Cairo Declaration on Higher Education in the Arab States

Preamble

We, the participants in the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARCHE + 10) in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt, from 31 May to 2 June 2009, hereby

1) **Recalling the terms** of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that higher education should be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (Article 26 - 1), and that education should be aimed at achieving "the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Article 26 - 2), and the terms of the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), which stipulates that signatory countries pledge to make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity (Article 4),

2) **Affirm** that lifelong learning should be based on four pillars: learning to live together, learning how to acquire knowledge, learning how to act, and learning for life; and that it is a duty of higher education institutions to conduct research that helps solve the most important problems faced by nations,

3) **Take** into consideration the recommendations of the United Nations, through:

   a) An *Agenda for Peace*, which contains guidelines and proposals for preventive measures that safeguard peace, in addition to practical steps to restore peace after the eruption of unavoidable conflicts.

   b) An *Agenda for Development*, which sets down the basic concepts of strengthening the opportunities of sustainable and durable human development; we affirm the region's need for a just and comprehensive peace, which allows education for all and paves the way for development,

4) **Note** that Arab states, while enjoying a common history, language, cultural heritage and traditions, are widely diverse in terms of population size, economic capacities, and cultural and educational traditions.

5) **Note** that the globalization of the economy and professional services, and the rapid growth in information and communication technologies, have led to increasing demands, in all fields, for specialists who can maintain high-level qualifications which boosts the role played by higher education in the development and prosperity of societies,

6) **Affirm** the recommendations of the conferences of ministers of higher education and scientific research in Arab states, which have been sponsored by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization since 1981, and **Commend** the efforts by UNESCO, ISESCO and ALECSO, citing the documents and projects launched by ALECSO, tasked by the Arab League, especially the plan to improve education in the Arab world (Tunis, 2008), and

7) **Recall** the Beirut Declaration of 1998 on Higher Education in Arab states for the 21st Century, and the document's recommendations, and the Arab Plan of Action for Science and Technology, which was approved by the Arab Socio-economic Council,

Therefore, we point to the following:

1. Developments in Higher Education in the Arab Region, 1998 - 2008

Higher education in the Arab region has experienced huge developments in the last decade, since the convening of the **Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education** (Beirut, 1998) and the **World Conference on Higher Education** (Paris, 1998). These developments have included large increases in the numbers of students at universities and the various types of institutes of higher education, as well as changes in the features of higher education. Many Arab Governments have allocated additional resources and launched development programs to this effect. In many countries, new legislation has been adopted and national bodies for accreditation and quality assurance have been established. The following summarizes the current situation, focusing on nine major points:

1. Access
2. Equality of educational opportunity
3. Quality
4. External efficiency
5. Societal responsibility
6. Management and governance
7. Financing
8. Arab and international Cooperation
9. Scientific research

1. Access

- Total enrollment in the higher education system in the Arab region as a percentage of the age group rose from 16% in 1998 to 22% in 2008, while the number of students rose from 1,294 to 2,379 per 1,000 people at first-degree university level or equivalent.
- Despite increases, enrollment rates in Arab countries are still lower than the world average (25%) and lower than the rates recorded in 2006 in other regions, such as Latin America (34%), and considerably lower than North America and Europe (70%).
- There is also a disparity in enrollment among various Arab countries, as the rate ranges between 8% in one country and 49% in another.
- There is an imbalance in the distribution of students enrolled in higher education between the humanities and pure and applied sciences, as those enrolled in the latter make up only 30% of the total, which hampers development, research, innovation and technology management in Arab countries.
- The number of those enrolled in Master's degree programs has doubled, while those enrolled in Ph.D. programs has trebled; the total share of students enrolled in graduate studies has risen from 5.8% to 6.7%.
- Despite the clear increase in the numbers of those enrolled in Master's and Doctoral programs, the percentage of those enrolled in graduate studies remains low compared to other regions in the world; this has a negative impact on the production of knowledge, research and innovation, and on training academic and research staff at institutions of higher education and in the production and services sectors of the economy.
- Higher education institutions are diverse and include universities, institutes, technological faculties, community colleges as well as distance learning institutions; with universities accounting for 35% of the their total number of higher education institutions (1,150).
- The increase in the number of non-governmental universities has not been accompanied by an expansion in the sector's student population; this sector accounts for 36% of all

institutions but takes in only 11% of students. This means that the models and cost of non-governmental education are insufficient measure to expand educational opportunities.

- Admissions policies and procedures in a number of Arab countries continue to face several challenges in balancing between the rise in study opportunities and the drive to maintain quality and secure equal opportunities and equity in the distribution of these opportunities.
- Distance, virtual and open educational systems and the concepts of continuing and lifelong education continue to lack sufficient attention and recognition in most Arab countries. This limits their ability to attract students and to effectively contribute in generating creative solutions to problems of access to higher education.

2. Equality of Educational Opportunity

The total share of females enrolled in higher education has seen a noticeable rise, to around 50%, compared to 37% in 1998. It is worth noting that this percentage is rising in public institutions of higher education, reaching 51%. In some Arab countries, there has been a noticeable drop in male enrollment in higher education.

Meanwhile, a number of Arab countries have not been able to achieve the required progress in guaranteeing a fair distribution of higher education opportunities between rural and urban areas, or among upper-, medium -, and lower-income groups in the same society.

3. Quality

There are clear efforts as well as a clear will in most Arab countries to improve the quality of higher education. This can be seen at several levels:

- the launch of promising sector-wide projects to improve higher education.
- the creation of frameworks for quality assurance and accreditation. Ten Arab states have established national committees and bodies for this purpose and most countries are in the process of establishing such bodies or are spreading a culture of quality, and establishing quality assurance offices and programs at universities.
- A number of Arab universities have received institutional or program-based accreditation by well-known international bodies.
- Participation in quality assessment programs conducted by a number of specialized international institutions, and in related international activities and conferences.
- Developing new legislation, plans and strategies whose implementation helps improve the quality of higher education in some states.

Despite the huge efforts made to improve the quality of education, there are still many shortcomings. The expansion in access to higher education, which was considered a huge achievement by some Arab countries in the last decade, has led a deterioration of quality in certain States. This is because higher education institutions have been unable to meet the conditions required to secure high-quality education quickly and in line with the average increase in access. This disparity between quantity and quality appears in areas such as student density as well as a lack of infrastructure, qualified faculty and financial resources. Some Arab countries have resorted to parallel education or other models, which gives room to the acceptance of providing higher education at lower standards.

As for quality assurance, the efforts here are at a standstill with regard to the general or regulatory frameworks; they haven't reached the "sensitive" areas in universities, i.e. the classrooms and laboratories, where instruction and research take place, and where quality issues confront true

challenges. This is due to:

1. A reliance on bureaucratic models in quality management and assurance.
2. A direct borrowing from systems used in countries or organizations outside the region without serious attention to establishing foundations and frameworks that are specific to the Arab region and suit this part of the world.

4. External Efficiency

Noteworthy efforts have been made in Arab countries to improve the relevance of the outcomes of higher education to the requirements of development and the job market, through various methods, such as:

A. formulating national strategies and plans on education and employment
B. establishing systems for partnership between the economy's productive sectors and institutions of higher education
C. designing programs to encourage expatriates to return
D. establishing university incubators

There are no statistics that offer a clear picture or evidence about the extent to which this relevance is being achieved; however, its weak points remain in effect and appear in unemployment rates, brain drain and lack of skilled work force in a number of specializations.

5. Societal Responsibility

Worthy of note in this regard is the fundamental role played by the higher education sector in developing Arab societies and forming human capital, which has led the development process in these countries; however, there are four areas of imbalance in this regard:

A. Institutions of higher education in a number of Arab States have fallen short in performing the task of serving society; there are few universities that require participation in such activities as part of the successful completion of programs or in their faculty recruitment. In fact, some universities fail to interact positively with local communities in terms of culture, development or the environment.
B. A number of states have failed to enact policies aimed at incorporating common university requirements into higher education curricula, extending on an equal basis to students from human as well as pure and practical sciences. These would comprise a general culture component that covers citizenship, human rights, religious tolerance and acceptance of others and other values that help build social cohesion.
C. The devalued status of social and human science specializations, as existing admissions systems, especially centralized ones, require high grade averages for pure and applied sciences, pushing students with lower marks into humanities disciplines. Also, public policies tend to favor pure and applied sciences in the distribution of available resources. The negative features resulting from these policies are evidenced by the profile of the elite and of those practicing certain social professions (teachers, administrators, media, etc.).
D. In the same context, it is worth noting, in a number of Arab states, the low standard of performance in using the Arabic language in higher education.

6. Management and Governance

Although the establishment of ministries of higher education in various Arab countries has helped spur progress in this field, we have yet to arrive at academic, organizational and financial

independence for institutions of higher education; here, we should note the importance of strategic planning, information systems and electronic management and the participation of stakeholders and beneficiaries in higher education.

7. Financing

Budget allocations to higher education in the Arab world have increased; their share of the state budget rose from 3.64% in 2000 to 6.38% in 2008, and their share of GDP has also increased, from 1.42% to 2.02%. A number of Arab countries are diversifying their sources of financing by various means, such as partnership with the private sector, providing consulting services and conducting research activities, endowments, etc. However, financing continues to constitute one of the biggest problems for all Arab countries.

Despite the many efforts and initiatives, the problem is becoming sharper due to the challenges of international competition, which requires that we tackle the issue of world-class quality of education and research. This requires additional resources and better use of available resources.

8. Arab and International Cooperation

Cooperation among Arab states and international organizations improved in terms of the benefit from services and expertise provided by the latter. However, shortcomings remain, as inter-Arab cooperation has yet to prepare sources of documented information that meet international standards, which can be relied on by any party interested in or researching the topic of higher education in Arab countries.

With regard to student mobility, Arab non-national students only make up 2% of the total number of students in the Arab world. As for teaching staff, the rate reaches 6% of total faculty in Arab institutions of higher education. Non-Arab teachers only account for 1% of total faculty.

Inter-Arab cooperation in education and scientific research has been on the rise over the last ten years; there is high-level bilateral cooperation between Arab states and European and other universities. The League of Arab States have also been developing a higher education strategy.

The positive orientation toward proposing an integrated framework for the development of higher education in the Arab region, by the Arab League (which has been tasked with this by summits of Arab heads of state), is one of the positive, forward-thinking policies aimed at creating an integrated strategic framework. However, it still requires policies, mechanisms and implementation plans that are binding on Arab League member states.

The decision by the 2008 Arab Summit in Damascus, to adopt a plan for improving higher education in the Arab world, should be considered an important step toward boosting joint Arab action in enhancing Arab education, and particularly higher education. Moreover, work on the details of this plan and implementing mechanisms will certainly boost opportunities for inter-Arab cooperation in the field of higher education.

9. Scientific Research

Scientific research in institutions of higher education is considered one of the components of a philosophy of higher education; at the same time, it is one of its goals and mandates, since higher education institutions are centers of knowledge production, research and innovation. This field has experienced developments on several levels:

  A. Developing systems, providing funds, offering awards and overseas scholarship programs in order to improve scientific research; participating in regional and international research projects; establishing modern systems of communication and documentation at

universities; linking university libraries to international documentation systems.

    B. Launching various types of initiatives in Arab countries, such as knowledge stations, scientific research databases, quality enhancement funds, scientific research bodies, research centers of excellence, scientific research chairs, scientific associations, etc.

    C. However, the financing of scientific research activities is weak; the average expenditure here is less than 0.2%, compared to 1% in a number of developing countries.

However, this sector was confronted to a number of crises, which have a range of causes: a paucity of resources, weak cooperation between research bodies and the service and productive sectors; Arab countries are still low in international rankings for scientific production.

Recommendations

Based on the principles, conclusions, and issues reviewed in the Declaration on Higher Education in Arab States, "Towards an Arab Space for Higher Education: International Challenges and Societal Responsibilities," as adopted by the Conference, and in view of the need for boosting higher education systems, based on the concepts of education for all and life-long learning, and preserving cultural diversity, sustainable development, transparency, accountability and the participation of all concerned parties, the Conference has adopted the following recommendations:

General Recommendations

• Prepare a periodic (biennial) report on the state of higher education and scientific research in the Arab region, based on national reports that use documented and updated databases; create the IT infrastructure at a regional level for higher education and scientific research.

- Initiate the development of policies, work frameworks and implementation plans to achieve the goals of the Development Plan for Higher Education in the Arab World, which was prepared by the Arab League and approved at the 2008 Arab Summit in Damascus; identify the phased, quantitative and qualitative objectives, and performance measurement indicators to implement the plan within a specific time-frame.
- Launch detailed studies and propose legislative and regulatory frameworks and the required national decisions to establish an Arab space for higher education; and submit these to political decision-makers in this domain.
- Develop benchmarks for quality systems in the Arab region, to guarantee unified concepts; agree on the foundations of quality and professional qualifications required for these organizations to discharge their functions; and coordinate relations and exchange expertise among them.

Specific Recommendations

1. Access

Continue to expand access to higher education, in line with the population density of each Arab country, while devoting increased attention to open, distance, and electronic education.
Strive to boost higher education enrollment rates in the Arab world to reach 30% of the concerned age group, and no less than 20% in any Arab country, over the next ten years.

2. Equality of Educational Opportunity

    1. Guarantee equality of opportunity in higher education for all segments of society, especially

those with fewer educational opportunities, irrespective of gender, social category, or geographic location.

2. Diversify types of institutions of higher education and their geographic distribution, to guarantee equal opportunity for all segments of society in Arab countries.

3. Quality

Implement quality assurance and accreditation systems in at least 50% of faculties, institutes and institutions of higher educations, both public and non-public, in each country over the next ten years; focus on disseminating a culture of quality in the higher education system of each Arab country.

4. External Efficiency

Adopt partnership programs between higher education and productive and service-oriented economic institutions, aimed at developing mechanisms for cooperation, relevance, identifying the needs of development, providing opportunities for practical training, upgrading, and research at the local and regional level.

5. Societal Responsibility

Reinforce the societal role of higher education, to serve society and disseminate a culture of citizenship and tolerance while highlighting the central role of social and human studies in developing society.

6. Management and Governance

Produce or develop legislation that guarantees the academic, administrative, and financial independence of higher education institutions (including their right to invest their funds), with the commitment by higher education institutions to the public policies, laws, principles and objectives set down by the State, along with the development and implementation of systems of accountability that guarantee the achievement of these goals.

7. Financing

1. Make maximum efforts to increase allocations to higher education, while using and managing these allocations properly.
2. Diversify sources of funding and encourage institutions of higher learning to develop their own sources of funding.
3. Determine the budgets of institutions of higher learning, based on the actual per student cost, in the various specializations and levels of education, with due regard to criteria of quality.

8. Arab and International Cooperation

1. Work towards the establishment of a regional system of qualifications and degree recognition.
   Encourage student and academic mobility among institutions of higher learning within countries and among Arab states.
2. Strengthen cooperation among Arab, regional and international organizations concerned with education and higher education; encourage joint cooperation in project implementation and the exchange of expertise and experience.

3. Promote UNESCO Chairs in Arab higher education institutions and help them exchange expertise and expand.

9. Scientific Research, Innovation and Development
1. Increase allocations for scientific research in Arab states to not less than 2% of GDP during the next 10 years.
2. Set down programs for joint scientific research among Arab states and create mechanisms for this.
3. Encourage the creation of joint scientific research networks in the Arab region
4. Propose the organization of a "Year of Science, Technology and Innovation" at the level of Arab states, to be held at regular intervals in a different Arab state, in order to increase contact and cooperation in the Arab region, and monitor progress in scientific and technological research in various Arab countries.

10. Follow-up mechanisms
Set up a committee comprised of the heads of delegations, gathered by UNESCO in order to set down mechanisms for follow-up and implementation.