ASREN

Arab States Research and Education Network

ASREN *Newsletter*

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*"**ASREN** is a non-profit company with limited liability (GmbH) and is officially registered in Germany, under the umbrella of the League of Arab States. The main goal is to connect Arab institutions among themselves and to the globe through high-speed data-communications networks. Such networks will enable sharing and access to a variety of R&E services and applications in addition to utilization of highly sophisticated and technologically advanced computing resources available only at very few institutions in the world."*

In this issue

ASREN and Arab NRENs participate in the Fifth Arab Internet Governance Forum in Cairo

In addition to ASREN, NRENs of Lebanon and Egypt participated in the Fifth Arab Internet Governance Forum (ArabIGF-V) held in Cairo, 22 to 23 January 2020. The forum was organized by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) and the League of Arab States (LAS) in cooperation with the National Telecom Regulatory Authority of Egypt as the Arab IGF Secretariat since 2012. It was generously hosted by the Arab Administrative Development Organization (ARADO) at its premises in Heliopolis.

The main objective of the ArabIGF-V sis to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on Internet governance amongst all stakeholders in the Arab region, including Governments, private sector, civil society, academics, technical community, and regional and international organizations. The dialogue will cover the topics of priority and issues related to Internet policies in the region, in line with the priorities stipulated in the Second Arab Roadmap for Internet Governance. The event also aims to facilitate linking the thematic areas covered with the overall objective of achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

ASREN took part in the preparations for the ArabIGF-V, which also involved the participation of members of ArabIGF Multi-stakeholder Programme Advisory Committee (AMPAC) in meetings during 2018 and 2019, which resulted with the identification of the main themes of the event, namely:

Themes of plenaries:
(1) Contribution to Internet Global Public Policymaking: From Internet Governance to Digital Cooperation.
(2) Meaningful access for inclusion and diversity.
(3) Digital transformation and Internet economy.
(4) Cyber security, privacy, trust and peace.

Cross-cutting areas:
(1) Gender equality and women empowerment.
(2) Social and human impact.
(3) Human development/ capacity-building.
(4) Legislative frameworks.

As one of the main stakeholders of Internet Governance, ASREN and NRENs were represented by Yousif Asfour, CIO of American University at Beirut who participated and contributed to the Forum in the main session on "Meaningful access for inclusion and diversity". In his intervention, Dr. Asfour emphasized that the value of the internet is derived from its ability to enable people and organizations from all parts of society to equally access, share and create knowledge and information.

Instead of unilaterally implementing laws and cyber controls that restrict the use of the internet, government and regulatory authorities must work in collaboration with all stakeholders from all sectors of society to develop and implement laws and policies that encourage everyone to access, share and produce content in line with the constantly evolving technology.

This means that our laws need to focus on the protection of intellectual property, freedom of expression, secure transactions, safe communication and equal access for all people and organizations.
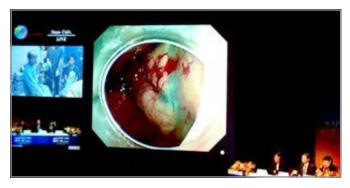
Dr. Asfour added: "In order to ensure inclusivity, we also have to work with all service and content providers to provide awareness and implement policies and standards that ensure access to people with visual, hearing, mobility, mental, or other special needs".

Telemedicine: Possible expansion to ASREN countries

Shuji Shimizu, MD, PhD, Telemedicine Development Center of Asia, Kyushu University Hospital, Japan

Network without applications means nothing, and there are many academic programs working on research and education network. Telemedicine should be one of the most attractive and important fields.

However, telemedicine requires special technology in terms of high-resolution images for precise diagnosis and smooth movement of transmitted contents such as surgery. It had not been satisfactory until 2002, when we first developed a new system between Japan and Korea, which could preserve the original quality without purchasing any costly special videoconferencing equipment. Telemedicine changed from experimental level to a practical and clinically suitable tool. It was an epoch-making event in telemedicine both in quality and cost, satisfying healthcare providers in Asia where there are many developing countries. It

Live Demonstration of Endoscopy

soon expanded around the world, and now we are collaborating with 763 medical institutions in 70 countries with 1140 programs in variety of subspecialties.

There have been few chances for us in Japan and Asia-Pacific Advanced Network (APAN) Medical Working Group to work with medical colleges and hospitals in Middle East and African countries. We do hope to start collaborations and create useful and educational telemedicine programs with ASREN countries to provide higher medical standards to the people in the region.

Register for now for the WACREN 2020 in Cotonou

WACREN is organizing its 6th Annual Conference on 19 - 20 March 2020 in Benin's largest city and seat of government - Cotonou, hosted by Benin Research and Education Network (RBER).

The venue is the 4-Star Hotel Golden Tulip le Diplomate Cotonou.

Stakeholders of research and education network (REN) across the WACREN region and beyond will gather around the theme 'Digital Transformation for Development' with the following sub-themes:

1. New Technologies, Innovation and 4th Industrial Revolution
2. e-learning, Life-long Learning and Education Strategy
3. Open Science and Open Access
4. Ethics and Governance

Participants are expected to be enlightened as various presenters share research data, experiences and knowledge on topics related to the theme for the event.

The 2020 Conference coincides with WACREN's 10th Anniversary and will include a special ceremony to celebrate the occasion.

Register at: https://indico.wacren.net/event/93/registrations/41/

Pan African University launches e-learning arm

The open, distance and e-learning (ODeL) arm of the Pan African University (PAU), which will offer free, accredited online courses to African students, was officially launched in December in Yaoundé, Cameroon, enabling millions of Africans of all ages to benefit from lifelong learning opportunities.

A flagship project of the African Union, the Pan African Virtual and E-University or PAVEU is geared

towards addressing the call by Agenda 2063 to accelerate the development of human capital, science and technology and innovation by increasing access to tertiary and continuing education in Africa.

Currently hosted at the Pan African University Rectorate headquarters in Yaoundé, Cameroon, PAVEU courses – which are all free and internationally accredited – are due to commence on 15 January 2020. They are open to applicants from African countries and the African diaspora. Courses include media and information literacy and IT courses.

Lifelong learning
Beatrice Khamati Njenga, outgoing head of the education division at the African Union Commission, told University World News that PAVEU provides a "unique opportunity to enable millions of Africans of every age to benefit from first and second chance education and training and facilitates lifelong learning".

"More than any other region and more than at any other time in history, Africa needs to multiply access to inclusive, responsive quality higher education and training … that is relevant and addresses areas of need and opportunity – not only for employment and entrepreneurship, but also for empowering people to secure a meaningful quality of life, responsible citizenship and democratic engagement," she said.

Njenga, who was in charge of education at the African Union Commission at the time of the initiation of the project concept and the establishment of the project's technical task force that included the University of South Africa (UNISA), the African Virtual University (AVU), the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), said: "It

is education and training that makes sense of Africa's resource endowment, takes advantage of emergent technological space, while resonating with African values."

Njenga said a large and increasing number of young people are unable to access "first chance" quality education and training while many others had initial technical and other training but needed new knowledge and skills as a result of the changing face of work and the expanding tech-based opportunities for creating gainful employment and entrepreneurship.

"Still others desire the freedom to change careers or grow therein," she said.
"All this calls for flexibility in education provision and recognition of alternative ways of acquiring knowledge and skills."

Dr Violet Makuku, quality assurance specialist and project officer for the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) Initiative at the Association of African Universities, told University World News the establishment of PAVEU highlights the efforts of the African Union Commission in developing inclusive education and increasing access to higher education in Africa.

Asked about challenges facing the new initiative, she said fast-moving technological developments meant that both university students and academic staff would need constant training.

Internet connectivity
She said another big challenge was power outages and internet connectivity, particularly in "remote and rural areas in Africa which should ideally be the main target areas".

According to the 2019 Affordability Report produced by the Alliance for Affordable Internet, Africans are charged around 7% of their monthly income for 1GB of data. The average United States earner would be charged US$373 per month for 1GB if the average cost was 7.12% of their income.

Makuku said contingent power supplies would be needed as well as the strengthening of national research and education networks (NRENs), which could reduce internet costs by 70%-80% due to economies of scale.

Yousef Torman, co-managing director of the Arab States Research and Education Network (ASREN), told University World News that PAVEU would boost higher education outcomes and utilise educational and academic resources across Africa for a wider number of students.

He said the existing African regional research and education networks (RRENs), namely, the Regional Research and Education Networking Organisation for Eastern and Southern Africa or UbuntuNet Alliance, West and Central African Research and Education Network or WACREN and

the Arab States Research and Education Network or ASREN for Northern Africa and Middle East Arab countries, that work together to establish the Pan African Research and Education Network will support PAVEU by providing the necessary pan-African high-speed network to access educational resources, tools and applications.

"The AfricaConnect3 project co-funded by the European Commission, which has already started, will also provide further support by connecting African universities to regional, European and global educational resources, applications and content," Torman said.

Strong foundations
According to Njenga, another bonus for PAVEU is the "cumulative experience" available to the new university.

"Open, e- and distance learning is not new, and there is priceless cumulative experience available," she said.

"With UNISA having pioneered distance education in the world over a century ago, AVU providing globally award-winning programmes, many African universities establishing open and distance learning arms to better serve their 21st century 'clients', the ACDE providing a mechanism for coordination and quality assurance, non-conventional providers like TRACE venturing into e-learning as alternative education modes for reaching out-of-school youth, and many Africans accessing such offerings from around the world – PAVEU is in good company," Njenga said.

"Furthermore, PAVEU has established working partnerships with a number of institutions in and out of Africa in the areas of education and IT, including those named above and others such as UNESCO, VMware and leading experts in Africa and the diaspora," she said.

Njenga said it was essential that PAVEU's programme mix be "informed by current knowledge and data on the needs of industry and other employers, the opportunities already available, and especially the profiles of learners".

African character
"The African character of PAVEU has to be reflected in the relevance of programmes and competence of facilitators, even while global competitiveness should not be ignored. After all, Africa will soon be the choice provider of human resources including intellectual capital to the ageing world," Njenga said.
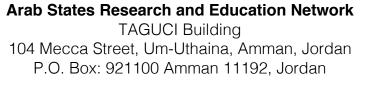
She said PAVEU should articulate clearly the advantages it provides over multiple other providers, but also engage and partner with other providers to promote "coherence and complementarity".

She said it was also important that PAVEU invest in the development of qualified programme developers, tutors, facilitators and African educators and forge robust links with industry to "maintain an innovative bent and ensure relevance and responsiveness".

Currently, the Pan African University has four operational institutes, including Northern Africa's Institute for Water and Energy Sciences in Algeria's Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, Eastern Africa's Institute for Basic Sciences, Technology and Innovation in Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Western Africa's Institute for Life and Earth Sciences in Nigeria's University of Ibadan, and Central Africa's Institute for Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences in Cameroon's University of Yaounde II. The PAU Institute for Space Sciences, expected to be based at the South African Cape Peninsula University of Technology, is yet to open.

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