

Tertiary Education in the MENA Region: Achieving Competitiveness and Employability through Good Governance

I am very pleased to be here with you today. First of all, let me express many thanks to the Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education for inviting me to be part of this conference, and for organizing this event, raising the issue of quality assurance in tertiary education, not in isolation, but rather in close connection with other issues within society that ultimately impact graduates of tertiary education institutions and the institutions themselves. Tertiary education plays many roles – contributing to the public good, to individual growth, and to the facilitation of cultural transmission but it also plays a role in creating a highly-skilled workforce and research & innovation to drive national prosperity. At the individual level, it provides the opportunity for creativity and a purpose, and at the national level, tertiary education allows for stability and prosperity.

Evidence shows that graduates of tertiary education institution can play a key role in rebuilding many of the nations in the MENA region, including most war-torn countries. We live in a world that is increasingly complex, and I do not need to convince any of you about this. Many of the countries in the region are facing socio-political changes, and demographic shifts. In this region, the MENA region, half of the population is demanding a better life for which education becomes one of its most significant means. But this is true in other parts of the world, for instance in Africa it is going to be the continent of the future, at the same time you see at other parts of the world where the population is becoming older and diminishing, so the demographics of the world will influence significantly the way that tertiary education is shaped in the future, the geopolitical realities of our complex world are there and will be there. The economic globalization that has brought a lot of success but it has also brought significant inequality in the world, this is another reality in which the future of tertiary education will have to act. And finally the dramatic technological shift in which we live and as we speak it is happening. Of course, all of those factors will influence dramatically the need to rethink tertiary education for which good governance and quality assurance are a significant element. The Arab Human Development Report that has been recently published highlights the role of youth in the MENA region as those who will be able to shift our realities and shape the future of the countries of the region. It calls for the need to look at things differently in the Arab states, particularly when it comes to employment and education, looking more to the private sector and perhaps coming up with different educational curricula that will address specific jobs and skills, skills for jobs not even created yet, the 21st century skills that include critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, digital & information literacy, and many more. There is at the same time an urgent need for creating stronger links between industry/employers and universities/colleges, as well as a need for more global engagement of our institutions. The University Governance Screening Card Initiative launched by the World Bank in 2010, and which continues to report on the governance of institutions of tertiary education in the MENA region today clearly shows the low participation of the private sector in the life of universities across the Arab world. This expresses very well the recognition that probably these institutions are not supplying the skills demanded

by the labor market as there is a disconnect between these two worlds and I think that this is significant work that we need to make in tertiary education.

It is important to recognize the connection between skills provided by tertiary education institutions and the employability of graduates as it is a need being perceived by the employers, many employers talk about that, and also it is important because we need to prepare the next generation of decision makers, thinkers, and at the end of the day citizens of our society with a different mentality, we need to prepare them in order to recognize that probably we have failed up to now in the way that we are preparing the next generations, we need to prepare them as individuals that have the capacity to think about themselves but at the same time as part of the larger local, regional and global community, individuals who are able to work in teams, who are able to speak different languages, individuals who are able to see the world at the global scale but at the same time that never lose the capacity to see the local realities, and to recognize that they are citizens of the world, but at the same time they should be responsible citizens of the community they come from. Individuals who are able to communicate properly, who are savvy technologically, and who are prepared to change, and more importantly, individuals who have the curiosity to continue learning for the rest of their life. Individual who are able to recognize that they will be living in a complex world, and if they are not prepared to continue learning to be curious about what happens, they will be not precisely the type of citizens that we need for a world that I hope is going to be better. So, how to do that?

Governments, international organizations and local universities should be very keen on supporting all efforts that address the improvement of quality and governance within institutions of tertiary education in the region as good governance and improved quality assurance within institutions of tertiary education can be one of the means for improved employability of graduates. It is the responsibility of the government, as well as the industry and the tertiary education institutions to address the needs of the youth.

The question of governance in tertiary education is particularly relevant in the MENA region where youth unemployment rates are higher than in any other region across the world – 21 percent of the unemployed are among the youth in the Middle East and 25 percent of the unemployed are among the youth in North Africa, tertiary education graduates with at least an undergraduates' degree make up nearly 30 percent of the unemployed. There is a broad consensus on the role of governance in improving education quality in tertiary education. Improving governance of a university translates to better planning, a better vision of the future, increased accountability, through not only better curriculum, but also universities that are socially responsible, recognizing that it is their responsibility to follow up on their graduates after they leave the institution, and finally improved governance mean giving a voice to key stakeholders at the university, among whom are students, faculty members, alumni, and also the private sector, a voice in decision making, a voice in how a university is managed..

I believe that the momentum towards improved quality assurance and good governance has been created among institutions across the region, we clearly see that here today. This will help universities realize their potential of being the 'engine rooms' of growth and prosperity of nations. I am always reminded of an expression that says that if the night is dark and it is darker

that is because the sunshine is going to be arriving relatively soon. A famous scholar said many years ago that what concerns us about today's world is that the future is no longer what it used to be, this is the complexity of the world in which we live. But if there is any hope, that hope should exist in the tertiary education institutions, and that hope should exist in the preparation of better citizens, and better people for the future.

Thank you very much.