

INTERVIEW

Online learning meets the Arab world

NEW UNIVERSITY LETS STUDENTS GO TO CLASS IN CYBERSPACE

American entrepreneur says Lebanon is perfect location for school's latest branch

Hadi Khatib
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Lebanon is about to become the regional launching pad for distance learning for Arabs, Cypriots and Turks seeking accredited American degrees over the internet.

Jones International University (JIU) is the world's first accredited online American university, and it has decided to tap into the Arab market by using Lebanon as a base.

This web-based learning institution was founded by Glenn Jones, a former US cable industry giant who sold his multi-million-dollar business and moved all his assets to cyberspace in 1998 to "democratize" education on a global scale.

A shrewd businessman, Jones turned a \$400 business investment in cable systems in the mid-1960s into a top-10 American cable company.

"We are very keen on entering the Arab world and we have friends here and we thought that the climate (and) the history of Lebanon made it the best way to enter the region," Jones told The Daily Star.

According to Jones, his motive for changing professional gears came after a 1987 visit to the Vietnam Memorial convinced him that armed conflict was a terrible way to resolve discord and, "although it wasn't a panacea, education provided great hope for a more peaceful and understanding world."

He said the concept was: If "you dropped out of the education system, you would also drop out of the economic system."

"That's where people lose hope," he added.

His business instincts also helped him choose the right medium to achieve his goals.

"My fascination with the internet grew along with my conviction that it was a wider, deeper and a more prolific business where I didn't have to own pipes," Jones said. "You can make \$100 million disappear like water in sand with cable, whereas the same amount goes a long way online."

Jones thought he could democratize education more "easily and efficiently" with the help of the internet.

The university, which took five years to receive accreditation, was established in 1993 and, as the first online university, underwent a thorough and difficult procedure. It graduated



Jones is upbeat about the quality of his staff

ed 36 students last year, and over 100 since it first began.

Enrollment grew from 1,000 students in 2000 to 2,000 last year. Jones said the average annual enrollment increase is around 80 percent.

"Our graduates have gotten jobs and/or promotions, and we keep in touch through an alumni association," he said. "The way it works is that if you are a student at JIU, the classes take place in a web forum, where students have a threaded (one-on-one) conversation with the professor, who presents the questions or the situation and every one has to respond."

|| JIU has graduated 36 students in the last year, and more than 100 since it began

"You can't sit in the classroom and hide, because the professor knows where you've been every minute that you have been on the internet, what websites you've been into, (and) if you are or aren't doing the work," Jones added. "It is very accountable."

"You could be in a study group with people from Helsinki or Sao Paulo, Denver, China, Pakistan - or anywhere else in the world," he continued.

Jones said tests are built into the course, so that as students progress they are being assessed as situations or questions are presented. A "class" of no more than 25 students must respond, although not in real time.

"The question is posted on the website and people come in and get it at any time and they are given a period of time to answer," Jones said, adding that each course lasts eight weeks.

The professors are chosen from a who's who in the educa-

tion system in the United States, including staff from Stanford, Oxford and even a Nobel Prize winner.

JIU is offering its services through the Middle East Center for Studies and Public Relations, run by its chief executive officer, retired general Hisham Jaber.

"I went to Egypt and I found a large market," Jaber told The Daily Star. "Many people were interested in e-learning there, and Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa told me that if you can find 100 students in Lebanon in one year, you can have 5,000 in Egypt, because you have 1 million students that want to go to universities, but there is space for only 100,000."

Jaber added that while each country he visited, from Turkey to Syria and the Gulf, had its own set of problems, Lebanon presented the fewest restrictions and the best combination of location, considerable internet penetration and English-language proficiency.

Jones predicts that within 10 years, "the majority of the learning will be done through the internet."

Distance learning obviously benefits housewives, employees looking to enhance their careers, those without transportation, or anyone with

only limited time to attend a regular university.

Moreover, lectures at JIU are always available online, so students need not fret being too sick to go to class.

The concept has already been launched by Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who called it the Open Arab University. It offers courses at \$80 per credit.

"I told them that you have

|| Ten years from now, 'the majority of learning will be done via the internet'

the structure but not the engine, because they need the professors," Jaber said.

Nonetheless, e-learning cannot replace classical university learning in every field.

Jones said that while it is impossible to teach some courses, such as those for brain surgery or chemistry, over the internet, "we are talking about putting a dental school online."

Prices however, may make it

difficult. JIU will be competing with 40 universities in Lebanon, and at \$230 per credit for a Bachelor's degree and \$300 for a Master's degree, it may be tough to get students to enroll during these lean economic times.

"People will have to afford it," Jones admits, "but it is still cheaper than getting the same degrees in the US, (especially) considering the high level of education you are getting."

He said that the school cannot lower its prices because then it won't be self-sustainable due to costs associated with hiring first class professors, software development, maintaining an electronic global library hooked up to 8,000 library databases around the world, and spending on research and development.

Jones said that an MBA from JIU costs around \$13,000 for a two-year program, calling it "education excellence at your convenience."

"But," he admits, like any school - be it online or off - "you have to work hard at it."