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**Middle East and North Africa Programme
Workshop Summary:**

Skills for Employability

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INTRODUCTION

The following notes summarise a public panel discussion held at the British Embassy, Cairo in December 2009, organised as part of the Chatham House and British Embassy project to celebrate 25 years of the Chevening Programme.

The panel discussion looked at the purpose of higher education, the need to equip young people with vocational skills for the labour market and to link up educational institutions with employers in Egypt. However, not to be forgotten are the fundamentals of higher education, such as critical thinking, problem solving and curiosity.

Speakers included Hind Hanafy, President of Alexandria University; Amira Kazem from the World Bank Cairo; Alan McArthur, UK Director of TVET; William John Morgan, UNESCO Chair of the Political Economy of Education and Director of the Centre for Comparative Education Research at the University of Nottingham and Paul Smith, Director of British Council in Egypt.

SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

Focusing on the Job Market

Professor Hind Hanafy began the discussion by addressing the question of how to equip young people with the skills needed for employment and the need for Egypt to produce good, efficient, employable people.

- Education must cater for the needs of society and meet an increasingly demanding economic reality;
- The concept of education needs to be changed and broadened.

With a focus on the job market, much can be achieved in Higher Education:

- Academic content is not enough: the focus must be on developing other skills, including language, communications, time management and computer skills;
- Universities can offer applied courses and industrial placements where students are treated as employees;
- For the private sector, it is key to have a motivated, dedicated, adaptable and flexible workforce, equipped with critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Incentives and Responding to Employer Needs

The second speaker on the panel, Amira Kazem, examined the labour market in Egypt and the notion of incentivising employers.

- The labour market in Egypt is currently segregated, with symptoms of market failure;
- There is a lack of accreditation and certification, a lack of information for adjusting curriculum to meet employer needs, and individuals do not have a critical mass of skills;
- TVET is not a short-term remedy for deficiencies in the education system, but a mechanism on its own.

Why would the private sector train or invest in a worker? The government requires a set of incentives and needs to continue financing systems. Employers should be encouraged to assess training needs, and receive a training provider with an interactive manner and a willingness to respond to

the needs of the employer. This creates an employer and a worker who appreciate the system, cutting across the vicious circle of employability.

Vocational Training and Employer Engagement

Alan McArthur, the UK director of TVET, assessed the relationship between employer engagement and vocational education and training.

- Vocational education provides young people with the knowledge and understanding of the practicalities and principles of a subject area in a simulated environment using specifically designed equipment:
 - This is usually demand driven, perhaps with a qualification at the end
- Vocational training is instruction through the demonstration of specific job related tasks at an industry standard. This has three main requirements:
 - Employer-industry engagement
 - Trainers highly developed in techniques and skills and have industry experience
 - Trainers/instructors with skills to assess standards and confirm competence.

The question then becomes how to engage with employers. The UK has the advantage that instructors have been in industry, whereas in other countries this is a big issue. One of the first things is to get trainers and employers together, creating space for them to spend time together and combating the reluctance between industry and the education sector. Employer engagement and trainers' familiarity with engaging with industry is key, and ensures both fitness for purpose and real relevance.

The Purpose of Universities

Professor John Morgan from the University of Nottingham looked at universities as potential engines for economic and social progress, and the lessons that can be learnt and shared between higher education systems.

- *Partnership*: Partnership is the key to universities that are fit for purpose – sharing between countries, between institutions, between programmes, and between individuals. He pointed towards the

Chevening Programme as being incredibly valuable at cementing partnerships and relationships, as a lifetime commitment, not just brief stay in the UK;

- *What is the purpose of the University?* As a beacon of civilization (economic, social and cultural); to provide intellectual and moral education for societies; to provide the highest level of skills development; to create and to share knowledge. These are complementary processes that make for employability;
- *What is employability?* It is concept that is subject to the volatile labour market, so it becomes difficult to predict ahead. Capability is a preferable term and lies at the heart of employability: critical thinking, team work, a spirit of entrepreneurship and curiosity.

The TVET Sector

Paul Smith, the director of the British Council in Egypt, ended the presentations with some observations about the TVET sector in Egypt, the importance of prioritizing and dignifying vocational training and the need for equal opportunities for all.

- Any country with a robust and realistic economic trade and investment strategy needs to look towards an equally robust education and employability strategy. The TVET sector is a powerful driver of socio economic success;
- It is critical that Egypt starts shaping the agenda and provide some leads, asserting how this sector is going to be managed and driving the consensus needed around standards;
- There needs to be an economic labour market analysis, taking individual industries, professions and vocations and gathering real market intelligence;
- English is regarded as a critical labour market need in Egypt, and the country's single greatest skills deficiency is in communications, particularly English;
- Another important area for investment is teacher and trainer development. The critical axis is industry and education institutions, creating a culture where employers begin to take ownership.

Discussion

Questions and comments from the audience covered areas such as creating more opportunities for women and supporting them while they raise children; the need for English language training, critical thinking and problem-solving skills; distance learning and international partnerships; building capacities in training and encouraging employers to think about training as an investment.

Professor Hanafy noted that if girls and boys are presented with the same opportunities, they will be equally employable, while Paul Smith pointed out that it is not easy to overcome gender stereotyping.

Professor Morgan argued that autonomy is essential in higher education, and that universities should pride themselves on independent thinking. Working creatively with students to develop their confidence is also very important – the undergraduate degree used to be voyage of discovery, but now it is a package tour with an undesirable destination. Professor Morgan also emphasized the need to understand the university's role in continuing professional development alongside professional associations and employers. This can be made even stronger through partnerships with other universities. However, although the involvement of employers is important, all countries still need basic, fundamental, curiosity-driven research otherwise universities will become inert.

Professor Hanafy concurred that everyone seeks autonomy in universities and that there has been a big wave of educational reform in Egypt: the first steps have already been taken. More confidence should be injected into industry, and in showing how university research can assist industry. Research can help develop critical thinking, and to be involved in research early on in life will help in innovation which Egypt needs. Professor Hanafy also argued the need for including technical and practical skills for the job market within university curriculums, and for developing concrete and intimate relations between companies and university staff members. However, she noted that with the huge number of students in Egypt, addressing all the issues raised is not easy.

The need for supporting, upgrading, and giving recognition to Egypt's three quarters of a million technicians was also raised, alongside government intervention, private sector investment, the role of small businesses in developing the economic sector, and the problems in maintaining standards and adopting qualifications.

On government support, Amira Kazem noted that in 2002 the government developed a policy statement focused on situation analysis, targeting real

needs and best practices. Out of this grew a skills development project (funded by the government and the World Bank) which puts together trainers and employers. Although this is a small initiative without a wide impact yet, lessons are being learned: start small and creep through. She also commented that training takes times and the private sector is cost orientated.

Alan McArthur addressed the issues of standards and qualifications by pointing towards apprenticeships as a good example of combining technical training, practical experience, key skills and qualifications. In the UK there are a range of apprenticeships which are work based but not purely a vocational qualification - delivered in the workplace but with an element of technical training. He also considered the idea of incentives to drive forward employer engagement. The UK government put incentives in place, conditions where they will provide funding if the employers produce certain outputs and become accountable, i.e. centres of excellence.

Paul Smith drew the meeting to a close by drawing attention to the need for finding employment for the 1 million graduates. Any strategy, he suggested, must not just concentrate on strengthening institutions but also on employer awareness. Employers should be setting their own standards and scoping their own needs.