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HEADLINE: Arab Universities Struggle to Meet Their Nations' Needs

BYLINE: DAVID L. WHEELER

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Is higher education in the Arab world modernizing at a painfully slow pace when it needs to be charging at the speed of photons down a fiber-optic cable?

Last month, at a rare gathering of Arab countries' education officials, university administrators, and others concerned with higher education in the Middle East and North Africa, speakers questioned the fitness of the region's universities and suggested that they are behind in information technology, short on research, long on dogma, and too often educate their graduates for government jobs that no longer exist. The meeting here, "Higher Education in the Arab World: Preparing for the Global Marketplace," was supported by Amideast, a nonprofit organization that encourages educational exchanges between the United States and Middle Eastern countries, with 10 field offices in the region.

Speakers from Arab educational institutions, while finding fault with the Western news media's coverage of the Arab world in the wake of September 11, were their own toughest critics. "We cherish our great heritage and our great culture, and rightly so," said Abdulkarim al-Iryani, a former prime minister of Yemen, who studied biochemistry at Yale University and has been an advocate for higher education in Yemen. "But we have lost its great tolerance and openness. We teach science, but we still have taboos." Among the topics not taught at many Arab universities, he said, were some of the basic teachings of evolution -- for instance, that 98 percent of the human genome is identical to that of chimpanzees, a fact that offends many Muslims in the same way that it offends fundamentalist Christians in the United States.

Indeed, professors in the Arab world were compared to clerics. "Education is taught like religion. Students are supposed to believe as a matter of faith," said Nemir Kirdar, the Iraqi-born president of a global investment company, Investcorp Bank, with offices in Bahrain, London, and New York, who was invited to give an employer's view of Arab higher education. Rather than use religion as an educational model, he suggested using science, with the expectation that students would question truth, debate hypotheses, and find solutions to problems. Mistakes, he said, should not be viewed as things that should be avoided at all costs, but as a path to innovation.

Research -- a scarce commodity, since money to support it is in short supply -- also must be added to the agenda of Arab universities, he said. "Universities should not be centers to transmit what is already known. They should produce knowledge to benefit their societies and the rest of the world."

Higher education in the Arab world cannot be separated from the generally grim economic setting in which it exists. Although a few countries are rich in oil, per-capita income in Arab countries is among the lowest in the world, and population growth and unemployment are the highest, said Mr. Kirdar. The League of Arab States, a political group that includes 21 countries and the Palestinian Authority, ranges from Mauritania, on the Atlantic coast of Africa, to Oman, which juts into the Arabian Sea toward India. The countries share the Arabic language, the Muslim religion, and some other common heritage, but are strikingly varied in many other features, such as landscape or society's attitudes toward women. Snow-capped mountains, fertile valleys filled with olive trees, and extensive cedar forests contradict stereotypes of sand dunes.

A few of the Persian Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates, have high female college enrollments, but over all, Arab nations lag behind the rest of the world in that respect: Only 12.4 percent of college-age women in the Arab League countries are enrolled in higher education, compared with a world average of 16.4 percent. A report prepared for the conference by the Cairo branch of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization urged the region's universities to do more for women: "Arab states need to take drastic measures for a radical change in their educational standing," it said.

Victor Billeh, director of the regional Unesco office, said that even collecting data for the report had been difficult. Basic information, like the date on which a university was established and the number of students they have enrolled, was hard to come by, and many of the universities have either no Web presence or Web sites that are devoid of information.

Of the 22 members of the Arab League, he said, only 10 had ministries of education, and in the other countries the universities didn't appear to be accountable to anybody. Only in Jordan, he said, do public universities charge tuition, leaving those in most of the region at the whim of national budgets. Governments have demonstrated little interest in developing standards of quality or adopting international ones, Mr. Billeh said. "There is no culture for accrediting programs of higher education, period." What he called "islands of excellence" do exist, but they must become a broader part of the regional educational culture, he said.

Graduates of universities in many Arab countries face unemployment in the double-digit rates, and fewer governments are resorting to the old strategy of bloating their bureaucracy and burdening the taxpayers to give young people jobs, conference speakers said. As a result, a few institutions are trying to

foster an entrepreneurial spirit. "If universities are only training people for existing companies," said Najib Zerouali, the minister of higher education in Morocco, "then they are not doing their job."

In a theme that has been sounded in many other parts of the world, some speakers heralded information technology as a field of commerce in which geographical position and natural resources matter less than knowledge and intellect, making it an arena in which Arab countries can compete. "We lost in the nuclear age, we lost in the space age," said Farouk el-Baz, the Egyptian-born director of Boston University's Center for Remote Sensing, and a champion of scientific research in the Arab world. "The information age has beckoned, but we can't enter it unless we act."

Abdalaziz al-Sugair, head of the Advanced Electronics Company, an electronics-design and manufacturing business in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, said he has built an enterprise in which 78 percent of the employees are Saudi, in a country that depends heavily on foreign labor and expertise. Graduates of Saudi universities contradict the stereotype of spoiled rich kids who don't show up for work and expect to start out in management, he said. They are willing to work their way up. But while they may have a great deal of technical knowledge in fields like engineering, he added, they have weak computer skills and a lack of business training in marketing and accounting.

What's more, he said, Saudi college graduates are not as fluent in English as they need to be in international business. He encouraged Saudi and other Arab universities to introduce job-oriented courses, in which skills like time management and a sense of striving for excellence could be taught. He also encouraged universities to forge connections to the global corporate world, using adjunct-faculty members and summer internships for students.

He and others at the meeting also emphasized that graduates need to be able to speak and write with more clarity and confidence -- echoing the desires of a good many American employers. "Engineers don't like to write, but it is essential," said Yahya al-Salqan, an associate professor at Al Quds University, an Arab institution in Jerusalem, who is also president of the West Bank-based Jaffa.Net Computer Systems. Engineers, he said, have to leave clear instructions for those who have to maintain the software the engineers write. "The software they come up with has to be maintained by totally different individuals," he said.

Driss Laraki, a Moroccan high-technology consultant, said that when he has a job opening, he looks for an applicant "who can write sentences and has an open mind."

At the meeting, a backlash of sorts also emerged from those who felt that universities shouldn't turn into assembly lines producing "robots" that

employers then pluck off a conveyor belt. Undergraduates could profitably spend a little time questioning the meaning of their existence, some participants suggested, in remarks reminiscent of curricular debates in the United States. After a luncheon panel of recent graduates, who said universities should do more to help students with resume writing and job placement, Samir Khalaf, a professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut, stood up and said he was disappointed. "Education is more than programming people for jobs," he declared. The university has recently adopted a core curriculum that requires history graduates to take science courses and engineers to dip into the humanities.

But the meeting here, by design, was tilted toward those trying to overcome the high unemployment rates in the Arab world, and toward those with a thirst for more technology.

At the end of a session on improving technology training at universities, an interpreter who had been translating between Arabic and English for members of the audience left his booth in the back of a conference room to plead for more Arabic works on the Internet, so that more people in the region could be included in the technology revolution.

"What is the Arabic word for server?" he asked. "I don't know."