

## **CLOSING PLENARY SESSION**

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### **Solidarity and Action: International Co-operation with Palestinian Universities**

It is a great pleasure to be here with you in Nablus: in this beautiful conference hall of your An-Najah National University. I was invited by the organising committee to address you as participants of this International Conference on the Role of Higher Education in the Context of an Independent Palestinian State, under the auspices of the PEACE Programme. In Paris, during the preparations for the World Conference on Higher Education in 1998, announced this morning by Dr. Dias of UNESCO, my good friend Professor Abu-Lughud and I discussed this matter more in detail.

Wholeheartedly I accepted this invitation. With great enthusiasm I greet you now. The discussions this morning illustrate how useful this meeting is. I greet you on behalf of the universities from Europe and world-wide, in at least four capacities, all of them are closely related to each other and to the theme of this Conference.

To start with, I am here representing the International Association of Universities (IAU), of which Professor Hanna Nasir is a member of the Administrative Board. I also represent the European Association of Universities (CRE). Each of these organisations have about 550 members, all research-universities. They implement activities in the field of management seminars (CRE), information services (IAU), special projects and meetings (both IAU and CRE). Those two large bodies of universities share the opinion that a solid system of higher education is imperative for the development of any country or region in the world; not only in delivering the necessary human resources in terms of qualified academics, but also in building up a sound research capacity, accountable to society.

But I am representing those two bodies in my capacity of Rector of Utrecht University in the Netherlands. I have been holding this position for some ten years now. During this period I came to treasure international co-operation between universities all over the world, based on a sense of true academic partnership. Last but not least, I am an academic myself, convinced of the contribution that any single member of "academia" can and should give to society.

### **Universities**

Allow me to present a few remarks illustrating how I look at universities and higher education.

There is of course no such thing as a precise definition of the university. Yet, we all agree about the people who, together, make up such a university. They are people who are **creative, capable, critical** and **professional**, who feel responsible, are accountable, but also show compassion for their tasks, for the relations among staff, students, colleagues, and the outside world!

"Creative" means that people constantly try to pose new questions and find new answers. Not for the sake of the questions and answers themselves, but always in connection with the progress made in their scientific field and to the needs that are identified by society. "Capable" meaning that people have the relevant capacities and compassion to function for the benefit of the society. "Critical" meaning that people from universities will never accept or change moral values, political ideologies, beliefs etc. without a thorough analysis of the consequences, implications etc. "Professional" meaning that people from universities are adequately equipped for performing their role in society. People who do not in the first place take into account their own interests, or only the easy answers, but concentrate on what needs to be done, also in a more fundamental way. Now this seems to me the essence of the mission of a university in fact of any institution of higher education. And it is this type of institution that can truly contribute, in a decisive way to the further development of the Palestinian international identity and the independent sustainable development of Palestine.

### **Values and Norms**

We should also keep in mind here the development of the idea of academic freedom and autonomy. These notions should have wide implications, not only for the scope and quality of teaching and research programmes at universities, but also for the governance of a university, especially in a time when outbursts of extremism are almost a common feature. My good friend Michal Severynsky of Lodz University, Poland, explained once the importance of the universities in his country in socialist times, in particular in the period of martial law. He called universities "places that teach democracy".

Universities, whose existence is based on a concept of freedom and autonomy, cannot escape their broader responsibility to try to help in solving urgent problems of racism, environmental pollution, hunger, war etc.

For institutions of higher education, international co-operation and linkages with partner institutes ought to be a fundamental component of their institutional policy, their commitment to the cause of education and research. Linkages should be based on true partnership: partnership between institutions of higher education and research, between people who want to achieve a maximum of academic creativity and innovation and who want to invest in such a partnership, both through staff and through financial input. Sincere commitment of people and a real flow of ideas and knowledge are more important than written agreements, big sums of money and all kinds of evaluations. Mobilising people is the key to success. The development of

networks, of partnerships in themselves are good laboratories of practising democracy and good governance, just because of the important differences between the partners!

### **Human Resources**

I think that my ideas about the mission of universities anywhere in the world and about academic solidarity should also be exercised in the relationship with Palestinian universities and institutes of higher education with the aim to enhance the human resources. The future of an independent Palestine will depend to a large extent on these resources.

In my opinion, the PEACE Programme has proved to be an invaluable instrument in mobilising international academic commitment. In this sense, I do think that this conference is already a success by the sheer fact of its existence. The presence of your President, Mr. Yasser Arafat and your Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi clearly illustrates the importance of this event. Professor Munthir Salah and Professor Baramki, Professor Chitoran and all the others involved in the organisation, can be congratulated. The Conference as such is a clear token of academic solidarity and of partnership. But I want to add immediately that this is not enough. A confession of academic solidarity should always be followed by implementation of academic solidarity through action. I dare to say that we have seen enough confessions of solidarity, solemn vows, to assist the Palestinian people without the practical implementation. We, i.e. the international academic community, should go on and set the example. We need to mobilise people in order to assist their colleagues here in this troubled country who do their job under very difficult circumstances in order to raise the quality of teaching and research. We need to assist our Palestinian colleagues to enhance research in areas of particular relevance for the future of the Palestinian society, like issues of water, land etc. In that sense we can make a modest but crucial contribution to the peace process in this region. In that sense, Palestinian institutions will be able to take their rightful place as equal partners in the international 'academia'.

### **Instruments**

A number of instruments have been defined: scholarships for students, exchange of staff, undertaking of joint research-projects etc. in order to really implement the solidarity. Think about the importance of the staff development programmes and solidarity the TOKTEN Programme (Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals). We need to encourage the international academic community to devote more energy and resources in the development of linkages with Palestinian partner-institutions. The PEACE Programme should continue and even strengthen its important role here. Scholarships might help to bring about the other wave Professor Sufian Kamal was asking for this morning. *Brain Gain*, not *Brain Drain*, bringing people back to Palestine should receive here special focus!

It is therefore imperative that the Palestinian institutions of higher education themselves formulate as accurately as possible the needs and strategies of their institutions. It is in my opinion also imperative that the Palestinian institutions of higher education proceed on the road to a rationalisation of resources. The optimisation of university resources in a national system not only of higher education, but of education at large is imperative. Such an integrated approach of planning of policy and strategy will certainly reinforce the system of higher education and thereby the position of each of the individual institutions involved.

Of course funding has to be provided in relation to the needs of young people and society itself. At the last Biannual Conference of the CRE, held in the Czech Republic; the importance of networking and strategic alliances for universities was stressed. The PEACE Programme could play a role here for the Palestinian universities. It already plays an important role in terms of an umbrella-organisation in initiating these international linkages. The fact that at the moment the PEACE Programme has 66 members clearly shows the good results, I come to offer you help, trying to mobilise commitment within the IAU and CRE for the PEACE Programme. Your programme should play a catalytic role in attracting assistance for targeted projects that you define, based on equal partnership.

I want to end by 'promising' that I will encourage as much as I can the academic solidarity with Palestinian universities in my four capacities as outlined in my introduction. The next conference organised by the PEACE Programme will show whether the deed did indeed follow the solemn vow. To start with, I will strengthen the commitment of my own university, Utrecht University. I thank you for your attention.