

Report from the workshop

EVENT: Economies in the Euro-Mediterranean: The role of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship

LOCATION: Euro-Mediterranean University, Piran, Slovenia

DATE: 31 January 2020

The last of the five MEDHUB workshops was devoted to the economies in the region. The diversity of the Euro-Mediterranean region is very much reflected also in the economies of the countries – their key preoccupations are very different. While the countries of the South are characterised by unemployment and weak institutional contexts, including political instability or even conflict,¹ the North is struggling with an ageing society and jobs that, to a large part, do not correspond to the aspirations of the youth. In both contexts, innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity have a strong role to play: they are enablers of higher employment and of quality jobs of the future. The qualities of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship are therefore inherently attractive to all the economies of the region. The focus on them enables a level-playing field for a truly region-wide discussion.

The *speakers* contributing to the debate in the event were: Olga Kokshagina (France/Australia), Inese Subovica (Latvia), Rajnish Tiwari (Germany/India), Mohammed Elrazzaz (Egypt/Spain). The event was attended by 10 participants.

The event discussed various *issues*, among them:

- The ways in which creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship can positively impact economies.
- The ways in which the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation works and the type of problems to which innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship typically contribute.
- The notion of *innovation*. We discussed specifically its value and the »fixation obstacles« that impede us from thinking out of the box, as well as the ways to overcome those. One potential lies in deconstructing the problem and moving beyond the knowledge base in problem-solving. The discussions on innovation in this event explicitly involved the notion of social innovation, grassroots and frugal innovation.

¹ Youth unemployment in the Euro-Mediterranean Region, and particularly the MENA Region, is one of the highest anywhere in the world, with rates well above 30%. Despite the favorable demographics in terms of age (over 50% below the age of 25), one-third of the MENA Region's youth live in fragile and conflict-inflicted areas. Moreover, the MENA Region is home to 58% of the world's refugees and almost half the world's Internally Displaced Persons.

- The time-span in which we find appropriate to frame our discussions. This was agreed at around 10 years. A period of less than 10 years is too unpredictable, while in a longer perspective, it is quite likely that a new challenge will arise.

The recommendations of the workshop for policy-makers:

- Acknowledge the positive role played by creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship across the societal spheres. Create *a mindset* for creativity and innovation! Promote these as positive values for the individuals and society as a whole. Make sure to treat them as open to the entire society (not only to some – educated – segments of it). The focus on innovation in solving societal issues should not deflect attention away from the responsibility of policy makers to create more favourable conditions. Policy makers need to continue working on closing the skills and gender gap, improving access to finance, improving the legislative contexts, eradicating corruption etc. Nevertheless, cultivating a culture of entrepreneurship and providing a conducive environment for innovation and creativity can unleash a huge potential and eventually turn generations of job seekers into job creators.
- Work actively to integrate these qualities into the curricula at various levels of teaching, in accordance with the age groups. The »train the trainers« approach is useful here, as usual: teachers are the key drivers of change in students.
- Policy makers need specifically to start embracing all types of innovation. Effort needs to be made to not overspend the resources and instead innovate in simplifying things and getting rid of what is not necessary or moves away from the existing way of doing things.
- To mainstream the notion of innovation to all segments of society, change the discourse and indicators to put focus on the qualities of simple, efficient innovation, e.g. speak about how much investment do you get by investing 1 eur (rather than how much money in absolute terms is devoted to R&D).
- The EU neighbourhood policy should capture the notions of frugal, social innovation and grassroots innovation as development tools/enablers.
- Increase the positive image of the MENA region as an opportunity for business and cooperation. An example of a positive image can be found in the fact that of the 100 highly innovative start-ups, 12% come from the MENA region.
- Focus specifically on civil service to endorse a mindset of creativity and innovation. Have the civil service not only promote these qualities, but be role models, inspiring others.

The recommendations on development of new curricula at universities or of reforming existing curricula of workshop:

- Include and strengthen elements of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship into curricula at all stages. While kids are inherently creative and innovative in all the countries (regardless of cultures), they lose some of that at a later stage, by being

squared into the system. We need to allow those qualities to flourish even as people move up the education ladder and acquire more functional knowledge.

- Seek to include creativity and innovation into subject courses of any discipline. These are not appropriate only for a certain type of studies. Engineering and sciences may seem more appropriate for problem-solving, but creativity can be made part of any curriculum or subject discipline. Equally, design thinking, moonshot thinking, CK thinking and other approaches have all been tested, there are examples of their successful integration into curricula. Each professor should actively explore how to allocate these qualities more space in the context of their own teaching load.
- Include practitioners, who bring insights from »real-world« into the teaching of the courses. Students learn a great deal out of real-life examples, including their failures (if practitioners are willing to share these).
- Professors, trainers and teachers should seek to make use of the diversity of their classroom/student groups. Diversity (not only of ethnicities, but also of social backgrounds, age, disciplines) directly fosters creativity and learning. As the students are made aware of the fact that diverse compositions of classrooms enrich learning environments, diversity can be used as a way of stimulating also intercultural understanding.
- Professors, trainers and teachers should seek to link the problem-solving approach (that usually occurs at the level of concrete problems) to societal problems as they are framed at the higher political level. We should seek to demonstrate how tangible solutions, creativity and innovation at the grassroots level are, step-by-step and gradually, contributing to the larger policy goals.
- Higher education institutions can help in promoting innovation specifically by gaining, improving access to knowledge, opening the doors and not limiting the knowledge to the owners of knowledge. Open science is closely related to innovation.
- Promote failures as part of the learning process, where appropriate. Move away from stigmatising failure (not making it appear as part of success). Vocational training, so important in our age, requires constant learning, but also processes of “unlearning”, learning from failure.
- Invite the management of higher education to transform itself. The transformation of higher education can be ignited effectively by the management so target these to convince them of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship, despite their resistance to change.