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Becoming a "World-Class University" in a Modern Context:

Challenges, Opportunities and Strategies Forward

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TOWARDS WORLD CLASS DIGITAL UNIVERSITIES

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Introduction

Your Excellences, Distinguished Friends, and Colleagues.

It is with great pleasure that I join you here today as a speaker at such a prestigious event. In today's knowledge economy, the topic of World Class Digital Universities is of utmost importance and one that is very close to my heart. I am glad I have the opportunity to share with you some of my insights on this important subject.

Education is a fundamental human right and is something we are constantly striving for as professionals and certainly wish for our children. We all know the immense value associated with a college diploma or university degree. Most of us here today would not be in the positions we are in had not it been for a good education in our formative years. Recently, the example of Miss Malala Yousefzai as a young ambassador of education is inspirational, she is fighting with all her might to see that the basic right of education is available to all and in particular to females.

Education is a very powerful tool that can totally transform nations and propel them into economic prosperity. We can see many examples around us such as the thriving knowledge based economies of the World which are testament to this.

While education is certainly a basic human right, *access* to and the *quality* of education remain to be two continuing challenges to educators globally.

Education as a human right

In 2011, the United Nations proclaimed that access to the Internet is a basic human right. As the UN GAID chair, I fought for this declaration and contributed to its drafting. I believe that by using the human right standard we can proclaim the same for higher education. The capacity to make higher education accessible to every person on this planet exists. The technology to do so also exists. The human will must match that potential. I am now calling for a human rights declaration on elite education for all.

We have a challenge to reach and educate those who cannot travel to obtain higher education be it due to monetary constraints, travel visa restrictions, or the remoteness of millions of people living in sub-Saharan Africa and other remote parts of the World. If education is going to truly stand up as a human right, it needs to be of a *world-class, caliber,* and *available* to all in an equal manner.

This is my belief in the democratization of education.

Definition of world class universities

If it is the right of citizens world-wide to have access to higher education, no matter where they live and what their nationality or religion is then we need world class universities that combine the elements of access and the latest technology to deliver high quality education to step in. This is especially important to the under-privileged in order to break-out of the vicious cycles of poverty they are in and to combat the unacceptable illiteracy levels we see today.

While University league tables such as the Times University Ranking list and the Shanghai list provide an indication of traditional university competency, I believe that in today's age, the term *world-class* should be applied to those universities and institutions that bring together both good technological access with elite educational material.

Universities without walls

In the digital age that we live in now students and educators are no longer confined to the walls of a traditional classroom. In fact, such walls are gradually being broken down, or are eroding away, due to their failure at educating a growing population. Traditional teaching approaches have become ineffective at educating the masses.

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

(Source: Projecting the Global Demand for Teachers, UNESCO Report)

This is catastrophic for education in the Arab world and needs to be addressed promptly in order to avoid adverse repercussions.

Universities of the future need to be border-less, not bound by a physical campus and need to move away from acting as hoarders of real estate. They need to be technology based and have technical trainers to teach students how best to use the various technologies to their maximum.

The day of the ailing old professor teaching from an outdated textbook on a blackboard are long gone. Instead, professors need to focus on producing excellent content which will be accessible by many more than in a traditional classroom setting. The digital tablet and the internet have now taken over.

This change is happening whether we like it or not and educators need to heed the warning signs. Universities that want to survive this tsunami need to change or else they will find themselves irrelevant. In fact, I see the future of universities as being purely digital endeavors with brick and mortar institutes being a thing of the past.

The future is world-class education **online**.

The TSUNAMI of Online Education

Commentators such as the leading British educationalist Sir Michael Barber and Laurence Summer (President Emeritus of Harvard University) further expound on this by saying:

"Deep, radical and urgent transformation is required in higher education."

"The models of higher education that marched triumphantly across the globe in the second half of the 20th century are broken."

"The traditional university is being unbundled……An avalanche is coming."

(Source: An Avalanche is Coming - Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead)

Stanford University President John Hennessy has likened the status quo of higher education to a tsunami by saying:

"A tsunami comes and remakes the coastline and changes things dramatically. It both destroys some things, but it also creates new things."

(Source: The Coming "Tsunami" of Online Education, Dr. John Hennessy)

The failure of traditional universities is evident and will only get worse unless radical steps are taken to reform them. Reformation is a requirement in order to meet the demands of the students of today and those in the future.

Allow me to share with you some additional statements from other prominent speakers and thinkers who have also commented on this failure and the need for education reform:

- *"Revolution hits the Universities"*- Thomas Friedman

- *"Online education is forcing elite schools to re-examine their priorities. In the future, they will educate the masses as well as the select few."* The end of University as we know it - Nathan Harden

- *"An online syllabus could reach many more students, and reduce tuition charges and eliminate room and board. Students in an online university could take any course whenever they wanted, and wouldn't have to waste time bicycling to class".* John Hennessy, President of Stanford University

- *"Bail out Universities rather than Banks "*- Sean Coghlan" BBC News Correspondent

- *"Our students have changed radically. Today, students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."* Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants - Marc Prensky

- "*The Victorians were great engineers. They engineered a [schooling] system that was so robust that it's still with us today, continuously producing identical* people *for a machine that no longer exists."* Dr. Sugata Mitra, Education Researcher in Newcastle University, UK

The Growth of Online Education

Furthermore, here are a few facts and numbers reflecting the growth and demand of online education globally:

- In 2011, 77% of American Corporations were using online learning (in 1995 this number was only 4%).

- 72% of the 600 companies surveyed said that learning technologies such as eLearning and mobile learning helped their business adapt more quickly to change, an increase of 11% on last year.

(Source: Towards Maturity Benchmark Survey 2011)

- E-Learning is proven to increase knowledge retention by 25% to 60%.

- 4,600,000 college students are currently taking at least one of their classes online and by 2014 this number will increase to 18,650,000. By 2019, **half of ALL classes will be done online.**

(Source: Corporate eLearning Exploring a New Frontier, WR Hambrecht.)

- Students involved in online learning outperform their peers.

(Source: Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies, United States Department of Education.)

- Millions of students are participating in online learning.

- 3.9 million students took an online class in the fall of 2007.

(Source: Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States , 2008, Sloan Consortium.)

- Public colleges report a greater commitment to online learning.

(Source: Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008, Sloan Consortium).

- Instructor-led training loses ground to eLearning moving from 70% of training delivered to 62%.

(Source: 2006 ASTD Industry Report)

- Corporate training alone is a $200 billion industry. eLearning represents $56.2 billion of this. This will grow into a $107 billion market by 2015.

(Source: GIA – Global Industry Analysts.)

- Corporations save between 50% and 70% when they replace instructor-based training with eLearning.

(Source: International Options Market Association, IOMA 2002)

Challenges facing Universities

Universities, like banks, are looking for bailouts to help them 'ride the tide' of the global financial crisis. Governmental austerity measures in the West are tightening financial aid available to local students which forces the universities in the West become more dependent on full paying foreign students to make up for the deficit in local student registration. Student uptake is being hampered by increased tuition fees, high living costs, and the difficulty of foreign students acquiring visa to attend elite foreign universities. This all adds to the problem of restricting *access* to education.

Digital natives and digital immigrants

Universities now need to cater to the 'digital natives' and by that I mean the new generation that has been born into technology and to whom technology is not intimidating.

This is the digital native who educators should be targeting.

Digital natives are increasing exponentially in number globally. It is these learners that educators need to focus on as they are the future of the world economy.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has provided some very interesting statistics which details the number of digital natives residing in various nations globally:

China   –   75.2 million
USA   –   41.3 million
India   –   22.7 million
Brazil   –   20.1 million
Japan   –   12.2 million
Mexico   –   9.1 million
Russia   –   9.0 million
Germany   –   8.3 million
Vietnam   –   7.5 million
UK   –   7 million

(Source: International Telecommunication Union)

The ITU defines a digital native as someone who is 15-24 years old and who has been using the internet for at least 5 years. I would add to this the millions that are 2-3 years young; for them, technology is **the** most important learning tool.

The students of today are e-learners who can tap into massive online repositories of knowledge, usually far better than their professors can. They are born with the 'milk' of technology from infancy. On the other hand, professors are now seen as digital immigrants who have come to technology later in their careers. Technical trainers, not professors, are required to help students best utilize this technology in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge.

The way forward

In the Arab world alone, online education is projected to take a massive push. According to the World Bank, "With the number of people online growing at a rate of 1,176.8% since the year 2000, the Arab world is soon to be one of the most wired regions in the world. Given these statistics, the Arab world has embraced the Internet and all it has to offer, including online education."
(Source: http://www.tripolipost.com)

All this leads us to believe that the only way to serve the growing demand in education is by going online. This has led to the development of many online educational initiatives such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Khan Academy, Coursera, MIT Blossoms, just to name a few. These have been designed to provide free, piecemeal chunks of courses to students; who on successful completion, can either gain credits which may go towards completing a full program, or receive course completion certificates.

The problems with such models are their financial sustainability, the level of participation they are receiving and the end result for the student. While piecemeal courses may be suitable for the short term, they do little to provide the sustained, lifelong learning that an education should provide. The old adage of *'You get what you pay for'* is very relevant here as putting courses online takes time, requires human resources and above all requires *money*. Free or close to free MOOCS may be good as long they can sustain themselves but the real world does not work that way.

In order to provide sustained learning, online programs need to be of high quality, have excellent content, should be built around financially sustainable models and should lead to internationally recognized qualifications. While students may certainly tinker with MOOCs in the short-term, no student will make a full-hearted commitment to a program that doesn't lead to a recognized qualification. As with any endeavor, you want something meaningful at the end to show for all of your hard work.

TAGIUNI as the solution

I have watched my nine grandchildren – all of whom are digital natives, grow up with the Internet and who were exposed to its intricacies and workings. Their experience is increasingly like that of every other student born in the information age. In the near future, the virtual world and the real world will become synonymous –; it will become impossible to unlink the two.

Until now, access to elite, world-class education has remained exclusive and unaffordable for the majority of students around the globe. For the first time in history we are in a position to do something about it. Access to world-class education is an inevitability whose time has come.

I come from a history of establishing leading world-class businesses over the last 40 years. I do not build on calls of goodwill, but rather aim to build feasible and sustainable entities. I say that we need to shift gears from "free online education" to affordable, "elite, accredited online education."

As a life-long learner myself, I took it as duty to fill this need. I established a concept which encompasses all the characteristics a world-class University should have, called Talal Abu Ghazaleh University (TAGI-UNI -http://www.tagiuni.com).

TAGI-UNI is a pioneering alliance, bringing together the best institutions globally, under one umbrella. Acting as a gateway to online education, TAGI-UNI ensures that only the highest quality online programs are offered to its students from reputable international universities and training institutes. This eases the burden on students to find a reputable online program, supports them in registering with a world-class institution, and provides them with the assurance that they will be backed throughout the duration of their studies by the reputation of the TAGI-UNI mother company, the Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization

(TAG-org, http://www.tagorg.com).

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. I should also add that the latest university we partnered with is the University of Scranton which is also a Jesuit university in Northeast Pennsylvania. Both universities offer high quality accredited programs, as do all the other universities that have partnered with TAGIUNI.

Through TAGI-UNI, I want to change peoples' attitude towards digital education. I want to prepare graduate students to become global citizens, equipped with the best skills to perform and make their mark in their respective economies. Digital education stemming from international institutions compels individuals to understand their interdependence and the interconnectivity 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 and promotes affordable, "elite education for all", not just "education for all."

Some TAGOrg e-initiatives

As a passionate advocate of elite online education, I have been instrumental in establishing up a number of other projects in the sphere of online education apart from TAGI-UNI. These include:

- Talal Abu Ghazaleh Cloud (TAG CLOUD - http://www.tagicloud.com)
- TAGEPEDIA (http://demo.tagepedia.org)
- ICT in Education in Five Arab States - Report (http://www.uis.unesco.org)
- e-Infrastructure as a platform

1. TAG CLOUD is the first private cloud implementation in the Arab region. I am proud of such an achievement and my vision behind it was to have a pool of scalable IT resources that can be provided upon demand without the need of costly administration. TAG CLOUD supports TAGI-UNI's academic programs, connects our students to the world, helps to simplify operations, and reduce costs by utilizing virtualization technologies. The TAG Cloud is used internally by the Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization (http://www.tagorg.com) to host all of its critical applications to support TAG-org's (http://www.tagorg.com) 83 offices worldwide. It will also be used to host TAGIUNI's educational resources and content which will be made available through a hierarchical federated access infrastructure.
2. TAGIPEDIA (http://demo.tagepedia.org) is a unique concept I established, directed to put up verified Arabic content on the Internet. The purpose is to disseminate credible knowledge from the Arab world covering all spheres of life, thus acting as a portal for disseminating Arabic knowledge globally.

3. The "ICT in Education in Five Arab States" report (http://www.uis.unesco.org) was a joint collaboration between TAG-org and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The purpose was to build capacity in Arab states by strengthening national capabilities to define measure the use of ICTs in education as well as to manage ICT policy development and implementation. This brought together policy makers from around the Arab region to see how ICT usage in education can be improved. The implementation of the recommendations from this report is currently being discussed between TAG-org and UNESCO.

4. e-Infrastructure as a platform - Across the globe, specialized high-speed communication networks have emerged as dedicated e-infrastructure platforms for research and education. Through these networks, students can seamlessly access a widespread and diverse educational content and resources. We are investing to become part of this global interconnectivity through a pan-Arab e-Infrastructure that links Arab institutions with reliable means of communication at the regional level.

TAGIUNI will be initially linked to the European and American research and education networks via a dedicated STM1 155 megabits per second circuit in London. This linkage will facilitate a reliable access to a wide range of educational resources that are available at partner universities.

I see these projects as part of my humble contribution to the digital natives; for generations to come; and was awarded the Visionary Leadership Award in Dubai in September 2013 for this and other work.

I urge all others in privileged positions to join hands and contribute to online education, as it is only through a collective effort will real change be made.

Closing Remarks

I would like to encourage all my colleagues in governmental capacities to help in ensuring full recognition of online programs in their respective countries. I would also like to request employers to embrace those with online degrees. In my organization, I have made a commitment to hire graduates of recognized online programs, in particular those who study through partners of TAGI-UNI (http://www.tagiuni.com).

I also call for the establishment of a very much needed Arab Accreditation Body for online education in order to help promote quality online education in the region and to act as a center of excellence.

I wish all students, no matter their age or location, the very best in their studies and will certainly endeavor to do my utmost to make a world-class education available to all.

Thank you.

Talal Abu Ghazaleh