Partnership with MENA: a translation task

Professor Colin B. Grant, Pro-Vice-Chancellor

Far-reaching horizons and …

Research problems such as climate change, food security, poverty and the digital economy are global. They reach beyond traditional actors such as institutions, states and businesses. This creates a global challenge and also a significant opportunity.

Research solutions are context-sensitive or ‘glocal’: they are culturally, linguistically and politically informed. Solutions vary in target impact, disciplinary range, public engagement strategies and theorisations.

But … these contexts – global and local – are connected.

… Multipolar systems

We have witnessed seismic shifts in global contexts: the end of the Cold War, the at times volatile rebalancing of the global economy, the Arab Springs.

Globalisation marks the advent of *bundled networks and contexts*. And today's bundled networks are fluid, agile forms that can flow around existing structures – nation states, national and international organizations and knowledge systems.

Multipolar systems

Higher education was once dominated by US and UK institutions (consider almost all international league tables).

This dominance has started to give way to a more multipolar system with the rise of innovation systems (Hall, 2005) in Asia (e.g. PR China, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Malaysia), the Middle East (UAE, Qatar) and South America (Brazil, Colombia).

Context-sensitive thinking

This multipolar order creates significant challenges for universities seeking to nurture global talent.

Multiple contexts require a strategic approach that engages strongly with the networked, contested and highly mobile systems and environments of which Higher Education is a part.

Our students and early career researchers have an advantage: *they were born into this reality*.

Contexts in MENA

International strategy without a long-term engagement with MENA becomes an exercise in ranking-chasing.

Clear asymmetries between very established innovation systems (e.g. Germany) and developing innovation systems.

But: these asymmetries are productive.

Thinking about Dialogue

Exciting and uncertain times.

Not clear we are equal to them: appeal for strategic dialogue on a grand – not timid – scale.

But where to start given complexities on the ground?

Thinking about Dialogue

A long-term partnership strategy requires a conceptual shift – a mutual translation effort (Habermas).

No longer a linear export model of western excellence but strategic initiatives to reopen Grand Dialogues across the disciplines.

Mobility of students and faculty!

Contexts in MENA

Predominant engagement models:

either:

recruitment-led

or:

capacity-building

Partnership still rather more marginal, usually from existing research links. Rarely leveraged.