



## Second Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education



### Second Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education Strengthening Arab-Euro University Collaboration: The Importance of Regional Mobility

Princess Sumaya University for Technology  
Amman, Jordan  
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#### Conference Conclusions

The second Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education (AECHE2) was hosted by Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Amman, Jordan, in the period 10-11 June 2014 and jointly organised by the Association of Arab Universities (AARU) and the European University Association (EUA), with the University of Barcelona (UB). The event welcomed over 250 participants, including 150 university rectors, presidents and vice-presidents as well as representatives of national ministries and higher education organisations.

The conference followed up AECHE1 that took place in Barcelona in May 2013, where a first set of bi-regional cooperation priorities were defined. AECHE2 targeted a specific issue of critical importance to higher education in both regions – mobility of students and staff and its impact. The intention was to map activity, share practices and encourage Arab and European university leaders, in partnership with governments and other societal stakeholders, to increase their efforts and investments<sup>1</sup>.

AECHE is a higher education dialogue initiative that has been launched in partnership between EUA, AARU and UB, supported by the secretariat at UB. The intention was to develop a permanent leadership dialogue platform for Arab and European universities that could capitalise on and showcase the extensive higher education cooperation between the two regions. It comes at a time when university collaboration between Arab and European countries has gained increasing significance, due to geo-political and economic considerations but also due to the proximity of the two regions and the common societal challenges.

#### Themes

The two-day conference addressed and discussed the following issues:

- Internationalising through mobility programmes
- Educating global citizens and preparing for a global workforce: the role of EU-Arab higher education student and staff exchange
- Joint study programmes and their institutional impact
- University leadership and the impact of mobility on institutions
- Regional frameworks for mobility

<sup>1</sup> An exhibition has also been held at AECHE2 to showcase Arab-Euro university cooperation projects, especially those supported under the Tempus programme of the European Union.



- University autonomy and academic freedom

The following summarises the main discussion points and outcomes:

### 1) The Mobility Imperative for Arab and European Higher Education

While brain drain is obviously a concern in many countries – perpetuated by inequalities, conflict and the general growth in free-moving students and labour - increased academic mobility was seen as a very positive and pertinent development that should be better exploited. The importance of structured mobility (mobility embedded in institutional partnerships and agreements) in particular is unquestioned; a moving testimonial was made by a scholar of Tafila Technical University in Jordan, who attributed her academic career advancement and her general professional and personal confidence to her studies in Sweden. Beyond the clear impact of such mobility on staff and students, which ranges from personal development to higher employment prospects, participants also conferred about the general impact on institutional internationalisation. An excellent example came from Palestine: Marwan Arwatani, President of Palestine Technical University, pointed out that without targeted mobility programmes, Palestinian universities would be isolated and largely deprived of international contact. They would miss important opportunities to exchange among each other due to both political difficulties and the general homogeneity of institutions within the country. Mobility programmes connect Palestinian students, staff and higher education institutions to the global academic community and are an important lever for institutional development and academic excellence.

The presentations also showed that incoming mobility has a particular significance: an international student body is becoming an indication for the quality and global relevance of institutions: EPFL (Switzerland) reported to host students from 125 countries, while Qatar University claimed that with its internationalisation efforts, it now welcomes students from 44 countries. The University of Bologna reported on its push to remove the word ‘foreign’ from its regulations and programmes so as to demonstrate that international students and staff are wanted and needed in the academic community. For these universities and others, the lines between domestic and ‘foreign’ students’ are increasingly becoming arbitrary, a welcome development that attests to the international nature of learning. Many universities are making distinct ‘internationalisation at home’ efforts to ensure that the presence of international students and staff enhances the quality and relevance of education and research. This is of particular importance for institutions with primarily ‘domestic’ student populations which are not often mobile physically.

No conference on mobility would refrain from mentioning mobility obstacles. While the obstacles are generally known (funding, poor promotion, recognition of studies, visa restraints, language barriers), they take different shapes in different settings. Participants of AECHE2 emphasised visas and other political restrictions. The situation seems to be particularly difficult in inviting international scholars to Palestine, for example. Visa delays and refusals are a problem both between Arab countries and with Europe. Though the European Union has established a broad and deep economic area as well as a “Schengen Area” for immigration, final decisions on visas granted to non-EU individuals for study and research purposes are still taken at national level. The EU ‘Scientific visa’ is a welcome advancement, but more work has to be done between higher education stakeholders and ministries of foreign affairs/immigration to ensure implementation on the ground.

### 2) Structuring and Enabling Mobility: The Role of Collaboration and Partnerships

The conference demonstrated a wide spectrum of international collaboration models, ranging from collaborative projects to longstanding institutional cooperation agreements and shared campuses/off-shore learning centres. These various examples were all seen as part of the framework for enhancing quality and quantity of mobility exchanges. Many initiatives also target explicitly



capacity building. Of note, while much cooperation is supported by the European Union, Arab Foundations, other national funds and institutional resources also contribute to the picture.

Joint programmes – programmes developed jointly and collaboratively delivered – are one particular tool that has gained prominence in the past decade and was also a topic of high interest at AECHE1. Though such programmes are resource intensive and only benefit a limited number of students, they have a clear impact on internationalising curricula, enhancing the quality of mobility and deepening of institutional partnerships. The University of Edinburgh, for example, provides a four year undergraduate programme with its partners in Arab countries in which two years are taught in Edinburgh and two years at a partner institution. It is also engaged in collaborative PhDs through two networks - Universities 21 and the League of European Research Universities (LERU) - demonstrating the important role that networks can play in structuring mobility and curricular/research collaboration.

Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (France) has built its international strategy around joint programmes and believes that though only a selected number of students participate in them, they have demonstrable impact on the internationalisation of the faculty and the institution at large. As another example, the University of Pavia (Italy) has a strategy to open up to developing countries which links mobility to institutional capacity building. In a system-to-system approach, it has developed co-tutelle PhDs with 10 universities in Palestine and provides scholarships for some of the candidates. It also prioritises outgoing mobility of European students to the Arab world, which participants perceived as good practice to be included more regularly in exchange programmes.

All presenters agreed on the importance of true partnership and trust with regards to developing joint programmes; no university has exactly the same academic requirements, nor should it. Difference should be portrayed as a strength and of added value to one's education. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on networking people and on reciprocity of exchange; mobility has to be a two-way bridge in order to harness real global opportunities and face real global challenges.

As another form of highly integrated collaboration, several participants referred to their campuses located in the Middle East. While in the past "off-shore campuses" were often seen as unilateral North-South and/or explicitly commercial endeavours, the range of such approaches in today's higher education landscape is impressive; campuses and learning/research centres located abroad have become an innovative way to facilitate mobility, boost internationalisation and engage in joint institutional projects. For some institutions, they have also become new extension of the institutional architecture: The German-Jordanian University is one clear example of an institution that bridges two systems and countries and is premised on learning and training in both systems. EPFL Middle East, a unique case, sends students trained in Switzerland to do projects and launch start-ups in the United Arab Emirates. Other campuses abroad are conceived in a 'South-South' way: Paris 1, for example, has a campus in South Africa that is contributing to South-South mobility by receiving students from other parts of Africa. While various European universities have partner campuses in the Arab region (TU Berlin – Germany and Paris 1 – France were two examples), some Arab universities also reported to have opened campuses within the Middle East, the Gulf region and parts of Africa (Mohammed V Agdal - Morocco, Qatar University, University of Science and Technology - Yemen).

Regardless of the form of collaboration, flexibility of funding has been highlighted as one of the enabling factors: Universities should be encouraged to develop fit for purpose approaches that match their mission and needs, generate synergies, and pool resources.

### 3) Mobility as an Element of the Institutional Strategy

Participants discussed how mobility contributes to developing an international profile and examined the overall implications for learning and teaching, for research, for the third mission and also for institutional governance and management. A key question was how institutional strategies can contribute to enhancing mobility and ensuring its quality, and how an institution can actually take



stock of its mobility exchanges to understand better their dynamics. A range of practice was shared to this effect. It was commented that the impact of mobility on the institution depends very much on the institutional strategy and the choices that are made under that strategy. Paris-Dauphine (France), for example, has developed a strategy for “globalised curricula” targeting 100% student mobility and attracting a high number of international staff (currently 16%). It was stressed that internationalisation efforts would have to reach out to students, staff and faculty in order to create a truly conducive environment for mobility and for the institution to be able to meet mobility targets. The President of Palestine Technical University (Marwan Awartari) concurred that internationalising the institution requires structural adjustments and faculty openness, two elements that are not a fait accompli. For example, opening the institution to international cooperation and mobility also means developing a language policy and language support measures for students and staff.

#### 4) Mobility and Technology

As many universities have or are in the process of developing online learning approaches, there was a discussion as to what extent virtual mobility could replace or complement physical mobility. Opinions on this issue remain divided, probably due to different experiences but also different purposes for mobility. While there was a general agreement that physical and virtual mobility are different in nature (and that virtual mobility should not necessarily be an absolute substitute for physical mobility), there is potential to further develop the latter in order to enhance internationalisation. Virtual mobility - forms of connecting students and staff internationally via technology and social media - can be a useful tool for internationalising curricula and generating greater international exposure to students who may not be able to be physically mobile. One discussant (Hamdan University) proposed “e-mobility” as a means to ensure that women could become mobile, for example, particularly when women are subject to a variety of social pressures and family obligations beyond the classroom.

Relatedly, the issue of mobility and social inclusiveness was raised by a representative of the European Students’ Union: those who are interested in getting mobile have often been mobile before and/or have internationally oriented families. But mobility must reach the entire student population. Universities need targeted actions to reach beyond the ‘usual suspects’- those who are naturally inclined to be mobile. This requires not only funding and dedicated programmes, but a clear understanding of the obstacles to mobility that students perceive and means to overcome them. Technology can be one solution to give students the first international exposure they need to become physically mobile at a later stage.

#### 5) Mobility and Employment

As most of the higher education graduates will not have a career in research or academia, the specific topic of how European and Arab Universities cooperate with industry partners to provide international placements for students and researchers was taken up. Participants commented that Euro-Arab initiatives for exchange with industry should be a primary element of bi-regional collaboration going forward. Placements both within the region and also bi-regionally were considered a strategic means to orient the student mobility experience towards future employment and consolidate collaboration between universities, multinationals and SMEs.

As an example, the University of Qatar emphasises collaboration with international companies, which also contributes to funding ‘chairs’. Companies host students through the IASTE programme and the university also participates in a variety of international innovation competitions (Shell Eco-Marathon) which engage companies from around the world and provide short-term mobility for aspiring students.

The University of Bagdad, Iraq, showed not only how a university can develop collaboration with employers, but the range of services required to support students in their careers (international



certificates for students of certain fields such as engineering and training centres which bring companies and students together).

EPFL Middle East is a particularly unique model: All teaching programmes take place in Switzerland, but students are then obliged to do their research and internships in the Middle East, which includes company projects and the creation of new products.

All presentations confirmed that the combination of work experience and international mobility renders multiple benefits, for students as well as for the facilitating institutions and their industry partners.

#### 6) Values and Mobility

Finally, in a special round table organised by the Magna Charta Observatory, speakers reminded participants of the values that must underpin mobility and Arab-European collaboration more generally. It is essential that academic institutions maintain their autonomy to teach the future generation in a collaborative and participatory way, with a common understanding of and respect for academic freedom, particularly in times of political instability. The university is a place where ideas and power interact and where openness is essential. The Magna Charta Observatory promotes these ideals globally and provides a forum for university leaders to discuss what academic freedom and values mean in practice.

The notion of teaching global citizenship was also discussed at length, something that mobility can foster. Global citizenship should not conflict with one's national commitment, but rather provoke a reflection on the individual's role in a globalised society. Including this notion into the curriculum in a trans-disciplinary way is a challenge for institutions.

#### 7) Forced Mobility: Scholars and Students at Risk

Given the current crisis in neighboring Syria, special attention was devoted to an unwanted form of mobility - Syrian scholar and student refugees. A large number of Syrian scholars and students have fled their country and are deprived of opportunities to study and work. Various international interventions are being made, but it was felt that the international academic community could play a more active role. In his keynote address, Robert Quinn, of Scholars at Risk, stated that if every university in the Arab world and in Europe would offer to welcome two Syrian academics and 10 Syrian students, this could save a generation. Scholars at Risk helps to place academics in universities outside of their countries and provide them the necessary support.

#### 8) Frameworks for International Exchange and Collaboration

At several points during the conference it was analysed how mobility programmes such as Erasmus have contributed to enhancing institutional and national internationalisation agendas and to reinforcing the role of higher education in the European integration process, in particular. Panelists and participants from Europe and the Arab countries discussed how European mobility programmes had shaped protocols and tools for mobility and shared their own experiences in managing mobility (with the EU, for example, but also with other regions). There was vast agreement that the European programmes contributed to enhancing internationalisation and cultivating institutional partnerships; a main virtue is that they emphasize inter-institutional agreements, which have longer-term benefits both in teaching and in research.

As no such programme exists yet between Arab countries, Arab participants expressed their interest in developing and supporting an Erasmus-like mobility programme for the Arab region, which could have a considerable impact on regional cooperation more generally. Good practices could be taken from Europe, both in the start-up of such a programme (which could have a modest pilot phase) and in the management.





## 9) Conclusions and Next Steps

The conference provided evidence for the high level of cooperation and exchange between Arab and European universities. Geographical proximity, common political and economic interests and funding support provided by Arab and European governments make it likely that these relationships will further expand and intensify over the coming years. It is noteworthy that the Member States of the Arab League and the European Union and its Member States, in their recent Athens Ministerial Declaration, refer to enhanced cooperation in higher education and explicitly mention AECHE as a platform for cooperation and exchange<sup>2</sup>. The release of this declaration coincided with the concluding session of AECHE2, where the leadership of AARU and EUA summarised the event and proposed to take several topics forward in future rounds of AECHE:

- Student and staff mobility is an efficient, flexible and relatively low cost means for further enhancement of academic and research cooperation between Arab and European countries, but also within the Arab region. Beyond its immediate academic benefits, it fosters mutual understanding between countries and societies and is instrumental in paving a more prosperous and peaceful future for all.
- The extent of existing cooperation between European and Arab universities, funded through EU programmes, foundations and individual Arab governments, is impressive but remains scattered. It would be important to map these activities and also get a clearer understanding of institutional and national higher education frameworks. This would build awareness in the wider academic community and also serve as a basis for enhanced regional and interregional exchange and cooperation. Such a mapping should also assess the impact and benefits of different types of mobility on students, institutions and societies at large. This will be essential for political buy-in going forward and also for up-scaling mobility.
- Flexible funding tools for mobility are crucial. Higher education institutions need sufficient autonomy to tailor their cooperation and exchange in a way that is contextually relevant and meets academic as well as social and economic interests. As one current example, the opening of the Erasmus+ programme towards other world regions and towards the Arab world in particular is very welcome. Two directional mobility, joint degrees programmes and capacity development projects are all important funding strands of the new programme. However, there is concern that some of the new rules and procedures will remain excessively complex, difficult for non-European HEIs to navigate and potentially limiting.
- Student mobility appears to be rather unilateral at present, with only a rather reduced number of European students studying at Arab institutions. However, there are clear examples of the benefits derived from reciprocal mobility, both for institutions, for individuals and for societies at large. The Erasmus+ programme will now fund more mobility of European students and staff towards Arab countries, a welcome development, but other investments must be made by the public and private sector. Joint programmes, for example, have proven a successful means of promoting two-way exchanges, and boost cooperation relations. More programmes of this nature should be developed between European and Arab universities.
- Defining mobility strategies and setting targets should be considered by both governments and institutions as a way to widen participation in and increase mobility.
- The development of a regional framework for mobility exchanges would have multiple benefits for individuals, institutions and society, and also contribute to promoting the Arab region globally. There is consensus that an Erasmus-style mobility programme, based on a joint credit transfer system, should be piloted among Arab countries. This programme should favour structured student

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<sup>2</sup> <http://qr2014.eu/sites/default/files/Athens%20Declaration.pdf>. Point 21: "The Ministers welcomed the setting-up of the Arab-Euro Conferences on Higher Education (AECHE) as a forum of co-operation between European and Arab higher education institutions and look forward to further meeting between both institutions"



and staff exchange between institutions and embed mobility in collaborative programmes. Good practice already developed under Erasmus Mundus and Tempus, for example, could be an important source of inspiration for a pilot that could be spear-headed by a group of countries and institutions, supported by European partners and expertise. Ownership for such a programme should be fostered in the Arab academic community and thus such a programme should ideally be financed by a joint fund, with Arab public and private investment.

- The conference demonstrated once more that universities do not only contribute to the development of globally competitive knowledge economies, but also to developing global citizens. However, fostering 'globally citizenship' is a notion that is widely absent from more economically focused political discourse on higher education. Therefore, education and research collaboration, which is one vehicle to address economic needs and enhance the employability of young people, must also aim at educating young people in intercultural awareness and societal responsiveness. Action should be taken by European and Arab universities to better demonstrate and promote their efforts in fostering global citizens and the role that mobility plays.
- Shared academic values have been emphasised as a core topic to underpin Arab-Euro higher education cooperation. In addition to championing academic freedom and institutional autonomy, higher education communities of both regions should ensure that the scholars and students of crisis torn countries are taken care of. This is not the responsibility of any one country or higher education institution, but of Arab and European countries and institutions collectively. While strategic mobility and cooperation are flourishing, the effects of forced mobility and migration have to be considered in the overall framework of academic cooperation.

AECHE is committed to following up these issues in the following ways:

- AECHE will continue to serve as a platform for European and Arab universities, gathering institutional leadership and practitioners and dialoguing with governments, partners from society and industry.
- It will seek synergies with and provide a forum for other relevant initiatives, such as the ARELEN network for leadership, the Mediterranean Universities' Union (UNIMED) and the UNICA platform for the Mediterranean.
- Its regular conferences can contribute to stock-taking, showcase innovative bi-regional higher education initiatives, and develop priorities and goals to be shared with all stakeholders.
- It will also develop a number of clearly profiled initiatives, such as seminars and other dialogue events as well as collaborative projects, which will feed into the preparation of the AECHE3 conference.
- AARU and EUA in close collaboration with their members, and with the support of the AECHE Secretariat hosted by the University Barcelona, will continue to develop this platform.

AECHE calls upon the academic communities of both the Arab world and Europe and the conference participants in particular to take proactive steps in:

- Engaging in AECHE initiatives
- Disseminating and broadening their own initiatives through AECHE

Parties can express their interest and ideas to the AECHE Secretariat: [aeche@ub.edu](mailto:aeche@ub.edu)

