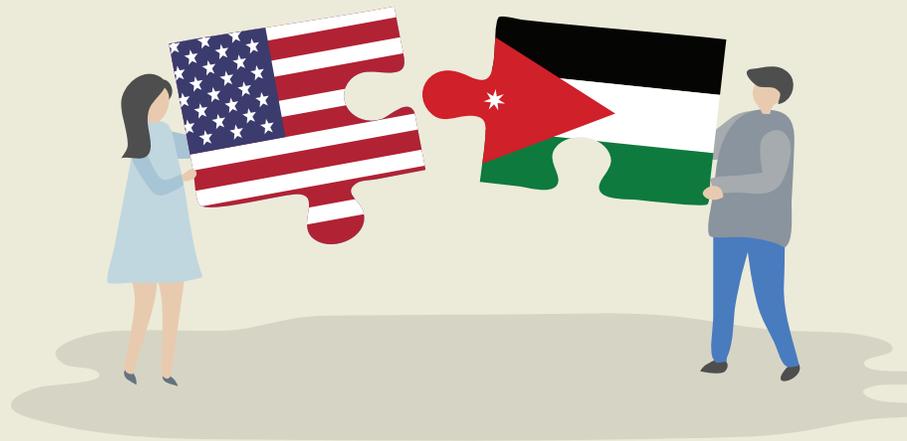


U.S.-Jordanian University Cooperation Network Workshop

A Brief Summary

By *Ara Tabmassian, Mark Johnson, Fadia Homeidan,
and Michael Bustle*



Many U.S. researchers have overseas colleagues or are perhaps approached by an overseas colleague (or a potential colleague) wishing to engage in collaborative sponsored research. Some notices of funding opportunity (NOFOs) or requests for proposals (RFPs) may allow or even require international collaborators. While most developed research educational institutions overseas and those in many developed countries share similar standards of responsible research that we have in the U.S., understand the various compliance issues we must meet, and have access to some sponsored programs staff who can provide guidance, many universities in lesser-resourced or developing countries have not been able to make the necessary investment in professional administrative staff who understand best practices in research principles, Uniform Guidance, budgeting and accounting standards.

This understandable, but unfortunate, situation generally results in missed or impossible collaboration possibilities and an inability to list the overseas researcher as a Co-PI or even as a subcontractor. Sponsored research (SR) administrators in U.S. universities need to have confidence that there is an overseas counterpart who understands the world of SR, communicates promptly and factually, and is able to provide the certifications, reports, receipts, and other data that our sponsors – and good management practices – require. Such parallel “infrastructure” is required even for viable grant proposals, much less for successful multinational research collaboration.

In many countries government agencies such as a Ministry of Education, a scientific research agency, or other national research or development organization – or even a university’s chief research office/officer (if one exists) – encourages, rewards, or requires local universities to engage in sponsored research and to seek collaboration with researchers in better resourced countries. There are several difficult questions here. How can an overseas researcher identify a potential U.S. or other researcher for intensive cooperation? How can an overseas researcher provide reasonable assurance that he or she has the knowledge, experience and access to local SR expertise so that there is little doubt about compliance and reporting requirements? How can an overseas researcher stand out and appear more competitive and promising as a potential Co-PI or subcontractor? Even if there are good scholar-to-scholar or individual relationships in place, what else is needed to sustain mutually beneficial and intensive research cooperation?

What can U.S. and other research-intensive universities - and the greater research community at large - do to encourage and increase the capacity of otherwise good higher educational institutions with talented researchers who are eager to collaborate internationally?

This article presents a case story that perhaps illustrates on a small scale what can be done to great effect. A number of U.S. universities have had various interactions with Jordanian universities over the years – including faculty research, student mobility programs, joint degrees, and formal exchanges. However, an assessment conducted by the Eurasia Foundation in 2016-2017 concluded that many of these relationships were dormant, resulted in little mutually-beneficial research, or were unidirectional, with mobility flowing almost entirely from Jordan to the U.S. In response to these gaps, and with the support of the Ministry of Higher Education in Jordan and the U.S. Embassy, a small consortium of active U.S. research institutions, in this case several land grant universities, met and agreed to work together. It is important to note that it was actually senior personnel in international affairs offices (either university-wide or in a particular college, such as a college of agriculture – representatives who generally do not exclusively engage in research in one particular area but try to facilitate new programs and networks for their faculty and students in all their departments or colleges) who went to Jordan and met with the Jordanian universities’ international office personnel (and sometimes other key personnel such as deans and chief research officers). On the Jordanian side, this effort came to involve all ten of the Jordanian public universities, which collectively educate approximately 80% of all students in the tertiary sector.

The Public Affairs section at the U.S. Embassy in Amman then arranged for Dr. Mark Johnson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to serve as a Fulbright Policy Specialist, with the specific mission of analyzing the international relations offices within the Jordanian public universities. Working together, the two governments, along with leading public and private universities, established a new organization, the U.S.-Jordanian University Cooperation Network (UCN), precisely to facilitate such partnerships and cooperation. With the support of the U.S. Embassy, the UCN was to be developed through two linked hubs or secretariats, one at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and the other at the University of Jordan. As part of these organizational efforts, in early June of 2019, Ms. Patricia Parera, together with colleagues from various research units at Virginia Tech, led a week-long research summit on “Innovative and Transformational Ideas to Improve the Development and Policy Response to Forced Displacement,” along with colleagues from Jordan and other countries.

Later that month, the core U.S. members of the UCN (including representatives of Virginia Tech, the University of Florida, UW-Madison, North Carolina State University, and the University of Arizona), met in Amman to participate in a capacity building workshop. This event included more than 120 participants, both senior leaders and research faculty, who met with the goal of strengthening strategic and long-term collaborations between

U.S. and Jordanian universities. This workshop, “Building Capacity for International University Cooperation and Research Collaboration,” was designed precisely to build up NCURA-style professional leadership in the area of research administration with a special focus on cross-border cooperation. The conference and workshop were sponsored by the U.S Embassy in Jordan and hosted at the University of Jordan in partnership with North Carolina State University’s Global Training Initiative. The Network invited experts from NCURA to participate in the workshop and to assist with the agenda items related to research administration and compliance.

On the first day of the meeting, Jordanian government representatives and university leaders made commitments to provide support to enhance international collaboration among U.S. and Jordanian universities and to advance joint research, expand academic exchanges, and strengthen the quality of higher education and research in both countries. UCN has been working with all the leading public universities in Jordan to establish a number of resources including a database of research projects and contact information for lead faculty and academic staff.

The three-day event, held in Amman from June 24-26, was attended by more than 120 representatives from UCN participating institutions and included a series of discussion panels on a variety of topics such as campus internationalization initiatives and competitive advantages; methods of internationalizing campuses and how to build professional capacity to achieve sustained international partnerships; institutional research priorities and opportunities for international partnerships; and strategies for research collaboration with government and industry. The workshops also included focus group discussions for identifying specific research initiatives that the Network can advance for funding opportunities around cluster topics identified by network institutions. The panel discussions were followed by a number of interactive sessions on building a university “ecosystem” for successful grant prospecting, proposal writing and research management.

In a keynote speech, Dr. Tahmassian discussed the globalization of the academic research enterprise and the importance of international collaboration to overcome many pressing issues such as climate change, food security and public health; how Jordan’s long academic history and its current investments in science and technology will contribute to advancement of its “knowledge economy”; and the positive role the UCN can play in fostering collaborations that will be necessary for universities to lead such developments.

The UCN leadership adopted an innovative approach in introducing the NCURA part of the workshop by starting with an on-stage interview format in which Ms. Patricia Parera, from the Language and Culture Institute at Virginia Tech, interviewed the NCURA members and presenters: Dr. Ara Tahmassian and Dr. Fadia Homeidan. The interactive session included a Q&A on the background of each participant; an overview of NCURA’s history, principles and training programs; ways to identify specific grant prospects; and the necessity of institutionalized and ongoing professional development of professional staff to support grant and research management.

Drs. Homeidan and Tahmassian followed with a series of presentations on research administration and compliance including: how to build a campus culture for successful grant prospecting and proposal writing; how to establish incentives and create win-win scenarios for cooperation; how to identify potential research funding; budget development; how to cultivate partnerships and “market” your proposals; and how to support compliance, monitoring and evaluation that aligns with international standards. Some in the audience seemed a bit wary of giving up their established practices, or more informal existing arrangements, but both Drs. Tahmassian and Homeidan emphasized the vital importance of professionalized administration.

Overall the presentation sessions were highly interactive with the Jordanian audience fully engaged in discussions and planning for follow-up activities.

Conclusion

The UCN is an example of a highly valuable network. It not only has institutional support for participation, it is also led by a number of interested and motivated volunteer individuals from both the U.S. and Jordanian institutions. NCURA’s participation in the conference and the workshop was well received by the workshop participants, and the sessions emphasized the need for Jordanian universities to develop and implement a comprehensive research administration program at their institutions if they are to be successful in internationalization of their research enterprise. As an organization whose mission is “*advancing the profession of research administration through education and professional development programs, the sharing of knowledge and experiences, and the fostering a diverse, collegial, and respected global community*,” NCURA’s partnership with the UCN on this workshop was a natural fit, and we hope that this partnership will continue as Jordanian faculty and universities continue with developing their research administration infrastructure.

Acknowledgment

We are grateful for the support and dedication of all UCN network representatives for their hospitality and assistance during the conference and workshop; University of Jordan for hosting the event; the North Carolina State University as the co-host; and the U.S. Embassy in Jordan for its sponsorship with particular thanks to John Hishmeh, Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer. A final thanks to all the participants for their interaction during the event which made it such a success. ■



Ara Tahmassian, PhD, is the Chief Research Compliance Officer at Harvard University, where he is responsible for research compliance activities across the University. He is also the Project Director for BMENA Bioethics Forum for a comprehensive mentoring and responsible conduct of sciences program in the Broader Middle East and North Africa region. He currently serves on NCURA Select Committee on Global Affairs and is the Vice-Chair of Select Committee on Peer Programs. He can be reached at ara_tahmassian@harvard.edu



Mark Johnson, PhD, is currently a visiting scholar (honorary fellow) in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, while he serves as a Fulbright Policy Specialist in Jordan, working with the U.S. Embassy to improve U.S.-Jordan cooperation. He has conducted policy analyses and program evaluations for organizations including the U.S. Department of State, the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and other public and private organizations. He can be reached at mark.s.johnson@wisc.edu



Fadia Homeidan, PhD, is the Director of the Office of Grants and Contracts (OGC) at the American University of Beirut (AUB). She is also the Director of the Technology Transfer Unit and the Centre for Research and Innovation (CRIIn) at the university. Dr. Homeidan has extensive experience in pre- and post-award sponsored project management. Dr. Homeidan is also engaged in encouraging, supporting and managing innovation and technology transfer at the university. Dr. Homeidan is the National Contact Person for Health at the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 Program. She can be reached at fh01@aub.edu.lb



Michael Bustle is the Associate Vice Provost for Global Engagement at North Carolina State University and the Director of the Global Training Initiative which develops short-term academic, cultural, and experiential programs for students, faculty, industry professionals, and government officials from North Carolina and from overseas. He and his team facilitate transformational and engaging opportunities for clients and students to understand and communicate more effectively across cultures. He can be reached at mjbustle@ncsu.edu