



World-class education in the Arab region

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My aim tonight is to provide a short introduction on what might be done to improve the life chances of the demographic bulge in the Arab world, for the Arab region has the world's youngest populations. This is easy to say but more resonant when you consider that China already has a problem of an ageing population, whereas 50% of the Arab world is under the age of 25. I am also going to consider how we can get out of what has been described as the catch 22 of the Arab economy – that in order to develop a sustainable and diversified economy, a country must have a skilled workforce which requires an effective education system. But to develop an effective education system a country requires a strong economy to provide adequate funding – the danger is of a continuous downward cycle rather than an upward one.

A young population is a potential opportunity but it is also an enormous responsibility and despite many alarm bells over the last 10 years not yet enough is being done to realise this potential opportunity. Meanwhile the youth bulge continues to grow. For example Yemen and Iraq are amongst the countries in the world with the highest rates of fertility – meaning that the population will double within 30 years. Stop and think what that means in terms of schools, jobs, health centres and, in the case of Yemen, water.

When I was helping out on the Broader Middle East Initiative the economists told us that 100 million jobs would be needed within 10 years just to meet the population growth. That 10 years is now. And reports last year are saying the same thing: 85 million jobs are needed before 2020 just to meet population growth.

Another figure for 2020 worth bearing in mind is one recently published by McKinsey, which suggests that by the end of 2020 the world will be short of 40 million skilled jobs. This means that there will be jobs but they will be skilled jobs and at the same time there will not be enough low-skilled jobs to go round. This is not a new problem, but it is a real one. In 2004 there was a World Bank report on higher education in the world, called *Peril and Promise*. It recognised the challenges – and proposed as a solution the need to accelerate growth in the completion of secondary and tertiary education – this has happened to some extent but only to a limited degree. What we have seen in the run up to 2015 is that the world has concentrated on primary education – to fulfil the Millennium Development Goal which commits countries to ensuring that all boys and girls in the world will complete primary school. This is positive but it is not sufficient. It is clear now that what the experts call functional literacy – meaning that you won't forget how to read and write and that you can do something useful with your numeracy and literacy skills – like fill in a government form – you need to stay in education until the age of 15.

So the real danger is that the growing populations of the Arab world will continue to suffer unemployment and under-employment with accompanying social unrest and poverty.

So that's the big picture; what about the specifics?

There are to my view two different but linked problems. The first is the general level of literacy that I have already alluded to and the second is the quality of the tertiary sector. Both are, of course, linked to unemployment.

On literacy we can divide the Arab world into two groups of countries: one group with relatively low literacy, particularly Yemen, Morocco (65%); but also Egypt, Iraq, Algeria (70%); and another group with high literacy: Jordan, Lebanon, and the countries of the Gulf. This leaves two in-betweens of Tunisia (78%) and Syria (82%) and one anomaly, Libya (94%). If you don't mind we will discount Libya because the figures are Ghaddafi's and their reliability is questionable. All other figures come from UNICEF who carry out a comprehensive survey of different indicators, including education, every four years.

So we have a problem of the biggest countries, with the fastest growing populations with the highest levels of illiteracy. This is not surprising given that it is clear that the longer you keep girls in school the lower your rate of population growth, but it is a situation that requires tough action to change.

And worth noting also the cases of Tunisia and Iraq – because they are the myths of education the Arab world – the apparent jewels of state education but with relatively high levels of illiteracy. In Iraq the decline is terrifying. 40% of girls in rural areas are now illiterate. This is both a result and consequence of early marriage, high fertility rates and very low employment outside the home. It is all the more striking because in 1958 Iraq had nearly total literacy. The point here is that you have to keep investing in education because it is surprisingly easy to get into a backward cycle of decline.

OK, so illiteracy is one point and important for future employment, for trying to reduce population growth and for general well being. We have to hope the goals that will follow the Millennium Development Goals next year will contain a commitment for all boys and girls to stay at school until the age of 15.

The second point is the quality of the tertiary sector. Firstly I would note that there is a real lack of good vocational training throughout the Arab world. I would be very interested in your views on this. I am assuming that the kind of cultural attitude that we see in the Gulf where any manual labour – even skilled labour is looked down on – is not necessarily true for Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Iraq – all with long histories of skilled craftsmen. So it should be possible to do more to improve vocational training. Iran seems to be much better at this and is competing with the rest of the world in some of the global skills fairs. The only other country from the region that attended the world skills finals last year was the United Arab Emirates. All the recent reports on vocational training in the Arab world point to real problems of implementation. There have been commitments in Tunisia and Egypt but these have been interrupted either by crony-ism or by a failure of government investment. The good news is that there are good examples in the world of how to make a difference. Today we all have our eyes on Brazil for other reasons. But Brazil has multiplied its annual budget for vocational institutes tenfold since 2003 with the result that half a million students are now studying at federally financed technical institutes. This in turn has given an incentive to private companies to create training programmes in industry-specific disciplines. This could be one way of breaking out of the catch 22 of education in the Middle East – invest in vocational training.

And then there is the question of the quality of university education itself. In a recent speech Gordon Brown quoted a study that said that only between 10 – 20 % of graduates from developing countries were employable by international standards. I have looked very hard for the source of that quote without success but nevertheless it sounds plausible. McKinsey published a report last year, which was a result of an extensive survey of young graduates in the Arab world. They all reported real difficulties in finding a job but they also said that the education they received had not given them any skills. Now anyone with children who are young recent graduates in Europe will report much of the same problem. So what is different about the Arab world? Well, the so what is that population bulge that I started off with - those 100 million jobs that are needed. The so what is that the Arab world has the highest rate of

youth unemployment of any region in the world. Already today 30% of young people in the Arab world are unemployed and that is from a base where the work force is proportionately smaller than any other region in the world because women do not fully participate and where because of the lack of social security the real figures are likely to be much worse. And this disenchantment with education is important because it leads to general negativity. A study carried out in 2011 showed that 70% of young people in the Arab world would like to leave. That is a devastating indictment and a very negative comment on the future.

What to do?

Well, one approach is the direct one of encouraging the private sector to sponsor education specifically for employment, building on the idea of the importance of vocational training but extending it to university education. In Jordan, for example, the government is trying to get the private sector to sponsor their own courses at university with the skills they need in computer science, accountancy, engineering etc. That is one approach and to some extent the link between the private sector and education is the reason for a somewhat surprising finding from a report done by the World Economic Forum last year: that Lebanon scored within the top five countries of the world in maths and science teaching. The WEF report is a controversial survey of businessmen's attitudes to their countries' education. In that survey both Lebanon and the UAE come within the top ten countries worldwide in terms of positive assessments by their own businessmen. So businessmen in both countries think that the education system is sound. What do the two countries have in common? They both have a large private sector in education, both at school level and at university and both countries have dynamic private sectors. Now I am not in the least bit suggesting that there are no problems in either country - interestingly both have problems of Arabic language attainment and the top ranking schools and universities in both countries use European languages as the medium of teaching. But let's also be clear: a report by Brookings this year shows how bad the learning deficit is in Arab schools, including in Lebanon and the UAE, with only 48% of secondary school students meeting basic learning tests in numeracy and literacy. The proposed solution put forward by Brookings is that more teachers are urgently needed and that new graduates should be encouraged into teaching.

This links me nicely with the next point, which is how to encourage critical thinking at university and how to improve overall skills, learned there. If we look at the world's best entrepreneurs today, they are either geniuses who never finished university at all, or they are often people who studied the humanities and learned that by pushing the boundaries of enquiry they could find new solutions. Of course this is a very difficult nut to crack and I am not saying anything that has not already been recognised by UNESCO and its Arabic equivalent - ALECSO. But progress has been terribly slow. And while universities in Holland and the United States are recognising the value of liberal arts to the teaching of science and engineering - in what Khaled Fahmy, professor of History at the American University of Cairo, describes as the need to understand the context in which you are operating - so an engineer needs to know about society and the environment, an architect about how families and society interact and a doctor about how hospital management works, etc. While these developments are going on in advanced economies, the Arab world is in danger of falling behind again.

Brookings is right that a step change is needed - possibly through concentrating on teacher training but definitely in improving the overall experience of education at both school and university. All of us can play some part in our discussions with opinion leaders and politicians and try and get them to be more focussed on education - both at school, in encouraging vocational training and in improving university curricula. There are a number of different actors doing their best to create change. I have already mentioned a few of them: the World Bank, Brookings, Education for Employment. I am here today to represent the Alexandria Trust together with David French and Shady Arafa. I hope you will take some time to read more about us and help us contribute to a more positive future for Arab youth.

Frances Guy is currently Representative for U.N. Women in Iraq. Until May 2012, she was a member of the British Diplomatic Service. She joined the Diplomatic Service in 1986 and held numerous roles including, most recently, as the Foreign Secretary's envoy to the Syrian opposition. She was HM ambassador to Beirut from 2006 to 2011 and HM ambassador to Sana'a from 2001 to 2004.

Appendix: The Alexandria Trust

The Alexandria Trust was founded and core funded by Egyptian philanthropist Salah Khalil and a group of Arab business leaders. The Trust was registered as a charitable company in the UK in February 2012 and is based in London. It works across the Arab education sector by identifying and incubating strong projects capable of reaching sustainability within five years and of having a lasting impact on education reform and development in the region.

The Trust's first project, launched in March 2013, is Al Fanar Media, an online publication providing news and opinion on Arab higher education. See www.al-fanarmedia.org.

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