

Harvard Alumni discuss reshaping future of education, economy

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Cairo: The Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) fourth annual Arab World conference drew the region's intelligentsia in the fields of finance, economics, education and the media, among others. Held in Cairo Thursday under the patronage of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, the Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros Ghali gave the keynote address.

“While we, at HAA have benefited individually from the quality of education that we received at Harvard that helped us in unveiling our ‘veil of ignorance’ and in our upward career mobility, we strive to help as many young and professional Arabs to profit from this opportunity based on meritocracy,” said Sameh El Saharty, president of the HAA.

The event held under the title, “The Arab World: Shaping the Future — How the changing landscape in the economy, education, business and media will shape tomorrow” brings together alumni, academics, professionals and intellectuals to exchange views and share ideas about the challenges facing the Arab world and the opportunities that may foster its economic and social development.

The conference kicked off with a panel titled “The Arab World and the global economic crisis: strategies for navigating the current economic environment and positioning for recovery.”

“We need to enable the private sector, create a bureaucracy-free environment since we have a problem of being over-regulated, reduce the regulations involved in starting, doing and even closing a business and we need to promote domestic investment instead of always thinking in terms of foreign direct investment,” said Assem Ragab, chairman of the General Authority for Investment and Free Zones.

Concurring with Ragab was Hisham Ezz El Arab, CEO of Commercial International Bank, who also stressed that there is a need to promote domestic investment.

The second panel at the conference was “Arab education: public or private?” which discussed the rise of private education in the Arab World and its impact on public education and shaping the development of the regional workforce.

Provost of the American University in Cairo, Lisa Anderson, spoke of how there are two main phenomena shaping higher education in the upcoming period: the conventional dimension and time. “The world is becoming smaller so we need to know the skills and kind of world the students will be approaching,” she said, adding that students will likely be studying at multiple sites and institutions and professors will be moving around as often too.

As for the time phenomenon, Anderson explained how there is now an instantaneous and limitless amount of information available. “Education is not about collecting information anymore, it's about how to understand, analyze and assess this information,” she said.

“We need to think about private universities in terms of how they are contributing to the economic, social and political objectives of the country,” said Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, former assistant secretary general and director of the Regional Bureau for Arab States and former deputy Prime Minister of Jordan.

Safwan M. Masri, professor at Columbia University, made an important note regarding profit-oriented institutions. “When you have for-profit organizations with education [it’s when you go wrong as there will be the dilemma of] responding to stakeholders versus the needs of the public at large,” he said.