



Rabat Declaration

Statement resulting from the Fourth Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education “Research for sustainable societies – the role of universities”

University Mohammed V, Rabat, 24-26 April 2017

Preamble

Both Europe and the Arab World have a long and rich history of scientific achievement, with the Arab world playing a pivotal historical role. Today, promoting collaboration in research and innovation, in the interests of society, is more important than ever before as both regions face challenges related to climate change, economic development, demographic imbalances, conflict, and migration. Addressing these challenges requires common efforts from policy makers and civil society actors. Universities, as the key institutions responsible not only for higher education but for carrying out research and promoting innovation have a particularly important role to play.

The unique role of universities and their long tradition in promoting dialogue and collaboration is at the heart of the Arab-Euro Conference (AECHE) since it began in 2013. The AECHE initiative stands for a more visible, structured and sustainable exchange among the university communities north and south of the Mediterranean region. Since its inception AECHE has facilitated exchanges between the higher education communities, policy makers, and other relevant stakeholders in both regions on key issues such as migration, employment, research collaboration on global challenges, and capacity building. AECHE has been recognised in the 2014 Athens Joint Declaration of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Union and the Arab League.

Statement: Reaching out through research collaboration across the Mediterranean

The Fourth Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education “Research for sustainable societies – the role of universities” (University Mohammed V, Rabat, 24-26 April 2017) gathered 150 participants. In addition to university leadership speakers, it included high level policy makers, and a range of other interested stakeholders. The conference discussed how universities can enhance their research collaboration, given the common challenges facing the two regions. Participants explored in particular how to develop and further expand collaboration focused on research training and capacity building.

Conference Conclusions:

1. Participants call for a new vision and a comprehensive agenda setting out a stable and long-term interregional collaboration process for higher education and research. This initiative would contribute to addressing key grand challenges impacting on Arab-Euro relations, and focusing on climate change, economic development, demographic imbalances, conflicts and migration. This would also help to better define and achieve established development goals, to contribute to social, economic and technological innovation and be part of a broader civil society partnership. Such a partnership is urgently needed to develop ‘people to people’ and cultural ties across the Mediterranean.
2. Universities commit to raising awareness of the value of collaboration, underlining its benefits for the two regions, and to working towards sustainable partnerships. The conference showcased examples of structured

staff and student exchanges, joint research initiatives and shared training and capacity building measures, e.g. through PhD networks and joint doctoral schools. These initiatives are robust, and fit for purpose, but also dynamic and highly adaptable to changing needs and conditions. As these measures rely to a large extent on the core funding and resources of individual universities, only limited additional funding would be required. In particular, joint initiatives in doctoral education appear as a means to enhance collaboration, boast the quality of research and education, and educate the next generation of academic and society leaders acquainted with university and society on both sides of the Mediterranean.

3. Research cooperation between the two regions could benefit from inter- and multidisciplinary approaches, which still do not get full recognition and support. In this regard, concerns have been voiced on the fact that the role of social sciences and humanities for research on global challenges such as energy, water and renewable energies is often ignored. Likewise, open science, open education, and digitalisation provide new opportunities for interregional exchange and collaboration. This topic was addressed during the conference, but requires further exploration on how Arab and European universities can cooperate and share resources.
4. National governments and regional institutions should recognise and support the key role of universities, and university partnerships, and consider them more strategically in their interregional collaboration agendas. This would require provision of adequate resources, but equally important minimising administrative and other obstacles to research collaboration, e.g. with regards to visa, and work permits.
5. The results of AECHE4 also confirm the urgent need for serious and long-term capacity-building that addresses both the national and the institutional (university) level, as already stated in the outcomes of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Research and Innovation (Barcelona, April 2012), stressing “the need to reform, modernise and strengthen R&I systems”.

Given these conclusions and the urgency of addressing the challenges that lie ahead, participants at the AECHE Conference look forward with great interest to the results of the upcoming Ministerial Conference on Strengthening Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation Through Research and Innovation (Valetta, 3-4 May 2017), and encourage Arab and European Member State Ministers and the European Commission to consider in their discussions and conclusions the need to:

1. retain and upscale adequate resources for, and develop common agendas through multilateral research programmes such as PRIMA and BLUEMED;
2. include a dedicated focus on the training of early stage researchers and collaborative doctoral education, building on the Salzburg Principles and the Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training;
3. consider complementary measures to promote and ensure ownership and active participation, e.g. through the setup of structures for peer learning and exchange of good practice at the level of governments and, importantly, for university managers;
4. consider also research on migration and refugees in Arab and European countries as a priority, promoting in particular an interdisciplinary approach able to address coherently its social, economic, political, legal and ethical aspects.
5. consider in their conclusions making reference to the offer of support made by the AECHE Platform as a means of underpinning the implementation, promotion and dissemination of agreed policies and initiatives, but also to act as a policy partner on behalf of the Arab and the European universities, in an active dialogue, and in cooperation with the EUROMED process.

About AECHE

The founding members of AECHE, the Association of Arab Universities (AARU), and the European University Association (EUA), are acknowledged representative organisations of the university sector and policy actors in their respective regions, and strongly engaged in global dialogue and collaboration. Jointly they reach out to more than 1000 members in 70 countries in both regions, including all European Union, Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood countries.

With the University of Barcelona as the coordinator of the initiative, individual EUA and AARU members, such as Princess Sumaya University for Technology, the Technical University of Berlin and the University Mohammed V of Rabat, contribute proactively by hosting and supporting events. Importantly, the initiative has been joined by several

networks and organisations active in the Euro-Arab and Euro-Med context: the AECHE Steering Committee comprises the Mediterranean University Union ([UNIMED](#)), and the Network of the Capitals of Europe ([UNICA](#)). In 2015, the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean ([UFMS](#)) joined the AECHE, to support synergies and cooperation with other relevant regional initiatives.

For more information about AECHE and its activities, refer to <http://www.ub.edu/aeche/>