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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN HELP TACKLE GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

The world faces a range of challenges, including increasing number of refugees, income inequality, loss of fertile land, leading to rising hunger and climate change. Governments and global institutions are addressing these problems, using a variety of tools. My guest today explains the important role that universities can play in addressing these challenges.

Maysa Jalbout is a nonresident fellow in Global Economy and Development here at Brookings and is a visiting scholar and special advisor on the UN Sustainable Development Goals at both Arizona State University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

You can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter, @policypodcasts, to get information about and links to all of our shows, including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings trade podcast; The Current; and our Events podcast. And, now, on with the interview. Maysa, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

MS. JALBOUT: Thank you for having me again.

MR. DEWS: Sure. The last time you were on was April 2014. We talked your research on education in the Arab world, and now you're doing some research in

a new area, and I appreciate you coming back to talk about that.

I'm going to quote from a piece that you wrote, titled Universities need to lead in serving humanity. "Today, more than ever, we are in urgent need for universities to lead the charge in thinking much more openly, creatively, and ambitiously about the challenges we face in local communities and across the planet." So, why do we need universities to lead that charge?

MS. JALBOUT: Universities are institutions that have access to human capital, to resources, to technology, to research and tools that are enormously valuable. But, they often use them to only serve their own purposes, which are noble in and of themselves, because they're about teaching and learning and conducting research. But, of late, we've been thinking about how can we get universities to apply the tremendous amount of resources and talent that they have to help solve some of the problems that we're facing.

We're really interested in seeing universities play a much more critical role in education beyond higher education, to really think about how they can help solve some of the challenges that are taking place now, not just in developing countries but even in their home countries right here in the United States.

Recently, there was a new initiative by a number of universities that have come together under the guise of the Sustainable Development Goals to think about that and to kind of form a coalition to think about that. I'm specifically, at the

moment, advising two top universities here in the U.S., MIT and ASU, on how --

MR. DEWS: Arizona State University.

MS. JALBOUT: Arizona State University, yeah, -- on how they can have a greater impact in the SDGs. We're starting with education, but, most critically, we're also thinking about how they can have an impact on climate change, on the future world of work, and it's very exciting. And, when I see that, when I see that these two universities have so much to offer in that space, I think all universities should be challenged to think about what they can do, and they should plug into the process globally.

MR. DEWS: Well, you mentioned the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals from the UN. Can you talk a little bit more about the challenges that you're thinking about that universities can tackle in the context of the SDGs? You mentioned climate change. You mentioned education. I think there's over 20 of them, 30 of them.

MS. JALBOUT: Seventeen.

MR. DEWS: Seventeen of them?

MS. JALBOUT: Yeah, 17 SDGs. Well, you can take any one of them, but, since I'm focused on education, let me start with that. If you think about the challenges in global education, they have to do with access, they have to do with quality, they have to do with system building, and they're critically in need of both

resources as well as fresh thinking. And, universities can offer both of those things.

Universities are constantly doing research. Some of them, such as MIT, they're experts in the science of learning, and, so, they can contribute in great ways to understanding how students learn and to help systems improve the way that they teach, as an example.

They can contribute at the country level by collecting data, analyzing it, and feeding it back at the country level to help improve the way that they plan for education and the way that they deliver it. They can also look at what they're currently doing in teaching and see how that can be used in the world of education and beyond. And, I'll give you an example.

MIT and ASU are two of the top universities in the world at teaching supply-chain management. MIT graduates a very small number of very talented people in supply-chain management. ASU works with MIT to increase that number, by teaching that online and creating a larger opportunity for students to come out as experts in this space. But, still, on a global level it's quite limited. But, they do have this incredible expertise.

And, most countries, most development issues cross-cutting across all these SDGs, struggle with how do you have a better supply-chain process to deliver, whether it's medicine or just vaccinations or text books in education, and so on and so forth, like emergency supplies. And, why not connect them? Why not

connect the talent of the universities, both the academia and the students, with the people on the ground, whether it's the UN agencies or countries themselves, and try to figure out how they can work together?

Now, it's all very hypothetical at this stage. But, what's really motivating us is that faculty and students are already working on these projects but, really, quite independently, and they have small examples of successes. So, the process is not really centralized. But, the potential is really quite huge if the university puts more of an effort to centralize the process, to put a strategy around it, to make it at the forefront of what they're about.

MR. DEWS: So, you mentioned ASU and MIT, and we can think of many other kind of top-tier universities in the United States and around the world that have capacity to do a lot of things. But, would this be a radical mission shift for a lot of other universities that maybe just are focused on educating students?

MS. JALBOUT: I don't think that it's a radical shift. I think many universities already see themselves as important contributors to even capital development, and I think most universities prize themselves on producing responsible young graduates who, hopefully, will go on to do good things for society. And, most universities think about that, first and foremost.

But, increasingly, universities are challenged to think about their role in society, to step away from being elitist, to extent the education that they can offer to

a maximum number of students. We're seeing that, for example, in ASU, where their president, Michael Crow, likes to say we measure our success by the number of students that we take in, not the ones we keep out. And, I think that is a fundamental shift in the way universities see themselves.

They're also under scrutiny for the resources that they have, and some universities have a tremendous amount of resources. And, what are they doing with those resources? I mention in the paper that you reference that they tend to have a mentality of scarcity rather than abundance, and I just want to explain what that means. That really means that they tend to be competitive, in thinking that a dollar that you have is a dollar that I don't have.

And, actually, I think that's a really old way of thinking about university education. Because, universities that are collaborating, universities that are working together, putting their resources together to think about how they solve these problems, that are bringing talent and students' energies together and really maximizing the opportunities that are available to their students and their constituencies are the ones that are going to be leading the future.

MR. DEWS: Well, that mentality of scarcity that you mention is, to some degree, based on the sort of conditional funding model that universities operate by. So, how do you go about changing that, and, also, are there other changes that universities should be making to try to participate more in addressing these global

problems?

MS. JALBOUT: Universities are typically -- depending on the country, of course, -- they're typically either public or private. But, increasingly they're looking for funding from alternative sources, like the philanthropic sector. And, some are able to draw resources more than others. Of course, ivy leagues have more resources than ones that are publicly funded. And, there's a huge range of universities.

So, we're not just talking about the MITs of the world. We're also talking about universities in developing countries, where they're struggling to stay open. And, so, every one of these universities has to now prove that it is a worthwhile investment.

So, in many developing countries, and I would say actually even right here in the United States, they're being questioned about what kind of graduates are they producing. Are they job-ready? Do they graduate with debt? But, is it worth it, and are they able to get a great job? Are they able to be an entrepreneur? Are they going to be able to be adaptable and transform themselves on a regular basis? So, there's a lot of pressure on universities.

What is really incredibly interesting at this time, with this new ranking that's just come out, is that they put that out there with a proposition that perhaps universities should be ranked not just on the traditional model but on the impact that they're having in the world, and they use the SDG as a framework, and it's relative

new.

But, what's really good, what's really great, actually, is that universities have responded very positively. They have participated in big numbers, and it's starting to have a very positive impact on the way universities see their role in this sector. And, I can delve into that a little bit more.

MR. DEWS: Yeah, please do.

MS. JALBOUT: I'll give you a couple of examples. There's definitely a huge variance in what universities see as their impact in this space. So, everybody is reporting a little differently, of course, and we're seeing some really interesting trends. For example, in places like the Middle East, some universities are really emphasizing that they have a very strong gender-equality lens. Universities in Korea are really focused on SDG number nine which is around industry, innovation, and infrastructure.

We're seeing, also, other universities really emphasize that they have a very strong social impact. My own university that I went to in Canada, McMaster University, ranked number two on the first impact ranking. And, I don't find that very surprising.

I think, having gone there as a student, I see that it is a university that is very integrated in its community. It has a huge focus on indigenous peoples. It has a very big focus on health in the world, health in the community and health in the

world. It has a very diverse student base. That's why they did very well. But, I do think that many more universities, if they participate, will also see that they rank quite well.

MR. DEWS: Yeah, I want to go see how my alma mater ranks, Georgetown University, and see if they're in the ranking. Can you remind listeners what the name of the ranking is?

MS. JALBOUT: It's the Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings for the Sustainable Development Goals.

MR. DEWS: You also wrote in the piece that "the universities most committed to service to humanity will also be the most inclusive." What do you mean by that?

MS. JALBOUT: Higher education is costly, obviously. Everybody knows that. And, it's becoming more and more costly. Right here in the United States it's a huge debate about the value of education and the fact that thousands of young people are graduating every year with huge debt. And, that cost is prohibitive for many, many students.

And, so, inclusive education means that it has to be much more accessible, not just cost-wise, which is very significant, but also in the way it's delivered. Because, often young people or even people who want to upscale or who didn't have a chance to have an education when they were younger, they need to be able to work and study at the same time.

And, so, universities have to think about how they can use technology to deliver education to people wherever they may be, so, whether they're across a country or in a different country, or if they can only do it online, or if they can do it even in a blended fashion so that they're taking some courses online, some face-to-face, or doing a project.

But, also, I think they have a mandate to ensure that there's a wider pipeline of young people who can come into university, which means that they have to work much more closely with high schools in their area and with national governments to ensure that high schools are actually graduating young people who are ready for university and that can be successful and put in place the measures to help young people actually finish university, because that's also a huge issue.

So, that's what it means to be inclusive. There's a wider lens and that is to contribute to improving the quality of education overall, because we know that success in university starts much, much earlier. It actually starts in early childhood, and universities can play a very significant role in training teachers, in creating opportunities for young people to do research, to develop skills. So, that's inclusion. There's much more to talk about, but I'll leave it there.

MR. DEWS: Maysa, over the summer, you gave a keynote address at a conference on the Bologna Process about this topic. What is the Bologna Process and how is it relevant to this issue?

MS. JALBOUT: The Bologna Process is an agreement between European countries. I believe it's about 49 countries that came together in 1999 and signed a declaration to create a pathway for higher education across Europe. It means to make it more accessible, essentially, for across Europe and to have much more cooperation.

So, this year was the 20th anniversary, and the conference was held at the oldest university in Europe, which is Bologna University, where about 1,000 people came from 200 universities to discuss the future of higher education. Now, it's expanded beyond Europe. You had American and Canadian universities, South African, from all over the world.

They asked me to speak about the very topic that we're discussing today -- How can universities have a bigger impact in the world? And, I gave them very specific ideas around how they can be more open and contribute to better inclusion, better human capital development. And, we talked about lots of very concrete examples. One of them is around opening their doors to refugee students.

This is a very real live issue in Europe, and there's a big debate going around what is the responsibility of universities to educate refugees. Some have stepped up and provided some scholarships, and others are thinking about what they can do to support refugees in integrating into their communities, and so on and so forth.

But, what I gathered from the conference is that the vast majority of universities don't feel that they're doing enough or that they have the impetus to do more. They don't necessarily know how, they don't think that they have the resources, but they also haven't been very forthcoming about what they would like to do, or they haven't really pursued it aggressively, let's say. They haven't gone out and asked for more resources to do that.

The conversation really centered around that, and I'm in touch with several universities that are now doing more, and I think that many, many more universities are interested in hosting refugees, in working in refugee camps, in providing scholarships, and I advised them to be more vocal about that, because I think there are philanthropists out there who would be interested in funding that.

MR. DEWS: I want to follow up a little bit on this refugee question, because I think it's something that a lot of people tend to overlook. When we see in the news reports that refugees, especially say from the experience of a war over the last 5, 6, 7, 8 years, the focus seems to be on are they getting food, are they getting shelter, are they safe from the violence? But, we often forget there's children involved who are not in school. And, now, a whole generation of the children from the original displacement of the Syrian Civil War are getting to be college-aged, and their parents could need education for job training.

Talk about sort of that issue in the sense that we have a generation of

refugee children who are needing higher education.

MS. JALBOUT: That's right. Well, in fact, if I can step back, the refugee education crisis is at every stage of education. The international community came together at the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis to fund a plan to put kids in school in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. And, to a large extent, that process has been hindered by the fact that not enough resources were brought to the table, so what was committed wasn't necessarily fully delivered.

Sure, there were a lot of challenges in coordination at the beginning. There was a lot of convincing that needed to happen. But, credit goes to the national governments that did open their schools, many of them in double-shifting processes to take in those kids.

But, due to limited funds and perhaps also with the short-sighted view that this crisis will be short-lived, the focus was on primary education. That's where all of the resources went. But, recent studies have shown that if you were a Syrian refugee and you live in Jordan, for example, and you're about 14 years old, the likeliness of you being in school is something like 2 percent.

So, there's this huge number of young people in those countries that are not in education. And, you can imagine what a worry that is for the host country, for themselves, their future, their families. They feel helpless and they don't have a future, because they're not developing the skills they need to survive. So, many of

them are out there working or trying to hustle. So, that's why we need a lot more investment in this space.

Now, this is nothing to say of higher education. The global average of refugee education at the higher education level is 1 percent. So, it's pretty much a miracle to be a refugee and go to university. It's really a shame, because what we've seen when refugee student are given the chance is that they excel, they become leaders, and they contribute a lot more than what they are given. This has been the story in every university student that we've seen programs invest in.

MR. DEWS: Let me go back to your piece which -- I'll put a link to it in the (Inaudible) as well -- you wrote that universities are best positioned to address these global challenges. Can you talk about what you mean by that, but also kind of in the context of how universities can do this work in coordination with or in parallel with governments and nongovernmental organizations?

MS. JALBOUT: Yeah, absolutely. You touch on a really good point there. We're not calling for a university to just go off and invent solutions for problems that they're not really engaged with. The idea is that universities need to connect with the education community, the global education community, to plug into it, to plug into the international development process, to understand what the issues are and to take stock of what it is that they're currently doing that can be relevant for communities in the U.S. or abroad.

So, the first task is have a process by which you understand how is university engaged in issues that touch on SDGs, participate in the ranking. The second stage is to see what is happening out there that we can plug into right away. And, then the third level is, what problem do we want to invest in developing a solution for?

We're sitting here at Brookings and it's a think tank and I think of universities as a pool of think tanks around the world, right. They're full of smart people. They have a ton of research going on. They have amazing energy with their students. That can be channeled for doing greater good in the world.

MR. DEWS: As we wind up here, Maysa, can you talk a little bit about and kind of help our listeners understand how you personally as a scholar pursue this work and this research?

MS. JALBOUT: Well, just recently, I've been appointed as a special advisor to both MIT and Arizona State University in helping them to figure out how they are going to contribute to the SDGs. So, we are now thinking about how different parts of these universities that are very interested in having impacts.

So, for example, ASU is deeply engaged in sustainability issues, and they are looking at how they can be part of the global discussion around climate change. MIT is deeply engaged in the process of using technology to deliver education -- so is ASU -- and there is so much potential for how that can be used and deployed for the benefit of the global community.

So, the message here is that we're doing some internal thinking, but we're also open to partnership with development organizations, with UN agencies, with other universities, with the philanthropic sector. It's a call to kind of bring our heads together and to invite universities to be at the table part of the process, because it's time to infuse new energy, new ideas, and new resources into the global development community.

MR. DEWS: Well, Maysa, I want to thank you for taking the time today to talk about your work in this area, and we will speak again later. You can find more about Maysa Jalbout and her work on our website, Brookings.edu.

The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Eowyn Fain. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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