

The Syrian Virtual University

Introduction:

"There are few earthy things more enduring than a university. Religions may split into sect or heresy, dynasties may perish or be supplanted, but for century after century the university will continue, and the stream of life will pass through it, and the thinker and the seeker will be bound together in the undying cause of bringing thought into the world." John Masterfield, Poet Laureate, 1946.

The Syrian Virtual University was officially inaugurated by President Dr. Bashar Al Assad on the 2nd of September 2002 as the first academic institution of its kind in the region.



Fully accredited and endorsed by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education, the SVU primarily aims at providing the Arab students, worldwide, with a world-class quality education, at home, through an integrated online learning environment based on the latest technological and educational developments.

Bringing international expertise home is meant to meet the needs of fresh high-school and university graduates as well as Human Resource Development plans. The Syrian Virtual University has a great role to play at this level by promoting and establishing a new culture in the region: Lifelong Learning.

I. Rationale behind Virtual Education in the Arab World

1. 1. Social and Economical factors

New technological changes have driven modern economies to review their social and economical structures in order to meeting with the latest developments engendered by the Knowledge Economy as well as the Global Market and the Internet.

The Arab World is now seeking to learn to adapt its own socio-economical infrastructure while attempting to meet the requirements of recent movements. That

is why new specializations must be introduced for the future local workforce to be able to acquire the latest skills and knowledge required for such economical improvements.

This does not mean that the current human resources are doomed to remain outdated. They must as well be upgraded in skills and knowledge in order to cope with the new inevitable changes.

Having in mind that employees must continuously follow up the evolution happening regularly within their fields, one cannot but attempt to bring education beyond university-campus walls.

Working and studying at the same time have become essential to human resources in all fields. Virtual Education is the fastest and easiest solution to merge work schedule with studies.

Furthermore, the traditional and common way of thinking in Arab societies is very much focused on high quality education. It is essential for parents to make sure their children would benefit from the best education available, which is why they often send them abroad.

These students who are studying outside their motherland usually get used to their new lifestyle and do not come back home anymore. This brain drain is damaging as it restricts the possibilities of social and economical developments of these countries.

One way to keep the new expertise inside a country is to propose to university students the possibility to gain whatever knowledge they desire within their homeland. Then they can participate in redesigning the economy and the market based on a more developed and modern vision.

1.2. Challenges within existing traditional universities

Existing universities in the region propose to students the possibility to enroll in a defined scope of specializations due to their natural limitations in Curricula creation. Indeed, investing in new curricula implies high expenses and most importantly qualified experts to teach the appropriate material.

Furthermore, traditional universities are restricted by nature in capacity absorption: the number of students who can enroll is narrowed to the physical space availability. In Syria for instance around 30,000 high-school graduates could not find a place at their local universities this year. In Egypt only, out of 600,000 university potential students, only 300,000 could enroll at their national universities because of capacity saturation.

Consequently innovations become a necessity.

Since space is a main issue, an “a-spatial” solution would be the most appropriate. Also ready-to-use curricula are the ideal answer to high investments and knowledge expertise.

The Syrian Virtual University meets these two hypotheses using “**virtuality**” in order to overcome space restrictions and **partnerships** with accredited and renowned international universities in order to provide SVU students with a wider range (from a large number of institutions) of existing specializations (already taught in partner-universities) instructed by experienced professors.



II. Rationale behind the Syrian Virtual University

II.1 Why a regional university vs. the already existing international virtual universities?

Ignoring cultural specificities and mores uniqueness would be a mistake when trying to establish an efficient educational system. Not to re-invent the wheel does not imply cutting an existing system and pasting it in another system.

Each system is to be created according to the user’s needs. If a specific method works for a defined society or group, this does not imply that it is necessarily universal. That is why when the SVU chooses to opt for programs from non-Arab universities, the selection is done according to the **regional market needs**.

Furthermore when SVU students enroll at a partner-university, a virtual community of Arab professors and experts (from all over the world) are available to support them in all **academic and cultural issues**.

Likewise, a market need assessment precedes the SVU-designed specializations creation. It is according to certain national and regional requirements that new curricula must be conceived.

II.2 Syrian Virtual University Short-term Plan vs. Long-term Strategy

Considering the immediate need to present the future Human Resources with the latest specializations available worldwide, the SVU has opted for a short-term plan which provides the students with international degrees from partner-universities at high quality standards.

On the long run, the Syrian Virtual University is to continue creating, delivering and managing its own programs which are to be designed in collaboration with the regional traditional universities and even some of the non-Arab partners.

This is an essential role for the SVU: the aim is not to replace existing universities but to help them in enhancing their capacities and quality by adapting to the latest educational technologies.

II.3 Why Syria?

The Syrian government was the first official Arab administration to adopt the concept of Virtual Education and to invest in its foundation both financially and legally since the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education fully endorsed and accredited the SVU degrees and programs.

From Syria, the SVU hopes to reach all the Arab students in the region and in the Diaspora worldwide.

III. The Syrian Virtual University Model

“Ignoring technology will not reduce its impact or cause it to fail or cause it to go away. Ignoring technology will only prove to our prospective students, our funding agencies, our partner schools that we are obsolete and disconnected from their reality. The scenario of rejecting technology results in our demise”

Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence,
(1997)

III.1 Syrian Virtual University: Mission Statement and Accreditation

The Syrian Virtual University is a public institution, **fully accredited** and **endorsed** by the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria. It aims at providing Arab students in the region and all over the world with International standards of Higher Education within an integrated pedagogical environment based on the latest technological developments.

There are two tracks offered at the SVU:

1. International Degrees and Programs presented by the American, European, Australian and Canadian partners
2. The SVU-designed Degrees and Programs, created, delivered and managed by the SVU

Those two tracks are necessary when drastic changes are to happen in a very short period of time. It is necessary to bring to the Arab world the latest developments worldwide but also to be ready and prepared for manufacturing changes internally. That is why the SVU does not solely present international programs, but also designs its own curricula.

High-school and university fresh graduates are the primary potential students for the Syrian Virtual University. However, since promoting Lifelong Learning is the first concern at the SVU, working adults are welcome to enroll for full programs or short courses, certificates or diplomas in the framework of Continuing Education and Human Resource Development.



III.2 Syrian Virtual University: Value Added Services

Academic curricula, even when designed by the finest professors cannot be efficiently taught outside a comprehensive learning environment in which the students can be supported and guided by professionals.

Accordingly the Syrian Virtual University offers a large number of services which cover all the university-life aspects and needs in order to provide the students with higher chances of success and achievement during their studies.

Academic Support:

1. Arab Professors Network

It is undeniable that cultural differences and gaps resulting from different backgrounds and ethos are to affect in some ways the learning journey of Arab students enrolling at non-Arab universities.

In order to bridge this cultural distance, the SVU has conceived an online community of Arab professors and experts from all over the world who are familiar with students' backgrounds (since they come from the same milieu) and who are living or lived in the university's environment in non-Arab countries.

2. Specialized Virtual Communities

Each student enrolled at a specific program may participate in discussions, online and offline, with peers and professors in his/her specialization. This will enhance rich and constructive interaction as well as study progress, which is improved by communication and group debates.

3. Advising

The Syrian Virtual University assigns an academic advisor to all SVU students, even the ones who already have an advisor from their remote universities. The SVU advisor is responsible for guiding the students in their learning journey and supporting them in academic issues.

Quality Assessment:

Offering education via a brand new system implies instilling credibility and trust within target audiences. The Syrian Virtual University is very keen on retaining this trustworthiness, which is why a constant Quality control is effectuated in order to maintain the standards the university has established at the beginning as pre-requisites for any academic, administrative or technical activity.

Career Orientation and Career Services:

In our societies education is directly related to prestige and that is why parents always attempt to guide their children towards the specialization which are considered to be as esteemed. These prejudgments lead the high-school graduates to all enroll at the same faculties. This trend directly affects the local and regional market which is and continues to be saturated in some fields and lacks experts in others.

The SVU considers career counseling as a duty much more than a simple service. A Career Planning team is always available for prospective students to assess their future academic and professional possibilities according to their needs, interests, academic and financial statuses.



Furthermore *Studying and Working at the same time* is a motto at SVU, and students are constantly reminded and encouraged to find part-time jobs or

internships. Hence a Career Services office has been established to help students being employed at SVU corporate partners during their studies and when possible after graduation.

Local Curricula:

The SVU is keen on providing world-class quality education to all Arab students. In order to reach the widest number of students, curricula in Arabic must be implemented. Already some programs are being "arabized" from English-speaking universities so that the Arabic courses are up-to-date with the latest developments in the different fields of study.

On the other hand, the Syrian Virtual University aspires to enhance local and regional universities' curricula by inviting their professors to teach at SVU and thus develop those advanced programs in Arabic. Then the local or regional university could present the courses in partnership with the SVU and initiate a new market in the Arab world for Virtual Education.

Language Proficiency Issues:

In the Arab world, it is quite difficult to propose degrees in non-Arabic languages because the majority of the students do not have the possibility to master a second language during high-school years.



This does not necessarily mean that they are not potential students for non-Arab universities. It is from this perspective that the SVU designed the Preparatory Year which enables the students to develop their language proficiency as well as computer and internet skills.

The Prep Year courses cover English or French (for the time being, according to the language of our partners), basic IT, Self-Motivation and Time Management in order to ensure that the student enhances the dexterity needed by Virtual Education.

Telecenters:

Since domestic Internet connection is not totally reliable yet in Syria and costs can exceed expectations when students need to spend more time online, the Syrian Virtual University has established *free of charge* Telecenters all over the country, especially in the most remote areas in order to give all the Syrian students an equal opportunity to enroll at SVU.

These Telecenters are also Certified Testing Centers in which the students sit for their proctored examinations throughout the year.



Technical Support:

The SVU Technical Support team is always available online and offline for the students and staff who need help with any technical difficulties.

A “physical” team is also available in all SVU Telecenters to give face-to-face support (within the Telecenter) when needed.

Administrative Support:

Pre-Registration, Application processes, course enrollment can be distressful for students who are not used to non-Arab universities’ systems. Problems and misunderstanding often discourage students who abandon easily when they feel processes are too complex.

At the SVU, the Administrative Team handles all these procedures for the students. Also a primary filtering for all applicants is effectuated at the Admissions Office which informs students of missing documents or failure to meet requirements beforehand. Therefore students can better their applications and save time, while partner-universities can ensure that all applications sent by the SVU are complete and conform to their pre-requisites.

Virtual Library and Virtual Bookstore:

The academic progress is never restricted to class material; students must always search and research in order to build stronger knowledge and understandings. For an extensive study environment, the Syrian Virtual University provides the students with a Virtual Library which gathers the resources of several of the best electronic libraries today. These libraries usually charge their users; however, the Syrian Virtual University students can access them for free.

Moreover, SVU students from all over the world may order their study materials from the online Bookstore available via the website.

IV. The Syrian Virtual University Partners

IV.1 Partnerships Benefits

By partnering with the Syrian Virtual University, the non-Arab universities can open-up a brand new market which can widen their prospective horizons. Indeed, the Arab world is badly in need of international Education with worldwide standards. Many students consider traveling in order to attain an education of the highest caliber.

Furthermore, all the SVU degrees presented by the partner-universities are fully accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria. In addition, there is a consensus among all Arab Ministries of Higher Education to recognize each other's state universities and accredited degrees/programs.

From an administrative perspective, the Syrian Virtual University is engaged to ensure that the students applying through the SVU meet the requirements set by the partner-university.

Also, in order to attract students, the SVU launches several marketing and awareness campaign which can be used by the partners to promote their degrees in the Arab world.

However attracting students is only the surface problem, how to retain them is the real issue. A higher rate of student retention may be achieved as a result of the local students support (technical, administrative, academic and cultural) provided by the SVU's experts and faculty, either online or at the SVU Telecenters. At the moment, the SVU has more than 25 Telecenters all over the country in Syria. The SVU is also expanding to Lebanon, Jordan, KSA, Yemen, Sudan, Oman and UAE.

IV. 2 Partnerships Parameters

The Syrian Virtual University is engaged to partner with accredited institutions only. This is a must in order to maintain the standards set initially and to ensure quality reputation for all the partners as well.

Equally important, the main goal of partnering with more than one university in more than one culture is to offer students a wide spectrum of specializations with a wide range of tuitions per specialization; thus providing students of different classes an equal opportunity to acquire the same standard of education and consequently equal career opportunities.

Businesses and corporations are welcome as well and have a great role to play in Human Resource Development. Indeed, students need to experience the "real world" while studying so they can graduate with a strong baggage in hand. Furthermore, business employees and executives can benefit from the short programs, certificates and diplomas offered by the SVU to upgrade their workforce knowledge and skills while keeping normal working schedules.

Conclusion:

Society is knowledge, and knowledge is power

Strategic, Economical and Human Resource Development are at the heart of the Syrian government today. The Syrian Virtual University carries a great responsibility in reforming those aspects and shaping a new society where the workforce enhances the socio-economical factors. At the same time, these factors constantly create new market needs to be resolved by qualified Human Resources to progress towards a New Economy of Knowledge.