

On Building an Academic Space for the Arab Region The Possible, the Probable and the Hoped For*

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Abstract

The paper addresses the problematic issue of identifying the actual extent of the future need for building an Arab higher education region; that is, a space comprising a network of universities aimed at facilitating regional mobility of students and researchers. The problematic is placed within the context of diminishing student and researcher mobility in the Arab region, at a time when international university clusters and spaces are emerging. After reviewing the experience with Arab university and academic networking (the Association of Arab Universities and the Federation of Scientific Research Councils, etc.), as well as international experiences (the European Barcelona Process), the paper proposes diagnostic indicators of scientific and student mobility in the Arab countries; and identifies shortcomings, through the partial results of a survey of regional student mobility in the Arab region (2009). Hence, the paper recognizes the obstacles to the establishment of the required space and the appropriate measures for overcoming them, such as ensuring the independence of universities and recognizing them as independent actors, and the need for initiating possible and applicable experimental trends.

I. Introduction

Paving the way for the future, while assuming that it is an identical replica of the present would be erroneous, for we do not know for sure what lies ahead, or what the individual needs of it will be. Based on the lessons learnt from the past, we can only assume what should not be done. When it comes to the future of the Arab region in terms of higher education, what should not be done is undoubtedly to ignore the importance of the vital space required by all educational systems, i.e. the human, social and political geography requirements and their relation to education and to environmental imperatives. Equally, the new projects in this field should not be seen merely as official decisions ready for execution, because such projects can only be successful if implemented through a gradual process, or else they are doomed to fail. When real indicators of the globalization of higher education systems were becoming clearer (through the marketing of university services and the equivalence of credits in preparation for the globalization of certificates and educational curricula), we had written on the occasion of the

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Association of Arab Universities' meeting (Tunis, 2000) that the educational cooperation between these universities in the Arab world could inch toward a state of isolation or "balkanization"². This was despite the remarkable efforts to modernize and improve the quality of the outputs and despite the increasing number of these institutions. This would be due to the sudden entry of Arab universities into this new era without any preparation and any academic or university space. They would need assistance to allow them to deal independently with the complicated situations that occur in higher education. These situations arise as a result of the quantitative expansion on one hand, and on the other hand because of the private foreign universities which have been brought in to the region, particularly to the Arabian Gulf (Ben Hafaiedh, 1999). This has happened because of the marked decrease in the international mobility of Arab students, due to security fears in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Some say that it is hard to project the evolution of the educational situation in universities for more than twenty or thirty years, but there is a prevalent belief that the near future could bring specific signs. Among these, the most important would be the monopolization of educational activities by the increasing number of foreign universities, and the shift in dealing with students, from the professional-citizen level, to the "highest bidder education" level. The clearest sign of this situation is undoubtedly related to the bifurcation of university services, stemming from the emergence of what is currently known as higher education cartels. Such preoccupations have brought some people to believe that "an increasing number of enclaves based on sub-national (ethnic and religious considerations), due to the expansion of university "balkanization" (Clark, 1995, 62), is expected." Nowadays, it has become clear that the two concepts of financial economy (investing in higher education according to a defined profit base) and knowledge economy (transforming knowledge into a generator of economic value in the medium and long run) are intertwined. This interconnection between the two concepts has become problematic by reason of the multiplicity and globalization of higher education spaces. In addition, this topic is no longer restricted to mere theoretical research in international conferences. At first, the critical approach toward knowledge economy and the requirements of academic and research skills mobility has evolved solely based on the importance of technology use, teaching and innovation. However, it has begun to gradually engulf all specializations, including the territorial construction of knowledge (Husson, 2009).

Alvin Toffler, a researcher in future studies, published a book entitled "Revolutionary Wealth" in which he states that in the future, the material economic space will not be the only fertile ground for economy and power in the world, given the growing importance of the "non-financial, non-material space", especially the force of creativity in research and learning. The former is a finite, non-renewable space, such as oil which runs out as we consume it, while the latter is infinite and unlimited, for knowledge is constantly enriched and expanded as we devour it (Toffler, 1997). The importance of creative knowledge as a wealth for the researcher lies in its separation between the internal learning brain and the external knowledge-stocking brain, through the modern institutions and techniques used in the transfer of knowledge. The internal brain has a limited knowledge assimilation capacity, whereas the external brain expands within the scope of a net, through accumulation (Toffler, 2008, p. 15).

In connection with the current and daily perspective, the recent financial crisis and its repercussions have revealed that the Arab Wealth System excludes knowledge as a source of power and depends heavily on financial wealth, even if the Arab region lacks a common economic space.

² The concept of "University Balkanization" was used for the first time during the consultation meeting called by the UNESCO (UNESCO - NGO, 1994)

This is all taking place “here”, in our region, while the situation “there”, in the rest of the world, is going in totally different directions. As a matter of fact, competition in building knowledge spaces through universities and higher education is becoming very similar to economic and financial competition. In 2001, a European parliament committee issued a report on building a space of knowledge and universities (European knowledge space, 2002), calling for the establishment of a “Green Book” that defines the future of the “European House of Universities”, in order to face Japanese and American competition.

This tendency falls under what is currently known as the Bologna Process, launched in 1999 and aimed at creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) before the end of 2010. Nowadays, higher education worldwide spaces have evolved simultaneously with markets and economic partnership spaces. In Asia, Japan is moving strongly in this direction through some projects such as the Exchange Program for East Asia Young Researchers. This is an attempt to guarantee academic and student mobility among allies, neighbors and nearby countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, the Philippines and India. Amidst linguistic and cultural stakes in Central Asia and the dissolution of the Russian Commonwealth, we find Turkey and Russia engaged in a confrontation to secure cooperation routes in the mid-continent; a polarization that seems to be dominating the scene. Under the mandate of former Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, the cultural and educational dimension of this showdown unfolded, in a bid to preserve whatever was left from the former soviet linguistic and cultural hegemony.

In Latin American states, the need for an educational cooperation space was left as clearly as in other countries. This tendency was clearly reflected through the rigorous work of the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, with the objective of creating a space similar to the European Higher Education Area.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the indicators of Arab-European or Arab-American academic and student mobility declined, along with the number of study visas granted to Arab students. However, that was only the tip of the iceberg, as in fact, the Arab-Arab academic and student mobility has witnessed a steep fall since the late 1980's. It seemed impossible to survive the scars of the regression of Arab students' international mobility which was exacerbated by the absence of a strong regional negotiator capable of catalyzing that mobility, as was the case in some countries like China, India and South Korea (Ben Hafaiedh, 2005, p. 34). Nowadays, international mobility patterns are recovering and Arab academic and student mobility is regaining its pre-2001 momentum. Still there has been no sign of any change in the regional mobility patterns, despite the increasing number of agreements, protocols and bilateral memoranda between countries and universities.

It is noteworthy that the levels of student exchange remain, to this day, lower than ever. Similarly, Arab researchers still find it extremely difficult to obtain a visa to enter some countries, even if they are only travelling to give a scientific lecture or to participate in a symposium or a conference. Sometimes this can be an impossible mission, especially when it comes to our colleagues from war torn hotspots or those suffering under the yoke of occupation, as is the case of professors or students coming from universities in Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon or even Algeria. This situation affects professors and students alike. One must note that no updated data are available on the size of educational exchange between professors, or that of Arab-Arab student mobility. Nevertheless, the latter can be specified through general trends. According to the data provided by ALECSO (Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization) in 2000, nearly 68,000 students, i.e. 33% of the total number of Arab students enrolled in higher education institutions, were studying outside their native countries. They were distributed as follows: 31% in Lebanon, 19% in Syria, 14% in Egypt, 13% in Saudi Arabia and 7% in Jordan.

Table 1: Arab Student Mobility based on most popular destinations

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Algeria						4677	5343	5863	5709
Bahrain					1331		797	672	(-)
Jordan		12155			15816	23242	21481	21509	(+)
Lebanon	15596	14008	14770	15186	12210	13930	14073	17199	22674
Morocco	4190	4502	4502		5125	6393	4958	6049	7029
Qatar			1617	1645	1633	1170	2378	...	2487
Saudi Arabia	6086	7561			11046	12199	12999	13687	(+)
Tunisia	2719	2756	2535	2487	2265	2338		2500	(+)

Source: Unesco database & The working documents of the Eleventh Conference of Higher Education and Scientific Research Ministers in the Arab World (Dubai, 2007)

According to recent estimates, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, one can relatively say that the data of the year 2002 has changed into a negative function (the Arab Maghreb). In some cases, the levels of student mobility hit rock bottom, while in others, their numbers climbed to relatively high figures (Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon). This is a result of the shift in Gulf student mobility towards private Arab universities, along with the visa granting difficulties students encountered. This is especially true for student visas to the United States (Table 1), despite the current thaw in the situation.

Table 2: The decrease in student mobility by country of origin and destination (the case of the Arab Maghreb Union)

	Morocco 1987	Mauritania 1987	Algeria 1987	Tunisia 1999	Tunisia 2002
Morocco		505	105	638	171
Mauritania					65
Algeria	152	104		405	20
Tunisia	583	163	75		

Source: (Ben Hafaiedh, 2005, p. 135)

This situation which currently necessitates public, civil and academic institutional work could be depicted through many factors, some of which follow:

1. The regression of scientific exchange and student missions as a result of a certain economic and regional climate. This is in addition to the decrease in scholarships among Arab countries, since mobility has been reduced to private universities (in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt).

2. The increasing isolation of Arab public universities, due to the concentration of cooperation in the private education sector. This relative isolation has many negative repercussions on research as well as on the emergence of an active and effective intelligentsia.
3. The extent to which the quality of education and research is affected by the lack of such a space especially at the level of research frameworks (PhD), and the sinking levels of competition.
4. The lack of legal frameworks that facilitate and encourage the mobility of researchers in order to promote cooperation in research and science.
5. The lack of coordination structures to organize and document academic research particularly in terms of outputs, scientific articles and PhD theses.

II. The challenges and impediments facing academic mobility in the Arab region

Higher education spaces include three types of academic mobility: national students and academic mobility of research skills (which includes faculty staff), regional mobility which takes place under regional agreements, and finally international student mobility. The success of mobility is generally assessed based on the ability of countries and regional groups to combine these three types of mobility, by ensuring the added value resulting from the transfer of knowledge and expertise. China, India and South Korea are among the countries that benefit the most from international student mobility. This has a guaranteed added value of ensuring that a large part of the skills that are gained abroad returns to the country of origin, as activating regional mobility leads to repatriated knowledge. Many Asian countries (including Indonesia) are currently making strenuous efforts to develop their university spaces and markets, thus becoming prominent attraction centers for many Arab students over the past few years. This situation is based on the definition given by an expert in the educational situation of the region: for the future battle where the Arabs could be absent will not only be about who will guarantee education for cheaper prices, but also about who will be the main hub for knowledge industry, or in another term, universities (Rayan, Jalal, 2009).

The main indicator for the presence of such spaces is not as much about the abundance of scientific meetings and seminars (all the activities of Arab academic unions and institutions such as the Federation of Arab Scientific Research Councils and the Association of Arab Universities concentrate on holding seminars and events), as it is about creating an open space to accumulate the benefits of innovation, creativity, scientific exchange and the capacity for development. Nowadays, we see Arab universities hosting a large number of scientific seminars and conferences. This phenomenon, described by some as "intense seminarizing" (Al Bizri, 2005, p. 56), is huge in terms of the number of meetings and gatherings. However, it is vain in its content and it lacks the ability to accumulate or create a critical mass in order to lay the proper foundations for a solid relation between the academic researcher and scientific research. Moreover, we can rarely find one database that can disseminate information about these kinds of activities, which often repeat the same topics. In addition, no estimations are available concerning the budgets allocated for these scientific events by Arab universities or by Ministries of Higher Education in the region. Basically, these events are redundant in terms of topic, and poorly funded in terms of publication and knowledge dissemination. In addition, the levels of arbitration are extremely low. All of these factors show the regression of scientific accumulation and the degree of isolation among universities in the Arab region.



In this context, the isolation of the academic space in the Arab region may be depicted by a number of indicators among which the most important would be the reality of academic isolation between different countries and institutions, and even academics themselves. That is because “academics in the region know too little about each other, and grow further apart due to the divergence of educational curricula and the methods in the Arab universities. In fact, the universities that established their educational curricula and methods based on the Anglo-Saxon academic system are different from those that were inspired from the French universities” (Al Hawat, 2006, p. 15), along with the bifurcation and the differences at the level of the language and administration.

Likewise, this applies to students and to research skills, as shown below, by an electronic survey comprising 836 students from 14 Arab universities. The main obstacle to student mobility between countries still lies in administrative procedures of acceptance and the absence of scholarships (when it comes to student mobility in the Maghreb, the levels are lower among Maghreb and Arab Gulf students, especially in terms of mobility from GCC countries towards Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt).

The Arab region rapidly opened its doors to the international educational environment, through hosting foreign universities. This was not necessarily through sending out students with scholarships, for there were no more spaces to open to in the region, not even territorially at the local level. This happened so hastily, as if commodifying higher education (the logic of the market) had prevailed over the logic of geography or that of the vital space which allows educational activity to expand. This was an economic activity rather than a materialistic one. If one supposes that higher education is the first loop, the Arab academic environment the second and the international environment the third, it can be said that the current internationalization of Arab higher education is not based on interconnected and successive local, regional and international spaces. It is more like separate spaces that lack the ability to negotiate (with external parties and in the formulation of agreements) or to achieve development (both at the local level and at the level of rationalizing development). However, it should be stated that these are abilities of great significance for universities in their reform process.

The main advantage of a knowledge economy lies in its capacity to enlarge the circles of alliances and partnerships in a rapid manner, but also to introduce the necessary changes to the system of knowledge production, beginning with higher education. Greater attention must be given to evolving skill standards as opposed to certificate standards, which is the criterion that defines the competitiveness of such a space, as well as its ability to enhance the educational and research quality. Such events occur in the material economic sector, just as they occur in the knowledge industry. While in the former case the role of universities is based on the economy of certificates, in the latter the priority is given to skills and the permanent mobility of scientific and research skills. This is due to the certificates’ equivalence value, which is viewed nowadays as one of the main characteristics of reform programs (LMD - license, masters, and doctorate). All of these factors and others, probably just as important, constitute the driving force behind numerous initiatives aiming at inciting governments (because universities have yet to become autonomous actors) to consider designing an approach for higher education, as a transnational and distinguished field of action or functional space.

Simultaneously, the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education launched an initiative, along with a suggestion calling for the creation of an Arab zone for higher education. In 2009, the relevant documents were submitted to the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO). These activities reflect to a certain extent the awareness of the importance of such



a space, which is generally established according to certain needs and requirements, including the urgent need for transfer channels. In the case of material economy, such channels allow a rapid and efficient mobility of commodities inside the common space. One may say that the same basis could apply to academic and educational spaces, where the main characteristic of knowledge economies, at the level of higher education, is the absence of transfer channels or bridges which are at the very core of any academic space. The main attribute of such bridges or channels is their ability to promote the flow of student mobility within the region and to generalize the interchangeable value of certificates, scientific skills mobility and researchers' mobility. This is with the knowledge that the Arab region faces numerous difficulties in terms of student circulation among countries and visa requirements. In some cases, it is just as hard to obtain visas within the Arab region as it is if the researcher's destination was the Northern hemisphere. The difficulties of geographic mobility (study visas or academic visits) can be tantamount to the difficulties encountered in collaborative research. Even though international collaborative research expanded in the Arab world from 32% (1990) to 35% (1995), nevertheless, regional cooperation remains at its lowest levels. For example, out of 2,716 articles published by Arab Gulf universities, 25% were completed in collaboration with foreign researchers, as a result of the reliance of Gulf universities on foreign academic facilities. As for Morocco, 804 (65%) out of 1264 articles (1995) were completed in collaboration with foreign researchers, and only 11 articles were published in collaboration with researchers from the region (Zahlan, 1999). Thus, these data from the late 1990's are being confirmed today with the beginning of the new millennium (Ben Hafaiedh 2006).

III. The Arab academic space - More than cooperation... Less than reform

It is true that scientific collaboration is predominant in the Arab discourse; nonetheless it has never encompassed the notion of an academic space or region in a practical way. In fact most of the collaborative policies were predominantly governmental with an absence of private initiatives and a lack of autonomy, even relative, in collaborative decision-making. In principle, one might say that collaborative action in the field of higher education has garnered the official Arab interest since the creation of the Arab League (1945). The Arab Cultural Pact (1964) was the first milestone in this direction and the first institutional formula of the "common Arab action" in the field of education, thus excluding higher education in particular. It was not until 1970 that ALECSO was established as a specialized organization whose mandate covers education at all levels. Furthermore it is the first Arab institution that created the Arab Center for Higher Education Research in 1982, entrusted with the mission of rethinking the collaborator's methods and structures, even at the level of universities. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Association of Arab Universities (AARU) was established and committed itself to be "*a regional institution with a distinguished role in terms of enhancing collaboration among Arab universities and institutes of higher education, as well as coordinating its efforts aiming at upgrading the academic education and scientific research, in addition to practical research focusing on educational problems*" (Bechara, 2007). The Association undertakes numerous complementary activities including degree equivalence, educational personnel exchange and information sharing. It also supervises numerous seminars and meetings such as the seminar of peer faculties which enhanced integration among the concerned faculties. Furthermore, it plays a significant role by way of the meetings of its General Conference, in terms of coordinating efforts among universities



and addressing common issues (Bechara, 2007, p. 11). In addition, efforts are being exerted by the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) which coordinates between affiliated higher education institutions in the Gulf area, and translates and publishes a number of books that concern universities and higher education institutions, in cooperation with ALECSO and ISESCO (Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

The main characteristic of most of these institutions is that they are completely linked to public and semi-public organizations that were unable to involve public universities as an active or a consultative player in their activities. This also included scientific associations and private universities and relationships with authorities. Some academic and university networking covered faculties and institutes as well, including in particular the Arab Society of the Faculties of Business Administration³ established in 1998 within the plan of the Arab universities Federation to create peer scientific associations for different faculties in Arab universities. This was in order to undertake scientific and academic activities in the Arab region based on different specialties.⁴ To date, there is still a lack of assessment of the action of such associations which are closely linked to ministries and institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, the main characteristic of such associations is that they continuously work (or are obliged to work) to determine their activities and agendas in conformity with the official public guidelines whose assessment is mainly limited to various unions. In this context, we may refer to the experience of the Federation of Arab

³ We might refer to the experience of The Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education (ARQAANE), which is an international non-lucrative association established in Belgium in 2007, with the objective of upgrading the quality of higher education in general, while concentrating on the Arab world in particular. According to its bylaws, the association:

- Coordinates with local Arab accreditation agencies regarding accreditation norms and standards.
- Spreads awareness regarding Excellence in Education in educational institutions in the Arab world.
- Provides accreditation services to respectable Arab higher education institutions that are an epitome of excellence in education.
- Supervises the establishment of a quality rating system for Arab universities.
- Creates a network specialized in quality of education that allows interaction and regular meetings between peers to exchange and assess experiences.
- Disseminates reciprocal learning and good practices throughout the Arab world and globally.

⁴ Based on its bylaws, this network seeks to:

- 1) Coordinate and develop curricula in faculties
- 2) Enhance cooperation in terms of preparation, translation and publication of curricula
- 3) Publish a scientific magazine specialized in covering the latest developments in the fields of Business Administration and Commercial Studies
- 4) Publish a scientific thesaurus related to Business Administration and Commercial Studies in Arabic, English and French
- 5) Give advice and provide expertise regarding the scientific foundations of new faculties of Business Administration and Commercial Studies in Arab countries
- 6) Coordinate between scientific centers for services and research in faculties and institutes of Arab Business Administration and Commercial Studies
- 7) Organize seminars and specialized scientific conferences and hold a scientific conference every two years at least, to discuss the major developments
- 8) Encourage the exchange of researchers, instructors and trainers
- 9) Encourage coordination in the field of graduate studies in terms of common topics and supervision
- 10) Encourage researchers to undertake common scientific research between faculties and institutes of Business Administration and Commercial Studies
- 11) Publish a comprehensive guide for member faculties and academic cadres in Arab countries
- 12) Establish a network of information and seek to enhance relationships between the association and its peers worldwide



Research Councils, which were mainly active in the pre-Gulf War period. In fact, this Federation has enjoyed the full support of Arab governments, being an institution encompassing official Arab research councils, whose members were mostly appointed by ministries of higher education or scientific research. During its presence in the Iraqi capital, Bagdad (before moving to Khartoum, its current headquarters), it focused on holding conferences and seminars related to population, environmental and scientific research along with globalization issues. This organization was mainly criticized for being politically and ideologically orchestrated, while it excluded, in its early stages, the Arab Gulf universities. This was due to the political disagreement prevailing between Bagdad and Arab Gulf capitals. However, there was a modest participation from Arab Maghreb universities. Furthermore, the repercussions of this regional situation on the activities of the Federation were double fold in terms of its effectiveness and scientific efficiency, given that the volume of its reports has been gradually decreasing since the late 1990's.

IV. The common academic space and the future of global competition

Given the progress of international relations and economic agglomerations, it is expected that there will be no room left for small and isolated university units in the coming few decades. This therefore requires determination in the future of knowledge and innovation industries, as well as the level of its local ownership, along with the fate of certain languages. This of course being the case of Arabic, as language is the physical vehicle of knowledge and scientific research. Moreover, huge challenges will arise in terms of the market absorption of knowledge makers, researchers and academics, given the uneven development of educational institutions on one hand, and their outputs and the requirements of the small national scientific markets on the other. In addition, there is the ensuing rise in unemployment in the scientific field and the detachment of universities from their institutional geographic environment. Needless to say that globalization today appears to be the extension of the sub-region and region rather than being a separation from them. The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) is currently working on establishing a wide network of universities that concentrate their efforts geographically and regionally while promoting the capacities of international cooperation, with the total absence of Arab universities (figure 1).

Figure 1: Universities and regions under review within the OECD program



Source: www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/regionaldevelopment

One of the local observers of the mobility of academic skills in the Arab region diagnosed mobility as follows: *“given that a professor at a university is treated according to his local nationality (rather than his Arab belonging), a member of the educational personnel who wants to work and undertake research in a university, even if it is the one from which he has moved, does not find the opportunity to do so. Thus, the Arab world witnessed the emersion of an unfair unemployment phenomenon in the scientific field. Furthermore, the mechanism of migration and free Arab skills flight outside the Arab world went on. In addition, university administrations which do not believe in democracy and in academic freedom and have long been hoping for a homogenized landscape that indicates their ability to curb the will of the university campus where they reign, saw their wish come true”* (Mustafa, 2005, p. 23).

Arab collaborative action in the field of higher education reflects Arab cooperation in general, namely a bouquet of noble projects suffering from the lack of resources, opportunities, and means of implementation. This reality is proven by examples such as the agreement for the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989. This stipulated the foundation of the Maghreb Academy of Sciences, the Maghreb University, the Arab Maghreb University, as well as the projects of Arab universities and academies in various specialties and cognitive fields. All of these are mentioned in numerous Arab bilateral and regional agreements, but most of these projects remain fictitious (Al Hawat, 2006, p. 27). In this regard, no agreements are available to either organize student mobility or Arab research skills mobility. In addition, there are many bilateral, tripartite and quadripartite agreements that organize a small number of student exchanges. Unfortunately, most of these agreements are never implemented. But above all, the main problem remains the absence of a regional negotiator who contributes to the upgrading of the participation level of Arab universities in other international academic spaces.

This gap has only been bridged by the bilateral agreements concluded between some Arab countries and the European Union countries. The most prominent example of this would be the “Ibn Rushd Program” which falls into the first phase of the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window Program funded by the European Commission. This is working on the development of cooperation between universities in the European Union and Arab Maghreb universities in particular. The main attribute of this program is that it seeks to upgrade cooperation between students and instructors in the region covered by the program. Those represented in this scheme are the French university, Montpellier II, in collaboration with 11 Arab Maghreb universities which include: the University of Tunis, the University of Sfax, the University of Sousse, the University of Oran, the University of Bejaia, the University of Constantine, the University of Rabat, the University of Tetouan and the University of Marrakech. Moreover, the collaborative network comprises at least 17 local, regional and international socio-economic institutions that provide this recent space with the necessary assistance to accomplish its mission. So far, the program has implemented 326 mobility processes including 256 from the Maghreb region to Europe and 72 in the opposite direction, so as to accomplish the program’s objectives which can be summarized as follows:

- Exchanging expertise and success stories between European and Maghreb higher education institutions in order to enable the latter to complete their upcoming reform programs.
- Enhancing cultural and economic relations through student exchange between European and Maghreb higher education institutions.
- Facilitating the procedures of degree accreditation and university education between the same institutions in order to upgrade skills, competencies and capacities according

to the Bologna Process in regards of foreign universities, i.e. those of non-E.U member countries.

- Developing communication capacities among higher education administrations in different institutions, with the aim of spreading awareness and disseminating information about various new programs.

In this regard, one might refer to the role of Arab universities that are concerned with an increasing number of mobility programs with the cooperation of the Agency of Francophone Universities. This Arab cooperation with the Agency goes back to the establishment of the Agency. As a matter of fact, in 1959, an initiative was launched by the University of Montreal in Canadian Quebec in collaboration with Mohammad Al Fasi, then President of Maghreb universities, who bestowed the new academic and university space with the title “Francophone or Semi-Francophone Universities”, in order to encourage the participation of Arab non-francophone universities, i.e. non-Maghreb Arab universities.

Later on, the International Fund for University Cooperation was established to provide proper funding for the new academic partnership. Then this structure matured and enlarged and in fact, from 1978 to 1984, it experienced a phase of effective networking and expansion, engulfing an increasing number of Arab countries. This then lead to the emersion of the Agency of Francophone or Semi-francophone Universities (AUPELF).

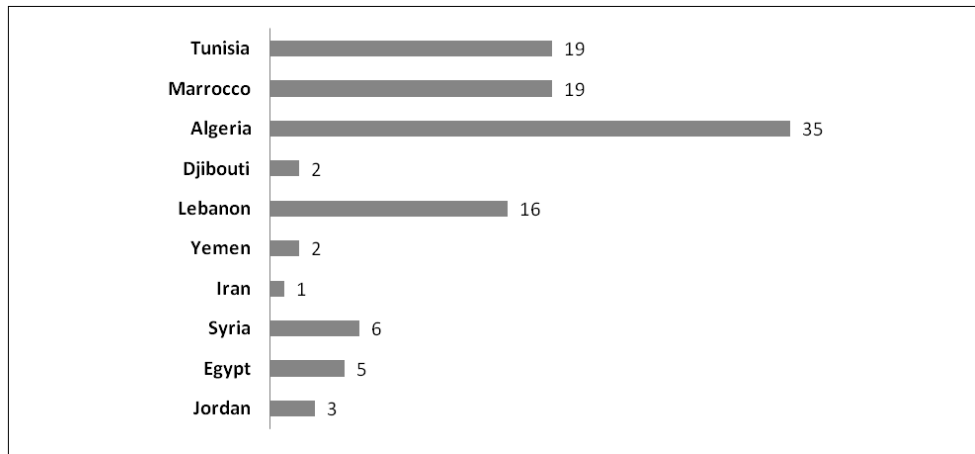
Table 3: The division of mobility orientation into three targeted groups in the framework of the “Ibn Rushd Program”

Targeted Group	Beneficiaries	Mobility Pattern
Group 1	Registered or working students and education officers in Consortium-member universities	License, Masters, post- PhD Research, academic officers.
Group 2	Students and researchers from countries outside the Union and in the geographic scope covered by cooperation.	Masters, PhD, post-PhD
Group 3	Students within a critical geographic scope. The mobility may include students seeking political asylum or who were unjustifiably expelled from university, for religious or gender-related reasons.	License, Masters and post-PhD

Source: www.network.averroes.com.

In 1993, the Exchange University Project (Université des échanges - UREF) was added to this institutional structure, paving the way for the establishment of some kind of consortium called AUPELF-UREF. These steps prepared for the emersion of the Agency of Francophone Universities during the meeting of the Consortium’s General Assembly in Beirut (Lebanon) in 1998.

Figure 2: Arab universities and higher education institutions that are members of the Agency of Francophone Universities



Source: www.auf.org

V. Introduction to results and goal-related tools...

Academics in the Arab region (as well as students) suffer from a lack of relations with others within the region and between its institutions. However, the individual relations between academics are far better at the international level than at the national and regional ones (Al Hawat, 2006 p. 28). In this context, one can notice that international relations in the field of education provide better cooperation, support and funding tools than the ones available in the Arab world. Furthermore, the existing common projects between Arab Maghreb countries and European Union universities, or between Gulf universities and North-American ones, are far more abundant than common research projects that are conducted by Arab researchers or research groups. The inevitable consequence of this situation was the aggravation of the bifurcation between Arab Maghreb universities and Levant universities, because the latter are content with the support given by partnership programs with the European Union or donor organizations in the Levant. Such conditions could be a prelude to shrinking opportunities for scientific communication and dialogue, despite the numerous seminars and conferences that are being held. In this regard, such a result could be considered inevitable given the low levels of networking and scientific association building; two key elements at the core of each academic space.

It is hard to establish an academic space in the Arab region out of the blue. In other words, it is not just a matter of public decision. It is rather a process that allows everyone to interact, especially universities, academic instructors as well as their representatives. In order to develop the space and to facilitate academic mobility in the region, a number of conditions must be fulfilled, among which the most important would be the presence of an official who will blaze the trail for this state of mobility; an official who goes beyond the technical sense of cooperation. Besides the establishment of an economic space or zone, the presence of an independent market must be presupposed. The same rule applies to the academic space which requires higher education universities and institutions, which if not independent, must be at least armed with a good administration.

Similarly, a knowledge economy requires an effective “dialogue with development institutions, as well as diagnosing their problems, their aspirations and the issues that can be solved by universities according to their current potentials. In this regard, university members can launch initiatives that place universities at the highest rank of the development process, through multi-disciplinary units and groups (... at the common Arab level). This will soon push Arab universities to seek more than just public sources of revenue, and thus involve the private sector seeking advisory services from foreign experts” (Mustafa, 1995, p. 32) or through transnational endowments. In this context, the Moroccan thinker Mohammad Abed Al Jabri notes: We have always demanded judicial independence, and we still do. But it has never occurred to me to rally for the autonomy of education. What I mean by autonomous education is unlike what many Arab countries are currently witnessing which is the orientation towards the privatization of education. For the motivation behind decision making to adopt such solutions is not a future vision, but rather the urgent and timely need. This need is expressed by governments in a bid to justify such measures, claiming that their budget can no longer cover education expenses given the permanent growth of this sector, and that they are incapable of dealing with “unemployment among university graduates” on their own. This vision is too narrow to encompass the outlines of the present and lay the foundations for the future” (Al Jabri, 2007). Good administration is a necessary condition and a step towards autonomy that may enable universities (and not only ministries of education) to play a major regional and educational role. As a matter of fact, autonomy is meaningless and remains incapable of developing effective regional cooperation, without a good administration that reflects first and foremost the orientation of university administration, then ministries of higher education. Autonomy can also contribute to the adoption of new values, such as competition, assessment of the efficiency of administration and empowerment. It also allows dealing with the recipients of educational services as customer/citizens, as well as ensuring impartiality amidst government and public pressures (Bashshur, 2004, p. 64).

Many international experiences (especially the European one) have shown the extent to which a regional academic space can improve university administration. Generally, this administration is divided into two levels. The first level is of administrative boards and is currently known as Supervisory Boards or strategic advisory boards. The second level is reflected in Europe, through the Spanish experience which sought to involve facilities from foreign universities and their countries of origin, in order to benefit from their expertise. These included the ones that belong to the European space, in order to upgrade the administrative performance of universities. A good university administration is the most appropriate condition for autonomy, which remains absolutely meaningless if universities do not undergo strenuous tests that allow them to demonstrate their administrative capabilities. This condition is in turn linked to the ability of universities in the Arab region to interact with their regional and international environment. For instance, it would be excellent if one day the administrative board in a Moroccan university, for example, includes professors from the United Arab Emirates, Syria or Sudan, etc. Having examined the governing laws of academic institutions in Arab countries, one notices that these institutions are not easily capable of networking, and that their bylaws are dissimilar, just like their conception of academic and research collaboration. Centralization is indeed the most obvious common denominator in the majority of these texts and relevant applications. It can even be said that in the past five years, the content of these laws has been slightly modified to emphasize the importance of university decentralization and autonomy. This varies from one country to another and yet still remains below international standards, even if this same issue raises numerous discussions in some European societies (e.g. the case of France through the 2009 university reform project).

In this context, it's worth noting that the applications remain slow, in particular when it comes to dealing with or collaborating between two Arab universities from two different countries. In terms of the completion of the democratic process for example, or the administrative reform, there is a tendency towards autonomy at the level of the university governing bodies. Moreover, we may add to this the decision-making related to collaboration which takes place in most cases within bilateral committees or bilateral cooperation protocols. These are government agreements and often subject to central decisions (excluding the improvement manifested through dual supervision agreements related to university theses). In this context (as an introduction), the result is the implementation of any project must go through administrative procedures to get the needed approval. However, such approval of the scientific project in terms of implementation, adoption and financing might take months and even years, or might indeed never take place... The most prominent example of such bureaucracy is the backlog in scientific research projects submitted by professors to their faculties or research centers; as these scientific projects to be adopted, a series of formalities, approvals, meetings and accreditations are needed. The project might even perish in the last phase of preparation, before commencement, under the pretext that the financial means of the university, the faculty, or the research institution do not allow its completion.

VI. Conclusions and future pathways

How can the future of the structure of this space be defined, based on the possibilities and probabilities of academic mobility orientations? The prospective study conducted by the French Planning Commission and published under the title *Global Student Mobility 2025* suggested three possibilities for the evolution of international mobility orientations. These orientations encompassed various regions of the world, including Middle Eastern societies. These possibilities are constituted by three scenarios: the likely scenario (3), the minimum scenario (2) and the maximum scenario (1). According to the variables that affect the orientations of mobility, the possibilities were formulated based on convenient and inconvenient contexts, in addition to considerations related to the levels of global demand and supply and their possibilities of evolution.

The study shows a series of results related to the rapid growth of mobility fluxes in Asia and more precisely China. It also gives low percentages related to the future of student mobility in the Middle East, defined according to a minimum probability (around 4%), a medium probability (4.5%) and a maximum probability (5.2%). No matter the orientations and the contexts, it is expected that in the worst case scenario, the volume of student mobility in the Middle East will increase remarkably. Whereas the maximum and the medium scenarios are based on the increase in academic mobility demand in the Arab region, in a context marked by a growing global demand on new specializations, and a sustainably increasing number of students. According to the study, it is also possible that the percentages of students who are likely to participate in those cases of mobility, could double, even in the worst case scenario (3) which estimates that this mobility will increase globally by 4%. Among the most important results expected for mobility fluxes, based on the minimum probability, we see the rapidly increasing number of applications. In addition there is the possibility of related numbers of some Arab countries, with the exception of Gulf countries, in terms of the correlation between student and skills mobility, or what is known as brain migration. This in turn is expected to be related to the levels of student mobility and the stability or decline in job prospects in some countries. Whether it is a matter of probable, maximum or medium possibility, one may speak of hoped-for, probable and possible scenarios.

The hoped-for possibility is that this expansion goes hand in hand with the upgrading of official and unofficial collaboration capabilities (on a dual basis between governmental programs and independent university institutions in a decentralized context). This is in order to intensify mobility opportunities in appropriate circumstances that would enable the reintegration of the Diaspora elite in the developmental cycle within the countries of origin. In addition, it would complete the aim of turning knowledge and learning abroad into an added value and a source of revenues (in the case of China). This scenario operates according to a dual dynamic which encourages independent scholarship programs and governmental programs, in addition to individual mobility initiatives and international and regional cooperation programs. This begins with an Arab higher education pilot zone.

As for the probable possibility, it is particularly related to the increase in the total number of students in the region concomitantly with the increase in student mobility within precise or globally, regionally and nationally demanded learning subjects. This increase takes into account important issues including the volume of non-return to countries of origin and its direct cost on educational systems (lack of revenues and added value resulting from mobility) given the expected impact on the budgets and quality of public education as well as on technology updating and transfer, and research development. This possibility is mainly characterized by the weak performance of the academic sector and informal institutions that may seek to enhance networking between universities in countries of origin and students, and promote skills outside the countries of origin. This possibility could be the closest to the reality of higher education in the Arab region, which already suffers from excessive centralization in the field of collaboration. It is worth noting that this situation varies from one country to another. Some countries are currently working on combining the four parameters to optimize benefits in this field (Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan) in order to maximize mobility opportunities, and provide additional opportunities for scholarships and formal and informal mobility programs. Other countries rely on formal and governmental programs, including national programs, taking into consideration the profits and losses in view of the increase in skills mobility. The most probable scenario is the minimum possibility, i.e. the decline in Arab mobility and stagnation locally and regionally. This does not only entail isolating universities and higher education institutions from their regional and global vital space (including the institutional environment), but also from their direct geographical surrounding. This possibility, which is the worst, characterizes several Arab countries that still consider university as an administrative structure governed first and foremost by political considerations.

The hoped-for seems to be inevitable despite the encountered difficulties. Thus the need for an Arab higher education zone can be conceived of as a logical consequence of developments related to more active and independent universities in the Arab region. Nevertheless, the recent past shows the need for thinking about it as a path and a composite building process aiming at supporting researcher and student mobility, regionally and internationally. It is also a milestone towards serious thinking about the future of "University House" in the region, within a context characterized by the vulnerability of common regional political institutions. And since it is a long term process, the informal, academic and university community should play a significant role. There may be an Arab process similar to the European Barcelona process which can be one day called the Cairo, Beirut, or Rabat process... No matter the place and the nomination, the terms and conditions must be taken into consideration to avoid the past mistakes.

The project of creating an Arab university and academic space is one of the priorities that only lack importance due to the absence of mechanisms that make ambitious objectives enforceable

ones, such as the autonomy of university institutions and the affirmation of institutional credibility in the face of the failure of all common Arab actions. In this regard, it is important to determine the local, national, regional and international roles to build such a process that does not lack means or justifications. From the human perspective, the Arab region is endowed with integrated characteristics that enhance the possibilities of creating such a space. Needless to say that 65% of the region's population are young and aged below 35 years. Moreover, the rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions and students, in particular post graduate students, in addition to the increase in the number of graduates and obstacles to their mobility, are evidence that call for more focus on higher education, thus increasing relevant expectations and outputs.

From the structural perspective, there is a need for a less ambiguous academic space, for there are densely populated countries, like Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Sudan, and other low density countries with abundant financial resources that enable them to upgrade their educational infrastructure, such as laboratories and advanced technology. Such a space can be a remedy for the negative aspects by maximizing or fructifying positive ones, through linking capabilities to human resources and linking material to non-material economy i.e. knowledge economy.

As for the always possible, it is mainly related to difficulties and to the need for mitigating risks or failures. Thus there is a need for finding mechanisms, partners, roles and achievable realistic objectives, even for a transitional or an experimental period. For example selecting a pioneer group of universities from some Arab countries as a pilot group and waiting for a ripple effect. This can be achieved in collaboration with other international and academic spaces. The general political and intellectual climate in the region has been marked by a proliferation of texts, legislations and conventions, so instead of finding new or alternative projects, efforts are being focused on activating and enforcing these legislations. Such a general psychological state prevailing in our universities makes us talk about the hoped-for, which is an Arab space or zone for higher education that represents a controversial response to the scientific elite in the Arab world. This is with regard to the failure of some previous university and scientific coordination projects in the face of challenges... For he who does not harvest shall have others eating his crops.

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