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Assessing the Community Engagement in the Learning Process across Disciplines at An-Najah National University (ANU)

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Abstract: *Traditional teaching approaches, in which the teaching/learning activities are limited to the classroom, have increasingly been alternated by non-traditional ones that go beyond classrooms and the higher education institutions campuses. The advancement of the higher education by moving from the old approaches to the new ones calls for clear understanding of the learning process: its components, its actors and its mechanisms. This study aims at exploring the teaching/learning process at An-Najah National University (ANU)—as a case—in order to diagnose the current conditions and to identify the extent to which the offered classes at ANU go beyond the university campus by engaging the community in their activities.*

This task was accomplished by creating baseline data on 779 classes from all faculties and departments in the university and by analyzing the extent to which these classes are interacting with the community. The study found that there are significant differences in engaging the community in the learning activities from one faculty to another and, in some cases, from one department to another in the same faculty. The study is concluded by recommended actions to be adopted by the policymakers and by the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) in the university, among the recommendations is to prepare faculty-based-training programs for the disadvantaged faculties that adopt the non-traditional teaching approaches the least.

Keywords: *Education Management, Community Based Learning, Community Engagement, Traditional Learning, Non-traditional Learning, Contextualized Training.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The vision of An-Najah National University (ANU) clearly states that the university plays a central role in serving the community and participates effectively in solving the community problems. The university, in addition, has put the advancement of the higher education on top of its priorities as stated in the purpose of the university's strategic plan [1]. It is very promising that the ANU strategic plan focuses on the community and the higher education advancement which, in fact, accelerates the adoption of non-traditional teaching and learning in different disciplines in ANU. Towards moving these statements from theory to practice, the university established the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT).

Since its establishment in 2011, CELT has put the transition from traditional to non-traditional teaching and learning on the top of its priorities and in the core of its mission. One goal of CELT is to continuously train the university teachers on the new pedagogical approaches including Community Based Learning (CBL), Project Based Learning (PBL) and Problem Based Learning (PBL), to mention a few. Towards achieving this goal, CELT has made substantial efforts at the individual teacher level with limited deep understanding of the learning/teaching context at the faculty level, which is necessary to enable CELT team to offer contextualized training.

Preparation and implementation of contextualized training is, indeed, a long process that should start, as any planning process, with diagnosing the current conditions and define the existing problems as a first step towards drawing the appropriate policies and specifying their corresponding actions [2]. This study falls in the first step –the diagnosing process—which aims to understand the teaching/learning context at the faculty level. The study aims also to address the variation among faculties in terms of community engagement in the learning activities as one of the most recent and successful non-traditional approaches in the modern teaching/learning process [3, 4].

The study will accomplish this endeavor by exploring whether the offered classes include projects or not as a primary element of engaging the community in the teaching/learning process. Addressing this issue at the university and faculty levels requires creating baseline data that can be a reliable reference for several remedial actions. Learning from other international experiences [5], the baseline data will, on one hand, help CELT team learn about the experience of those who implement classes with the community and have already built sustainable relations with local community organizations. On the other hand, CELT can prepare contextualized training by identifying the needs of each faculty, rather than individual faculty members.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

For the last three years, CELT has adopted a strategic goal concerning the promotion of the community involvement in the learning process across different disciplines at ANU. CELT team have limited knowledge about a few classes that are being run in collaboration with the community and other classes that have already successfully completed [6]. This study will help the center enrich its database about the classes interacting with the community without coordinating their activities though CELT. Having such records will help the center learn from the existing community engagement strategies and the corresponding activities either in the class or in the field.

Since CELT did not gather systematic data before this survey, the collected statistics will provide a baseline data so that appropriate training programs can be reached over time. The data will also help CELT team draw a full picture of non-traditional activities taking place across disciplines and how they are managed and evaluated. It will also help CELT capture the variation among faculties in terms of the nature of non-traditional teaching approaches and the extent to which different faculties adopting such approaches. Identifying such issues will help CELT prepare faculty-based-training programs for the disadvantaged faculties that adopt the non-traditional teaching approaches the least.

The survey will, in addition, help identify the barriers preventing these faculties from adopting the new approaches, and how to deal with these challenges in order to bridge the gap across disciplines. Afterward, the results of the study will allow the CELT team to incorporate new tools in its training programs, on one hand, and to evaluate and measure the impacts on the targeted faculties, on the other hand. For example, projects as the practical part of the classes need skills and proficiency in design and implementation. These skills are required to deal with a number of challenges including: theory-practice balance, class and field work activities management and distribution, and team work evaluation. All these aspects are covered in the study and will be discussed in detail in the Results and Discussion section.

3. METHODOLOGY

CELT has achieved significant progress in strengthening the links with the community from the public and the private sectors, as well as the universities at local, regional and international levels. However, more attention should be paid and more efforts should be invested in order to make these links more sustainable, which calls for continuous studies and data collection. The methodology in this study is designed to explore and to evaluate the practices and techniques being employed to maintain the links between the university classes and the community organizations.

Accordingly, the main goal of this survey is to provide a baseline data that will be used in evaluating different approaches and their related techniques in the teaching and learning process in ANU within individual faculties and across disciples. This ultimate goal was taken in designing the survey by dividing it into four main parts.

The first part included general information about the faculty, the department, the name of the class and teacher's experience. The second part involved questions on the community activities included in the class and the nature of these activities. In the third part, the respondents were asked questions on the project, its assessment, its data sources and the nature of the final output of the project. Finally, the survey included a list of questions on the beneficiaries from the community, their role in the evaluation process, and whether they have an opportunity to give feedback about the service they received from the students. The questions include multiple choice questions in addition to yes-no questions, as well as quantitative questions.

This survey was conducted through a questionnaire which worked effectively as indicated by the number of courses (779 courses) covered by the survey. The questionnaire was completed by

individual teachers who were asked, specifically, about all classes they were teaching during spring semester 2014-2015 in order to guarantee an acceptable level of randomness of the collected sample. All faculties in ANU were represented in the survey as shown in Table (1):

Table1. *The Collected Sample*

No.	Faculty	Number of included departments	Number of classes covered by the surveys
1	Share'a (SHA)*	3	38
2	Education (EDU)	11	105
3	Law (LAW)	1	31
4	Fine Art (ART)	7	72
5	Humanities (HUM)	8	82
6	Engineering (ENG)	12	141
7	Economic (ECON)	10	117
8	Medicine (MED)	6	93
9	Science (SCI)	6	100
Total	9 faculties	64 department	779 courses
* Share'a (SHA): is the name of the Islamic Studies College			

It is obvious that the larger the faculty the larger the number of surveys collected and analyzed. As shown in Figure (1) below, the Engineering Faculty has the largest percentage of the collected surveys and the Law Faculty has the least, which is consistent with the faculty's size.

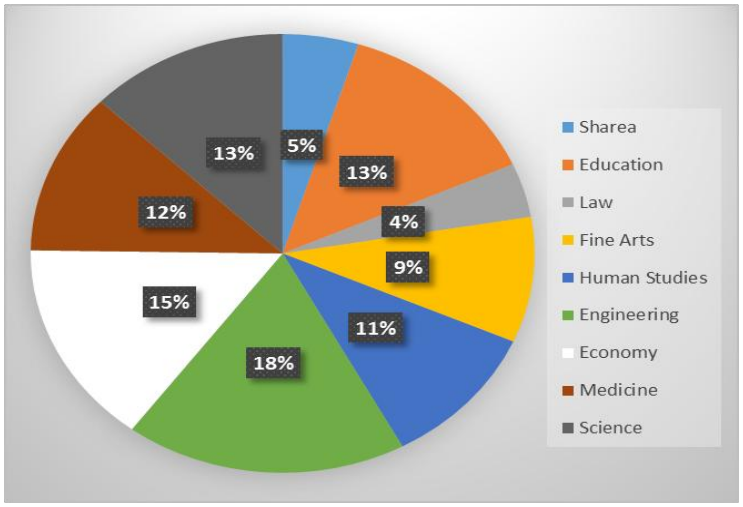

Fig1. *Sample distribution percentages across faculties*

4. Results and Discussion

This study is exploratory in nature that is reflected on the survey design and contents. The survey does not aim to cover the proposed themes in detail, and it leaves the in-depth investigation for further research that might elaborate on the different dimensions of community engagement in the learning process. The results of the survey, however, are essential as a first step towards a systematic assessment of the teaching/learning process across the disciplines in ANU, which will help build a training strategy. This section will be divided into two main subsections: the first will address the issues of involving class projects while the second will investigate the community engagement across disciplines.

4.1. Classes Involving Projects

The results on project involvement show that 56% of the surveyed classes don't include projects while 44% do as illustrated in Figure (2). This, in fact, is an interesting result as it comes better than was expected by the CELT team, and it will open a wide door for further analysis regarding the community engagement in later stages. The discussion will go through two stages: the first is about what reasons that prevent teachers from involving a project in their classes, and what suggested actions to deal with these barriers. The second will focus on the classes involving projects and will include a discussion about the project assessment and will proceed to community involvement and follow up.

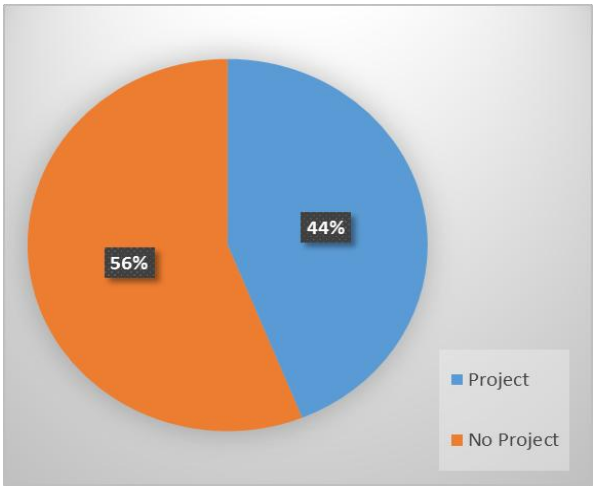

Fig3. *Percentages of the classes having projects*

Teachers who don't include projects in their classes were asked about the reasons behind not having projects. Figure (4) shows that majority of the non-project classes (53%) don't include projects because the classes are theoretical in nature (Basic Classes). If we combine this result with the results in the previous page, we can conclude that almost 1/3 of ANU students don't take projects in their classes during the stage of building basic knowledge. The question here is that: why do we need to surrender to this fact? A major challenge for the CELT team here is to think creatively and design training workshops on how to involve projects in basic classes. CELT can start with a series of focus groups from each faculty having this problem and investigate the unique conditions of each faculty in order to prepare contextual training workshops. In later stages, contextual-training workshops can be designed for specific departments—with least project involvement—and the methodology can be repeated to include other departments that have the same problem.

This is also the same case for the two following results indicating that 25% of the non-project classes don't have projects due to high number of students, and 14% because the semester is not enough to include a project in the class. In both cases, CELT team should think innovatively in order to design non-traditional training workshops on how to run projects in classes with high number of students, as well as when teachers think there is no enough time. Suggested acts here might include training on how to manage and evaluate projects of large groups, how to employ peer-evaluation techniques, and how to make balance between project activities and class activities in classes with intensive theory.

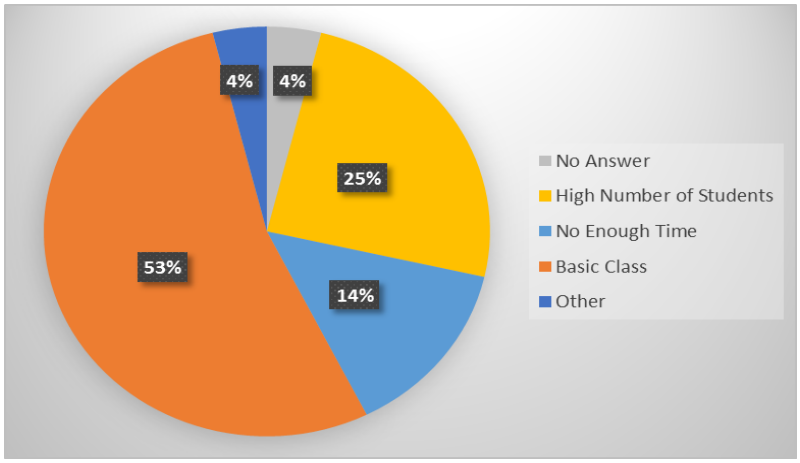

Fig4. *Why don't teachers involve projects in their classes?*

Regarding the project distribution by faculty, it is obvious from Figure (5) that the Engineering Faculty and the Education Faculty are the best in terms of adopting projects in their classes while the Law and Share'a are the least. These results give a strong indication about the teaching/learning context of various faculties, and direct the CELT team, for instance, to target the Engineering and Education for advanced training courses such as project based learning, problem based learning and community passed learning. The results also give an indication that these faculties have more potential to provide trainers to CELT than other faculties.

As to the other faculties with very low project involvement percentages, it is very important to do further analysis in order to draw a full image about what is going on in these faculties and to answer the key question: Why don't these faculties involve projects in their classes as others do? In order to avoid extensive discussion and as this paper aims to show the methodology rather than explaining all details, one faculty will be discussed to answer the posed question.

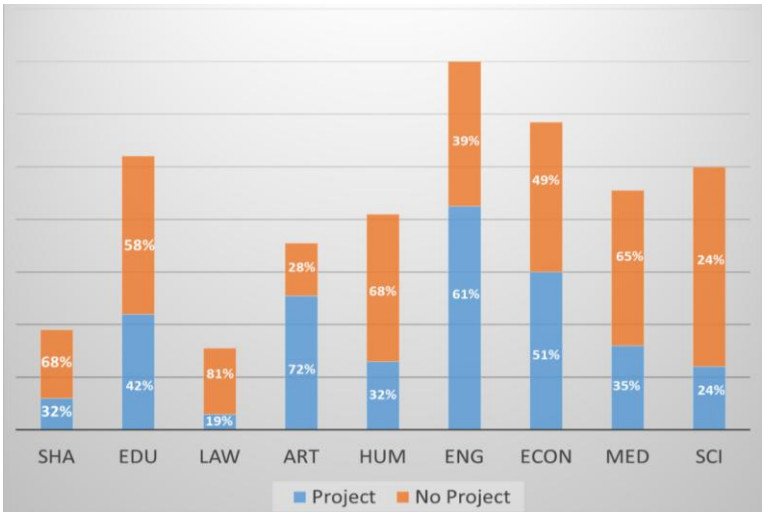

Fig5. *Project involvement by faculty*

The Share'a faculty is selected as an example on low project involvement (68% of the classes don't have projects) in order to analyze the reasons behind this result. As shown in Figure (6), 57% of the classes don't have projects because these classes are foundational ones. The figure shows also that 37% of the classes don't have projects due to the high number of students in the classes. These numbers are consistent with the results from the overall university evaluation shown in Figure (3) above. Same remedial actions suggested before are applicable here, namely training workshops on involving projects in fundamental classes and in classes with high number of students.

At the policy level, CELT can work on incentives actions such as giving some Share'a class lower limits of students' number in order to motivate faculty members adopting new teaching approaches, specifically practical approaches. Such actions might help move the culture and the context of the faculty from pure theoretical approach to theory-practice approach.

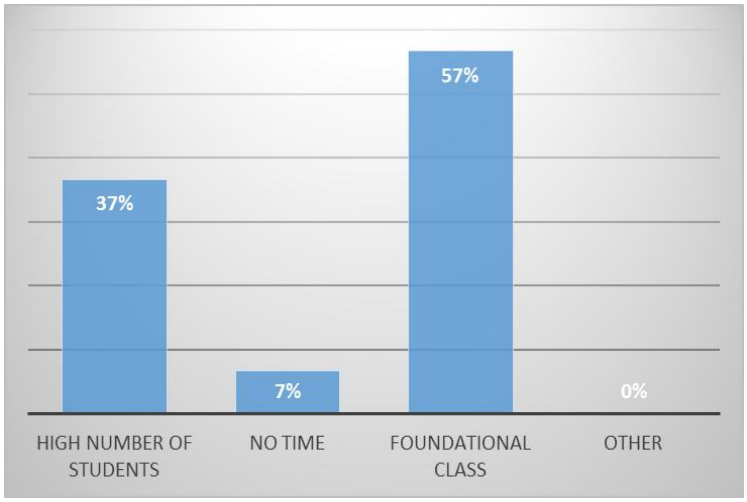

Fig6. *Why Share'a classes don't have projects*

4.2. Grading and Assessment

One important motivation for the students to work hard for a class, in general, and for a class project, in specific, is the grade. Consequently, the grade should be distributed proportionally between the class activities (the theory) and the project activities (the practice). The survey included an important question about the percentage of the project grade from the total class grade. As shown in Figure (7),

25% of the classes give 10% or less of the total grade to the project. This low percentage is not a problem in itself as long as the percentage is proportionate to the effort invested in the project activities and its requirements. This specific result is purposefully left to be discussed below by taking the Art Fine College as a detailed example on how project grades are distributed inside a faculty.

It is shown also that 25% of the projects take up to 20% of the total grade, and almost same percent (22%) of the classes dedicate up to 30% of the grade to the project. CELT team needs to investigate this category to draw an understanding of what types of projects are given, how much efforts are invested in such projects, and how these projects are practically managed. This also will be discussed later by an example from the Fine Art Faculty.

Finally in this section, the outstanding result was that 20% of the classes dedicate 50% and greater of the final grade to the projects. This is an attractive results for the CELT team to shed a light on how such classes are being planned, designed, evaluated and implemented, because the teachers or the departments offering these classes are apparently aware of the importance of the practice. This case will be discussed in more details in the next section.

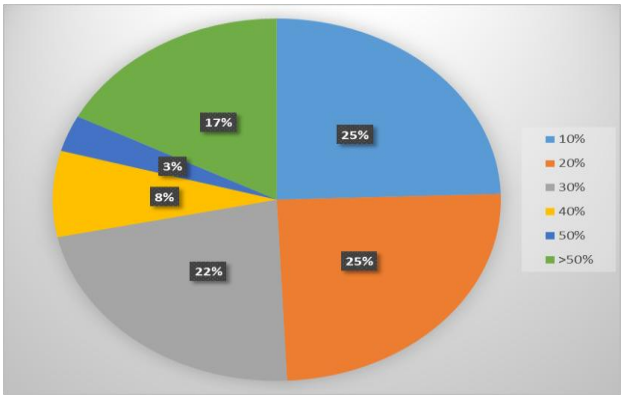

Fig7. *The percentage of the project grade from the total class grade*

As an example on how the project grade is distributed within a faculty, the Fine Art faculty is selected to illustrate this case because it is the faculty with highest project percentage (72%) as previously discussed. Far from the results of the overall university, Figure (8) shows that in 46% of the classes offered in the Fine Art Faculty the projects take 50% and greater from the class grade. This means that Fine Art Faculty is a special case in which practice is more important than other faculties. A suggested action here is to make focus groups for teachers who teach in this way to document their experience and learn from them some lessons about how they implement such classes. Later, CELT can design training workshops to improve the teachers teaching/learning techniques for all faculties in the university.

If we put this statistic a side, the rest of the results fit perfectly under the normal distribution curve. In the two extreme sides rest 4% of classes with 10% and less of the class grade on the left extreme side and 4% of the 40% to 50% of the class on the right extreme side. These results make the Fine Art Faculty a typical model to be investigated to learn and train. The results from this faculty, therefore, will be further investigated in terms of the extent to which the projects involve community partners, which will be discussed in the following sections.

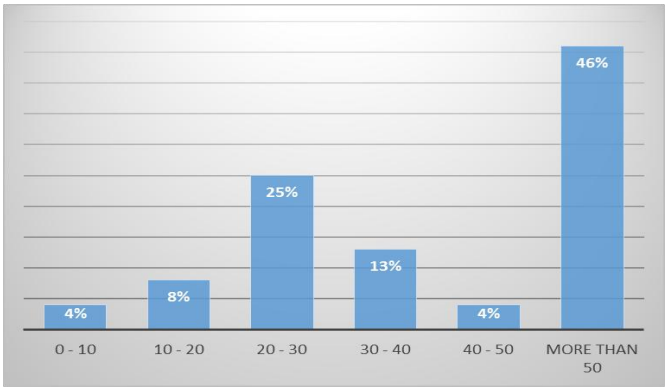

Fig8. *Project grade distribution in the Fine Art Faculty*

4.3. Community Based Projects

The second part of the study focuses on the projects proceeding to a community partner. Three aspects of these community projects will be discussed, namely, the community partner type, the project grade and the follow up with the community partner. These aspects were selected intentionally because they are the core elements of the CBL training workshops usually organized by the CELT every semester.

The results in Figure (9) show that 11% of the projects proceed to a community partner. In terms of quantity, this is a relatively acceptable percentage of community projects at the university level. CELT, however, aims at improving the quality of the courses adopting new learning approaches along with increasing the quantity of these courses. This section will mainly analyze the quantity and to some extent the quality of the course including community projects.

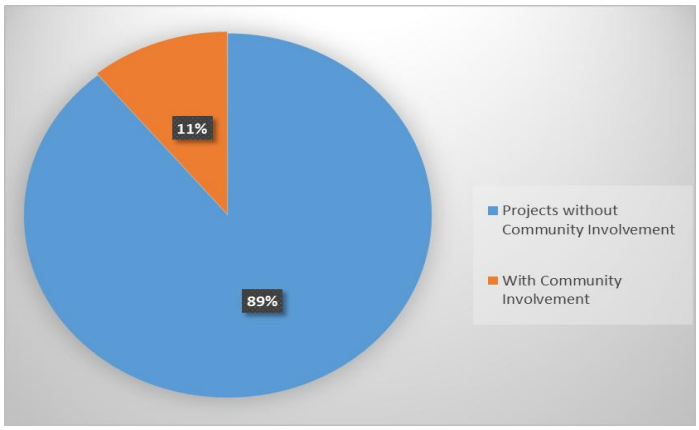

Fig9. *Percentages of the courses involving community partner at the university level*

As to the variation among faculties in engaging the community, the results illustrated in Figure (10) show significant differences between the faculties that range from no community involvement at all as in the case of Share'a and Law faculties to more than 20% in the case of the Education and Engineering faculties. These results call for two types of actions: Firstly, CELT can organize working sessions with those who involve community projects in their classes. These sessions will provide an opportunity to exchange ideas with those teachers and analyze their experience. Consequently, CELT team can introduce their experience in the CBL, and they can learn lessons from those teacher, which might help improve the CBL process followed by CELT.

Secondly, CELT can target the faculties with low or no community involvement in their projects. Those faculties have high potential for working with CELT on different levels. CELT can introduce the idea of CBL as a first step towards increasing their awareness about the importance of such learning approach for the students, the community and the teachers. On another level, CELT can organize special meetings to explore the reasons behind no (or low) community involvement, which might call either for remedial actions from CELT or the actions might be on the administrative level.

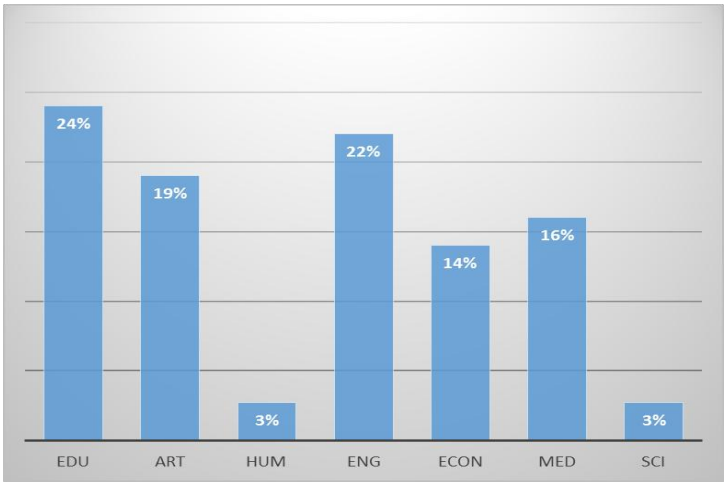

Fig10. *Variation in community involvement across faculties*

In the following section, the three aspects of the CBL will be discussed starting with the type of the community partner, moving to the grade of the community project and ending with the follow up status.

The results in the first aspect is related to the course design, specifically, the grading system of the class. As Figure (11) shows, 44% of the community projects at the university level are given 50% or greater from the total class grade. This result is promising as it indicates that the teachers are aware of the effort-reward balance; the effort invested by the students and rewarding grades given to the students. This, however, is not an enough evidence that the community project in these courses are being taught appropriately. The teachers of these courses might also need consultation on large community projects assessment and management.

The other classes in the rest of the grading categories will need the same consultation on managing community projects, as well as training on course design and grading systems. For example, the results indicate that 8% of the community projects in the university are given less than 10% of the total grade. This means that the teachers of those classes need consultation and training on the concept of effort-reward. The main question here is that what type of community projects that deserves only 10% of the class, what about the students' performance in the project and their engagement with the project activities. A recommended action here is to organize reflection session with students after working with the teachers who might also be invited to participate in these sessions. This, in deed, might help the teachers understand the importance of balancing the grade with effort invested by the students in the class.

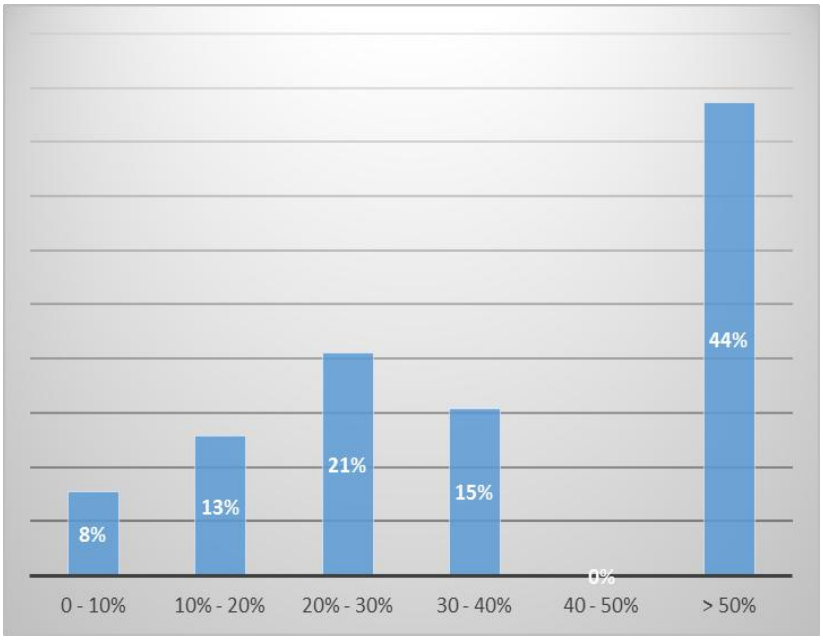

Fig11. *Community project grade distribution at university level*

One of the most challenging stages in the CBL classes is to select a motivated community partner who has the readiness to collaborate. The techniques usually used to approach a community partner depends on the type of the organization. A community partner from the private sector has different interests than a public or an NGO partner. They also have different working system and communication routine. CELT focuses on these aspects when holding CBL training workshops. Therefore, it is important to know what types of community partnerships are usually used at ANU.

As shown in Figure (12) below, the community partners belong to three categories: Private sector, public sector and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). There is no significant differences in terms of the number of classes belong to each category. These statistics are useful for CELT team because they have worked on several projects with the private sector so they can support the classes in this category with training and consultation. The public and the NGOs, however, have the priority in the CBL classes as they don't use the service they receive for commercial purposes. On the other hand, the public and NGOs usually provide services free of charge, so this means that CBL courses serve the general public in an indirect way. In all cases CELT team can refer to the base line data to do more analysis and to help organize the relation between the community partner and the teacher.

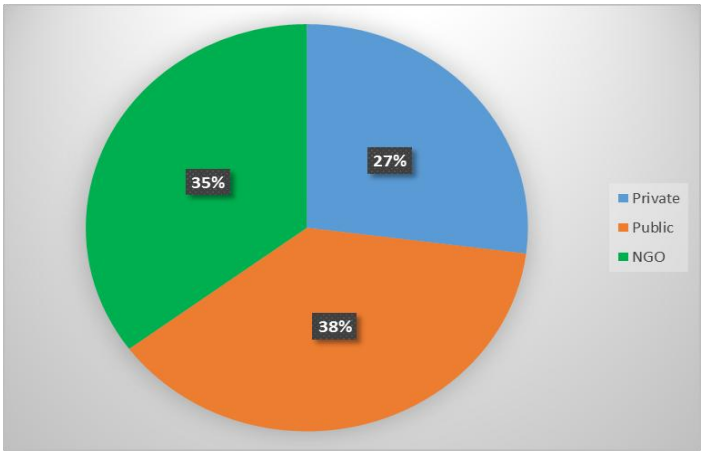

Fig12. *Community partnership categories*

Finally, it is of high importance in a CBL course to follow up with community partner who receives a service from the students. This, actually, is necessary for the students and the community partner as they work for a semester, and sometimes for a year or more, on one project that is designed to fulfill a community need. To what extent the project has fulfilled the partner need is an important question that can be answered by following up with the community partner.

The results in this aspect are very promising as 71% of the community projects have follow up with the community partner as shown in Figure (13). This is a very good source of ideas to strengthen the relation between the community partners and the teachers and to make such relations more sustainable. CELT in deed can learn a lot from the existing experience and can participate effectively in the follow up process. CELT participation can come in form of proposing mechanisms of communication between the teachers and the students from one side and the community partners from the other side. CELT can also work on developing follow-up tools and add them to its official website so that all stakeholders (community partners, teachers, and students) can refer to this website and participate in well-designed follow up channels. Finally, CELT can host community partners as well as teachers and students to document their experience with the existing follow up tools and mechanisms and to work together to improve these mechanisms and to make them more practical.

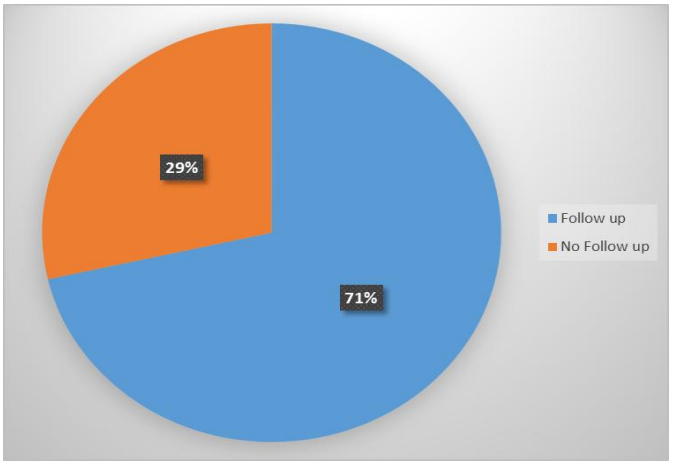

Fig13. *Percentages of follow up with the community partners on their projects*

5. CONCLUSION

The study resulted in two types of the conclusions: (1) there are some promising results with high potential for unrevealed success stories. For example, there are high percentages of involving projects and community projects in the classes at the university level; and (2) there are some weaknesses at the faculty levels such as the Law and the Share'a Faculties that don't have any type of community engagement, and in other faculties the misdistribution of the community project grades in some cases.

These results either the promising or the weak ones call for variety of actions from the CELT including contextualized training workshops on designing and managing CBL classes, teamwork

management in large classes, project design and management for fundamental classes. In conclusion, the next steps that should be built on the results of this study requires strong leadership at the institutional level, systematic assessment of the impact at the faculty and university level, as well as it needs resource allocation.

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My name is **Emad Dawwas,** I am an assistant professor in Urban Planning at An-Najah National University (ANU) – College of Engineering. I have been working in urban planning field since 2002 and I got my PhD in 2011 from University of Washington – Seattle, USA. I have also interests in improving the teaching process by adopting new pedagogical approaches, specifically, Community Based Learning (CBL) approach. I am currently the coordinator of CBL Unit at Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at ANU. I have published some work in the CBL as an evolving learning approach in addition to my participation in several conferences in new trends in education at the national and international level.