

## **A Modern Arab University? AUB as a Role Model?**

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I have often asked myself the following question: Is there in the Arab world a University that excels in a single program to which a student from outside this Arab world might come to get a Ph.D.?

The answer unfortunately tends to be a resounding NO. This is so even in fields where one should expect leadership in the Arab world. Forty years ago, while a student in the United States, I gained the friendship of two students at Yale from AUB who were also there to study, of all things, Arabic Literature!

This year, yet one more student from AUB is also going to Yale for that purpose. This is not only un-acceptable but also tolerates no excuse. Students pursuing Middle Eastern History and Middle Eastern Archaeology follow similar treks. Needless to say this is also the case in other fields of Humanities, in the Social Sciences, and ALL other fields and particularly the Physical Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

This clearly should not continue if we as nations and as peoples are to be counted as effective entities in the modern world. But where does the problem reside? Surely, it resides not only in a shortage of universities, but also in the way such universities are organized and funded. Consequently, it is imperative to comprehend the relationship between universities and the societies they serve.

Universities are knowledge banks in the full sense of the world. Not only are they the custodians of heritage and knowledge, it is imperative that they contribute to, and produce more of both. Students and faculty must be the engine behind this productivity. It is also the case that no product in the field of 'learning' can add to knowledge unless it is at the absolute borderline of its progress as known worldwide. It is therefore imperative that research active faculty, supported by students at all stages of development, be actively engaged in this process. A university that does not serve its environment at this boundary will eventually assume secondary status to those that do, whether they are in this same society or elsewhere.

On the other hand, a society that does not compel its universities to attain this standard will also be relegated to a secondary status in the world by others who do. There are many instances in the history of the world that amply demonstrate this phenomenon, and changes in the Arab world, among others, demonstrate this well. An obvious and striking example stems from our own society: We only need to compare the state of Arab world today with Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries, when that city was the leading center of learning in the then civilized world because it had

organizations involved in investigations in the humanities and the sciences. Not surprisingly, modern Europe saw its renaissance with the advent of such centers of learning a few hundred years later. The same developments led also to progress in the US during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and similarly in the countries of the Far East.

This progress, which Europe and the US have witnessed, was unfortunately not matched in the Arab world and most of Africa.

The way out is clear and well defined: Arab society should be the main force behind this drive. By that I do not necessarily mean only Arab governments. Rather, I mean the society at large since without it's prompting this development forward, no progress will happen.

The greatest Universities in the world were founded through personal initiative by pioneers who could see their long-term implications. The university we are in here was founded in a similar fashion. Based on the fact that the recipe for a University revolves around funding and organizing talent, I claim that we in the Arab world are lucky enough to have the necessary funding and an abundance of talent, but lack the proper organization. Anyone who looks at Arab talent active outside the Arab world can only be impressed by its quality and quantity, and also its immense contribution to its host societies. Contrarily, anyone looking at talent within the Arab countries cannot but bemoan the lack of such great contribution in spite of the immense talent that abounds as well.

Our Universities have not been able to fruitfully channel this talent because of a variety of factors that I wish to address here. The solutions are known and have been partially practiced in the Arab world. I shall deal with three main headings: Organization, academic programs and funding.

### **Organization**

I will use the case of the American University of Beirut as a model for my discussion concerning organization.

The American University of Beirut has existed for 137 years being a good model for undergraduate education in our region. It has given many benefits to the area but one may argue also that it has been the cause of some limitations.

The American University of Beirut has been a singularly different example in this part of the world for 137 years. It has in many ways not only set the pattern for American style undergraduate education in our area but has on occasions ventured into graduate education as well. Its American character notwithstanding, its resilience stems mainly from it being based on the following foundations:

1. It is an independently run institution.
2. It is a transparent institution that has developed with academic excellence as its prime motive.
3. Its support is primarily private although it has for some time obtained varying amounts of support from non-private sources such as the USAID program.

4. It is a not-for-profit institution.

These four foundations allow its administration to act in a timely fashion and adjust to changing circumstances and requirements. For example, this allows its administration, among other things, to do the following:

1. Appoint its faculty, staff and administrators in accordance with strict recruitment procedures and based on peer evaluation.
2. Provide an atmosphere of academic freedom for its faculty to excel at academic activities that they wish to engage in.
3. Admit students according to strict requirements of academic excellence and performance.
4. Budget for personnel and academic activities in accordance with achieving the best academic results possible.
5. Accommodate curricular programs and changes in such programs as its faculty see fit for their academic goals.
6. Equip itself with what is needed in accordance with the nature of the educational delivery process.
7. Support actively the research programs of its faculty and students.

In addition, one should keep in mind that its administration, itself, is selected after peer review and is accountable to a board of trustees.

Implementing such principles is easier said than done, for this requires the acceptance of such principles as a community contract on the part of society at large, faculty, potential students and employees. This is where one must start in establishing a university community.

Within the above framework of reference several facts may be highlighted. First of all, our Universities, whether private or funded by government, must be organized as independent entities, but must at the same time be monitored continuously and their performance evaluated.

Secondly, independence implies accountability at all administrative and academic levels of performance within appropriate criteria. Independence also means that resources are allocated in specific budgets for its programs.

Thirdly, transparency of operations implies that appointments, promotions and terminations at all levels and ranks are done according to defined criteria and procedures. The aim should be improving the performance of the University. It should certainly not be that of securing jobs to individuals. In particular, state funded institutions should not be allowed to become employment opportunities for the powers that be.

Finally, it is essential to realize that no university can be in essence profit making. Universities, both private and public, should be only created for the public good.

## **Academic Programs**

I will use the case of AUB again in discussion academic programs. The University has been the trendsetter through out its illustrious history in offering undergraduate and limited graduate education in Lebanon and the region of the Middle East. Its programs are based on a model of liberal education that has, until a few years back, been unique in this area. It became the model for other institutions founded in this region by its alumni and graduates and others were recently established through direct advice from AUB itself. The medical school has been a fundamental source of medical education in the Middle East for over a century.

The American University could have done and should do more. For even with its illustrious history and contribution to the region it has not yet attained the classification of a true first rate Research University. It has particularly not advanced to the point where it offers terminal degrees. Its short experience with Ph.D. programs in the late sixties and early seventies of the last century was cut short by lack of funding and lack of stamina and determination, and it is fair to say that, although it pioneered the establishment of a research active and oriented faculty, it has yet to proceed to the fullest requirements needed. Faculty at AUB are research active and are expected to be so for promotion and advancement purposes among other things. The graduate programs are, however, not complete although we hope that this deficiency will be amended shortly and supported to grow to its full potential soon.

Of course, not all Universities are expected to be Research Universities, but no one country can afford not to have some. The degrees offered by Universities in any country should have all gradations. These extend from two years 'Associate Degree' programs to four years 'Bachelor (license)' degree program, and then further at the Research Universities to the highest degrees possible: MS. and Ph.D.

Programs of education at Universities should project the maximum flexibility in offerings, with the maximum possibility of choice by students who may wish to redirect their fields of interest midway in their undergraduate education. This approach is becoming worldwide and the Arab world should not fall behind by holding to the past. The use of credit systems for courses and the selection of groups of courses for attaining a degree offer the possibility of implementing both these principles. The old 'block' specialized approach is slowly being abandoned and we would be well advised to do so.

It is also becoming a standard that lower degree programs are not seen as specializations, but more as further 'general education' with a concentrated preparation in a particular field or fields. The aim here is preparation for a very diversified market place and job market. Acquiring methodology of approach to problem solving is the basic goal. This requires experience in the Humanities, the Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences all together. These fields have become more interdependent and tied together by the language of Mathematics. Any artificial separation, either physical in terms of location, or academic, in terms of programs of study, would naturally hamper and undermine this educational goal. The concept of a

unified campus, first pioneered by the Arabs of Spain, is gaining acceptability worldwide.

As far as specialization is concerned, it takes place in postgraduate education (graduate school) and at the stage where one attains the highest degrees. Universities clearly cannot do everything for everyone. Centers of Excellence must be created in Research Universities according to their strengths. Not only would coordination and role distribution in this respect lead to optimization of the benefit of such centers, but also competition would be highly desirable and should lead to the improvement of all.

All these levels of universities operate in concert supported by a much-needed good preparatory education in the 12-year pre university high schools. These first 12 years require a lot of improvement as things are now, but are beyond our scope in this meeting. It is necessary though to highlight here what the outcome should be of this interval of education, and I will sum this up in the following four points:

1. Communication with sources of knowledge all over the world has become necessary for any learned society. It is clear that this cannot be done if one insists on a single language of instruction. The study of foreign languages throughout these years has become an imperative and must not be avoided.
2. Mathematics as a basic language of Science must well taught, as no one can be a modern student without a basic knowledge in it and the material of the Natural Sciences.
3. Computer literacy and the learning of languages of computers has also become an urgent matter in this modern age of communication and information technology.
4. A basic foundation in the culture of the nation and its history are a must along with basic understanding of the Humanities, Social Sciences and Economics.

### **Funding**

All Universities, private or public, must rely on society at large for financial support. A society that does not support its educational institutions cannot expect such institutions to prosper. Support can be channeled in a variety of forms through private foundations or formal public institutions. Such funding is also crucial when it comes to the research activities in any university.

Institutions of this nature are crucial for developing universities and need be created at the level of individual countries as well as at the national level. The Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research (LNCRS) was a pioneering step in this direction, and the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) was another. More such institutions are needed across the whole Arab world.

Financial reward for good research should be more funds for such research. Whether we like it or not, universities require such targeted monies to move forward and join

the club of excellence in this world. Arab universities are in dire need of such targeted support. In this respect, it is stunning that according to the UNDP report, funding for all Arab R&D activities through such sources was only 0.4% of GDP in 1996 compared with a typical 2.5% elsewhere.

As is clear then, funding for all academic activities is badly needed in Arab Universities. If there is a single effort that must be immediately attended to and acted upon, it is the establishment of a single 'Arab Research Agency' to provide such funds. The models in mind are the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Health in the US, and the various Research councils of Europe.

Needless to say here, any disbursement of funds must be done on the basis of a purely peer review process in accordance with strict guidelines followed at the models mentioned above. Compromise in this regard would be highly detrimental to the whole effort.

Private organizations, it may be added, could also organize along similar lines. The models here are the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Hewlett Packard Foundation etc. In this regard, various efforts seem to be under way, notably the recently founded Institute for Arab Thought, and we look forward to it to take a lead in this direction.

One thing is clear to me personally. If funding sources are not created soon, there will be no hope for our Universities to achieve world standards.

### **Conclusion**

Before ending I wish to point out that a quest for excellence in education is not a wishful dream ....I would like to recount a statement made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century describing American medical education by Franklin Mall (1905):

“ How different is the study of medicine in Europe from that in America! There freedom reigns and students wonder from place to place. Able students select great men as teachers and thereby develop themselves and they wander for years studying in the famous foreign universities receiving information from the great masters. How much longer must we wait for similar privileges in America! ”

Johns Hopkins had been founded in 1876 to promote just these ideals ....The Rockefeller Institute (now the Rockefeller University) was to follow suite. They have both become among those 'great institutions' for medical research and education. Needless to say, the state of American medical education has become the best in the world since then.

I believe that there is here an important lesson to follow.

As one realizes the role of Universities and other Centers of Excellence in our future, the creation and funding for such institutions clearly becomes not a matter of choice, but rather simply a matter of survival.

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