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# CONFUSION, CRISIS AND CHANGE IN THE ARAB WORLD

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*The current unrest and dramatic power shifts occurring in the Arab world may spark new opportunities for international education to prosper in the region. Key factors instrumental to their success are highlighted here, together with examples of current international collaborations working to improve educational systems for the newly empowered citizens.*

The world has recently been witnessing – or rather, is still witnessing – a wave of popular uprisings in the Arab world against long standing regimes. Television broadcasts and newspapers have brought us the overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt, a raging civil war in Libya, with ongoing unrest being reported from Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Most sitting governments in the other Arab states are following these events with apprehension, although some actively support uprisings in other countries.

Arab governments received loud wake-up calls from their citizens, especially from the younger generations that grew up with social media. Twitter, Facebook and other networks have provided a means of rallying people that the regimes could not counter. Social media swept away all-powerful politicians like Hosni Mubarak, something previously unimaginable. No one expected that

and conversant with the latest apps and social media, but simply because of their sheer numbers. People under 30 make up between 50% and 60% of the population in most Arab states. Coupled with high unemployment rates, mostly in the non-oil exporting countries, it is clear that the youth represent a powerful force that Arab politicians can no longer ignore.

#### **INTERNATIONAL STUDY OPPORTUNITIES**

Many young people in the Arab world now demand a better life. Higher education is seen as the key pathway to achieving success, so we may assume that students will be looking for study opportunities, either at home or abroad. Can that demand be met? Looking at the Gulf Area, younger generations will not lack opportunities: the International Exhibition & Conference on Higher Education (IECHE), which was held in April 2011, in Riyadh, attracted more than 250 000 visitors and had 428 inter-

therefore, one wonders whether Saudi Arabia would not want to take the stage as regional education hub for the Arab world.

What about the non oil-rich countries though? The 2008 World Bank report *The road not travelled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*, may be three years old, but is still relevant in many respects. In some MENA countries, national universities lack the appeal of international education, so there is a tradition that students travel overseas, a route mainly open to the elite. In other countries, gaining education abroad is highly restricted by the regime. What is clear is that participation in higher education ought to increase, be it at home or abroad. Quality issues exist, such as the modernisation of curricula and the training of staff, which ought to be taken up in earnest. This also tallies with the findings of a recent US-Islamic World Forum meeting, which took place in April 2011 in Washington; the proceedings of that meeting were due to be published by the Brookings Institute, by June 2011.

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Mubarak's son would not succeed him. It is, of course, unclear how events on the political front will evolve. What is clear, though, is that the citizens – and more particularly, the younger generations in the Arab world – have claimed the stage. Not just because they are well educated

national exhibitors (Australia 29, Canada 39, China 30, France 17, Japan 18, Saudi Arabia 53, Turkey 18, UK 62, USA 53) and thousands of congress participants from all over the world. Saudi Arabia is clearly investing heavily in education – some 25% of the country's GNP – and

#### **INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

The EU has been working in cooperation with the Arab world for quite some time, but this may have passed most people largely unnoticed. In November 1995, the Barcelona declaration signalled the beginning of official EU cooperation

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on a number of themes, including social, cultural and humanitarian partnership. In 2008, this 'Barcelona Process' was continued under the name 'Union for the Mediterranean' (UoM). Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes are now being offered through delegations in many Arab states – running from Algeria to Yemen,<sup>1</sup> together with projects in the field of education, dealing – *inter alia* – with staff training. What's more, there's the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI), based in Slovenia. EMUNI is one of the six priority areas of the Union for the Mediterranean. It was established as an international network of universities – the Euro-Med University network – which, it is hoped, will contribute to the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education, Science and Research Area. The 2010 General Assembly of EMUNI<sup>2</sup> counted 179 organisations (HEIs and other organisations) from 38 countries. EMUNI was awarded an Extended Erasmus University Charter in December 2009. This Erasmus University Charter provides the general framework for all European cooperation activities which a higher education institution may carry out within the Erasmus programme.

There's no doubt that EMUNI will grow in importance now, with the current changing landscape in the Arab world. However, there is more to internationalisation with the Arab world than EU policies. The Arab European Universities Association (AEUA),<sup>3</sup> established in 1998, brings together the

European University Association (EUA) and the Association of Arab Universities (AARU). AEUA has been organising annual Presidents' meetings on an ad-hoc basis for quite some time. Between 3- 6 July 2011, AEUA will be staging its presidents' meeting in Groningen, the Netherlands, and it is set to be the biggest AEUA meeting to date. Speakers include the Saudi Arabian Minister of Higher Education, his Dutch counterpart, chief representatives from AARU, the Dutch-Flemish accreditation organisation NVAO, presidents from universities in Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Sweden, the Netherlands and Yemen, plus the CEO of the Netherlands-based natural gas and energy trader GasTerra. Many participating HEIs aim to foster collaboration with partner institutions, leading to staff exchanges, curricular reform and so forth. Themes for the AEUA Presidents' Meeting will be quality assurance and accreditation; governance; internationalisation of higher education; and the issue of the labour market link with higher education.

#### THE NETHERLANDS

Recruitment within the Arab world is a further example of existing international collaboration. Many countries have been active in this field already: predominantly the UK, USA, Canada and Australia – the ones that also accounted for the biggest number of booths at IECHE last April in Riyadh. The Netherlands is a relative newcomer to this field: earlier

this year, the Holland Arab Education Consortium (HAEC) was established; a joint effort of the universities of Groningen, Leiden, Maastricht, Twente and Wageningen.<sup>4</sup> HAEC undertakes joint cooperation with Arab HEIs and the recruitment of students, with the focus currently on Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The disciplines that the HAEC partners are actively seeking for cooperation in the Arab region are medicine, IT and engineering, but other disciplines may be added as the consortium evolves. The Netherlands Ministry of Science actively supports HAEC, which may turn out to be a huge bonus when it comes to striking first contacts – in most Arab countries, the higher education sector is still, by and large, public, and government support is the yard stick against which foreign HEIs may be measured. This is especially useful when it comes to long-lasting partnerships, like the partnerships established by HAEC members Groningen and Maastricht with HEIs in Saudi Arabia in 2006. For curriculum and staff development, Groningen signed two large contracts last April, in Medicine and Computer Science.

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1. [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/web\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/web_en.htm)

2. <http://www.emuni.si/en/strani/419>

3. [www.AEUA.net](http://www.AEUA.net)

4. [www.haec.nl](http://www.haec.nl)

5. <http://www.zawya.com/middle-east/education>