Third Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education (AECHE 3):

Opportunities and Challenges for Arab and European universities in fulfilling their societal mission

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Arab-Euro Higher Education Conferences (AECHE)

AECHE is a collaborative endeavour of the European University Association (EUA) and the Association of Arab Universities (AArU), facilitated by the University of Barcelona (UB) which hosts the secretariat. It is intended to be a dialogue platform for the higher education community in Europe and the Arab world, responding to the important need to generate synergies between higher education initiatives in the two regions, and to advance policy dialogue. AECHE holds periodical university leadership conferences on topical issues, punctuated by thematic events targeting different audiences and practitioners. Its Steering Committee is comprised of AArU, EUA, UB and key networks and institutions working in the Arab-Euro higher education arena. AECHE3 was the third conference of its nature, attended by over 200 participants from 43 countries in both regions as well as policy makers, journalists and social partners/NGOs.

AECHE3 in context

AECHE3 focused on opportunities and challenges for Arab and European universities in fulfilling their societal missions. The topic was timely given the national and international crises that are directly effecting the two regions. Civil rights restrictions, political repression, and armed conflict are vastly impacting the ability of universities in both regions to deliver upon their missions of teaching, research and service to society.

Of particular interest in this conference was the focus on how universities are responding to the needs of refugees, and the general implications for the higher education sector in Europe and across the Arab region. The event was a unique opportunity for AArU and EUA members as well as their partners to tackle issues arising from the recent refugee crisis. It was an occasion to share practice, map important initiatives and reassert the urgency of finding solutions to the immediate education needs of refugees. It also framed more generally the ways in which universities work in local, national and international contexts.

AECHE3 also considered the results of the European Union co-funded TEMPUS project entitled ‘Modernisation of Institutional Management of Internationalisation in South Neighbouring Countries – MIMI’, which aims at enhancing internationalisation strategies through, among others, the implementation and promotion of an Arab Network for Internationalisation. The MIMI project co-sponsored AECHE3.
The conference proceedings

AECHE3 opened with a session entitled ‘Visions of Peace’. The speeches of Wail Benjalloun, former President of the Conference of Moroccan Presidents and current President of the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) and Guilherme d’Oliveira Martins of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation were important starting points for introducing the different themes connected to ‘Universities and their societal missions’. Ramon Torrent, representative of the Rector of University of Barcelona and director of the AECHE secretariat, reminded participants that the university community can and should contribute to international relations, and to the building of peace through dialogue and joint endeavours.

The conference then addressed a number of challenging and interlinked topics: Universities’ contribution to interregional dialogue, collaboration and conflict solving, the common challenge of integrating refugees, identifying and implementing the right funding instruments to support effective internationalization strategies, skills to address global challenges and the need for collaborative Arab-Euro research. Important speakers from university leadership, ministries and NGOs in both regions were invited to share case studies, present their initiatives and provide insight.

Values and academic freedom

The diverse range of distinguished speakers repeatedly stressed the Importance of values and how higher education must be premised upon certain common values that inspire the teaching and learning process. These values must speak to the very diverse contexts in which Arab and European universities operate. In the panel discussion on ‘Educating citizens: The role of universities and other post–secondary educational institutions’, it was suggested that agreeing to those common values may not, in fact, be so difficult: it is about empathy, respect and the ability to learn freely without restriction or repression. Common values must also assert that universities and other higher education institutions are ‘safe zones’, so to speak, where one can learn, teach, debate and research irrespective of the political conflict and, in some instances, war that may surround.

Collaboration

Past AECHE events have always had the thread of ‘collaboration’ running through them; In Amman in 2014, the AECHE2 conference examined ‘intra’ and ‘inter’ regional mobility and how they are both driven by and drive the internationalization of higher education. At an AECHE thematic conference in 2015 in Al Gouna, Egypt, different models for ‘off-shore’ and international institutions and campuses were featured, and how these are increasingly being developed collaboratively, with the interest of all partner countries in mind.

AECHE3 took a different tone: collaboration, mobility, internationalization and partnerships were not the direct subject: fulfilling societal mission was. The discussions in the various sessions demonstrated that collaboration, mobility, internationalization and partnerships are, in fact, the vehicles for fulfilling societal missions: Ashraf Shihi, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Egypt, expressed this eloquently in his speech about Egypt’s current
challenges: He cited the popular African proverb ‘Alone you can get there fast but we get farther together’.

Calls for greater collaboration echoed throughout AECHE 3. This has been with multiple objectives:

1) First, to enhance research and ensure that knowledge is not monopolized in the rich and developed countries: This was a key message from the speech given by the Lahcen Daoudi, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Morocco.

2) Second, to educate global citizens: There was a plea from Salim Daccashe, President of Saint Joseph University in Lebanon, for more twinning models and from Marwan Awartani, President of Palestine Technical University, to develop course content collaboratively that promotes global, or ‘planetary’, citizenship.

3) Third, to provide students the skills they need with respect to employability, and to address global challenges more generally: Mostapha Bousmina, President of the Euro-Mediterranean University of Fez presented an interesting 7 pillar approach for teaching global skills while Sinead Lucey of the Irish University Association outlined the Irish attempts to design and assess learning outcomes that incorporate these skills. Several institutions that presented from both the Middle East and Europe, including Mohamed Abaili, Deputy VC for Academic Affairs (Provost), UAE University, United Arab Emirates, also mentioned social outreach and engagement activities as part of the curriculum.

4) Fourth, collaboration must be a means to address conflict: In both the working groups and the plenaries, several inspiring and innovative initiatives were presented. This included initiatives for

   a. Study placements for displaced students: Christian Thomsen, President, Technical University Berlin, Germany and Ute Clement, Vice-president, University of Kassel, Germany presented their specific approaches for targeting potential refugee students, while SPARK, an international NGO, detailed a major refugee placement programme. The joint DAAD, British Council, Campus France, Nuffic project called ‘HOPES’ will provide placements for refugee students over the next few years, both within Europe and in the Middle East.

   b. Placements for displaced scholars to continue their academic careers. The ongoing work of the Scholars at Risk network (presented by Sinead O’Gorman, European Director) is critical in this regard.

   c. Online and digital solutions to help students continue their studies: Sanja Sontor presented KIRON Open Higher Education, a young initiative that is serving as a bridge for refugees to follow courses online and subsequently gain student places at partner universities that support the endeavour.

   d. Support for refugees regarding social integration, language development and other important ‘transitionary’ skills that migrants may need. Interesting examples were provided by TU Berlin, Kassel University, University of Antwerp and the Central Eastern University (CEU).
5) And finally, in terms of what collaboration can address, there was again a plea from universities in Palestine, Ukraine, from Scholars at Risk and from others for **safe, war-free learning environments**.

**Funding**

Funding was naturally a key point of interest in AECHE3. Octavio Quintana Trias, Principal Adviser for Migrations, DG for Research and Innovation, European Commission, outlined current opportunities under EU research funding, including an 11.5 million euro call, scheduled to be launched in July 2016, on topical issues such as migration drivers, skills for refugees, and integration policies and measures. Funding is also available under the Science for Society call, which provides small budgets for university projects for refugees.

Claire Herrmann of the European Commission DG Education and Culture pointed to the emphasis that the Erasmus+ programme is putting on innovative solutions to the refugee crisis, notably through capacity building projects and by opening up the EU language learning platform for Erasmus to migrants.

In addition, a number of ‘grass roots’ initiatives were shared: KIRON Open Higher Education indicated that many businesses are supporting online learning for refugee students. Zsuzsanna Gabor of the CEU, Hungary, commented that despite the cold political climate towards refugees in her country, the university was responding with own resources and providing tailored courses for refugees and refugee outreach.

**Conclusions: Perspectives for higher education in Arab-Euro policy dialogue’**

International relations are getting more and more complex; AECHE is an instrument - modest in its means but ambitious in its objectives - oriented to tackle, if not to overcome, these complexities. AECHE3 has demonstrated the importance to talk to each other and to recognize the ‘us’ in that conversation. It has also created greater awareness for the fact that institutions can do, and are doing, quite a lot to help those that are in need. Providing study places for refugees, for example, can indeed be part of the societal mission of universities, but can also be framed (ideally, positively) as a contribution to the inevitable internationalization of the HE sector.

In order to realise societal missions, building bridges between the Arab and European regions, but also between universities, governments, cities, and organizations from civil society, is critical. These partnerships can enhance the capacity to teach and to generate knowledge and also to respond to the need to foster stronger global sensitivities and global awareness. Collaborations do not only serve to create technical skills, but can help to integrate students and scholars that are displaced into new communities.

Universities’ main contribution to policy design and implementation can come from their capacity to promote research and to engage in collaborative activities that are strategic for, in the context of AECHE, both regions. To do so, universities need adequate and sufficient funding. Governments, social partners and businesses, in collaboration with universities, need
to find and design funding instruments that will help the higher education community to address issues of global importance. AECHE3 has provided a snapshot of some of those funding responses, but more must be done.

The advantage of AECHE is that it is truly bi-regional and is predicated on associations such as AArU and the EUA, which have a broad policy mandate and membership base. The main result of this AECHE conference has been that of consolidating the Arab-Euro dialogue in Higher Education, enlarging it and also opening it to other regions with which Arab and European countries share a common history and a current interest. AECHE must think globally, and relate its policy discussions to other world regions and actors. The fact that the Organisation for Iberoamerican States for Education and Culture (OEI) was present on the final panel of this conference is a promising channel for extending the AECHE dialogue.

AECHE4 has been formally announced for the final week of April 2017 in Morocco, targeting the topical issue of research collaboration and sustainable solutions to global challenges. The enthusiasm for future AECHE conferences demonstrates the validity and vitality of the AECHE approach and allows participants to look with moderate and prudent optimism towards the future.

-Elizabeth Colucci, General Rapporteur