

Academic Collaboration Of Rawalpindi Medical University & Al-Azhar University For Gaza Students: A Ray Of Hope In A Catastrophic Scenario

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Abstract

Objective: To review the academic collaboration between Rawalpindi Medical University and Al-Azhar University of Gaza for assisting undergraduates of Gaza.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive survey was carried out to review academic collaboration of RMU with Al-Azhar University of Gaza that was primarily meant to endow educational facilitation to Palestinian medical students during their country-wide crisis. Of the 36 Palestinian medical students enrolling at RMU for continuation of medical education, 29 underwent an objective assessment of their prior knowledge. Following the assessment of prior knowledge by the shared Table of Specifications (TOS), a composite curriculum designed by the competent faculty of RMU was implemented.

Results: Of the 36 medical students coming from the Gaza Strip to RMU, 29 students underwent subject-wise objective assessment before implementation of the purpose-built curriculum. They attempted C2, C3 level one best Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) of Anatomy, Physiology, Biochemistry, Pharmacology and Pathology. Each section consisted of 10 MCQs. The students achieved the highest mean score in Pathology (5.52 ± 2.05). The mean score of the students in Physiology (3 ± 1.4) was the lowest. The comprehensive curriculum with a detailed plan of assessment, learning outcomes, teaching methods and Continuous Internal Assessment (CIA) weightage was also disseminated. A mentoring team was also familiarised with guidance. A thorough monitoring system was also introduced for the smooth execution of the whole process.

Conclusion: The academic collaboration between RMU and Al-Azhar University of Gaza would be useful to Palestinian medical students in completing their medical education.

Keywords: academic collaboration, Gaza Strip, medical students, purpose-built curriculum

Introduction

Gaza was subjected to severe, catastrophic attacks by the armed forces of Israel that resulted in substantial deaths. The building, water and sewerage system and medical centres were badly damaged, which made the existence of life impossible.¹ The health system has entirely collapsed, that drastically impacted the health and well-being of Palestinians.² Millions of people have been killed, and around 2.3 million inhabitants have been displaced.³ Women and children of Gaza were brutally hit by the Israel-Palestine conflict. It became quite difficult for the health workforce to manage the mounting casualties.⁴

The economic disruption in Gaza due to the war considerably intensified the crisis.⁵ This conflict and hostility between the two regions should not only be perceived as a political matter, but the resultant social disaster will take a long time to recover and get back.⁶ The swift dissemination of various contagious and infectious diseases among the vulnerable became a serious problem in disaster-stricken regions due to overcrowding, lack of food, water supply and sanitation, which emphasised the immense need for vaccination campaigns, emergency care, psychological support and international collaboration.⁷

The mental well-being of healthcare professionals also at Gaza could not escape the psychological challenges resulting from war.⁸ The medical students of Palestine also faced multiple psychiatric problems, as the majority of them had lost their friends or relatives due to the Israel-Palestine

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conflict. Losing homes and jobs also led to social disruption.⁹ Moreover, two medical universities of Gaza were completely demolished with killing or displacing most of the faculty and students, and hence, turmoil of the entire education system.¹⁰ Educide amidst conflict drastically influenced the education of medical students in addition to deteriorating their mental health and subjective well-being.¹¹ The provision of a safe and conducive learning environment for medical students became unfeasible in Gaza due to security concerns as well.¹²

The alarming situation due to the conflict scenario led the medical students of Al-Azhar University to move to Rawalpindi Medical University (RMU) for continuation of their academics, where they received a warm welcome on 1st November 2024 by the students and faculty of the university.¹³ About 44 medical students from an aggressive homeland ultimately reached RMU for continuation of their undergraduate studies.¹⁴ The present study is intended to provide an overview of academic collaboration between RMU and Al-Azhar University of Gaza for the facilitation of undergraduate medical education. This academic collaboration between two universities was meant to ensure a smooth transition of medical students coming from Gaza into the academic and clinical learning system of RMU. This survey would not only enable us to have a glimpse of the nobility and openhandedness of the Rawalians, but also sketch out the stringent efforts laid down by the faculty and its preparedness to teach the students coming from different cultures and atmospheres.

Materials And Methods

A cross-sectional study was carried out to have a glimpse of academic collaboration between Al-Azhar University of Gaza and Rawalpindi Medical University in quite despairing circumstances, when the disaster resulting from Israeli bombardments in Gaza is not hidden from anyone across the globe. A total of 36 4th-year medical students from Gaza came to RMU. Following initial objective assessment about major medical subjects of the first 3 years by TOS, a comprehensive curriculum designed by the competent faculty of RMU was implemented. The data was analysed by using MS Excel 2016 software. Descriptive statistics were applied.

Results

On arrival at RMU, 36 medical students from Gaza attended an orientation session in the CPC Hall of RMU. This session was meant to introduce them to their learning environment, academic calendar and key faculty members. Moreover, assessment policies, clinical training requisites, student support and health services, mentorship program and extracurricular activities were also elaborated. The chairpersons of basic and clinical sciences gave a brief overview of their respective curricula, rotational planner, community-based projects, research activities, patient-centred learning and diagnostic modalities.

Those medical students were then subjected to comprehensive academic assessment for gauging their prior knowledge as they have gone through first 3 years of medical education at Al-Azhar University at Gaza. The Table of Specification (TOS) for this assessment is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: TOS for assessment of Prior knowledge of Palestinian medical students

Subjects	Tool for assessment	No of MCQs	Cognition level
Anatomy	Single best MCQs	10	C2 & C3
Physiology	Single best MCQs	10	C2 & C3
Biochemistry	Single best MCQs	10	C2 & C3
Pharmacology	Single best MCQs	10	C2 & C3
Pathology	Single best MCQs	10	C2 & C3

About 29 students were subjected to objective assessments of the aforementioned five subjects and were observed to be well-versed in the knowledge of Pathology, as shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of Initial Objective Assessment

Parameters	Anatomy	Physiology	Biochemistry	Pharmacology	Pathology
Mean $\pm$ SD	4.6 $\pm$ 1.74	3 $\pm$ 1.40	4.72 $\pm$ 1.8	4.1 $\pm$ 2	5.52 $\pm$ 2.05
No. of students with $\geq$ 50%	15 (51.7%)	4 (13.7%)	16 (55.7%)	12 (41.3%)	20 (68.9%)
No. of students with $\geq$ 70%	4 (13.7%)	0	5 (17.3%)	3 (10.3%)	9 (31.03%)

A system was developed to ensure evidence-based learning of the medical students and to encourage their personal and professional growth through structured guidance, constructive feedback and extracurricular activities. They were also encouraged to join RMU's societies (e.g. sports, debating) for holistic integration and relationship building. A mentoring team was also set up to facilitate Palestinian students in their academics, as depicted below in Figure 1

The MBBS curriculum of Al-Azhar University at Gaza comprises 6 6-year detailed course. Palestinian students have completed the first 3 years of MBBS and 5-8 weeks of the 4th year course at Al-Azhar University. So, the curriculum for the 4th, 5th and final year was chalked out with a prime focus on clinical education and practical training. Division of subjects and credit hours for these students at RMU was according to the scheme of Al-Azhar University. The course content, along with learning outcomes to be achieved, teaching strategies, assessment plan and reference books were also specified right from the beginning for smooth execution of all academics. 10 marks were to be given for 100% attendance. Research was also incorporated for the acquisition of students with basic research competencies and data analysis skills. Study guides were also formulated. The assessment framework drawn for Palestinian students is presented below in Table 3.

Table 3: Assessment Framework

Type of assessment	Strategies	Tool of assessment		Number of assessments
		Theory	Practical	
Formative assessment	LMS Based	MCQs	-----	1 per week
Summative assessment	End of course exam (All Major& minor courses)	MCQs	OSCE	1
End-of-year assessment	Course-based assessment (All Major courses)	---	OSCE	

The Continuous Internal Assessment (CIA) for both major and minor subjects is illustrated below in Figure 2.

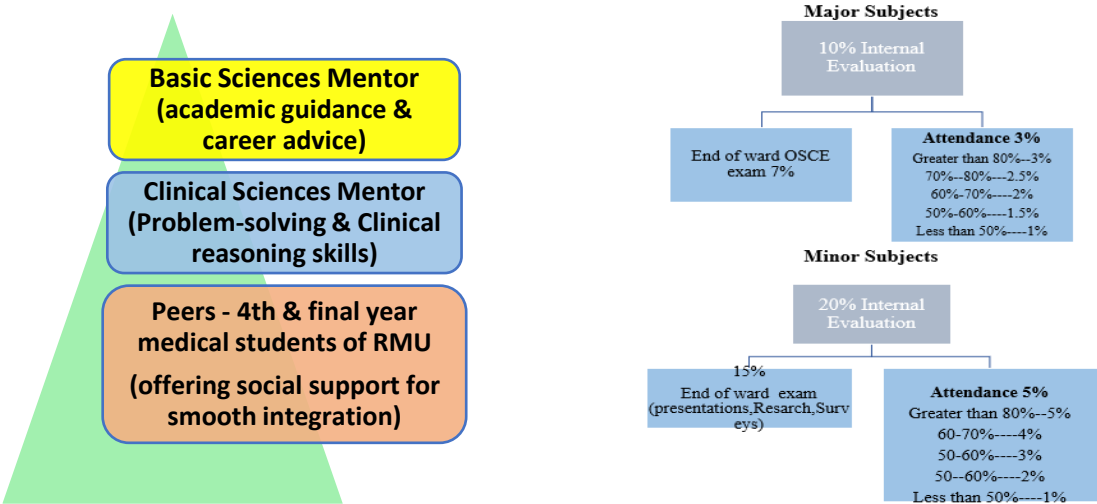


Figure 1: Mentoring Team for medical students of Gaza

Figure 2: Continuous Internal Assessment (CIA)

A rigorous monitoring system was also put in place for continuous monitoring of Palestinian students by certain Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as mentioned below in Table 4.

Table 4: Monitoring system with KPIs

Academic indicators	Performance in assessments, clinical skills and research outputs.
Student support indicators	• Accessibility to psychosocial support services for war-affected students • Retention rates and academic performance of Gaza students in RMU programs

Regular reporting, feedback collection and use of technology to track student progress and program outcomes were the main reporting mechanisms.

Discussion

The attacks by the Israeli army on Gaza radically influenced the lives and work of healthcare personnel. Apart from financial constraints, they were also confronted with educational challenges.¹⁵ The damage to healthcare infrastructure not only disrupted the provision of healthcare services to the injured but also desperately impacted medical education.¹⁶ There were two medical universities in Gaza, both of which were demolished by Israeli bombardment. The faculty members of the medical institutes were subjected to targeted killing and airstrikes.¹⁷ Hence, continuation of studies by medical students at Gaza became out of the question.¹⁰

In response to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, a generous and humanitarian initiative was taken by Pakistan to facilitate Palestinian medical students in the continuation of their medical education. By rigorous alliance of a Pakistani philanthropic society, Al-Khidmat foundation, Global Relief Fund and Doctors of Rahman, around 192 Palestinian medical students were supported for their medical education in Pakistani universities.¹⁸ Around 44 medical students were supposed to reach Rawalpindi Medical University of Pakistan for continuation of education,¹⁹ out of which 36 students of the 4th year attended the orientation session, and 29 were subjected to academic assessment for gauging their prior knowledge following physical and psychological well-being analysis, as shown in Table 2. This assessment was purposely done to build new knowledge on prior information that enhances cognitive retention by making the learning relevant and worthwhile. The average scores gained by Palestinian medical students might be due to their exposure to catastrophic situations and traumatic events amidst the Israeli-Palestinian war. A comprehensive curriculum was designed for continuation of 4th, 5th and final year medical education of Palestinian medical students by finalising their educational content, learning outcomes, time tables and assessments as revealed in Figure 1 and Table 3. Their Continuous Internal Assessment (CIA) for major and minor subjects were also evidently specified along with a strategic monitoring system as depicted in Figure 4 and Table 4, respectively.

Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PM&DC) allowed Gaza medical students to continue their medical education in Pakistani universities. This initiative was taken by PM&DC instead of the request of the Pakistani High Commissioner from London to cater for the Gaza medical students in Pakistan in the wake of the current havoc.²⁰ Shifa College of Medicine welcomed Palestinian students of the 4th and 5th year from the Islamic University of Gaza to facilitate their completion of medical education in October 2024. Similar to RMU, an orientation session and white coat ceremony were organised to pledge bonding and cohesion with them.²¹ This academic collaboration between Pakistan and Palestine not only provides learning opportunities to Palestinian students that will augment their personal and professional development but would also permit them to contribute empathetically to the suffering humanity of their native land.

Conclusions

The academic collaboration between RMU and Al-Azhar University of Gaza would definitely facilitate Palestinian medical students in completing their medical education. The periodic social and moral support would substantially enable these students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

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