



UNIVERSITIES AS KEY PARTNERS FOR DEVELOPING GOOD GOVERNANCE PRACTICES IN MENA

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Introduction: In October 2009, the World Bank, together with the European Investment Bank, the Governments of Egypt, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, and the City of Marseille, launched the Marseille Center for Mediterranean Integration (MCMCI). The Center will facilitate access to best knowledge and practices and improve cooperation to support development policies geared towards greater integration and convergence in the Mediterranean Region.

MCMCI will offer a platform for public and independent institutions from the region to discuss these challenges, learn from each other and strengthen local, national and regional capacities to manage interdependence and other developmental challenges. Among these challenges is that of good governance and this Quick Note is based on a speech given at one of MCMCI's first forays into this area with a focus on the governance of universities and its broader impact on the good governance agenda in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

MENA and the Governance Challenge: According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) produced by DEC and WBI,² the MENA region scores low on Voice and Accountability, an aggregate indicator that measures perceptions of citizens' ability to

participate in selecting their government, possibility of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and access to free and independent media. Therefore, improving transparency and accountability are key obstacles to overcome in MENA in order to succeed in improving Governance for Development.

Although MENA has important universities that have high academic and technical standards, they are not exempt from the governance and accountability constraints observed in the overall MENA context. Most higher education systems are highly centralized, with little authority given in terms of how to appoint their staff, how to manage their budgets and even on what programs to offer. Along with limited decision-making power, they also lack accountability measures. For universities to operate as independent institutions, with freedom of expression and independent capacity to create and disseminate knowledge, they need to have more transparent governing arrangements.

MENA and the Youth Challenge: The Middle East and North Africa is a youthful region. With about two thirds of the region's population below the age of 24, MENA is facing an unprecedented 'youth bulge.' The large youth population is the result of high fertility rates between 1970 and 2000, and while growth rates are slowing down, the region will continue to have one of the world's youngest populations in the next decade. It is a region with an old and rich past – but, as noted, it is a region with a very large number of children and young adults who are yearning for the type of education that will make it possible for them to reap the full benefits of the global economy

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in the 21st century. The challenge is formidable and it is also urgent: these young people are anxiously waiting to be educated and to be trained. Each year of delay in the necessary reforms is not only a lost year, but also translates into a huge loss of talent and a huge loss of opportunities for the youth- and with serious implications for social and political stability

Reforming Higher Education: The process of reforming higher education systems is challenging and the record – on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea – has been mixed. There have been successes – and there have been failures. There have been different levels of progress, different levels of commitment, and different levels of achievements.

One of the key challenges ahead for countries on both sides of the Mediterranean has been to improve the governance of the higher education system, to tackle issues such as university autonomy, quality assurance, financing, accountability, etc. The Marseille Conference on Universities as Key Partners for Developing Good Governance practices in MENA, held on December 16-17, 2009 was not only an opportunity to share knowledge on this important topic – it was also a chance to move the agenda forward, to gather the ideas and experiences that will inform concrete decisions and will translate into action in the very near future. The young people in the MENA region cannot afford much more time to elapse before concrete improvements take place in the way higher education is delivered across the region.

Against this backdrop, in his Opening Remarks, Emmanuel Mbi expressed these three key remarks:

- First, Universities, as places of learning, have developed the type of extensive and thorough knowledge that can inform decisions on how best to reform higher education systems. Universities are also places for exchange of ideas: the rich history of the Mediterranean world is a clear example of the importance of such exchanges, with the incessant back-and-forth of ideas between its various corners and its various centers of knowledge. And

finally, universities are obvious stakeholders in the reform, and their ownership of the reform agenda is hence critical for success.

- Second, we at the World Bank are very interested in learning from both academics and practitioners, from both OECD and non-OECD perspectives. The topics that will be discussed are complex ones, and require a confrontation of viewpoints and mutual learning – in the best academic tradition. The end result should be new and better ideas on how to help transform governance of the higher education systems in the Middle East and North Africa region.
- Third, we need to adopt a very pragmatic approach. We all know that the challenges are in many respects formidable, and will take time to address. What is at stake is not only to change a set of regulations, but often to change the way people think about the role of universities and the way higher education systems can be best managed. We also know that higher education reform is a sensitive topic. Political leaders need to approach the issue with caution. And we know that there is no one-size-fits-all, that each country and each system is different and that actions need to be adjusted to each specific situation. Hence, we need to make a conscious effort to remain as grounded as possible, and to focus on identifying practical ways to start moving forward – small or not-so-small steps that can be taken now and that would make a difference.

The Relevance of Universities in Addressing the Governance Agenda: Universities are relevant institutions in promoting economic growth and civil society participation; not only for their capacity to create and disseminate knowledge, but also as organizations that attract talented people, inject new ideas, enrich cultural life and are regarded as encompassing the whole social fabric of which they are part of.

Although none of the universities in the region are in any of the rankings of the world's top universities, there are key universities that can

play an important role in providing leadership in terms of governance reform in the university system, and be an entry point for wider dissemination and practice of transparency and accountability at different levels of public and private institutions.

On the **government** side, a key role lies in strengthening the governance capacity at local and community levels so as to deploy its enabling powers more effectively to promote a process of social learning among local institutions.

Until now, the **countries** that have been more involved in higher education governance reforms with the Bank's support are Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and West Bank and Gaza. Through the Skills Employability and Labor Mobility Program, the Marseille Center for Mediterranean Integration (MCFI) seeks to expand the number of countries that would benefit from these reforms, and continue its support to Universities that would be interested in pursuing their reform efforts.

Through a technical assistance program, MCFI seeks to **improve transparency in the way decisions that affect Universities are made** by enlarging the number of stakeholders concerned in the decision-making process. Another objective is to **improve and enlarge the information dissemination efforts** concerning all aspects of University Management such as web-based information on Budgets, Accreditation and or Evaluation results, employability of graduates, campus facilities, research projects, and other relevant information for students and families. Finally, the program aims **to build the capacity of at least one key** and strategic University in each participating country.

To carry out the above, a three year process is proposed. The regional seminar that took place on December 16-17 in Marseille was the kick-off of this program.

By implementing a set of reforms conducive to transforming the way decisions are made in Universities, we expect that important institutional examples and leadership will be provided for other public and private institutions to follow. As institutions devoted to forming young people with the skills and values required in productive and democratic societies, universities have a wide range of potential spill-over effects on a sizeable population. University students will learn and witness transparency and accountability first hand. In this way, these reforms and initiatives may generate an important regional network of institutions in the region, and the impact that their activities will have can be multiplied and disseminated to wider audiences. With the internationalization of higher education, this network can be linked to best practice governance initiatives in other parts of the world.

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