

The Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARCHE + 10)

organized by

UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States

and held in Beirut
on 4-6 May 2009

Introduction

Higher Education in the Arab Region has witnessed **significant developments during the last decade**, since the holding of both the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARCHE) in Beirut (1998) and the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) in Paris (1998). These developments included the considerable increase in the number of students, universities and higher education institutes of all types. They also included changes in the features of higher education in terms of the status of the private sector, the specialized universities and those affiliated to foreign universities as well as in terms of the geographical distribution of higher education institutions outside capital cities. Many Arab Governments have allocated additional resources and launched development programmes to this effect. Also, new legislations and national accreditation and quality assurance bodies, have been established in many countries, etc.

The Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education aims at assessing achievements, defining challenges and studying future prospects, namely the means of cooperation among Arab States in the field of higher education. It also seeks to review the previous issues in light of the changes that have taken place during the last few years at both the international and regional levels and to address the new issues raised by these changes.

It is hoped that the Conference would establish a new agenda for higher education to be adopted by Arab States in the years to come and would submit this agenda to the **World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE + 10)** which will be held in Paris on 6-8 July 2009, in order to enhance international cooperation for higher education development under the sponsorship of UNESCO, concerned international stakeholders and all other partners.

The Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARCHE +10) will be attended by officials and representatives of ministries of higher education and scientific research,

universities, governmental Arab organizations, professional organizations, international organizations as well as experts, academics and journalists.

Themes of the Conference

Theme I: Equality of Educational Opportunities

The number of students in higher education has increased from 3.2 million in 1996 to 7.2 million in 2006. In 1996, there were 1202 students per one hundred thousand inhabitants, whereas this number has increased to 2230 in 2006, reflecting a great increase in the available educational opportunities.

However, these increases have been of varying degrees of importance in the Arab States since some of the latter have achieved high enrollment rates while others still have very low enrollment rates. This is not due to the lack of financial resources only but also to a series of factors related to policies, social values, partnerships, etc... On the other hand, there is the issue of equal access to higher education which is related to the differences between communities, geographical areas and social categories as well as to gender and age disparities.

The present topic highlights facts and realities in the Arab States. It tackles the importance of economic, social and legislative factors (enactment of laws, establishment of plans and policies) in the interpretation of these facts, in respect to the past or current acceleration, deceleration or equity in educational opportunities. It tackles as well the differences between higher education institutions of all types, including open learning. In addition, it deals with admission policies, the recognition of diplomas and the regulations governing the students' mobility between faculties, universities and countries, and the effect of these factors on the size and quality of educational opportunities. The present topic gives particular attention to case studies that describe or explain a number of initiatives, innovations and innovative systems which made a real difference in terms of educational opportunities at the university level.

Theme II: Quality Enhancement and Quality Assurance

The issue of quality is being set forth in all circles concerned with higher education since 1998, namely as regards its relationship with quantitative increases. Arab States have allocated additional resources from their budgets or through loans and grants to assess quality or to establish quality assurance and accreditation bodies.

The present topic tackles the quality issue in all its aspects: quality assessment, quality control, quality improvement, quality assurance and accreditation.

It also tackles numerous quality components: (1) outcomes: such as the graduates levels and the results of national or regional competitions, international classifications, etc; (2) processes which encompass: curricula, teaching languages, teaching methods, buildings and facilities, laboratories, libraries and faculty members; (3) relevance: adequacy of university training (programmes and curricula) to the world requirements for graduation and for the exercise of a profession, on the one hand and, to the local and Arab market requirements, on the other, (4) ICTs in education, management, documentation and statistics; (5) scientific research: allocations, facilities and the regulations in force, areas

of interest, faculty members' productivity, the documentation and dissemination of researches as well as the dissemination of their results.

These issues are addressed through case studies, compared and analytical studies, presentations and exhibitions related to leading projects, initiatives, programs and innovations, etc..

Theme III: The Social Responsibility of Universities

The social responsibility of universities is currently addressed at the World level. Arab States are probably the States that are suffering the most in this field and that are mostly in need of addressing this issue since some of them have witnessed, during the past few years, internal crises, conflicts or challenges related to freedoms, democracy, governance, human rights, terrorism, etc.

On the one hand, higher education provides society with graduates equipped with number of values and skills as well as with the necessary general knowledge to play their different social roles at both their occupational function and their broader status as citizens. In this context, the present topic tackles the extent of the contribution of higher institutions as whole, through all their programs, to the dissemination of general and social culture in terms of values, knowledge and skills related to citizenship, tolerance, acceptance of others, ethics, sexual and social discrimination as well as in terms of high thinking skills. It also tackles the role played by higher education institutions as cultural spaces that extend bridges between academia and society. The present topic addresses as well community service programmes related, for instance, to the contribution to health care or literacy campaigns, to the concern for the environment and to the participation of faculties in public councils, social programmes or in voluntary organizations.

On the other hand, higher education encompasses programmes that are specifically orientated towards the training on "social" professions and towards the training of academic elites in a number of human and social fields as it is the case for the training programmes addressed to teachers, managers, professionals in the mass media, historians, linguists, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, etc... It is to be noted that these disciplines generally attract most of the students while attracting the minimum resources and usually face many problems at the qualitative level compared to science and technology studies. A serious concern is expressed worldwide as regards the deterioration of higher education in the fields of human and social sciences, which drove some areas and states to establish special strategies for the development of teaching and research in these fields. From this perspective, the present topic tackles the status of human and social sciences programmes in the Arab States in terms of teaching or in terms of research, resources, methods, contents, orientations and outcomes, etc...

The issues under this topic are addressed through case studies and through descriptive, comparative and analytical studies as well as through the presentation of leading practices, plans, projects and initiatives.

Theme IV: Management, Governance and Financing

This topic tackles three issues, each one encompassing a series of subjects.

1) The management of higher education at the national level: autonomy of public

universities, functions at the Ministries of Higher Education and their relationship with private education, management and implementation of governmental projects for the development of higher education, national bodies and councils concerned with higher education (supervision, quality assurance and accreditation, etc), transcontinental universities, distribution of roles between the State, the market and higher education; 2) governance (at the institution level): appointment of heads of faculties, departments and programmes, councils and their role, participation of the faculty members and students in decision making, university climate, administrative bodies and academic freedom; 3) financing: current expenditure and investment, total costs, government funding, other available funding resources and systems.

The above issues and subjects are studied through the analysis of legislations, documents, general and statistical data, and through case studies and comparative studies.

Theme V: Arab Cooperation

This topic tackles cooperation opportunities among Arab universities along with its advantages and challenges, within the framework of the existing structures or within the framework of new structures and forms. It is noted, for instance, that around half of the universities in the Arab States are not affiliated to the Union of Arab Universities and that bilateral and trilateral projects are rare among Arab universities compared to the cooperation programmes concluded with parties outside the Arab World, at a time when the students flow among Arab universities is decreasing.

The present topic tackles the opportunities of cooperation between ministries and bodies concerned with higher education in the Arab States in fields such as the recognition of diplomas and the exchange of information and expertise in higher education. It gives special importance to the establishment of an Arab database on higher education and to the content of the recommendation issued by the Eleventh Conference of Arab Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research (Dubai, 5-6 November 2007) related to the advocacy of an Regional Agency for Quality Assurance of Programmes in the Arab States (RAQAPAS).

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