Strategizing for the Kingdom’s Future: Community-University Research Partnerships in Jordan

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As community-university partnerships continue to gain momentum and grow on an international level, there are many exciting opportunities on the horizon. However, communities and universities also face challenges formally establishing and cementing those partnerships as a permanent part of university and community practice. The case for the Arab World and in particular, Jordan, is no different. One subcategory of community-university partnerships is community-based participatory research where universities and communities partner to solve a particular problem or achieve a particular goal. This chapter focuses on evaluating successes and challenges that exist in Jordan today, in order to give perspective on the road ahead for these types of partnerships. This is especially pressing for Jordan: addressing national priorities primarily depends on finding homegrown solutions to its existing socio-economic challenges.

Certain problem areas have reached a crisis point in the past decade. Mass protests stemming from inadequate social and economic opportunities for youth, compounded by the ongoing Syrian and Iraqi refugee crisis have put the government under intense pressure to find and implement solutions. In order to address these issues, Jordan must utilize its resources to develop new strategies from local knowledge. While Jordan is renowned in the Arab world for its educational standards and efforts to develop a knowledge economy, academic research output remains low, particularly in the social sciences. Due to exceptionally weak in-country capacity, ministries and aid organizations often depend on foreign researchers or institutions to inform policy decisions in Jordan. This foreign dependency emphasizes that Jordan’s in-country resources for research are underdeveloped and underutilized.

In Jordan, while research partnerships remain infrequent and informal, individual efforts described in these case studies display tremendous impact and potential for the future. Jordan stands to benefit by promoting and providing incentives for university-community partnerships as part of its national education strategy.
for the coming years. In order to do so, however, a practical strategy must be formulated. This paper highlights success stories in Jordan, elucidates challenges, and proposes recommendations.

Background

In the past several years, Jordan’s neighbors have experienced severe instability and war. Consequently, the government has found itself in a state of crisis management. The invasion of Iraq and influx of Iraqi refugees, protests from the Arab Spring, the Syrian war and establishment of largest refugee camp in the world in northern Jordan, university violence, and the emergence of ISIS have all threatened to destabilize Jordan. Despite local criticism of electoral processes and increasing internal discontent, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq have served as reminders to its citizens of what political unrest can bring. Therefore, presently Jordan prioritizes its efforts to address crises that weaken its stability over long term, sustainable development strategies.

Above all, Jordan struggles to cope with the direct and indirect costs of the substantial influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees and address youth grievances. With the Syrian conflict entering its fourth year, Jordan now hosts the world’s largest refugee camp and more than 600,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, n.d.). This influx has had negative effects on social cohesion with subsequent economic consequences to Jordanian residents. It has also created setbacks for the country’s efforts to prohibit members of radical groups from entering Jordan. In addition, the crisis has placed additional strain on areas with limited absorption capacities and weakened economic growth in northern Jordan (Needs assessment review…, 2013).

Jordan is among the top 30 countries in the world with a youth bulge (Ortiz & Cummins, 2012), and has experienced increasing pressure for government reforms via mass youth demonstrations in 2011. The monarchy has so far successfully avoided a Jordanian “Arab Spring”, but has difficulty managing public opinion. One of the consequences of unresolved youth concerns has been the phenomenon of on-campus violence, regularly needing to be dispersed by riot police, and often sending students to the hospital and shutting down classes for days at a time. National statistics from the Public Security Directorate reported that the number of incidences of violence doubled from 2006 to 2010 (Dalgamouni, 2012).

In addition to regional pressures, Jordan also faces international pressure regarding its critical political situation. The country delicately balances internal pressures to maintain security and stability with external pressures to reach benchmarks towards a democratic transition. Though there is some genuine basis for internal pressure for democratic changes amongst civilians, larger pressures come from Western aid partners. Jordan’s dependence on foreign aid has a great impact on Jordan’s foreign and domestic policies.
Higher Education and Universities

Years spent at any Jordanian university serve as a foundational and formative time for any young Jordanian. The university is an essential part of community life in Jordan (Feinstein, 2014). While campuses historically have been off-limits to civil society (Nizam, 2014), that has significantly changed in the past five years. Today, there are a number of programs and activities sponsored by civil society on campus, particularly focused on youth political participation and entrepreneurship. Examples of these programs include INJAZ (King Abdullah Foundation for Development); Al-Hayat Center; and National Democratic Institute programs.

Jordan is well known for its educational standards and its efforts to develop its human resources for a knowledge economy (Al-Shalabi, 2012). The education system has undergone rapid expansion over the past few decades, and the gross enrolment rate for the 18-25 year-old population has steadily increased since 2001. In fact, universities are now facing over enrolment in Jordan and throughout the Arab World.

Dr. Sultan Abu Orabi, Secretary General of the Association of Arab Universities and former President of Yarmouk University sums up Jordan’s position and policy on higher education:

…really if you look at Jordan, we are a unique country. We have no oil; we have no gas; we don’t have natural resources. We are a poor country. We are very small in population but we are big in our activities. Our investment here in Jordan, I would say are the human beings; human capital is our natural resource (personal communication, November 15, 2014).

Jordan’s accomplishments are results earned by a government supporting a strong education policy.

Jordan’s Civil Society

The concept of civil society is still relatively new in Jordan and organizations under this umbrella only began to flourish in the 1990s. However, Jordanian civil society is largely viewed as representing foreign interests instead of public demands (Jarrah, 2009). Additionally, this work is often regarded as a service to foreign countries rather than genuinely generated from community demands (Al-Hourani, 2010). A healthy and thriving civil society is still developing in Jordan.

When applying the concept of civil society to Jordan, one must recognize its weakness in addition to informal “non-Western” considerations, such as tribal leadership, deeply embedded in the society and operating alongside formally established systems. Tribes in Jordan play a political role, offer an alternative judicial system, and provide services to communities (NGO Law Monitor, 2014). Many other types of community affiliations operate in Jordan that would not ordinarily be considered
part of civil society in a Western context. For this reason, this chapter focuses both on CSOs and informal community partnerships in Jordan.

Policy

Despite the great need for coalitions to address national socio-economic issues, there is a lack of cooperation and utilization of these resources. Furthermore, there is no official strategy towards community-university research partnerships. While there are some laws and regulations relating to education and research that point to an awareness of these challenges, in practice they are not readily enforced.

In the Law (No.23) of Higher Education and Scientific Research (2009), several articles promote research and partnerships on an individual basis. Article 3 clearly states that,

…higher education aims to…encourage, support and upgrade scientific research especially applied scientific research which aims at community service and development; create a coherent institutional link between the public and private sectors on one hand, and the institutions of higher education on the other;…and to enhance the scientific, cultural, artistic and technical cooperation in the field of higher education and scientific research with other countries, international organizations, Arab Islamic and foreign organizations….

Furthermore, Article 9 explains the details of the Scientific Research Support Fund, established in 2005 with the aim of encouraging and supporting scientific research in Jordan. It details the requirements of the General Director of the Fund, his or her appointment, and the makeup of the Board of Directors that supervises the fund. Article 10 details the funds’ financial resources, which are subject to approval by the Ministers Council if funding comes from a non-Jordanian source.

Article 26 of the Jordanian Universities Law and its Amendments states that any Jordanian university must allocate 3% of its annual budget for scientific research, publication and conferences. This can support faculty research in addition to masters and undergraduate student research. The university is also required to allocate 2% of its annual budget as scholarships for Jordanians pursuing masters and PhDs abroad that will help develop the academic cadres of the universities. Any unspent revenue will be transferred to the national Scientific Research Fund if unspent within three years of their date of allocation. In practice, however, this regulation was only enforced in the past year. Also, the fund has been flexible in reallocating other university expenses to this fund that could have been interpreted as supporting research at the universities, due to the economic constraints under which Jordanian universities have been operating.

The Jordanian Universities’ Law requires that public universities allocate 2% of their budget to research production. However, this funding remains unspent at many universities and only recently has the Ministry of Higher Education begun
to enforce the collection of unspent funds. Moreover, in consideration of the financial deficits at overenrolled public universities, the ministry has been flexible in reallocating other purchases to the research budget such as computers and scholarships. The ministry additionally oversees the publication of nine journals, seven of which focus on applied sciences and the remaining two on language and literature, none of which provide the social science research support Jordan needs. Jordan University publishes one journal for social sciences, but it contains only 30 articles per year, with few articles focusing on Jordan.

Socio-economic crises have highlighted the need for evidence-based and innovative research in Jordan. One of Jordan’s most valuable resources is its education sector, which ranks number one in the Arab World according to UNDP’s Human Development Index. It is surprising, however, that despite a strong education policy and commitment to its human capital, Jordan’s research output is extremely low, particularly in social science research. Jordanian universities fund applied science research over social science research ten to one. Furthermore, the MOHE has confirmed that funding available for academic research remains underspent, or reapplied toward other educational expenditures such as scholarships.

While Jordan has implemented some reforms, these efforts have seen little measurable impact. This is unsurprising due to the lofty goals and vague approaches listed in the Jordanian National Agenda of 2007. The agenda cites goals of “increasing national spending on academic research from 0.34% to 1.5% of GDP by 2017,” but lists only two strategies to accomplish this: (1) establish a National Commission for Academic Research and (2) encourage academic research and a culture of innovation. The National Commission for Academic Research has not yet been established and the second strategy is too vague to be measured. Furthermore, data regarding Jordan’s academic research spending has remained unavailable since 2007 (Jordan National Agenda, 2007).

In 2009, several amendments were made to the Jordanian Law of Education and Academic Research which sought to “create a coherent institutional link between the public and private sectors on one hand, and the institutions of higher education on the other, and to develop these two sectors through consultation and applied academic research.” Jordan has witnessed little successful collaboration. Articles 3, 9, 10 and 11 establish the Academic Research Support Fund which provides additional funding for academic research. However, this fund lists seven out of eight priorities related to applied science research, with the remaining and eighth priority as Humanities, Social and Economic Sciences without any mention of the application of these studies in Jordan (Law No. 23 of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2009).

These policies can be seen to support research of all kinds in Jordan, and in particular community-university research partnerships. However, as cited in our interviews, without specific guidelines or benchmarks, the knowledge, practice, promotion and enforcement of these policies is infrequent.
Case Studies

University of Jordan

The University of Jordan, located in Amman, is the country’s largest and oldest institution of higher education. The university has the highest admission averages in the country and is considered the premier university in Jordan. One of the university’s goals is to “strengthen ties with the local community, Arab and regional educational institutions and bodies” (University of Jordan-Amman, n.d.). The University is the home to several research centres including the Hamdi Mango Centre For Scientific Research, the Water, Energy and Environment Centre, the Centre for Strategic Studies, and the Centre for Women’s Studies (University of Jordan, n.d.). All centres interviewed report to be mainly funded by outside grants, with the university providing basic foundational office support.

The University of Jordan has the largest budget for research of all the public universities based on its size, approximately 1 million JD per year, and fully spends these funds. The deanship also hosts seven journals. The UJ Deanship of Academic Research, founded in 1973, organizes, supervises, promotes and supports academic research at the university (University of Jordan, Deanship of Academic Research, n.d.). A quarterly call for proposals allows all faculties the opportunity to receive funding for their research. The deanship at the University of Jordan says it has made efforts to improve the management of research at the university. According to the faculty we spoke with, in the past there have been complaints about the bureaucracy and lag time for funding requests to be approved, but now the deanship averages one month to approve requests, sometimes reducing the proposed budget.

Women’s studies center

The Women’s Studies Center was founded by HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal in 1998, and grew to become a department in 2006. It was the first in the Middle East to offer a Masters degree in Women’s Studies. The degree is interdisciplinary and works with faculty in several other departments and disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. Its research priority is to produce new knowledge about women and gender issues. Additionally, it tries to facilitate teaching, research, publishing, consultancy, and awareness for women’s studies, feminism, and gender-related issues in Jordan and in the Middle East. The vision of the center is deeply related to the every day lives of women in Jordan and the region.

The center frequently engages with CSOs involved in women’s advocacy such as the Arab Women Legal Network and the Jordanian National Commission for Women. “They come to us with expertise and sign an MOU with our research team made up of faculty and students,” Dean Dababneh explained. She suggested that this department and research center does not seem to face the same barriers to cooperation that other centers and CSOs face in other areas, perhaps
due to the recent funding streams towards women’s empowerment in Jordan in the late 2000s. One of the center’s highly publicized projects is the “Women’s Legal Literacy Campaign” which started in July 2008. This campaign was the first national-level effort to raise women’s awareness of their legal rights in the constitution and international conventions. It started with a survey in collaboration with the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) to assess the legal questions of greatest interest to women. The survey tested knowledge about personal status laws, labor codes, and retirement benefits, and produced a widely distributed document. Furthermore, the project later hosted local level workshops for legal literacy inspired by the national campaign with Women Business Owners’ clubs. The Jordanian Women’s Unions are also very involved in outreach for the project. Recently, Sister is Global Institute launched the Aman Online Information and Resource Center on violence against women (see http://www.sigi-jordan.org). Even while conducting the interviews for this research, our Jordanian researcher faced scrutiny and surprise about his role. It was not commonly accepted that he was conducting intellectual work.

Additionally, the Effat El-Hindy Online Counseling Center has become a source of information and resource on legal and social issues in Jordan and the region (Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, 2008).

The Centre for Strategic Studies

The Centre for Strategic Studies Jordan (CSS) was established at the University of Jordan in 1998 with the objective of providing government bodies and organizations in the public and private sectors with high-impact studies of politics, foreign policy, economy and society of countries in the Middle East region. While CSS is not a government institute and receives almost no government funding, their audience is largely decision-making bodies and stakeholders in political roles including political parties, members of Parliament, and the Royal Court. The Board of Directors is also largely comprised of ex-politicians, ex-ambassadors, and other leaders in the public and private sector. The center has received Presidential recognition in 2012 for its role in serving Jordan’s national priorities (M. El Shteiwi, personal communication, October 19, 2014).

CSS is in constant production of books, surveys, and papers and determines its own research agenda based on the consultation and approval of its Board of Directors regarding the emergent research needs of the society. The centre specializes in policy papers and polling. Some recent policy papers on topics such as coping with the refugee crisis, parliamentary political process recommendations, university violence, and economic return on education and recycling in Jordan have been successfully adopted into policy. They carry out domestic and regional projects in partnership with many international funders such as the Arab Barometer for Democracy, Transparency International, and UN agencies.
The centre engages with the community and civil society through workshops with stakeholders, civil society leaders and political parties. An example of this is the centre’s star project for 2015, titled “Jordan in 2030”, which is a conference to determine a set of proposals for Jordan’s biggest challenges and national priorities that impact future economic, political, social and human developments. It receives contributions from governmental institutions, the private sector, and civil society and is fully supported by the University in an effort to bolster its role as an active and engaged member in the community. The director hopes that this project will preempt a lack of strategic planning at the government level. The director also explained that the project will produce a unique document on economic, human development, energy, water, politics, and governance recommendations. Civil society’s role will be consultative after drafts are prepared, especially for economic, youth, and political recommendations.

**Yarmouk University**

Yarmouk University is the second largest university in Jordan with a total of 33,000 students and 12 colleges, located in Irbid, Northern Jordan. It was established by a Royal Decree by King Hussein Bin Talal in 1976 and has seen a significant expansion since that time. Yarmouk’s mission includes “adopting a global vision in terms of principles and universal humanitarian standards and seek to positive interaction with all cultures and open the doors of cooperation with all international universities and research centres of excellence” (Yarmouk University (b), n.d.). The Deanship of Scientific Research and Graduate Studies was established in 1977 to administer academic research and graduate studies at the university and facilitates the development of academic research to be on par with global standards. The Deanship works to foster cooperation with scientific and academic institutions (Yarmouk University (c), n.d.).

In past years, Yarmouk University has performed well in research, however interviews with all departments revealed that the deanship still has ways to go in improving bureaucracy. Members of the administration explained that proposals are usually rejected because they do not meet university standards. When projects are funded abroad, a faculty member reported that while the university policies support cooperation with the community and CSOs on an official level, in practice the university is neutral: “They neither support or impede the work, but university administrators attend our events when invited.”

**Um Qays community-based tourism project**

The Um Qays Community Based Tourism project is a wonderful example of community engagement by Yarmouk University. It is managed by Dr. Zaid Al Sa’ad, a team of 6 professors from various disciplines, and several MA students through the Yarmouk University Archaeology, Conversation and Management of Cultural Heritage Department. Funded by the EU, this project is aimed at
developing the Um Qays Cultural Heritage Site, hand in hand with the local community. Um Qays is the site of the ancient Greco-Roman city of Gadara, and archeologists have uncovered many impressive remains, including a colonnaded street, a theater, a mausoleum and a Byzantine church. The ruins are also set against a backdrop of hills and countryside overlooking the Golan Heights and the Sea of Galilee. The site attracts hundreds of thousands of international and Jordanian tourists.

Dr. Al Sa’ad’s background is working with the tourism sector on cultural heritage and tourism development, which he sees as extremely important for sustainable development and community engagement. His team identified a problem in Um Qays that exists throughout Jordan, which is the lack of engagement of the local communities to the heritage sites in and around their villages and cities. At Um Qays, there was a disassociation between the community and the site, which has resulted in negative attitudes and feelings in the local community. This led the local people to become antagonistic against the site, and the efforts of the government to develop it. Dr. Al Sa’ad’s team started this project to understand what had gone wrong:

Um Qays used to be a big problem at the beginning. The government tried several times at initiatives for tourism development, all failed because of the negativity and position of the local community. The community used to be part of the problem and not part of the solution. There were certain mishandlings of the site because of the community. They also had a bitter feeling of dealing with the government in the past, trying to enforce certain development plans with private sector bodies. Decisions taken in Amman would be enforced on the community without consulting with them (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

This project was about formulating a new approach, based on working with the community from the very beginning. During the planning phase, researchers consulted the local community:

...we introduced ourselves as an educational institution trying to help them. They didn’t believe us in the beginning. It took us one year of confidence building, of workshops, meetings, and we explained to them what we are, what we intend to do for them, and our perspective on how it should be done (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

The approach was to utilize “community-based tourism development” as an alternative to the failures of the government’s centralized tourism development, which engages the community in all activities and decisions about the site. With the typical centralized approach, a certain central authority takes decisions for the site with involvement from the private sector (such as building a big hotel, restaurant, and tourism facilities). Consequently, most of the benefits go to the private
sector and not to the community, while community members are often only hired as employees and cheap labor for construction.

In contrast, community-based tourism development includes consultation with the community and their direct involvement. If there is a need for certain facilities for tourism, such as opening small motels and guesthouses, then they are developed by the community. In the end, tourists enjoy these efforts, because they do not only visit these sites to see archeological remains but also for traditions and to experience the community. A feeling of interacting and mingling with the people is rewarding for both the visitors and the community and is also part of the attraction of the site. The project convinced the community to develop certain initiatives and small projects, such as souvenir shops where traditional products could be sold. In this case, the people of the local community feel the benefit of tourism:

...they used to complain at the beginning that ‘Tourism is not doing anything for us – people come from Amman even with their bottles of water with them. Visitors pay entrance fees to the government to visit the site, and all they leave us with is the litter. This is what we get from tourism’ (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

The project team invited members of the community to the university in addition to organizing two workshops at the site. Not only were these workshops hosting an exchange of ideas, but also an exchange of culture. Locals cooked traditional food. The research team met with different groups, not just community leaders but anyone in the community who wanted to be involved. These workshops featured open discussion about development plans for Um Qays, and the community expressed their concerns and provided feedback. “We identify and engage the most influential people in the community, the sheikhs, the activists, influencers. We go to schools. Even with the young generation to start there. We pass a strong message in an effective way” (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

A big part of this project was spreading awareness about the importance of preserving the site. During the workshops, attendees discussed how the site was linked to their identity, their national feeling, and to feel proud that they are the owners of the site. Once a sense of pride was established, the workshops addressed the economical aspects of tourism development so the community could understand the best ways to make money from the site.

Since the recent completion of the three year Yarmouk University project, the situation in Um Qays has changed dramatically:

We have the full support and satisfaction from the community and it was a very successful experience which got them directly involved. Best of all, now they are associated with the site and feel they are the real protectors of the site (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).
Together, the team put together an integrated development plan and a shared policy for the site.

I hope we can try this approach with other sites in Jordan for Petra, for Jerash, which is the most preserved roman city outside Rome but it is not on the world heritage site list. The local people must feel the site is so important for them. There is a big potential for economic value for them. Then they start to see that it is important for their futures and for their families (Dr. Al Sa’ad, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

Challenges

While universities have reported success reaching out to the community, the civil society organizations with whom we spoke cited little success in recruiting university involvement in their own research projects. Conversely, university administrators and faculty members cited challenges including NGO capacity, quality standards and transparency issues.

NGO Capacities

Currently, Jordan remains highly dependent on foreign research. A dean we interviewed explained that the top research centre producing and providing research for the government is a private for-profit centre that is foreign owned and operated, and none of the research is available publically. “It is a problem to have women’s research conducted by researchers not from the region,” commented the Dean of the Centre for Women’s Studies at University of Jordan. This lack of confidence in local research and knowledge production can be seen in the fact that foreigners author the majority of studies conducted about Jordan’s current social and economic crises.

The university faculty and administrators we interviewed also suggested that there is a weak capacity for research, lack of quality standards, and internal failures at NGOs. These academics reported that the academic level of NGO research does not meet university standards: “We have no idea about the theoretical tools which produces shallow research” suggested one interviewee. Another said, “you will find that many reports that do not follow research standards, fall prey to common mistakes such as plagiarism, or only exist to fulfill a donor requirement.”

They also complained of a lack of transparency in financial and electoral processes and an absence of basic management skills, suggesting that “NGOs use money differently.” One interviewee reported that NGOs often operated too much like businesses, while at the same time distrusting their political agendas. “It is difficult for a university, which is a government institution, to be seen as partnering with a partisan/opposition organization such as an civil society organization. Also, we don’t serve clients. Besides that, many organizations are still immature.” Another interviewee said, “There are two scenarios for working with CSOs, working
on a service contract as a researcher, or as an institution as partners on a research team.” One administrator summarized that

…policies need to be put in place to ensure proper power balance between communities and higher education institutions. Too often relationships are not partnerships at all rather the higher education institution fulfills the role of the provider of research material for the NGO.

Lack of Networks

“CSOs and universities act as isolated islands,” said one interviewee. There is a great need for a network of expertise and practice in Jordan that would enhance knowledge sharing with communities. Due to the lack of networking and engagement between the overall university community and NGO community, there remains great opportunity to connect and engage those communities on a local and national level.

Two successful coalitions cited by interviewees are RASED and Forum for the Future. For example, RASED is a coalition of civil society organizations monitoring national and municipal elections in Jordan. The RASED coalition for election monitoring, a household name in Jordan, is one of the few successful collaborations between the CSO community in Jordan. Founded in 2007 by the Al Hayat Center for Civil Society Development, RASED was the first local organization to observe parliamentary elections in Jordan and present its findings in the Jordanian media. Over the years, RASED’s reputation grew, as did the coalition. By 2010, the coalition consisted of 50 CSOs and in 2013 it comprised 125 organizational members. As one faculty member explained, “now, you cannot be viewed as a legitimate CSO in Jordan and not be a member. This experience is a lesson that in civil society, if you prove yourself, over time people will trust you.”

University Funding, Bureaucracy and Lack of Strategy

At the same time, NGOs aware of university procedures are afraid to approach universities due to the bureaucracy and follow up involved. This same bureaucracy of the university also contributes to students seeking out CSOs to support them in their initiatives and projects rather than the university.

Many interviewees cited lack of adequate funding from the university as a reason for weak research. One interviewee and Dean of Academic Research at University of Jordan said “this funding should not be understood as enough to complete a research project, but rather as starter funding to then apply to foreign donors. Those who understand the funding this way have a much easier time.” However, many faculty do not even bother to go through the university processes for such small rewards, rather going straight to foreign donors. This may contribute to the fact that the national research fund, which is over $30 million, has been
cited as not adequately spent. Administrators defend this by reporting that the
good quality of the proposals sent to the fund is lacking. However, few programs to train
faculty on how to adequately fill the funding proposal applications exist. Further
inquiry on the part of the Ministry of Higher Education needs to be done in order
to diagnose how these three pieces interact with one another.

The “Real” Science: Arab World Cultural Bias

It is quite common to witness a bias towards applied sciences over social sci-
ences in the Arab World, and Jordan is no exception. From the time a student is
in primary school this idea is typically reinforced by families and then later dur-
ing the tawjihi placement exam at university. Based on the scores of the exam, the
brightest students scoring highest on the exam will be admitted to applied science
faculties such as engineering, medicine, and pharmacy and students scoring lower
have more limited options and are admitted to departments such as languages,
social sciences, or law. In rare cases, a bright student would opt for a discipline that
did not require a higher score.

Our interviews revealed that this social stigma is perceived to affect the fre-
cency of support from research funds towards the social sciences and also affects
the quality and capacity for social science instruction and research output. In fact,
during interviews conducted in English, the deanship for academic research was
typically translated as “the deanship for scientific research,” even by the deans
themselves. The numbers of applied science research projects funded compared to
social science projects as advertised by universities also reflects this, in addition to
the amount of funding and journals available in which to publish.

Brain Drain

What is often referred to as ‘the Brain Drain’ impacts research in Jordan,
as explained:

…the best of our researchers find a better environment abroad,
every year we are losing thousands of researchers for many reasons.
Better environment for research, we don’t have academic freedom
and social justice. The Arab world loses on the average 30,000
researchers per year (personal communication, November 17, 2014).

Jordanian faculty members frequently travel abroad to earn their credentials
and many remain abroad for better opportunities. “We have many university pro-
fessors here graduating from the United States and Europe,” explained a faculty
member, “which indicates that the individual quality of our faculty is okay. But we
don’t have the resources to drive that kind of practice here.”
Opportunities and Proposed Recommendations

Despite the many challenges, there are a growing number of opportunities and low hanging fruit for community-university research partnerships in Jordan. In several cases, due to the informal nature of research partnerships, we found that many universities display a lack of knowledge management by claiming to engage with the community without the ability to cite specific examples or statistics. However, in one case, at Al El Beyt University, the Dean of Academic Research provided us with an annual report on research for his deanship. Well aware of the challenges his deanship faced in promoting research production for the university, he also had statistics to cite. This dean produced this document in order to identify weaknesses in the deanship and also to share with other faculties and administrative bodies. The document was so well researched that we hope it becomes a common practice among all deanships at Jordanian universities.

From our interviews, we were able to identify several (sometimes contradictory) factors which contribute to a lack of university-community research partnerships in Jordan. How these factors interact requires further inquiry. We propose that the Ministry of Education take on that role, using the following recommendations. Given its role in supporting higher education, the ministry should take the following steps to address this policy challenge:

• Adequately evaluate the failures of the JNA 2007 and draft a more detailed plan to inject a culture of research, encourage academic and especially social science research in Jordan including:
  • Fairly enforce the “Law of Higher Education and Academic Research”.
  • Closely evaluate individual cases of low research output at public universities that are consistently unable to spend their funds.
  • In cases of underproductive faculty, brainstorm strategies with the Deanship of Academic Research to incentivize and encourage faculty research production.
  • In cases of productive faculty but inefficient university bureaucracy, implement new policies to ensure efficient processing for funding proposals.
  • In all cases, organize tutorials for faculty demonstrating techniques to successfully apply for funding and raise awareness about available research funding streams.
  • Tackle the evident bias for applied science research over social science by separating the funding streams and open spaces for new research currently drowned out by costly applied science projects. Agree on new guidelines on a consultative basis on what types of expenses can be charged to research and analyze constant obstacles.
• Organize a national research conference for social science research. Invite both higher education institutions and NGOs to bolster research output and address the lack of networking and engagement between the university and NGO community. Doing so will take advantage of the opportunities to connect and engage higher education institutions and NGO researchers on a local and national level.

• Use this moment to establish a network that can capitalize on new linkages between NGOs and higher education institutions and maintain synergies.

• Encourage undergraduate and graduate research. Young Jordanians are concerned about their country’s future and eager to address these challenges, but lack the practical research skills and support to investigate these issues. Universities have seen an influx of political education programs in the past three years, however few focus on methodological research and critical thinking skills. It is never too early to learn how to conduct sound research, and young Jordanians need activities to keep them intellectually engaged and discouraged from participating in activities harmful to society.

• Encourage a practical application of social science research. The ministry can play a role in reducing the gap between theory and practice in Jordanian academia by promoting the rhetoric that local social science research will be given weight in Jordanian policy decisions.

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