The Role of Universities as a Challenge and Opportunity for Intercultural Dialogue in Today's World

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In an epoch that has often been defined by its civilizational differences this conference is a clear reminder that there are many of us out there that seek to endorse proactive solutions to an unnecessary problem.

It is with this that 'Intercultural Dialogue' has become the obvious approach to help remove both real and ideological barriers in the contemporary world. It is a term that suggests openness, far greater than that of the globally pronounced 'multiculturalism' which has seemingly floundered by reinvigorating the social divisions it had tried to exclude. Most importantly it offers a sense of practicality to building relationships that goes beyond the rhetoricised notion of 'building bridges' as it is a means rather than just an end.

The Council of Europe (2003) for instance defines intercultural dialogue quite succinctly as '*an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the others global perception.'*

This statement provides us with a reminder that all dialogue and therefore knowledge is multifarious in its creation thus intimating that hierarchies of ideological opinion should not be pursued above equal cultural interaction. It should consequently be the goal of all who adhere to this principal that a separate sphere of influence continue to be created, an area where we can isolate incidences of common ground between different cultures and attempt to generate positive 'spillover' effects into other parts.

One could suggest that universities in this modern age are ideally placed to instigate a process of intercultural dialogue. They can, by harnessing both the intellectual content of their faculties and the youthful energy of students, engineer a forum through which practical and virtual initiatives can bring together a variety of disciplines that universally strengthen teaching, student skills, research plus technological and scientific innovations, thus ultimately leading to the expansion of knowledge and further understanding between societies.

We can be thankful that policy support for such has arrived and continues to be delivered from international bodies such as UNESCO whom in redefining educational goals in The World Declaration of Higher Education for the Twenty First Century (1998), emphasised educational plurality in order to improve standards globally. The International Association of Universities have also continued to influence proceedings following on from their 2002 conference on the 'Internationalisation of Higher Education' which promoted workshops on the mobility of staff and students, internationalisation of curriculum and intercultural dialogue on campus.

Focusing on practicality, support has also been aided by organizations such as Tempus who promote the improved modernisation and overall quality of education by financing joint schemes and projects that embark on educational reform in accordance with European Union objectives. An Najah National University for example has benefited from such a scheme where the establishment of an educational centre for Masters level students in the area of energy efficiency and clean energy has promoted a number of positives such as:

- Affiliations with other institutions; Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) Stockholm, Sweden and the Technical University of Berlin, Germany.

- Exchange of staff for training purposes.

- Curriculum planning generated from within the initiative.

We can also mention Erasmus within this context as another European Union educational subsidiary that is specifically designed to develop long term inter-institutional cooperation by supporting the mobility of staff and students alike, along with the broader aim of improving social and economic developments.

Specific to the Euro-Mediterranean region UNIMED is one organisation that upholds the concept of integration through technological, scientific and cultural collaboration. An Najah itself has previously participated in Euro-Med Heritage I and II in partnership with UNIMED. More recently with the prospect of furthering regional assimilation An Najah has also embarked on a joint project with the Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies (EMUNI) in Slovenia for the benefit of developing research and academic cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean sphere.

Programmes and initiatives of this type endorse the internationalisation of higher education and therefore infuse intercultural dialogue at a very important level, offering not only cooperation but the opportunity for institutions to seek internal change in order to meet with the demands of the increasingly globalised network. However, we also have to be aware that despite the promotion of mobility, knowledge exchange, networking and cultural respect there are also limits to the extent in which intercultural dialogue can be achieved through universities.

The proposed 'internationalisation of the curriculum' for example is an important part of the overall process and should provide a content that serves domestic and international students by being respectful to cultural diversity, preparative for the contemporary environment and universally adaptive. However there is still a lot of work to be carried out in this area as the 'curriculum' is often susceptible to Western homogeneity. This often leaves a sense of educational imposition rather than the mutual acceptance of cultural values. Endorsing contribution from all parts is therefore vital to promoting a successful interdisciplinary system that will influence faculty and students instead of instilling a form of educational 'orientalism' within proceedings.

Despite the desire to develop relations and 'internationalise' the contents of higher education there is still a much larger problem at hand that challenges the very survival of individual institutions.

We can acknowledge that universities are part of the current globalisation process and are therefore subjected to the same economic insecurities as any other business.

However, this poses a negative dimension as universities under this intense pressure succumb to the competitiveness of the market and often pursue a mercantilist approach to education within a global context. Under this view students and staff become commodities as institutions purposefully embark on marketing programmes to entice their share of the market. As a result competition for student fees has become a lucrative industry, especially through the design of GATS (Global Asset Transformation Services) who place education firmly within the liberal market as a profit making entity.

Universities that are best equipped to deal with this process will prosper, as what they offer is far in advance of university capabilities from within the developing world. This problem is also compounded by the utilisation of advancements in integrated technology which has aided the development of 'distance learning' and the global exportation of courses from established institutions to prospective students.

Where these subsequent optional advancements may prove beneficial for the individual student or staff member, it does little to reassure the future of universities within the developing world (in accordance with a World Bank report, 2002 and UNESCO, 2003). Instead it directly contributes to the 'brain drain' and further decreases the level of equality between the North and South. In Palestine for example the political situation combined with the little or no public funding received makes universities such as An Najah susceptible to these exact conditions. Solutions have and continue to be sought in order to contain the loss of staff and students to this international educational system but there are obvious limits to ones control where financial gain is preferred over collaboration and exclusion over inclusion.

We must remain vigilant within such a system as so initiatives that seem to promote institutional interaction don't always become a mere ad hoc to the macro economic process. We should also be aware that we do not eradicate the values that have traditionally placed universities in the position of a public service because as I have mentioned universities are ideally placed to promote the goals of intercultural dialogue.

It has come to the point then that we have to ask 'what can we do to help maintain the positive momentum established in promoting intercultural dialogue at the university level?'

- From a theoretical perspective there is a need for all of us to re-evaluate our epistemological and ontological foundations as so there is a general acceptance of each others differences and predicaments. From this point we can embark on a new journey of transformation that will enable a move towards a process of equal assimilation at the academic level and potentially beyond.

- From a practical point of view there is a need for capacity building activities to induce awareness and implementation skills that can improve both North-South and South-South relations.

- Also increased financial support and funding opportunities should be made available in order to help implement:

- Internationalised curriculum initiatives.
- Further collaborations between institutions.
- The arrangement of conferences and academic meetings in both local and international arenas to encourage further constructive dialogue of the matters at hand.
- Continuous staff training in all academic areas
- Scholarships and grants for students that encourage a mutually beneficial approach to the interactive process and therefore helps stave off the 'Brain Drain'.

• Adding to this, continuation in actively seeking collaboration with other institutions regionally and internationally is not only imperative to supporting the aforementioned goals but also sustaining the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

It is necessary that I reiterate the importance of this overall process being a means to providing intercultural dialogue and encourage that all who are involved with either the management of universities or internationalisation of higher education recognise the challenges that lay ahead. Positive initiatives continue to be put in place and from my experience the enthusiasm that is generated at the inter-academic level in regards to such justifies all the effort that all of those who are involved invest. There are difficult times in front of us, particularly in this current economic, epoch but I for one remain extremely positive and I hope that you can take spirit from this and continue to play a key role in striving for intercultural dialogue.