

Network Experience II.2

Ma'an Alliance: towards more civically engaged Arab universities

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At a time when change is sweeping the Arab region, universities have a vital mission to prepare young citizens for the tasks of building their societies. Universities themselves are examining ways to become more active 'institutional citizens' as well, by engaging with their immediate communities, offering the expertise of faculty and administrators, and contributing to policy reform projects. The Ma'an Arab University Alliance for Civic

Engagement brings together Arab universities with the collective goal of enhancing civic engagement in higher education. Founded in 2008, the Alliance encourages peer learning and sharing of experience and offers resources for curricular development and research in this area. The Alliance currently has twelve member universities in eight countries of the region.

ORIGINS

Decades of overcrowding, inadequate budgets and rote learning had distanced many Arab campuses from the worldwide movement towards a more engaged pedagogy. However students were lobbying for greater participation in the community and some faculties responded by encouraging clubs, class field visits, and community activities. At another level, faculties at national universities have

traditionally been called upon by governing bodies to provide their research know-how towards the solution of pressing social problems. Offices of Community Outreach formed at some national universities, but restrictions were enforced on political and civic engagement if seen as threatening to the existing regimes. A further challenge is that some administrators and academics still view civic engagement as an alien idea, and one that interferes with a purely academic environment.

In order to connect those within Arab universities with a commitment to civic engagement, a regional conference was held in October 2008, hosted by the American University in Cairo (AUC) in partnership with Innovations in Civic Participation. Titled 'Tadamunn: Towards Civic Engagement in Arab Education', the conference brought together over fifteen regional universities from Sudan to Palestine to the Arab Gulf for three days of intense discussions and planning. Administrators, faculty members and students attended and worked in parallel groups to devise recommendations for future action. The energy and ideas generated at Tadamunn – especially by the student participants – became the first step towards establishment of a network of Arab universities committed to advancing higher education civic engagement in the region.

Following one of the main recommendations, the Gerhart Center at AUC in partnership with the global Talloires Network launched the Ma'an Arab University Alliance, a network to strengthen the community engagement activities of member institutions. Among the envisioned activities are documenting creative campus programmes; demonstrating impact; advancing dialogue on the civic roles of universities in their environments; and holding seminars for peer learning and skill transfer in areas such as community-based learning pedagogy. One immediate activity was the formation of a website to which members may post useful materials and publications in Arabic and English.

THE VISION AND VALUES

In order to join Ma'an, the president or chancellor of a university within the Arab region writes a letter of commitment that covers the following principles.

The Ma'an Arab University Alliance is a regional association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social respon-

sibilities of Arab higher education. We work together to implement the recommendations of the Ma'an Declaration in the Arab World, working within the Talloires Network to build a global movement of engaged universities and citizens.

The Ma'an Alliance is unique in that it is a network of universities specific to the region. We work with the knowledge and understanding that civic engagement has multiple facets. In our work we promote the following values:

- Respect for mutual learning between institutions of higher education and communities
- Application of standards of excellence to community-engagement work
- Aspiration for diversity in both our membership and approach to civic engagement
- Empowerment of individuals and groups to strengthen relationships between higher education and society
- Scholarly recognition of the value of service and action in teaching and research

With the establishment of the following goals:

- Promote and expand civic engagement programmes on campus through teaching, research, and community service
- Facilitate the exchange of best practices, as well as educational and financial resources between member institutions
- Encourage students to collaborate with university administrators to increase civic engagement programmes

MAIN ACTIVITIES

The Ma'an Arab University Alliance aims to create a movement of civic engagement and social responsibility among institutions of higher education in the Arab World. Collectively, this can form an effective lobby advocating for civic engagement activities between the university and the community, and supporting the exchange of best practices among its members and with others within the region.

Ma'an's first official event was 'Expanding Civic Engagement in Arab Universities: A Peer Learning Workshop for Faculty' hosted by the American University of Beirut in 2009. The seminar was attended by over 30 academic administrators and faculty members. A subset of Ma'an member universities met in June of 2011 in Madrid during the international Talloires conference on university civic engagement.

MEMBERSHIP

Members of the Alliance commit themselves to action on both institutional and collective levels. Members agree to expand and strengthen their civic engagement and social responsibility work through teaching, learning, research, and service. They also agree to share information on their civic engagement policies and programmes with the membership of the Alliance.

The following institutions have signed their commitment to the goals of the Ma'an Alliance and are therefore simultaneously members of the Alliance and the global Talloires Network:

American University in Cairo
Qatar University
American University in Beirut
Lebanese American University, Lebanon
Notre Dame University-Louaize, Lebanon
Saint-Joseph University, Lebanon
Effat University, Saudi Arabia
Ahfad University, Sudan
Al Quds University, Palestine
Bir Zeit University, Palestine
The Dubai School of Government, UAE
American University of Kuwait
Arab International University, Syria

PARTNERSHIPS

To achieve its goals, the Ma'an Alliance has established partnerships with key actors in civic engagement matters, namely the Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP) and the Gerhart Center.

ICP is a global leader in the field of youth civic engagement whose mission is to facilitate the generation of opportunities for young people to improve their communities and build essential skills for future success through civic engagement. ICP envisions a world where young people in every nation are actively engaged in improving their lives and their communities through civic participation (www.icicp.org, www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork).

The Gerhart Center is a university-based institution offering resources for the promotion of philanthropy and civic engagement in the Arab world. Established in 2006, the center aims to further the American University in Cairo's mission to advance social responsibility and active citizenship. The Center promotes social change in the Arab region through building a culture of effective giving and civic responsibility (<http://www.aucegypt.edu/RESEARCH/GERHART>).

STUDENT ROLES

Students play an important role in the expansion of civic engagement on their own campuses, so the Ma'an Alliance encourages students to participate in active dialogue between higher administration and faculty to share ideas on the implementation of innovative programmes.

During the October 2008 Tadamunn Conference, students discussed a variety of themes. They felt a lack of awareness about civic engagement at institutions in the Middle East and North Africa region. Many described the level of volunteerism at their institutions as low and believed that there is a gap between the faculty and local community. They also mentioned that students lacked creativity due to the curriculum at their university.

Their highest priority recommendations were to incorporate community-based learning courses in the curriculum; providing opportunities for post-graduation work and/or volunteering in public service; for universities to provide funds for student-led civic engagement projects, mentorship and support for

student leaders; and more open dialogue and communication with students.

Students felt it important to discuss motivations. They attributed students' participation to several factors including faith, personal experience(s), the sense of belonging to a social movement, and social interaction with peers. In addition, they debated whether volunteerism should be made mandatory in universities, presenting compelling arguments for and against this policy.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

The Ma'an Alliance hopes to become the premier and central resource for the Arab region on civic engagement practices in higher education.

The Ma'an Arab University Alliance brings together resources, experience, and experts from within the region to discuss successes and setbacks that are specific to the region and the culture. While the goals of both the Alliance and the Talloires Network are one and the same, approaches to the success of these goals will

vary widely from country to country and region to region. A cultural perspective on civic engagement is vital and absolutely necessary in order to understand civic engagement in the Arab region. Giving and social solidarity are deeply embedded in the culture of the region, but often seen as an individual charitable responsibility rather than a strategic institutional goal.

There are important signs of change. A number of public and private universities are establishing off-campus programmes, career placements and internships. At the same time, student clubs are lobbying for a more engaged relationship to local communities and problems. Community-based learning as a classroom method has over 40 faculty adherents and 56 courses at the AUC alone, with many more coming on board in Ma'an member universities.

Challenges remain in countries that are facing conflict or unfinished political transitions, but increasingly more voices are calling for higher education to live up to its responsibilities as a contributing member of the community and incubator of tomorrow's citizens.