**International Exhibition and Forum for Education**

**Transformative Education and Rejuvenation in the Arab World**

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**Opening Keynote**

**Transformative Education and Rejuvenation in the Arab World**

**Talal Abu-Ghazaleh**

**Founder and Chairman of Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization**

**Chairman of the Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education**

**Chairman of the Arab States Research and Education Network**

Dear Excellencies, colleagues, friends, and guests;

It is a great honor and pleasure that I have the opportunity to speak to you today at this third convening of the International Exhibition and Forum for Education, on a subject which has been my life-long passion and commitment.

It is most appropriate that this event focuses on education; where major improvements have taken place over recent decades, yet many challenges remain. It is in the Gulf region that we have the opportunity and the challenge to set the pace and lead the transformation in the educational systems of the Arab world as a whole.

In my speech last year at the Gulf Education Conference, I pointed out the tremors we can feel from the tectonic shift that is taking place in the world and, more specifically, in our region today. These trends, and the forces that drive them, are inexorable. No region or country is immune to the rapidly accelerating pace of change and so we must all learn to cope with and master the forces of history and technology that are shaping a new world around us.

Last year, Stanford University President John Hennessy likened the status quo of higher education to a tsunami, saying: “A tsunami comes and remakes the coastline and changes things dramatically. It both destroys some things, but it also creates new things.” We in the Arab world are also facing a tsunami; and it engulfs more than our education system.

I am speaking to you today not only as a dreamer for the future of the Arab world, but also as a realist. And the reality is we must acknowledge our shortcomings to once again become thought leaders.

In a critical 2009 study, UNESCO reported that higher education in the Arab world continually fails to meet the needs of students, employers, and society at large. Institutions in our region are overcrowded, understaffed, and produce graduates with qualifications that are not in sync with the labor market.

I wish to most humbly argue today that, in spite of the tremendous progress that has been made in modernizing our educational systems over the past two decades, we are still far from the goal of creating an educational environment which places the learner and his/her ability to learn at the center of our focus.

What this implies is that our educational systems should transmit the most up-to-date information and impart the latest knowledge to develop the capacity of students and their ability to absorb, retain, and utilize the acquired information. But most importantly, it should stimulate in them their own capacity to think critically and creatively and use their faculties to generate new knowledge and disseminate existing knowledge in the widest scale. Achieving this is necessary to meet the economic, social, and environmental challenges that we face, in consonance with our own culture and history.

I have a vision of rejuvenation: an Arab Golden Age, where the best and brightest from the West aspire to study in the Arab world at the most advanced research facilities in the world. To achieve this vision, we must act in unison and collaboration to overcome the tide of challenges we face.

Let us think of these challenges as a tsunami:

When a tsunami occurs, all indicators appear beneath the ocean and it is not felt on the water’s surface. Once the tsunami reaches the shore, the initial wave is felt with subtle impact. It brings a sense of wonder or curiosity.

To the untrained eye, all indications of danger give off an illusive sense of normalcy. But those who recognize the warning signs know what is coming and bear the responsibility to act. They know that the next wave will inundate the beach, and each successive wave will push further inland, wreaking havoc as it flows.

We have experienced the first wave: globalization and the internationalization of education. We have watched with excitement and wonder at the possibilities this paradigm has provided us.

But second wave is coming. This wave will change everything: education, economics; even how we interact socially. The model for this wave presents itself as open, accessible, and online.

Some others have recognized it as well. Why else would Harvard and MIT invest $60 million into a collaborative online education project? And why would Stanford University be able to raise $22 million for its online education project? Because they’re standing on the same shore as us, and they see the rising tides.

While it is important to recognize what others are doing, we must first assess ourselves.

Before the young people in our region reach adulthood, they will experience the painful and equally shameful period of “‘wait-hood.” Wait-hood is the period of time between graduation and successful employment. Here, for longer than anywhere else in the world, young college graduates must wait. They wait for the market to need their skills; they wait for employment opportunities at their level; they wait to advance in their personal lives. And while they wait, the skills they learned in college slowly depreciate. This wait-hood period is worsening day by day, and our education indicators contribute to this decline.

In the Arab world, we use three major indicators to determine our success: scores on international tests, fields of study, and literacy rates. While high test scores are good for boasting numbers, they do not measure quality or efficiency. And they certainly do not account for what happens once students graduate. These indicators contribute to the transitional period of wait-hood.

Let us look at some labor statistics: According to a Gallup poll of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries from June 2012, aspiration levels for entrepreneurship was at record low levels. In some cases only 2-3% of the students surveyed stated that they sought entrepreneurial opportunities. A lack of mentorship, financing, and government support were the leading reasons for this lack of drive.

Instead, most of those surveyed said they wanted to work in the public sector for job security and financial stability.

And what of those who are inspired? They’re going abroad to study!

Available statistics have shown that on average only 1% of students at Arab universities are from outside the Arab world. This clearly shows that inward student mobility is almost nonexistent. On the contrary, out-going students from the Arab countries at the postgraduate level is estimated at 53%, mainly in doctorate programs. A few statistics and government reports are published on inward and outward student mobility. The reports indicate that there is a high percentage of inter-regional Arab-Europe mobility or Arab-Malaysia mobility, compared to westward mobility. This means that many students from the Arab world study in European and Malaysian universities, but not vice versa. Thus, the flow is largely one-directional, confirming a foreign cultural pattern in the regional knowledge distribution.

Lastly, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics predicts that by 2015, the Arab world will be short 300,000 teachers; second only to Sub-Saharan Africa, which will be short 1.2 million.

I understand that these numbers are alarming, but there is still time to rise with tides.

It was the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire who coined the term, “banking,” to describe the contemporary approach to education, stating: “It transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power."

This accurately states the problem we have with our education indicators, and we must recognize it before we fall behind the rest of the world.

We have to consider that education must be an ongoing life experience; one is generally not afforded the luxury to simply stop learning, and stagnation of skills is no longer acceptable in the workplace. Technology is advancing so rapidly that even the most skilled professionals must be trained in emerging software, hardware, methodologies, and approaches.

Education, at its core, is an investment in human potential. Students want to see their investment in education translate into opportunity. If, when they graduate, the positions offered to them is beneath their skill set, their response will undoubtedly be negative. This is why we see a lack of productivity or engagement. It is not a lack of will; it is a lack of opportunity. Regrettably this can become a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating scenario.

I want to bring to your attention some topics to consider.

**First: A change of paradigm**

I beg to submit that this calls for a change in the educational paradigm based on the legacy systems that we have inherited from the past.

To some extent, change in education is inevitable as new forms of teaching and learning have emerged to accommodate globalization and technological trends. Much of the appeal of change originates in the judgment that the current educational systems have failed to address today’s challenges and the most pressing problems in our economy, society, industry, and environment.

With advances in ICT technologies, education can be dramatically enhanced to support delivery to all citizens anytime and anywhere on Earth.

Opportunities for change and reform are tremendous, including policies that:

1. Enable educational systems to support knowledge-based industries and developing a strong ICT sector to enhance competitive advantage.
2. Train growing numbers of knowledge professionals through educational opportunities that foster a stronger entrepreneurial culture and growth of indigenous technology enterprises.
3. Enhance ICT capabilities and skills across the public and private sectors through adult learning and retraining programs, enabling society as a whole to become active participant in the knowledge industry and economy of today.

The world economy is now more competitive than ever before and the engines of growth are moving to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The relative importance of the major determinants of growth has also been changing with the shift from manufacturing to services and from capital resources to knowledge and innovation.

The ICT revolution and globalization have given birth to a new knowledge economy. These trends have impacted all aspects of education. New methods and tools of education are emerging to prepare citizenry with knowledge that spans international boundaries and enables societies adapt better to a globalized knowledge economy.

**Second: Core components of a new educational paradigm**

1. A learner-centered educational system which fosters critical and creative thinking.
2. A system that focuses not just on the acquisition but also the generation of knowledge and its practical applications to the economic, social and environmental problems of the country.
3. A system that is based on the idea of life-long learning and capacity-building with adult learning and retraining programs as integral components of the system.
4. A system that is based on the understanding that learning is not a one-way or linear process that is directed from the teacher to the taught, but more of a dynamic and circulatory and inter-active dynamic that generates understanding, creative thinking and knowledge for all participants- the teacher and the taught alike.
5. A system that places a high premium on ICTs as tools and networks as platforms for the generation of knowledge and its applications.
6. And finally, system that is rooted in the culture and social milieu of the country and, yet, is fully plugged into the global networks of education, learning, research and development communities to ensure that it remains abreast of the cutting edge and of knowledge, science, and technology.

**Third: Status of Arab higher education**

The Arab region is known to be rich in history, culture, tradition, religion, and art, noted as invaluable assets that can be utilized to root our educational systems at all levels throughout the region. Public university structures are dominant in the Arab region constituting over 65% of the total number of universities. Available statistics have shown that government expenditures on higher education (except in GCC countries) is limited and does not exceed 10% of the expenditures of that made in the industrialized countries.(over 25% of the S.A. budget is for education).

For research and development, the average government expenditure is much less than 1% of the total GDP, compared to 3-4% in the industrialized countries. Though the big picture of Arab higher education is not promising, there is a growing move towards developing better education systems in Arab universities, building on the long Arab heritage with more technologies being integrated to keep in pace with recent advancements and trends.

**Fourth: Challenges and opportunities**

There has been a tremendous increase in educational opportunities with the rise in the number of students, the private sector’s investment in higher education, and the emergence of new types of education such as open and virtual universities, remote learning, and distance education.

Still, the challenges and issues are enormous, which include limitations on funding, localized quality standards, lack of policy directions, and inadequate educational resources. Governments have been realizing the declining status of higher education and have put so much effort to improve performance through partnerships, establish effective support systems to provide more opportunities, develop ICT infrastructure and quality assurance systems to enhance competitiveness and productivity, increase spending, and launch effective research and development programs.

Several opportunities exist for improvement through networking, linkages, and collaborations with institutions at the regional and international levels, increasing branches and joint international universities, and increasing open and virtual university structures.

In the end analysis, it is the human factor that makes the difference in moving forward.. It would be short-sighted and wasteful not to invest in young people and not to allow them the opportunities and the space to discover the best productive use of their talents and energy.

Yet the main challenge remains in the capabilities of the government to keep in pace with the continuous change of technology, services, and content that would require new kinds of tools and internal and external relationships between all elements of the society.

With the introduction of the regional concept of e-Infrastructures, making available high speed networks, access to resources, content, data, and material, and even more importantly building network based communities of research and development become more viable in the educational context. As educational access becomes more dependent on virtual campuses enabling shifts to accommodate life-long learning, online teaching and learning, media-rich course ware, and other kinds of content that will shape the new learning environments.

**Fifth: GCC opportunities**

In my view, the Gulf region is in a position to leapfrog other more advanced countries in adopting the learner-centric approaches to teaching with more digital tools, networks and resources. The digital life of people has become dependent on high speed internet access, relevant content and resources, and educational tools, which will form the engine for innovation for society as a whole.

Opportunities may include cooperation agreements with foreign universities and increasing internationalization, setting up regional and international virtual universities, increasing public private partnerships towards enhanced education, developing rewarding Information and Communication Technology infrastructures, and finally facilitating information sharing and enhancing quality of education.

ICT infrastructures could foster national information systems, national/ regional research and education networks, university portals, digital libraries, research databases, and e-learning systems. Quality structures, on the other hand, include national commissions for quality and accreditation, quality development programs, capacity building projects, substantial university – industry linkages, and regional quality organizations. Research and development efforts are still on the regional and national agendas mainly recognized at the policy levels.

**Our efforts and contributions at TAG-Org**

Four decades ago, I built Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization with the aspiration to promote intellectual property rights and contribute to the development of a knowledge society in the Arab world. Over the years, our Organization’s scope has broadened, our number of companies has grown; we expanded to become a global leader in professional and educational services. In that time, some things have remained constant – particularly our commitment to consistency and quality.

We have ridden the wave of change over the decades, adapting to technological advances and reinventing ourselves along the way. I wish to share with you some experiences and qualities which have contributed to our success.

Our Organization has successfully done brick and mortar education: Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Graduate School of Business (TAGSB) in Jordan was the first FIBAA-accredited MBA in the Arab world. On September 25, 2011, TAGSB was named “Best Educational Institute in Management in Asia” by the World Education Congress Asia Awards. This prestigious accolade is selected by a Global Research Cell consisting of professionals from across the globe. TAGSB epitomizes a successful partnership between both the private and public sectors in the Arab world: Inaugurated in 2006 as one of the faculties of the German-Jordanian University (GJU), a public university established in 2004 through the joint cooperation of the German and Jordanian governments

At TAGSB, I offer all of my graduates opportunities for employment at TAG-Org if they are unable to find work once their education is complete. The relationship between education outcomes and the market is so vastly intertwined that one can create the market for the other and vice versa.

Now, with Talal Abu-Ghazaleh University, we are intensifying the paradigm shift from bricks to clicks.

Imagine if there was a system in place that would take a ground up approach with students, helping them achieve their goals. A system that wasn’t interested in high student turnover rates, but one where success of educational outcomes was paramount, and the teaching of applicable skills was its primary focus. A system that attributed its success to its alumni and held responsible the institutions that inadequately prepared students for the workforce. Imagine it was accessible without leaving your home, without ever having to travel or needing a visa. This is a great need for people not only in developing countries, but citizens around the globe.

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh University is that system to meet this need. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh University is our endeavor to democratize education, promote global citizenship, and empower citizens who have been disenfranchised by the technological revolution. Our mission is to make accredited educational programs accessible to everyone, everywhere. Instead of competing with institutions, we are a global educational alliance – collaborating with elite universities to deliver their education, online, to achieve our mission.

The first university to join our alliance was Canisius College, the premier private university in Western New York. As a Muslim, it is an honor to partner with a Jesuit university because it shows that no matter where we come from, our objectives for education are universal.

Through this University I want to change peoples’ attitude toward digital education – to show that it is the way of the future. Digital education stemming from international institutions compels individuals to understand their interdependence and the interconnected nature of the modern world. It allows for world-class higher education to reach across cultures to learners who are unable to afford the costs of travel.

I see world-class education as a human right and I want to put the power of choice and contribution into the hands of students. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh University makes it possible for transformational societies to embrace new concepts from the ground up. We promote affordable, elite education for all, not simply “education for all.”

I come from business. We do not build on calls of goodwill; we build feasible and sustainable projects. We need to shift gears from "free education" to affordable, “elite education.” We will not help our grandchildren by providing unrecognized and unaccredited education.

Two years ago, in 2011, the United Nations proclaimed that access to the Internet is a basic human right. As UN GAID chair, I fought for this declaration and contributed to its drafting. I believe that using this standard we can accomplish the same with higher education. The capacity to make it accessible to every person on this planet exists. The technology exists. The human will must match its potential. We need a human rights declaration for elite education for all.

We also oversee the Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education (www.aroqa.org):

- A non-profit and independent organization established in Belgium in 2007 with the fundamental objective of promoting excellence and raising the quality of education in the Arab world.

- Provides quality assurance support, audit, and accreditation services to Arab educational institutions

- Collaborates with Arab and international accreditation bodies to facilitate benchmarking and sharing of expertise

- Develops promotional activities to promote collaboration in research and education community, encourage joint projects, sensitize decision makers on quality, and help develop support groups of quality and accreditation communities.

- Regional Partners: League of Arab States, Association of Arab Universities, Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN), British Accreditation Council (BAC), Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), Commission on American and International Schools Abroad (CAISA), part of New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

And the Arab States Research and Education Network ([www.asrenorg.net](http://www.asrenorg.net)) is another imitative we have as part of our education objectives:

- Builds, maintains, and consolidates sustainable regional Pan – Arab e-Infrastructures dedicated to e-Science and education across the Arab Countries

- Facilitates the collaboration and cooperation among the researchers and academicians in the Arab region.

- Provides education and research institutions with reliable means of communication at the regional level.

- Strengthen the notion of partnership and encourage joint scientific research at all levels.

- Minimizes the cost by using available research, academic and technical resources through a dedicated network with no need for duplicating investment.

- Uplifts efficiency and productivity and boost the concept of creativity and innovation through the use of e-infrastructure and network available resources

- Regional Partners: League of Arab States, European Commission funded projects: EUMEDCONNECT, EUMEDGrid Support, CHAIN, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization, Jordan University Network, Morocco University Network, Sudan Research and Education Network, Somalia Research and Education Network, Algeria University Network, and Egypt University Network

As Arab nations, we are compelled to seek and secure a position of prominence in this world. To achieve that, we must encourage, nurture, and reward creativity and innovation.

In this moment, I am pleased to share with you the launch of Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Knowledge and Wealth Creation. This facility is prepared to be the first of its kind in the Arab world, to be run by the most prominent group of professionals at TAG Organization and to have the capacity to develop and grow independently.

Now is the time to introduce a new method of learning in the Arab world – one that encourages entrepreneurship and discovery. TAG Knowledge and Wealth Creation is a place for inquisitive minds to transform concepts on paper into prototypes and patented goods. It is a place to generate these works into practical products, to enrich the lives of people – locally and internationally. Our aim is to cultivate a more diversified knowledge economy by creating linkages between creative designers, technical experts, and academic leaders.

Through its services, TAG Organization has assisted and developed higher education institutions; now we aim to facilitate inventions and intellectual property that will elevate the stature of the Arab world. I am confident that our thinkers and dreamers will dedicate themselves at TAG Knowledge and Wealth Creation to transform the theoretical into the tangible, leading the Arab world to the future we envision.

**Moving forward**

The key to success is collaboration, local, national, regional and global for the acquisition, absorption, creation and application of knowledge, science and technology for solving local problems locally. We have to continue to think globally but act locally. I applaud governments who have launched research initiatives, including scientific research commissions, centers of excellence, science councils, business and technology parks, and incubators. We need to support them and breathe new life into them.

Plans for improvement have always been given a priority. A common space for a networked Arab Higher Education System remains a challenge. The only existing space for recognition of academic degrees in the Arab countries was signed by 14 countries in 1978. In contrast to many regions in the world, still there are no common references to the degrees and their granting institutions for the whole Arab region. As more students mobilize across the Arab region and growing need for coordination between degrees, a robust recognition system as well as an education space needs to be established for the Arab region. Research collaboration is important likewise, and can be achieved with pan-Arab regional funding mechanisms and programs.

**In closing,**

This Forum is an opportunity to consolidate our efforts together toward developing a more inclusive knowledge society and creating a prosperous future for our young people.

I invite you to our fifth annual conference on “Quality Frameworks in Education” (www.aroqa.org), to be held in September 2013. It is a major annual conference in quality of education, coordinated with quality and accreditation commissions and organizations. We look forward to developing our role to facilitate comprehensive access to education and power the engine of innovation for society as a whole.

I thank you for your attention and wish you every success in your undertakings.