

Rotary Club Address
Tuesday, March 30 at 8:00 pm

The Challenges of Higher Education in the Modern Middle East

In view of the fact that I have been at AUB for less than two years, you may think it presumptuous of me to address you on the topic of the “Challenges of Higher Education in the Middle East.” If these remarks have any validity at all, it is thanks to many people who given me their own perspective, and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. There are essentially four points I would like to address tonight: the phenomenon of new universities in the Middle East; the challenges to the creation of such institutions; the prevalent focus on the importance of science and professionalism; and the idea of the “complete citizen.”

Phenomenon of new universities

I'd like to start by looking at the regional landscape of education. One of the most remarkable phenomena in the modern development of the MENA and GCC regions, including Saudi Arabia, of course, is the explosive growth of new universities and graduate programs in a part of the world where they have been so scarce. The older institutions of high education have now been complemented by scores of new colleges and universities, all of which are devoted to different purposes.

Several individual examples are worth mentioning to illustrate the many ways this expansion is taking place. Some universities have established branch facilities, such as Wollongong University in New South Wales, whose sponsored campus in Dubai is thriving after 17 years, and now one of the oldest universities in the UAE; its programs include business, computer science, and language study. A more ambitious project is the rising campus of New York University in neighboring Abu Dhabi, which aims at setting up a full four-year undergraduate program based on the NYU curriculum at home, offering degrees fully equivalent to those granted in New York. The emirate of Qatar has invited several prestigious universities to set up specific programs in a coordinated setting founded on the idea of a business park; including Northwestern, Cornell-Weill, Georgetown, Carnegie-Mellon, Virginia Commonwealth, and Texas A&M. Among these branches, degree programs are offered across many fields: law, veterinary medicine, foreign service, engineering, medicine, and design and art—the idea being to create a synergistic entity out of multiple independent programs. Still another model is the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a graduate-only university on the shores of the Red Sea, devoted to the solution of environmental and engineering problems of global scope, and bountifully endowed with billions of dollars in research funding. None of these models is inherently better than any other, but it indicates the degree of urgency and thoughtfulness with which various governments have approached the issue.

Great universities are as much a feature of national pride in the developing world as in the developed world, but—more than that—they are the harbingers of success for their own populations. This is one reason why—and understandably so—universities have been at the top of national agendas in the GCC and the MENA regions. These countries acknowledge the pressing need to build indigenous human capacities and to create self-

sustaining economies that are far more diversified than those reliant on the pumping and exportation of oil. Moreover, we live in a region that is desperately in need of higher education offered more widely to its young citizens. So this is a trend that is inevitable, and it is one that should be greatly encouraged.

Challenges of new universities

But this brings us to our next point, along with several cautionary remarks. Creating new universities is a most worthy goal, but one that is hedged about with two significant challenges. First: where do you find talented faculty who are at the very top of their fields? And second: where do you find students who have the right preparation to study in advanced areas of research?

In locating talented professors, you have to begin somewhere, and several nations in the GCC area have chosen the obvious avenue: you import them. Joint agreements with prestigious universities in the US and Europe offer a source of good faculty, who can spend a semester or a year or even three years teaching in Qatar or Dubai or Abu Dhabi or other places. They are enticed by high salaries and the opportunity to live in a fascinating part of the world. And the huge financial resources available to these new universities reflect the priority that education rightfully holds in these Arab nations.

But the great unanswered question is: how long will such faulty members remain? It is a plain fact of academic life that professors are not motivated primarily by high salaries. Otherwise they would not be in academia: the corporate world offers far greater rewards in this respect. In fact, the business world competes directly with universities for employees in the fields of engineering, medicine, public health, science, and business. On the other hand, for academics, there are four major sources of career satisfaction that the corporate world does not easily afford:

1. One is the freedom to create new knowledge through pursuit of their own research;
2. Another is the chance to teach brilliant young minds and train the next generation of excellent thinkers;
3. The third is to live in an intellectual community where they can find a permanent home—one that is shared by colleagues who will challenge them and collaborate with them. A corollary to this is the ability to speak and write and publish in a manner consistent with academic freedom.
4. And fourth: many universities in the United States and Europe grant tenure, which for academics is another seal of approval that carries with it life-long employment and security, if not high salaries.

These characteristics go far to promote what is referred to as the “life of the mind,” the essential academic openness that great universities espouse as their chief mission. If these sources of satisfaction are not met, there is little chance of establishing a permanent body of faculty members eager to make a permanent commitment to any university, whatever its lofty goals or however large its financial resources.

Let's go to the next question: where do you find students to attend such institutions? Again, you can import foreign students, but this does nothing to promote internal development. So the region must focus not only on the creation of vibrant universities and professional programs, but also on the need to foster a sizable population of young men and women emerging from local secondary schools. These young high school graduates must be equipped to tackle the difficult content and the spirit of inquiry that institutions of higher education assume as a matter of course. These are essential talents that the best professors will demand from their incoming students.

Countries that have been foremost in establishing new universities, therefore, could profit from taking a harder look at their elementary and secondary systems of education. Secondary schools have been in existence for decades or even centuries—they closely reflect the values of their own cultures, and because they have been long established, they present a much harder challenge in terms of rejuvenation and redirection. Young minds must be adequately trained in mathematics, the hard sciences, computer technology, and writing skills to tackle the materials of their college years.

One other critical issue is that the world is changing at an ever faster pace, and it is becoming smaller while doing so. Are college students from the MENA and GCC regions ready to enter a world where the private enterprise across the globe is beginning to talk to itself? And, by the way, what language is being used? The clear answer, for better or worse, is English. There is nothing inherently superior about English—it is simply an accident of history and economic development. There have been Muslim nations in southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, that have opted to educate their high school students in their local language; but for availability of textbooks, access to internet, and fluency in technical terminology, their graduates have found themselves limited in many ways. So practically speaking, mastery of English gives real advantage to students who are given admission to university-level programs. Ultimately, one important measure of success in the relatively new phenomenon of higher education in the Middle East will be the proportion of the college student body—and the faculty—who are not “imported,” but native to their own countries.

Focus on science and professionalism

I'd like to focus next on science and professionalism, which is the ultimate goal of higher education. The columnist Thomas Friedman has written recently on the Intel Corporation awards, which are given to young people in the areas of science, engineering, and medicine. He has commented perceptively on the prevalence of Asians and South Asians in these awards, countries where enormous emphasis is placed on excellence in these areas. More specifically, Lebanon's Minister of Tourism, Fadi Abboud, has recently commented on the state of the knowledge economy in Lebanon itself, which has an unrealized potential for regional competition in the areas of science and technology.

There is certainly a reason for emphasizing science and technology. The hard sciences are based on the premises of proof and demonstrability, and a strong system of peer review encourages rapid publication and wide dissemination of knowledge. These are fields of research where enormous progress can be made on multiple fronts, expanding our

knowledge in scientific realms, where problems are tackled and new theories proposed, and human life is improved on the basis of that expanding base of knowledge. Because they have direct impact on the quality of life, these specialties of science and technology are the ones that are most vigorously supported by governments that desire solid economic development; and because they offer lucrative careers to those who train in them, they are pursued by students.

On the other hand, there is another area of human endeavor that has proved relatively static in recent years, where knowledge does not increase from year to year, but where lessons must be learned anew for every generation. I would describe this as a chronic condition of the humanities and social sciences, whose purview is the realm of human interaction, respect for others, understanding of other cultures, mastery of multiple languages, receptivity to constructive criticism, the ability to self-assess and self-critique, and the dialectic between ideology and pragmatism. The humanities have been under fire even in the United States for not serving a tangible economic purpose. Arts programs, literature surveys, music courses, and the study of certain major languages like German have been cut from college curricula as being on the fringe of what is useful.

Yet many of the skills taught through the humanities and social sciences bear upon the reasons why human beings are who they are, in the biological, anthropological, and spiritual sense. One cannot train future leaders who have not reflected on the nature of the human condition, and on the question of which systems of moral behavior are most appropriate for their own cultural ethic.

The complete citizen

My final point, the “complete citizen,” follows on the previous one. Educational systems that have evolved naturally, over time, tend to embody the inherent goals and values of the societies in which they reside. This is not necessarily the case for the new universities we have been considering: they have been intentionally created from scratch. As we have noted, they have been devised largely to address specific priorities and to address problems of national urgency. Such goals are highly laudable.

But institutions of higher education in the Arab world also have the opportunity, if not the responsibility, to enshrine the values embedded in cultural traditions that are unique to their region, and which emphasize such things as the centrality of family ties, local and regional history, Arab scientific achievements, a rich literary tradition, and the pacifist kernel of the Islamic faith. These are values of which the West remains largely ignorant, or is aware of only through prejudicial eyes.

So we are talking here not just about the “capable citizen” or the “professional citizen,” one who is prepared to deal with the technical challenges of research, development, public health, and the economy. We are talking about the “complete citizen,” someone who has been exposed broadly to many disciplines and different cultures, who is keenly aware of his or her own civic responsibility and the potential of how the individual’s action can influence a modern state. They must be creative thinkers, careful listeners, and

responsive actors. After all, those who have received the finest education are the ones who also bear the greatest responsibility for the shaping of the future.

And the future, with all of its uncertainties and complexities, will surely entail a smaller global stage, as I have already mentioned. Countries and continents are becoming more intertwined through interdependent economies and the availability of internet communication. Education that does not prepare its students to face people and experiences outside the narrow confines of a single country is a poor education indeed. So, finally, let me touch on the issue of diversity and its worth.

In the United States, American universities extol the idea of diversity and go to great lengths to recruit students who are under-represented: African-Americans, Hispanics, native Americans, and others. But what does diversity mean in the Lebanese sense? This is a question I've often asked myself, and which we face in looking at our student body at AUB—let me focus on Lebanon for just a moment. Lebanon, for its size, is already remarkably diverse, with multiple religious sects acknowledged by the constitution (18 of them, which I will not enumerate, because you in the audience can do it better than I); but also different regional traditions and economic levels, multiple languages and cultural heritages engrained in its society. Any American university (or in any other country, for that matter) would be hugely jealous of the range of backgrounds that we have to consider during the admissions process at AUB. Our fellow citizens speak Arabic, French, English, and Armenian, all as native tongues, and they famously combine three or four of these languages in a single sentence. Yet at AUB we still wish to attract more Europeans, Americans, and Asians to Beirut—it is important that we do so. The reason is that, along with different faiths and multi-lingual talents, 80% of our students have within them one common factor: the essential predilections of Lebanese society and political orientation, a factor that still governs a good deal of student life on campus. Every society has its prejudices, of course. International students bring with them the knowledge—and the example—that things can be different, as well as arguments why things should be different. Global outreach begins at home. And, let us be clear, global perspective also has the potential to change things in beneficial, yet unexpected, ways.

In this we return to the original meaning of the word “university”—which did not merely denote a collection of buildings, teachers, and students. “University” also meant “the quality of including, affecting, or involving the whole of something”—what we today refer to as universality. Simply: we owe to ourselves and our children to reach beyond national boundaries and invite the world in.

Conclusion

Finally, let me conclude with a final thought, which circles back to the beginning of my presentation. We are witnessing the rise of multiple universities in the Arab world, across a series of cultures that remain notably different, one from another. Throughout the Arab world, governments are realizing that their greatest natural resource is their young people, and the only way to actualize the potential of this priceless resource is through education. To succeed in revamping and invigorating the education sector requires the participation of many parties. We need visionary and committed political leaders, talented

administrators, a fully engaged populace, and, above all, the active involvement of Arab educators and intellectuals who will provide the impetus and the expertise to enhance educational structures and practice.

Some countries have historically been more open to western or foreign affiliations, others embrace their native traditions and faiths more closely. So in some ways it is a quandary to me that, in the wake of the terrible events of 9/11 and the unilateral military interventions of the US in this part of the world, the distinctly American model of education is still so widely admired and eagerly embraced: it is the gold standard. In fact, there are a number of universities and colleges in Lebanon that have appended the name “American” to their name, even though they are not chartered in the United States, are not accredited there, do not follow an American curriculum, and have no Americans on their staff or their board of governors.

So the hardest challenge to be posed is the following one: Can one fully embrace an American educational system only for the results it gives (in other words, educated professionals and leaders), without also embracing its underlying values of openness, critical speech and critical thinking, transparency, social responsibility, civic engagement, the acceptance of diversity, and shared governance? Are these fundamental values also the ones that all modern states in the Arab region are eager and ready to embrace? The most difficult challenge in regard to higher education may be the way in which countries of the MENA and GCC regions can or cannot adapt to an educational model imposed from the outside, and how they can make it their own, valid for their own cultural traditions.

My own feeling is that these new universities cannot succeed as well as they might without integration into their own cultures. Whether situated in a business-type park in order to spark creative partnerships, or set in the midst of busy city streets, effective universities inevitably serve as engines of change. It is just not reasonable to think that students—the leaders of our future—can be sent off to a secluded campus (the “ivory tower”) that is set apart from urban life and treated as a place insulated from the whirl of everyday life, where one gets simply obtains professional credentials after a few years and then return to the real world.

Research and development create new scientific realities and possibilities, and it is useless to pretend they have no effect on how we choose to live our lives. We have only to think of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859—scientifically valid, yet socially controversial even in America after 150 years—to understand the extent to which the world of academia itself—and the fundamental requirement for open debate—poses perhaps the greatest challenge of all to societies in the wider Middle East.

The need for higher education is urgent, and the challenges and long-term implications are real.