Dignity Initiative research team. Dignity Initiative is housed in Birzeit University's Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. This research project investigated the components that entrench colonial structures and hegemony, components that enable a decolonization and emancipation, in knowledge producing and reproducing processes in Arab universities and research centres. This study is part of a number of studies on dismantling colonial structures from knowledge production processes, conducted by researchers at five universities (the American University of Beirut, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (Beirut), the University of Dar Al-Salaam, the University of Addis Ababa, and Birzeit University) with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

This study aims to understand and locate colonial practices in Arab universities, and to illuminate the features of the colonial structures that control the process of knowledge production in them, as well as the methods that combat and oppose these colonial structures and practices. The aim of combatting colonial structures and practices is to strengthen the organic bonds between research programmes and society in the Arab world.

This study consisted of three components: first, identifying, refining, and sharpening concepts necessary to studying the process of decolonizing knowledge production. Second, using these concepts as analytical tools for studying the case of Birzeit University. Third, examining the extent to which the results found of the Birzeit University case study are generalizable by investigating the applicability of generalized results to other Arab universities and intersections with globally emergent phenomena in knowledge production institutions over the last decades.

Throughout this study, the research team sought to provide a qualitative contribution to decolonizing knowledge production literature. The relevance of this work is vital since rejection of Eurocentrism has led a significant portion of specialists in this field –many of whom from the Global South- to fall into the fallacy of rejecting everything Western. In denying the existence of what is global and dividing the world into East and West and other divisions thus reproducing colonial consciousness which serves colonial functions. These trends have sometimes reached the point of rejecting "Western knowledge" and even rejecting rationality based on its association with colonial knowledge.

This research is based on situated knowledge understood as a human creation, while its coloniality is dependent on its uses and deployment, not on its place of origin or in the identity of its creator. It is not possible for cognitive hypotheses, based on colonial dichotomies (such as East and West), to constitute units of analysis for understanding and then dismantling the colonial structures that dominate knowledge production processes because these hypotheses imply a colonial epistemology based allocating an essential character to non-social characteristics (such as geographical location or ethnic characteristics) of knowledge producers.

This research seeks to answer the following main question: What are the structures that ensure the reproduction of colonial knowledge, on the one hand. On the other hand:

what hinders the production of emancipatory knowledge in universities and research centres? In addition to the main research question, the research team identified a set of sub-questions:

1. What is the vision (model) that inspired the founders of Birzeit University in the founding phase?

2. What is the nature of the research conducted at the university, and how does it contribute to the reproduction of colonial or emancipatory knowledge?

3. What are the knowledge production goals the university seeks to achieve? (Whose interests does the existing knowledge production process serve?)

4. How do the used curricula, university programmes, and the teaching methods contribute to the reproduction of colonial knowledge?

5. How does the university's reliance on external funding affect the quality and nature of research at the university? Is there a relationship between funding and research topics that do not originate from the community?

6. How do promotion and tenure systems contribute to defining the intellectual features of the university? Do they contribute to the reproduction of colonial knowledge? What changes have occurred?

7. What considerations are used in the decision-making process? How do they contribute to the reproduction of colonial knowledge? (Or to what extent and how does the characteristics of the university's administration influence the process of knowledge production?)

8. How does external intervention by the Ministry of Higher Education and other entities that intervene in the knowledge production process contribute to the reproduction of colonial knowledge?

To answer the main question and sub-questions of the research, the research team reviewed a range of different literature and materials that dealt with the issue of knowledge production. Colonial knowledge, emancipatory knowledge, decolonization, decolonization the knowledge production process, Eurocentrism, and Indigeneity, are among the research topic. The research team also reviewed the World Bank's publications related to higher education from the mid-1980s to the present in order to track the World Bank's various policies towards education and higher education. The Bank has played a pivotal role in shaping education trends and priorities in the world, specifically in countries of the Global South.

The research team reviewed Birzeit University's systems and operating procedures in relation to academic and administrative matters since its establishment in 1979 until 2024. Particular attention was given to the transformation of Birzeit College into a university. This review aimed to track the changes that occurred in the relevant university systems during throughout its modern history in order to identify transformations that reflect policies to remove colonial structures, or the infiltration of colonial structures, into these systems. These transformations constitute a basic means of controlling the process of knowledge production in the university, the progress of education in it, and other administrative and bureaucratic issues that have an impact on the research and education processes.

As part of the research process, the team held sessions to discuss issues related to the study of decolonizing university structures from the knowledge production process, in

which the conceptual premises of the research, its context, and the appropriate scope for studying colonialism and liberation related to the knowledge production process in general. The case study of Birzeit University in particular was addressed.

The team conducted eighteen interviews with members of the Birzeit University community with experience and expertise, who are familiar with the university's journey and the changes it has undergone since its establishment. The interviews included dialogues with current and former academic staff members, members of the university's Board of Trustees, current and former vice presidents, former university presidents, administrators, union leaders, and a former senior employee in the Ministry of Higher Education. After completing the case study, the team conducted seven interviews with Arab academics from Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt, in order to examine the extent to which the team's conclusions in the case study resonate, and the extent to which they can be generalized and applied to Arab universities, and perhaps universities in the countries of the South in general.

The study came up with a set of results and conclusions. The most prominent results of the Birzeit University case study was that the issue of colonization knowledge does not gain a clear position in the university's programs, visions, and projects. This necessarily leads to a lack of attention to the need to strive to decolonize the process of knowledge production, in addition to the absence of serious and systematic attempts to do so, although the university has witnessed limited attempts throughout its history to produce emancipatory knowledge (not linked to the center). The study also concluded that a set of changes have affected the university in several aspects, especially governance, which are changes that largely reflect the university's interaction with social conditions and various local and international parties. The study also concluded that it is possible to divide the history of Birzeit University into two main eras: the era of establishment and resisting the occupation (1973-1993), and the era of identification with neoliberal policies (since 1993), and that it is possible to draw the features of two stages within the second era.

The study came up with a set of hypotheses that the team sought to examine their resonance in Arab universities through the dialogues it conducted. These hypotheses can be summarized as follows: the lack of awareness of the importance of producing emancipatory knowledge among university administrations; the limited scope of the process of producing emancipatory knowledge in universities; the association of emancipatory knowledge production in universities with the existence of progressive social and political movements; that emancipatory knowledge production requires teachers with a critical prospects who seek to bring about change; that the cessation of government support for universities causes a financial crisis that has many negative effects on knowledge production in them in several ways; that the financial crisis pushes universities to compete with each other and to work to meet the market's needs for labour; that global trends in higher education and the policies of the World Bank and donors support neoliberal trends and increase the dominance of the centre over universities in the periphery; and finally, it is unclear whether projects with national or "third world" motivations, such as Arabization of teaching and others, lead to the production of emancipatory knowledge.

The second phase of the study, which sought to examine the extent to which the results of the Birzeit case study and the hypotheses it produced could be generalized to Arab universities, found a set of results that can be summarized as follows: The generalizations that the Birzeit University case study produced were not limited to it,

but also describe, to a large extent, the situation in Arab universities and the countries of the South in general. The study showed, similar to Birzeit University, the absence of public discussion on the issue of knowledge production in Arab universities, and the importance of working to decolonize them, and that combating colonial domination and decolonization is reduced to combating its manifestations, through initiatives to boycott Israel and support Palestine, for example. The study also showed the limited work on producing emancipatory knowledge, as its limited production is done through individual and intermittent efforts, in contrast to the absence of a clear policy in this direction among universities.

The study also concluded that Arab universities have been affected by a set of global neoliberal policies that have pushed researchers to engage in a set of bureaucratic tasks (related to quality control) instead of producing emancipatory knowledge, and pushed universities to adopt bibliometric standards and publish in international journals to evaluate scientific publications, which prompted researchers in universities to adhere to the standards of publishing in those journals in terms of methodologies and research topics and their nature. The study also found that relying on international funders to support research in universities has opened the door for funders to heavily influence the determination of research topics and their nature, and in shaping research priorities in universities, which do not necessarily respond to the needs of the local community and provide solutions to local problems. The study also concluded that the decrease or cessation of government support for universities has led them to enter into competition with each other to attract students.