

7th international platform on Integrating Arab e-infrastructure in a Global Environment, e-AGE 2017

1. SCENE SETTER

You will participate in the opening session of 7th international platform on Integrating Arab e-infrastructure in a Global Environment, e-AGE 2017. This is an annual international conference organized by the **Arab States Research and Education Network (ASREN)**. Since the launch of ASREN in December 2010 at the League of Arab States, it was decided to organize e-AGE every year in an Arab country. E-AGE is in line with ASREN's major objectives that are related to dissemination and awareness, promotion of research collaboration and joint activities, and establishment of research networks in the Arab region and worldwide. ASREN was and still is heavily supported by the EU through different projects.

e-Age topics are typically related to research and education with a focus on the importance of ICT, e-Infrastructures and networking for the development of research and education. At previous e-AGE events, ASREN attracted high level and distinguished speakers from around the world. For example, 50 speakers from 24 countries in participated in e-AGE 2016 in Beirut where "Ubiquity and Cohesiveness of e-Infrastructures" was the main theme of the conference. The conference this year chose "**Education, Science and Innovation**" as a main theme.

2. SPEAKING POINTS

- Your excellency Dr. Khaled Atef Abdel Ghaffar, Minister, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Egypt
- Your excellency Ambassador Dr. Badereddine Alali, Assistant Secretary General, Head of the Social Affairs Sector, League of Arab States, Egypt

- Prof. Mohamed Swehli, Secretary General, The Arab Board of Health Specializations, Jordan
- Dr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, Chairman of ASREN and AROQA, Jordan
- Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, allow me to say how glad ^{and} I am happy to be here in such a distinguished assembly. It is events like these that provide unique opportunities for networking and matchmaking, for exchange of ideas, for cooperation in education, research and innovation, and for new cooperation prospects between Arab States and also Europe.

Your distinguished conference this year chose “**Education, Science and Innovation**” as the main theme for your 7th round. Fundamental changes have occurred both in the EU and in the Arab countries over the last few years. It seems to me that, despite the tormented evolution of our regions, and maybe precisely because of that evolution, a constant remains to persist, and this is scientific collaboration.

R&I Cooperation in Context of Neighbourhood Policy

- Let me start by highlighting that we strongly believe that education, research and innovation are crucial in addressing the most urgent challenges the region is facing.
- The South-Neighbourhood is a strategic partner with which the EU entertains a long standing relationship. Fundamental changes have occurred in the region in the last few years and I feel that precisely because of this rate of change scientific collaboration can provide consistent common ground. Scientific research has the ultimate goal of increasing knowledge and promoting sustainable development in the region at large;

Research can provide answers to major societal challenges which affect all of us directly such as food security or water resources management.

- I would like to thank the League of Arab States for hosting today's meeting. The EU and the League of Arab States are working closely together to address common regional challenges. Earlier this week, we held a series of joint meetings in Brussels, including the annual EU-LAS strategic dialogue, to take stock of the current issues facing both Europe and the Arab world.
- In line with the EU Global Strategy, EU cooperation with the Southern Neighbourhood countries takes place in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which was reviewed in 2015 to respond to the new challenges of an evolving neighborhood. The review refocused the ENP to ensure a differentiated approach to partners, recognizing the different aspirations of each country, **joint ownership**, based on both partners' needs and EU interests, and more flexibility in the use of EU instruments. The EU is investing a lot in economic development, resilience, security, democracy and the rule of law under the revised ENP. By using a tailor made approach of the ENP with each and every country, we seek to ensure it addresses most effectively the real needs and interests.
- The new approach has been crucial in reenergizing the EU's relations with the ENP partner countries, including through the negotiation and adoption of new Partnership Priorities, where education, research and innovation cooperation was – beyond doubt- highlighted in the adopted PP as an area of mutual interest.

Our Openness to the World and Support to International Cooperation

- As I said, we strongly believe that research and innovation could be crucial in addressing the most urgent challenges the Arab States and well

as Europe are facing. But we need to work together and we need to create the **enabling environment** and **tools** for that to happen. There is a need for a reinforced interaction between all innovation stakeholders in the region - academia, public authorities, NGOs, and private sector.

- Just to mention few examples of our endeavors to support the interaction and cooperation between all research and innovation stakeholders in the region:
- The European Commission has successfully supported the creation and consolidation of regional research and networks and their interconnection to the pan-European GÉANT (GÉANT is the pan-European data network for the research and education community co-funded by the EC) network in different parts of the world, such as in Latin America and the Mediterranean. Projects such as AfricaConnect, and now AfricaConnect2 and EUMEDCoonect1,2 and 3 (where ASREN is a lead partner in these projects) reflect our support to integrate Africa and the South Med region in the global connectivity map for research and education. For example, as many of you are aware, EUMEDCONNECT3 sets out to create a high-capacity dedicated internet network for the research and education communities across the eastern Mediterranean region, enabling scientists and academics to collaborate and engage in innovative, data-intensive international projects. With direct links to the pan-European GÉANT network, EUMEDCONNECT3 provides access to over 50 million users at over 10,000 research and education establishments across Europe.
- We also supported the collaboration of researchers and innovators in the region through our framework programmes (FP7) and now H2020).

Over the past years, researchers from both Europe and Arab States have been increasingly working together in collaborative projects through the various EU programmes. The EU framework programmes have been instrumental in pushing forward research and innovation cooperation. In the past 20 years, over 1500 projects involving researchers from Arab States have been funded under EU different framework programmes. This is a big thing. To give just a concrete example, about 600 public and private entities from the South Mediterranean participated in FP7 (2007-2013) and received a financial contribution from the EU of some 80 million EURO.

- Currently, under H2020, more than 100 entities from Arab partner countries are involved in on going H2020 projects. ASREN is a partner in MAGIC project funded under H2020.
- This is a good start but we need to increase these figures and enhance our cooperation further. I would like to take the opportunity of this important conference to encourage the Arab scientific community to get to know more about the opportunities of cooperation offered by the Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, Horizon 2020. This instrument is open for global engagement and Arab academic institutions and research centres are currently benefiting from it.
- During its final three years Horizon 2020 will provide further investments of around €30 billion in research and innovation through the work programme 2018-2020 adopted on 27 October, aligned to the EU's current agenda and priorities. The total investment for calls for proposals will be around EUR 26.3 billion. The work programme has an increased focus on international cooperation with around 30 international flagship initiatives with over € 1 billion budget of significant scale and scope on topics

dedicated to cooperation in areas of mutual benefit. The Arab world is targeted within the scope of a broader geographic region including Africa and the south neighborhood. I invite you all to visit H2020 participant portal and engage in the currently open calls.

- As you^{are} all aware, the European Union's Erasmus+ programme is a funding scheme to support activities in the fields of Education, Training, Youth and Sport. Erasmus+ also supports teaching, research, networking and policy debate on EU topics. In South Med region and during the period 2014-2017, 112 projects with a budget of EUR 92M are funded by the EU.
- There are certainly still some margins for improvement, nevertheless, our progress is real: it has also evolved in recent years since cooperation in scientific projects and international networks } towards the joint development of programs based on the principles of *mutual interest*, *co-decision* and *shared benefits*. In addition to H2020, we are looking ahead to a major research and innovation programme in the region (PRIMA).
- As part of the EU endeavors to "**open**" European research and innovation policy "to the world", PRIMA is an excellent example of "science diplomacy at work" that seeks to promote international scientific cooperation to tackle global and regional societal challenges together. PRIMA, or the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area, supports the sustainable management of water and food systems in the Mediterranean Area by pooling know-how and financial resources in a strategic research partnership between the EU and Participating States. It is indeed milestone and a flagship in science

cooperation and science diplomacy in the region because PRIMA is the first joint programme of its kind. The budget of the initiative based at present €494 million (of which €274 million from Participating States and €220 million from the EU) over a 10 year period starting in 2018.

I wish you all a successful event and further collaboration under the EU programmes and beyond.