



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Dialogue Snapshot
Expanding Opportunities for Libyan Higher Education
March 2014

Following Libya's parliamentary elections in 2012 and the establishment of a new government, the new representatives announced a bold vision for the future of Libyan higher education. The aim: to create world class universities (WCUs) that would help diversify Libya's economy and turn Libya into a hub of academic achievement. Using its significant oil resources, this aim of higher education reform showed a candid understanding of the long-term effort required to make change. An improved higher education system will yield job growth, decrease reliance on foreign expertise in technical sectors and increase Libya's chances to become a higher education hub for the region. Yet, despite the commitment to reform, crucial questions remain: What kind of progress has been made since the Revolution? What are areas that still need to be worked on? What do Libyan institutions seek from international cooperation? What can the international community do to make such cooperation more meaningful and fruitful? How does the academy connect to the economy in Libya? What disciplines and professions should receive focus in reform efforts? How can faculty, curriculum and student culture be improved? Will online and distance education programs play a large role in the new Libya? What assessment and quality assurance techniques should be employed?

“Part of the discussion needs to be how to prepare higher education for the next economy. Adapting to the current economy is adapting to a failed model.”

- Conference participant.

To address these issues and recognizing the cooperation potential among Libya, the US and regional countries, the Hollings Center convened a three-day Higher Education Dialogue entitled, *Expanding Opportunities for Libyan Higher Education*. Held in Istanbul, Turkey from March 13-16, 2014, the dialogue brought together scholars, higher education professionals, civil society members, private sector representatives and policy makers to discuss recent developments and next steps toward building a better system in Libya. The conference covered both macro and micro topics, as well as the aspirations of the Libyan people and the realistic steps both Libyans and the international community can take to make improvements.

There were several takeaways from the dialogue:

- Outside of the desire for creating a world class system, there is no further vision of what that system would look like. As a result there is no national strategic plan that would set a path to that vision.

- If linkages between the private sector and higher education are strengthened, Libya’s human capital will improve and its socio-economic transition will gain pace.
- For higher education reform to succeed on multiple levels (faculty, institutions, students), mentalities need to change. This can come about through grassroots efforts as well as through top-down actions.
- The Libyan higher education sector is open to ideas and concrete projects from the international community as long as they are attuned to local needs and sensitivities.

Higher Education Development in Libya: Aspirations and Reality

Approximately two years into the new regime’s term, many of the challenges facing the development of a new higher education system for Libya remain. Dialogue participants agreed that the piecemeal reform efforts of varying degree and size within institutions have not been sufficient. The barriers to setting a detailed vision and establishing a national strategic plan are significant, especially as there are immediate populist pressures for action and change. Significant shortcomings identified by the participants included:



College of Pharmacy, Omar Al-Mukhtar University
Source: Wikimedia Commons

- **Security:** The country still faces significant security challenges that have resulted in de-prioritization and delays in reform efforts. This includes unstable pockets controlled by militia and tensions between the eastern and western parts of the country. Additionally, the insecurity affects educators directly, as there are examples of faculty receiving threats of violence from students due to the system’s shortcomings.
- **Capacity Problems:** Several universities, such as the University of Tripoli, enroll 100,000+ students. In a country of only 16 universities, student bodies of this size put significant strain on the infrastructure of the campus. There is simply not enough class space and living space to handle the number of students. Additionally, several professional disciplines, such as Medicine and Law are significantly overstressed.
- **Poor Campus Environment:** As one participant noted, “the campus is repulsive.” The infrastructure that does exist on many campuses is not conducive to a collaborative, collegial environment. Rather than be an environment where students can learn and network for positive change, these campuses are instead breeding grounds of absenteeism and apathy.
- **Faculty:** Faculty are overburdened and underpaid, so much so that a private tutor market has emerged benefiting the young elite. Curricula, after 40 years of political intervention, are outdated. Standards for faculty achievement and development have not been established.
- **Poor IT Infrastructure:** While overall broadband access is starting to improve, Libya still lags in internet connectivity and computing infrastructure. This has made internet-based distance

education difficult to implement. Computing infrastructure on campuses cannot meet the challenges. This problem is retarding modernization efforts.

- **Student Culture Challenges:** The Libyan higher education system suffers from a problem of student culture lacking in accountability. There is little incentive to achieve in the educational process and no penalty for failure. If the student fails, it is the instructor's fault. The government-provided living stipends for students and nearly unlimited opportunities to retry following failure have only exacerbated these problems.
- **Quality Assurance:** While programs have been developed within some universities and programs, these efforts require substantially more resources than are currently being provided. Assessment techniques could also benefit from a review of best practices. Without better analysis it is difficult to determine both goals and program effectiveness.

The stark realities facing the younger generation of Libyans after the revolution have created a sense of urgency. This is the primary factor influencing the immediate actions taken by the government in the higher education sector in 2012. The problem is that many of these challenges noted above cannot be solved with immediate actions. It will require concerted effort, long-term investment and a combination of both grassroots and top-down actions for the sector to reach its potential.

Connecting the Academy and the Economy



Oil platform in the Mediterranean Sea. Libya's export economy and GDP are heavily dependent on oil and extractive resources.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, Author: Cipiota

One of the primary reasons for the aspiration to overhaul the Libyan higher education system is to improve Libya's long term economic prospects by diversifying its economy. As one participant aptly stated, "Part of the discussion needs to be how to prepare higher education for the *next* economy. Adapting to the current economy is adapting to a failed model." This belief is a primary reason for the Libyan government's plan to increase scholarships for student exchanges abroad, particularly in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.

The challenges facing the Libyan economy are numerous. Recent data shows that approximately 59% of the available labor force is employed in the public sector, conducting mainly government and service jobs.¹ For the labor force working in the private sector, the oil and extractive industries provide most of the remaining employment. The vast majority of Libya's GDP (over 50%) and 95% of export earnings derive from the oil sector.² Failures in transportation infrastructure, training programs and healthcare have made diversification efforts difficult. And furthermore, the questions about the security of the country, the stability of the government and the rule of law have resulted in tenuous foreign direct investment (FDI) outside of the of the oil sector. If the Libyan economy is to diversify, that diversification will have to begin within.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html>

² <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html>

Developing the higher education sector will play an important role in the development of local economic engines that will diversify the economy and decrease the dependence of the country on the oil and public sectors for employment. At the moment, the education sector is woefully unprepared for this type of mission. There is a significant need for the development of business schools and business curricula. Libya, like most of MENA region, does not produce any significant research that would aid in development and innovation in the economy. Trade sectors also require effort. Vocational education suffers from a negative stigma, as parents push their children toward professional fields like medicine and law. Of those that do go to vocational school, as one participant noted, approximately 70% drop out before completing their programs.

Throughout the dialogue, participants actively discussed the need for better data about the micro- and macro-economic problems facing Libya. Rudimentary data covering superficial topics and basic needs has been collected, but deeper, more relevant data on educational output in the primary, secondary and tertiary system does not exist. Data linking educational and economic outputs and outcomes has not been collected. As such, several participants noted that it is difficult to assess starting points for action both within universities and in the educational system as a whole. There was general agreement that collection of this data should be a priority to set an economic vision for Libya, and that economic vision would play a role in the educational vision. But it is important not to get mired solely in the collection of data. As one participant noted, “We must collect, assess and *act*.”

Participants devised the following solutions for immediate and long term actions:

- **Use the international community to assist in economic assessment** for the determination of educational strategic needs. International entities have significant experience in conducting these programs and Libyan counterparts can provide proper insight.
- **Develop new departments (faculties) in underdeveloped fields**, such as business, hospitality and journalism that could boost local entrepreneurship and civic action. This would start the process of developing locally sustainable and diverse economies.
- **Initiate a media campaign to stress the importance and the positive benefits of vocational education.** A similar public relations program in Turkey, sponsored by the private sector, was successful in boosting enrollment and completion in trade schools.
- **Create Career Counseling offices at schools.** These units will focus on a comprehensive career advising approach (beyond simple matters like resume building). In addition, these units will host career fairs that will connect local companies to students.
- **Construct “Science Parks”** that can act as hubs for innovation. By incentivizing these sites, Libya could make improvements in R&D output and also support entrepreneurship.
- **Foster more public-private partnerships (PPP)** that link higher education institutions to local businesses through internship and apprenticeship programs. PPP will be more locally sustainable and result in better training. Such a program could be done through the creation of a Small Business Alliance which would network local businesses to engage in such activities while sharing resources.

Improving Faculty, Curriculum and Student Culture

If redevelopment of higher education in Libya is to have the desired outcome expressed by many of the participants, there is going to have to be significant changes to the quality of the faculty and the type of curriculum being offered at the institutions. The current faculty is overwhelmed. The sheer number of students that each is assigned cannot achieve quality outcomes. For example, according to one participant, the University of Tripoli enrolls approximately 100,000 students and the Medical School at Tripoli enrolls 16,000. Compared with a similarly large system in the US, like the nine-campus University of California system which in 2013 enrolled 3,220 medical students³, it becomes clear how disproportional and overstressed some disciplines have become. As a result, the faculty are severely overburdened and underpaid, especially in professional fields like medicine and law. Students and faculty recognize this. It is not uncommon for the wealthiest students to hire university faculty as private tutors for instruction.



Participants discuss current challenges.
Source: Jonathan Lewis

Exacerbating the problem, curricula offered in many institutions require substantial updating. After 30 years of dictatorship and top-down intervention, the culture of academic freedom necessary for the creation of quality curriculum remains underdeveloped. Additionally, pedagogy is stale and not adapted to new practices and new technologies. A modernization effort is desperately needed and the international community could play an important role in this effort.

The student culture in Libya is also a significant problem. As one participant asked, “How do you create a culture of accountability amongst students in a scenario where there is entitlement and where failure is difficult?” Universal access to higher education, overloaded class sizes, government stipends for enrolled students and multiple opportunities for failure without penalty have resulted in segments of the student body that do not take their studies seriously. While only a fraction of Libya’s students hold these attitudes, it is more than enough to poison the well. As a result, the degrees for all students are devalued. To make matters worse, the immediate socio-political environment in Libya has made the students more demanding, some even resorting to violent threats to faculty for passing marks. In order for the outcomes of the Libyan higher education system to be more effective on society as a whole, student culture needs to improve. Doing so will take significant time, and may first require improvement in other factors, such as curriculum and faculty. As one Western participant noted, “Academic integrity is not just generating diplomas. We give diplomas to pre-screen potential leaders. We give diplomas that mean something.”

The participants discussed these issues in earnest. For improving the quality of the faculty, the participants suggested the following:

- **Create faculty development teams & centers.** These units will focus on improving instruction and curriculum and will act as centers of quality assurance and assessment. Depending on the level of buy-in from the Ministry of Scientific Research and Higher Education and university administrations, these teams or centers could be developed on the national level, within universities or even within departments. These venues will also serve as logical “arrival points”

³ <https://www.aamc.org/download/321526/data/2013factstable26-2.pdf>

for international assistance efforts, as these centers will collect information on the educational environment through assessments.

- **Devise a system of mentorship** that connects Libyan scholars with international counterparts. These mentorship networks could be used to develop a culture of peer review, connect Libyan scholars to R&D and grant funds and expose them to the wider academic community.
- **Create new faculties** in conjunction with creating new departments to satisfy economic needs. Creating new faculties can serve as pilot programs within universities for setting new faculty standards that would be easier than overhauling entrenched standards in existing departments. Such efforts will have to be conducted carefully, so as not to further destabilize the climate of the university.

For improving the curriculum, the participants suggested the following:

- **Change the prioritization of exchange funds:** Exchange funds currently being used to send students abroad for study should be shifted to exchange programs that train faculty on curriculum and instruction development. These training programs tend to be faster and more cost effective than sending undergraduates and graduates to expensive degree programs abroad. The potential outcome will also have greater impact on the educational sector as a whole through the multiplier effect.
- In addition to prioritizing STEM fields, participants agreed that **incorporating Liberal Arts education into the curriculum** is very important. Not only has research shown that a Liberal Arts curriculum is ideal for economic development and diversity, but it will also be important for the development of a vibrant civil society. Participants noted the need to develop critical thinking skills in Libya, which also can be addressed by well-designed liberal arts curricula.
- **Language** is still a significant barrier to distributing curricular content. The international community can play a role in two ways. First, international supporters can translate curricular content into Arabic for instruction. Second, the international community can assist in establishing English language instruction programs. Participants recognized that the long term economic future of Libya will require better knowledge of English.

Is Online Distance Learning a Feasible Solution for Libya?

“Good technology can never replace education. Good technology can’t help you if you have bad teaching.”

- Conference participant.

Throughout the dialogue conference, participants discussed the merits of incorporating distance education, primarily via the Internet, as part of redeveloping higher education in Libya. While there was no absolute consensus, there was general agreement that online education will play a component in any redevelopment strategy. As one participant commented, online education could be an “accelerant” that could take significant pressure off of the existing stressed resources of the current system. But as another participant concluded, “Good technology can never replace education. Good technology can’t help you if you have bad teaching.” As such, it is important to remember that any online or

distance education model will still need quality methodology, good faculty and well-planned curricula.

There will be some infrastructural challenges to developing online programs, the most important of which is access to broadband speeds. The good news is that this development is ongoing. A high speed undersea cable (a trunk line) already connects Libya to the global system through Tripoli. Development of mobile broadband access (the likely fastest way to increase such capacity) is already underway. While mobile broadband access only stands at 13.8% coverage according to one participant, that number is only about 10 years behind Europe and could be made up quickly.

Keeping in mind that coming infrastructural improvement will make online distance education an increasingly attractive option in the coming years, the participants offered the following suggestions:

- Participants generally agreed that a **blended model** that mixes on-campus and distance learning would be the best model to adopt. If developed properly, this could take some of the tremendous pressure off of the infrastructure of large campuses like the University of Tripoli, but also preserve the personal interaction that will be critical to developing Libyan civil society. Developing a blended model will require additional staffing resources (online moderators, additional graders, technicians, etc.).
- A distance education model (either online or by using traditional means like the post) **could reduce societal pressures facing women** in the educational system. In more traditional communities or more remote communities, distance learning programs will provide an opportunity for women to continue their educations.
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide a unique opportunity for large scale one-off training programs and courses from renowned institutions. The current problem with MOOCs is that they are not offered in Arabic. The international community could play a helpful role in **translating the content of these courses into Arabic**, thus opening them to Libya and the region as a whole.

Envisioning a New System: Creating a Model Institution

In both formal and informal sessions, participants discussed the aspiration of Libyans to create a world class university (WCU) and what such an institution would look like. Towards the end of the dialogue, participants began discussing further the idea of creating a completely new school, one that could be constructed from scratch and serve as a model for other institutions in the country to follow. It would also counter the likely institutional resistance that would be faced by reform efforts within institutions and not be encumbered by institutional inertia.

The model institution would have:

- **A private, non-profit model:** The new institution would follow the private, non-profit model similar to that found in the United States. At current, most of the private institutions in Libya are for-profit. The distinction is important. The new institution could receive support from the government and would be governed by a Board of Trustees or Governors with at least partial independence of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Higher Education.
- **A selective student body:** A smaller student body would be selected based on entrance exams. This will create a better student culture of self-selecting individuals of higher academic caliber.

A smaller student body would take stress off of the physical infrastructure and improve instruction by reducing the student-to-faculty ratio. Students would be expected to pay a nominal tuition to help drive a culture of ownership and achievement among students. To counter the possibility of creating new elite, funding can be provided for scholarships to underprivileged students.

- **Internationally trained faculty:** Faculty at the new institution will have received international training in instruction and curriculum development. Additionally, the standards and expectations of the institution's faculty will be clearly defined and monitored. Doing so will help faculty members' progress with their own research and teaching careers.
- **A Core and STEM Curriculum:** The new institution will incorporate both Liberal Arts requirements as well as training in science, technology, engineering and math. This program will not only help to diversify the economy, but also develop critical thinking skills.
- **International accreditation:** the new institution will seek accreditation with both the Ministry in Libya as well as an international accrediting body. By doing so, the institution will regularly collect and assess data, setting benchmarks and goals for future progress.
- **An innovation hub:** the new institution will serve as hub for both innovation in education, but also as a hub for innovation in research and the economy.



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The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue.

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