

# Why Libya Restart?

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UNIMED has been operating for about thirty years to foster the academic and scientific cooperation of universities located on the two shores of the Mediterranean. For the development of its activities, UNIMED made good use of different national and European cooperation programs by constantly trying to enlarge its range of cooperation. In the absence of a multiannual programming document since 2017, Libya has benefitted by annual Special Measures. Consequently, the participation of Libyan Universities in European cooperation schemes has been, until recent years, very limited.

The recently changed Libyan political framework, following the fall of Gaddafi's regime and the resultant end of the international embargo, lead the international community and UNIMED in primis to use the Erasmus+ Capacity Building program as a primary tool to explore possible collaboration paths with Libyan Universities. Erasmus+ has represented a key to open the door for a fruitful cooperation, for fresh relationship with Libyan actors, for a better understanding the complex Libyan scenario. We therefore activated our university network, created stable and coherent channels of communication, established relationships with Libyan universities in order to jointly open the way for a long-lasting collaboration framework, with the only country of the southern shore of the Mediterranean that, at that time, was not yet part of the UNIMED network. Our actions in the country brought excellent results since the beginning, and this mainly thanks to the expertise of our network members and the willingness of Libyan Higher Education Institutions to cooperate to boost their international exposure. With the first Capacity Building project, ENROL (coordinated by one of our Italian associated university, the University of Calabria) we had the opportunity to concretely get in touch with several and different universities, which in turn allowed us to understand the Libyan Higher Education system and universities' strengths and weaknesses. With our past experience as a rich background, we started this journey analysis to have a comprehensive and up-to-date picture over the Libyan Higher Education system. The interaction with Libyan colleagues, a wide-ranging desk research and an empirical analysis lead us towards surprising results. What we have immediately seen is that, despite a fairly significant international isolation and closure, which lasted over 40 years, and even during a civil war with muddled boundaries, the Higher Education system not only did not collapse but maintained its activities, its structures, its autonomy and a line of cooperation between the East and the West of the country. Concurrently, over time, the number and variety of cooperation projects have increased.

Libyan system has proven to have dynamism and autonomy, in a problematic context. UNIMED has engaged in the Libya Restart initiative to highlight the Libyan enormous potential and its crucial importance for the whole Mediterranean. A potential that it is mainly related to its education system. The result is a truthful testimony of the vitality of the Libyan academic community. Thanks to this work we aim to offer to professionals, colleagues working in the field of international cooperation, and also international institutions, a starting point for discussion and a foundation to start imagining how to support country's reconstruction, how to build a dialogue that has too often been interrupted. With the Libyans, for the Libyans.



# Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

The main objective of the Libya Restart analysis was to set the basis for future cooperation between the Libyan Higher Education Institutions and the European ones. In order to facilitate this, UNIMED identified needs, constraints, barriers and opportunities of national, regional and international interest.

The aim of this final section of Libya Restart is to present our conclusions, drawn from the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews, and as a result of the discussions with our Libyan colleagues. The scope is to generate a set of recommendations for further exploitation and future actions. The wider objective is to provide a starting point for system improvement, to be discussed with Libyans and international stakeholders, as a basis for reflection and dialogue at the 2020 Libya Restart conference.

The recommendations should not be intended as “*written in the stone*” but rather as “*food for thoughts*”, as a guideline for their development, expansion, revision.

Recommendations are direct, at different levels, towards the following actors:

- ✓ Libyan Institutions and national authorities;
- ✓ Libyan Universities and in general to the whole Libyan Higher Education system;
- ✓ European Universities and the European Higher Education system;
- ✓ European Union, for the benefit and support of existing and future policies;
- ✓ European Commission, with particular regard to the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs;
- ✓ European national authorities, such as agencies for international development and cooperation;
- ✓ International stakeholders, organizations and NGOs with a particular focus and interest on Libya, such as IOM and UNHCR.

Recommendations are grouped into sections, according to the topics of the analysis conducted. Each recommendation is briefly explained and concrete actions are proposed as examples for the follow-up.

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<sup>1</sup> These recommendations are the results of the SWOT analysis and do not represent in any case an exhaustive list of topics. The aim of Libya Restart is to discuss these recommendations with the relevant stakeholders in order to verify their effectiveness and promote concrete actions on their basis.

# Governance and Autonomy

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**Development of an effective and tailored university governance system through a benchmarking system.** Such a system will allow institutions to improve their leadership, adequate management and funding - together with the development of clear goals and policies and performance improvement. One of the key elements that has been the recent focus in higher education reform worldwide is university governance. This concept describes how universities and higher education institutions define their goals, implement them, manage their institutions and monitor their achievements. The overall framework of the system and the interaction between the institution and public authorities are crucial in defining university governance. Within this explanation, institutional autonomy and how it is perceived by the university community are considered important drivers of change: how institutions are managed is one of the most decisive factors in achieving their goals. Universities in Libya would need to develop a specific and tailored governance system which could allow them to improve management and leadership, and the clear definition of goals and policies. In this framework, to facilitate the process, Libyan Universities should introduce a benchmarking system, where universities from the EU and other countries in the South-Mediterranean region transfer and share good practices on university governance, especially on how to improve university performances, definition of goals and policies. This benchmarking study could be also followed by the organisation of *ad hoc* seminars, where universities will meet their peers, where staff (academic and administrative) have the opportunity to increase their capacities in leadership, management and policies.

**Support the Libyan Ministry of Education for the definition of a shared national strategic vision for the Higher Education System through a reinforced role of University Presidents Council.** Libyan Universities would benefit from a participative approach in the re-definition of national policies and strategies for HE, which will grant a solid common base to Universities' institutional plans. A starting point should be enhancing and making more relevant the role of University Presidents Council in the process. In a good governance university system, it is very important to have a comprehensive national strategic vision for Higher Education, on which universities can rely to define their own institutional strategic plans. In this regard, the role of the University Presidents Council should be strengthened in the re-definition of the national strategy for HE, by which institutional plans should be inspired. To achieve this crucial objective, University Presidents should increase the number of regular meetings to set up the basis for the definition of the national strategic vision, taking into consideration the specificities of each university, their mission and objectives. These meetings' results should be shared with international partners and then followed-up with the Ministry of Education, in order to co-design a vision and strategy for HE at the national level, framed into the national reform process.

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**Increasing University academic autonomy.** Academic autonomy will allow a more flexible approach towards teaching innovation, pedagogical methodologies, introduction of new courses and programmes, assessment methodologies, management. University's academic autonomy in Libya has proven to be relatively low: universities have partial level of autonomy, all their decisions in academic matters have to be later approved by the central government, namely the Ministry of Education. Recently, there has been a trend towards centralising the reform of programmes and curricula, aimed at standardising about 60-70% of the content of all subjects at the university level. Consequently, the necessity to increase university's academic autonomy in Libya has become a priority in order to diversify the teaching and learning pedagogical offer, pedagogical methodologies and to have the possibility to introduce new courses and programmes. Autonomy can be achieved by organising training activities for academic staff, where they learn about new teaching practices, assessment methodologies, management of the academic offer, digital tools, etc. European universities and international organisations, at the vanguard of teaching and learning innovation, can share experiences and good practices on how to manage new and innovative teaching techniques and assessment methodologies. Within this capacity building action, teaching guidelines, tailored on the Libyan HE System, could also be developed for the benefit of the academic staff at the Libyan HEIs. On a long term perspective, the Libyan universities will benefit from the introduction of new tools and methodologies in their daily academic routine, ensuring a more flexible approach and increasing their autonomy in renewing and managing courses and programmes.

**Increasing University financial autonomy.** Universities should be granted higher autonomy in managing and allocating available resources, in developing alternative sources of revenue, through provision of continuing education services, participation in international projects, cooperation with the industry sector, etc. Very little funding is received from loans and grants obtained by international organizations, outsourcing and contracts. Universities in Libya have very limited access to other sources of revenues, except for the budget and financing of the Ministry of Education. Instead, they should benefit from further developing alternative sources of revenue, and from further engaging in research services or in the provision of continuing education services. Increasing financial autonomy for universities in Libya will be a long process, which may start by organising regular yearly meetings among university Rectors, Financial Directors and administrative staff, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance aiming at sensitising all actors and stakeholders on the importance to diversify financial resources for the universities.

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## Quality Assurance

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**Constant training of university staff members to guarantee quality standards in performance and teaching/learning activities.** For the benefit of the HE system and its beneficiaries, Universities should guarantee a constant update of university staff skills, in particular on the following issues: quality assurance, institutional management, pedagogical innovation, teaching and research methodology. By training academic and administrative staff, the University can guarantee a high level of performance and efficiency, together with a high quality standard of teaching and learning, on a long-term basis. The University should define a three-step awarding scheme: first raising awareness on the topics and their importance for HE, second defining a training scheme for both academics and administrative personnel, third providing awards for participants as an incentive for professional growth. On a short-term basis, the University should build on existing Quality Assurance offices for the identification of needs and for the organization of tailored trainings, exploiting the possibilities for capacity building offered by international programmes.

**Strengthening Quality and Performance Evaluation offices (QPEOs).** To allow Universities to rely on a well-defined and widely shared quality culture, it is crucial to upscale and upgrade the existing Quality and Performance Evaluation offices, in a way that they become a reference point to disseminate QA practices; define and share quality indicators (not only for administrative and financial issues but also for teaching/learning processes); support managers, administrative and teachers in improving the quality standards of the institution. As a long-term result, the University will be empowered in terms of management and administration capacity, as well as by raising the quality of the education provided. On a short-term basis, the QPEOs should: design an institutional strategy where QA mechanism, indicators and practices are defined; raise awareness among colleagues, the university leadership and academics on the importance of QA; support university staff in implementing quality processes; conduct periodical monitoring and assessments. A closer collaboration with the National Center for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Educational and Training Institutions (NCQAA) and the other QPEOs is further recommended, in the framework of a more comprehensive national strategic plan, as well as strong capacity building action is highly recommended.

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**Widening the scope of action of the National Center for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Educational and Training Institutions (NCQAA) in supporting universities' QA processes.** The NCQAA should act as the missing link between Higher Education Institutions and the Ministry of Education: it should widen its scope of action, not only granting the compliance of Universities in terms of administrative, financial and logistic aspects (criteria and standards are thoroughly detailed in the guidelines on accreditation and quality assurance standards for Libyan HEIs), but also verifying the compliance with the highest quality standards both in terms of teaching methodology and contents of the

programs offered. Enlarging and enhancing the role of the NCQAA in supporting Universities towards curriculum innovation, assessment methods, modernization of teaching and learning experiences, would generate a tangible increase in the quality of the education offered. This should not imply centralization. On the other hand, the National Center should support University's academic autonomy offering training and M&E instruments; increasing discussions with universities on how to conform to the highest international quality standards; providing universities with strategic directives. As an example, the education system should establish an award for quality and excellence at the departmental level, to inspire more good work and quality in education.

**Making the process of accreditation of Universities more systematic and accountable, in particular increasing control over the proliferation of private Higher Education Institutions. Institutional accreditation is particularly important because it helps determine if** an institution meets or exceeds minimum standards of quality, evaluates its credibility and proficiency. The process of institutional accreditation must be made systematic and accountable, where the criteria for evaluation are widely known. Particular attention must be paid to the establishment and accreditation of private higher education institutions: it is vital to ensure the quality of the educational programs offered, to avoid an uncontrolled growth of institutions which are not aligned with the national strategy for HE and with the highest quality standards.

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## International Cooperation

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**Strengthening Universities' exposure and performance at the international level.** International cooperation and mobility are key tassels for the country's developing process, allowing for knowledge transfer, skills improvements, exchange of good practices and human resources development (both for academics and administrative staff). Universities' exposure at the international level may have an impact on research activities as well as on graduates' employability, enhancing the capacity of Universities to produce a change in society. Despite some HEIs are involved in several international initiatives, there still are Universities which have very little international exposure, limiting their possibilities of improving through cooperation and by taking part in study visits "seeing with their own eyes" what happens in more advanced institutions. EU Members States are considered key players for Libyan Universities, as it is also demonstrated by the participation of Libyan Universities in the Erasmus Plus programme post 2011. The support of the European Union in the short and medium term seems to be decisive above all in terms of capacity building actions, reinforcing the possibilities for Libyan institutions to network at the regional and international levels and to learn from the exchange with more experienced institutions. On the long term, it would be beneficial for Libya to benefit of mobility programmes and/or dedicated funds for Libya (i.e. a special window within the E+ programme for mobility, as it has been done for Tunisia and Algeria).

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**Funding of science diplomacy actions, giving them relevance and recognition.** In post-crisis contexts, it is necessary to guarantee a continuity line in the students' education path and support Universities as fundamental player for society reconstruction. Universities can be, and are, above and beyond political divisions: Libyan Universities seem to be among the few actors, if not the only, able to survive to the political division between East and West and capable of dialogue with international Universities and organizations despite political instability and mobility limitations. International Relations Offices, researchers and academics are constantly in contact at the national and international levels, pursuing joint actions and consultations for advancement. Universities need to continue working and cooperate, within national borders and beyond, to directly advance a country's national needs, to address cross-border interests, to meet global challenges. In the short run, science diplomacy actions will support exchanges of knowledge and facilitate international scientific-diplomatic cooperation, providing opportunities for dialogue that are at the moment simply not possible. In the long term, scientific collaboration can be a way to make diplomacy through "parallel means", easing political tensions, guaranteeing stability, mitigating the economic crisis, reducing the country's isolation, supporting long-term stabilization.

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#### **Widening the outreach of Libyan Universities:**

- a) enhancing the pan-African dimension of the Libyan Higher Education system, exploring the possibilities to develop Intra-African programmes on common topics of interest for HEIs and strengthening South-South cooperation arrangements. Due to the geographical location of some institutions (e.g. Sebha University) Libyan Universities should be considered as natural receptors and interlocutors for reaching the Sub-Saharan African region, so it is recommended to encourage this dimension and promote regional partnership.
- b) promoting the participation of Libyan Higher Education Institutions in research programmes focused on sensible issues that have an impact in the region and worldwide, and for which Libyan contribution brings additional value (i.e. migration).
- c) expand the geographical scope of international cooperation in Libya, engaging into cooperation programmes and mobilities the less involved universities, the more peripheral and/or youngest universities, to allow them to benefit from internationalization and regional collaborations.

## **Universities in the society at large**

**Prioritization of the National Research Agenda.** Libya needs to move forward towards a more mature research and innovation environment in the country, where Universities are able to engage in high-quality scientific research activities and support the definition of successful actions tackling the challenges of society. Higher Education Institutions have the potential of providing expertise, scientists and scholars, so that research outcomes really contribute to country's developments. However, Universities will be able to do so

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only relying upon trained and skilled human resources, and well equipped and functioning infrastructures; by an efficient framework for R&I management; benefitting from specialization strategies within universities. In the short term, improving the capacity of universities to produce and manage research activities, allowing students to engage in high-quality scientific research, is the minimum requirement for Libya. In the long run, a National Research Agenda (in cooperation with the Ministry of Education) will frame research activities in a more comprehensive vision for the country, improving the overall capacity of generating valuable research and sustainable advancement. Moreover, a reliable, accountable and efficient national research system will be more attractive for foreign researchers and companies, and will reduce the gaps generated by a severe brain-drain effect.

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**Enhancing the social relevance of Universities in cooperation with local actors.** During our research work, it clearly emerged that Universities (both in the east and west part of the country) are considered by citizens as one of the most (if not the most) reliable institutions in the country. HEIs are expected to generate stability, to drive economic growth (both in terms of offering job places and in terms of graduates employability), to fill political divisions, to serve the community. However, Libyan HEIs do not yet have dedicated offices (or funds) dealing with their social dimension, neither do they rely on a formal strategy by the Ministry of Education for the university's third mission. Curricula and programmes should be designed to strengthen graduates employability, to serve the needs of the society, so that the University becomes the starting point for reconstructing the country. Universities should establish durable and stable relations with the actors of the civil society, reinforce the transfer capacity with industries, create and promote synergies with local actors and organizations for a fruitful use of resources and to avoid duplication of efforts, engage in the co-creation of policies with decision-makers for sustainable development. This would only be possible starting by defining a cooperation scheme between national authorities, HEIs and socio-economic stakeholders to foster mutual dialogue, employability, sustainable development. In the long run, this win-win approach and the continuous communication flow between decision-makers, universities and stakeholders will generate, on the one side, a vision for the country in which all main players are involved, on the other hand, a strategic alliance supporting growth and social cohesion.