

## An EU-Arab Partnership to Foster Entrepreneurship Education in the Middle East: The ASPIRE Program

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**Abstract.** This paper demonstrates how the higher education sectors of three countries in the Middle East have benefited by forming a partnership with six universities in the European Union under the framework of an EU-TEMPUS program. This cooperation has created a consortium called ASPIRE, an acronym that stands for “Achieving Sustainable Programmes in Regeneration and Entrepreneurship: Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories. The ASPIRE consortium’s main focus is the development and promotion of education programs in the field of entrepreneurship. This area is seen as an important catalyst to economic development and prosperity in the Middle East and is an important topic that needs to be addressed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and in a region where youth make up the majority of the population. The paper summarizes the experiences of Arab partner universities and concludes by focusing on how the ASPIRE program has benefited entrepreneurship education in one of the partner universities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The ASPIRE program is a good example of how universities in developed and developing countries can join forces to share experiences and resources to foster a much needed global entrepreneurial mind set amongst university graduates.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, higher education, EU-ASPIRE, Jordan, Middle East

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### 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is an elusive term that is often associated with the recognition of opportunity, an element of risk and the development of new ventures. It is a driving force for economic development, job creation, encouraging innovation and social empowerment. It also contributes to personal development and self-fulfillment. There are a number of factors that play a major role in the decision to start a new business. These include the presence of a market opportunity, government incentives, funding and financial obstacles, the macroeconomic environment, education and training, availability of mentors, skills and knowledge to exploit a value added idea and the ability to create and launch a new business (Gartner, 1985; Luthje & Franke, 2004; Liñan & Chen, 2009). The past decade has seen policy makers in both developed and developing countries focus on entrepreneurial activity as a means of alleviating the welfare of its citizens (European Commission, 2003, 2010).

With such a focus on entrepreneurial activity, education and training in this field has been discussed by many authors (Dickson, Solomon & Weaver, 2008; Fayolle, Gailly & Lassas-Clerc, 2006). Entrepreneurial education is not just about teaching someone to run a business. It’s an holistic approach that helps to empower and develop individuals to be creative and to recognize and exploit market opportunities, thus creating economic value and helping to contribute to social development (Sanchez, 2011). For this reason, it has been part of the curricula of US higher education systems for the past 50 years, often adapting to meet

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the emerging needs of real world businesses (Wilson, 2008). The literature on the importance of formal education as a prerequisite to entrepreneurial initiatives is divided into two camps. On one side advocates claim that education can improve a person's creativity and provide them with the necessary skills and mind set that is able to see and grasp opportunities (Lühje & Farnke, 2004; Dickson, Solomon & Weaver, 2008; Gural et.al, 2010). On the other hand, some researchers argue that formal education kills the entrepreneurial spirit by placing too much emphasis on conformism-which in turn restricts creativity and innovation and makes individuals more risk averse and less tolerant to ambiguity. There have also been arguments that entrepreneurship education focuses too much on the entrepreneurial processes such as opportunity recognition and marketing strategies but does not focus enough on developing skills and attributes needed for success (Gural et.al, 2010).

Formal education was found to be one of the most influential factors in choosing entrepreneurship as a career option (Henderson & Robertson, 2000; Mohammed et al, 2014). Recent research has also found that young university graduates between the ages of 25–34 years show the highest inclination towards starting up their own business (Bosma et al. 2008, Liñán, Urbano & Guerrero, 2011; Wyne, 2014). Furthermore, a study conducted by Pajarinen et al.(2006) found that academically educated entrepreneurs are often more innovative and better able to use modern business tools and incorporate technology into their businesses over less educated counterparts. So while the debate continues, one cannot deny the significant impact that universities have on the entrepreneurial intentions of young minds (Dabic et al, 2012; Packham et. al, 2010; Schwarz et. al, 2009, Cheng et. al, 2009). Today there is a strong call for reform and embedding entrepreneurship education into education systems worldwide. This is seen as a means of encouraging innovation, risk taking, creativity and critical thinking skills that will lead to job creation and sustainable economic growth (Borozan et.al, 2008; European Commission, 2010; Domereschi, 2013). Therefore, a strong focus within entrepreneurship education should be on the process of new venture creation and creating graduates with a global mind set who are job creators rather than job seekers.

## **2. Education in the Arab World**

There are diverse differences in education systems in the Arab World. Most of the education offered is based on rote learning, in often overcrowded classrooms, where critical thinking and the ability to think out of the box are not encouraged. Competition to secure a seat in a university is very fierce and often getting into university is a matter of life and death. Unfortunately, a large majority of education systems in the Arab World are not in tune with market needs and this creates a surplus of unemployable graduates with bleak hopes for the future ( World Bank, 2007). Fewer than 10% of universities in the MENA region offer entrepreneurial courses. Just 17 universities in the region have centers for entrepreneurship and only 5 offer a major in entrepreneurship (WEF, 2011). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and in a region where youth make up the majority of the population, job creation through entrepreneurship is an important factor for alleviating the economic welfare of Arab citizens.

### **2.1. The EU-ASPIRE Program**

Achieving Sustainable Programmes in Regeneration and Entrepreneurship: Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories (ASPIRE) was established as a result of a 1.1 million Euro grant that was awarded to Staffordshire University in the UK under the umbrella of EU funded Tempus projects. It involves 12 partner universities from the Middle East and the EU: Staffordshire University (UK), University of Huddersfield (UK), University of Bari (Italy), Technological Educational Institute of Thessaly (Greece), Vrije Universiteit (Belgium), Université Pantheon-Assas, Paris II (France), Princess Sumaya University for Technology (Jordan), Al Hussain Bin Talal University (Jordan), Beirut Arab University (Lebanon), Modern University for Business and Science (Lebanon), Birzeit University (Palestine) and Al Quds University (Palestine). The project was initially meant to run for a 36 month period from October 2010-October 2013, however it was extended to May 2014. The major aims of the project involves:

- Capacity building in the form of human capital formation which will contribute to sustainable economic development in the Levant region.

- Refining/modernizing the concept of entrepreneurship education curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in the Arab partner universities.

The four specific objectives for entrepreneurship education within the program involves:

- Embedding entrepreneurship in the curricula regardless of discipline and through the delivery of a 3 module enterprise pathway
- Designing and delivering jointly taught Entrepreneurship Masters programs in each partner country
- Promoting the Bologna System together with Quality Assurance (QA) procedures, ECTS and Diploma Supplement
- To improve the human capacity of partner universities through 3-month study opportunities at EU partner universities.

## 2.2. What has been accomplished in the partner universities from the Middle East?

In general the following activities have been realised under the ASPIRE program.

- Field monitoring visits by EU partners to discuss the progress of the project and challenges encountered during implementation
- Staff mobility (EU partners have hosted staff from the Arab universities to develop expertise and capacity building)
- Enterprise Pathway Development Workshops have been conducted at various levels to develop elective modules in entrepreneurship at the undergraduate level
- Development of Masters program in Entrepreneurship (jointly taught by both Arab and EU staff)
- Workshops on the Bologna System and how it can be implemented in Arab education systems
- Internal Quality Control and Monitoring Visits
- A substantial amount of computers, IT equipment, books and other resources have been purchased and donated to the Arab partners

The six partner universities have different success stories with regards to the ASPIRE program, with some being able to benefit more than the others.

**Beirut Arab University (Lebanon):** Center for Entrepreneurship (CFE) was established based on BAU's first visit to the Business Village at Straffordshire; Entrepreneurship education started as an elective that quickly spread to other faculties; collaboration with local high schools and Summer Camp activities run by the CFE; provide training workshops around Lebanon; Start-Up Weekend sponsored by the Kauffman Foundation and the Lebanese Ministry of Economy; set up an Entrepreneurship Club for like-minded students.

**Modern University for Business and Science (Lebanon):** Masters in Business Administration with a 3 module entrepreneurship pathway- double diploma program with Straffordshire University; Bologna criteria applied to Masters course and able to offer Diploma Supplement; established a fully equipped Entrepreneurship Business Center that offers coaching, mentoring and business plan training; opening a course in 'Sustainability Skills for Business' at the undergraduate level.

**Birzeit University (Palestinian Territories):** Executive Program in Entrepreneurship was established and offered through the Center for Continuing Education (9 modules); Entrepreneurship Development and Business Start-up Program was offered under the Najjad Zeenni IT Center of Excellence focusing mostly on ICT based start-ups; opportunities for seed funding for qualified entrepreneurs were created through the entrepreneur-investor matchmaking program; formed partnerships with the BID Network and SPARK; organized National Business Plan Competitions and have outreach and capacity building programs to encourage entrepreneurship in the local community.

**Al Quds University (Palestinian Territories):** Due to bureaucratic restrictions that could slow down the process of establishing a new program, this university chose to establish an MBA program with a concentration on entrepreneurship ( by November 2014 it will become a degree in itself); partnered with SPARK to develop programs and activities that empower young people to lead their post conflict societies into prosperity.

**Al Hussain Bin Talal University (Jordan):** Set up an elective course in entrepreneurship, that is available to all students and a course in Entrepreneurship and Small Business for Business and Economics majors; the Business School is currently planning to enhance the delivery of these course with the use of Virtual Learning Environment; weren't able to start the Masters program in entrepreneurship due to not being able to meet the accreditation requirements of the Ministry of Higher Education. To offset this, they are working to partner with PSUT in the existing MBE program.

The consortium members agree that the most under-utilized area of the program was with regards to 3 month staff mobility to EU universities. This particular program objective wasn't feasible in practice as most academics in Europe are on holiday in the summer months. Therefore staff mobility within the program was limited and for much shorter periods of time.

### **3. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan**

It is a time of unprecedented change in the Arab World and while the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has managed to weather the political storm that has wrecked havoc in neighbouring Arab states, it still faces many demographic and environmental challenges both at home and abroad. The Jordanian population is expected to reach 7.9 million by July 2014. More than half of the population is under the age of 24. The unemployment rate amongst youth (those between 15-24 years of age) stands at nearly 30% (CIA, 2014). Poor in natural resources, Jordan relies heavily on foreign aid, remittances from Jordanians living abroad and the income from the services sector which accounts for more than 70% of GDP. The steady influx of refugees over the past decade and in particular the Syrians fleeing from the conflict across the border, is draining national resources and further weakening the economy. Additionally, there is rising public anger over wide spread corruption, economic austerity measures and inadequate political reforms (World Bank, 2013). With a growing young and dynamic population, one of the Kingdom's principle goals is to increase access to higher education and establish a knowledge-based society. Jordan's steady investment in education over the years has resulted in a dramatic increase in literacy rates to a level of 95.9%. The country is the highest spender on education in the region, investing more than 20% of its GDP. Currently there are 10 public, 17 private and 51 Community Colleges offering higher education in the Kingdom. Around 230,000 students are currently enrolled in public and private universities (MOHE, 2014). Jordan's human capital combined with entrepreneurial activity is believed to be a pathway to growth and prosperity not only at home but in the wider region (UNESCO, 2010). Entrepreneurship in Jordan is fueled by the boom in the ICT sector and with the right combination of encouragement and protectionist measures it can spread through other sectors, bringing prosperity to all sections of the population. In Jordan, fostering entrepreneurship has priority in the national agenda (QRCE, 2014) and education in this respect is believed to significantly impact the creation of new business ventures (UNESCO, 2010).

#### **3.1. Princess Sumaya University for Technology (PSUT), Amman, Jordan.**

Princess Sumaya University for Technology (PSUT) is the only private, non-profit university in Jordan and was established in 1991. It is the academic arm of the El Hassan Science City and the medium of instruction is in English. A total of 1270 students are studying in four different departments within the King Talal Faculty of Business and Technology. The university prides itself on establishing niche degree programs that are highly sought by the industry and its graduates are known to be amongst the best in the Kingdom. The university "strives to create a culture of entrepreneurship among its students" and this is reflected in its strategic goals and strong ties with the marketplace.

#### **3.2. What has PSUT achieved as a result of the ASPIRE program?**

- An enterprise pathway for undergraduate students has been established with 2 modules being piloted in the Department of Accounting- Entrepreneurship and Entrepreneurship and Innovation. These have been extended as electives to other departments in the faculty. In the near future, the module in Entrepreneurship will become a core requirement within the Business Faculty and upon popular demand, offered as an elective for other faculties.
- The Masters program in Business Entrepreneurship (MBE) started in the Spring semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. Currently there are 3 cohorts, with the 4<sup>th</sup> starting in October 2014.

- The success of the program in such a short period of time has led to the Queen Rania Center for Entrepreneurship (QRCE) being transferred to the administration of the Department of Business and Technology at PSUT. This Center will provide further training, mentoring and incubator facilities for PSUT students and will increase its existing outreach and capacity building activities to Jordanian high schools and the local community, particularly in rural areas.
- MOU's have been signed with Jordanian training centers, local NGO's and angel investors. Partnerships with local industries are being negotiated to provide coaching/mentoring opportunities and job placements for PSUT students and graduates.
- First Entrepreneurship Day was held to disseminate information about entrepreneurship education and Jordanian organisations that provide support and funding for start-ups. Jordanian success stories from different industries were presented. For the first time, the university will be participating in the Global Entrepreneurship Week in November 2014. The Department of Business and Technology is preparing to launch a country wide "Start-Up Weekend" for the next academic year.
- Currently, based on the experiences of teaching staff, feedback from students and the industry the Masters program that was started as part of ASPIRE is being refined to create a more dynamic, hands-on program that is in tune with both student and market needs.

#### **4. Conclusion: What Happens Next?**

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of the economy in all three Arab countries involved in the ASPIRE program. University students see "lack of funding" , "lack of technical know-how" and "economic/regional instability" as their major obstacle in taking a step towards becoming an entrepreneur (Mehtap, 2014). While SMEs are known to promote economic and social development by creating jobs and income, many SMEs in the partner Arab countries see "just surviving" as their major challenge. In order for these establishments to grow and contribute to the economic development of their respective countries, they must be led by dynamic entrepreneurs who are skilled , innovative and able to recognise opportunities. Entrepreneurial education that focuses on building skills, behaviours and attitudes required by the marketplace and action oriented learning models is the foundation for creating an environment that is conducive to entrepreneurial activity. Therefore, ASPIRE should be the beginning, not the end of entrepreneurial education initiatives in the partner Arab countries and the wider MENA region. Developing know-how through practical entrepreneurial education is only the first step. Next we need to work on changing the mindset of our conservative, collectivist societies and breaking down stereotypes and taboos. We are societies that don't like risk, are discouraged by our families and friends and have a fear of failure. To do this governments and policy makers need to work closely with the media and different stakeholders to promote entrepreneurship from the grassroots level and up. This calls for public awareness campaigns promoting existing national entrepreneurial initiatives. It also calls for a revision of traditional curricula at all levels and for entrepreneurial education to be embedded into the classroom experience from a very early stage. It also requires easing regulations in the Arab World in order to encourage innovation and the flow of capital and funding. There is a need to address the issue of patents and intellectual property rights by revising administrative systems and business laws. Private sector engagement needs to be encouraged by fostering university and industry partnerships. Support should be provided for high impact research at higher educational institutions that can link technology and innovation to industries in the Arab World and beyond. The people of the Arab world need to realise that entrepreneurial activity is not restricted to SMEs and that it is in fact a global mindset that can be taught and can flourish at all levels and in all types of industries.

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