

King's Academy's Jordan Model Parliament*

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IN 2013, on the sidelines of the annual Model United Nations (MUN) conference held at King's Academy in Madaba-Manja, Jordan, nineteen students gathered to discuss, in Arabic, hard-hitting topics in Jordanian society. This small informal gathering proved so popular that two years later a stand-alone conference was organized that gave birth to the Jordan Model Parliament (JMP). This conference used classical Arabic (*fus-ha*) as the official language and was organized by the students themselves. More than one hundred students in the inaugural JMP spent three days attending eight simulated forums. Student delegates from fifteen public and private schools divided themselves into twelve groups representing the twelve governorates in Jordan, debated selected topics, and discussed solutions to pertinent Jordanian issues.

In the second JMP held in 2016, around three hundred students from twelve public and eight private schools across the Kingdom participated. The number of interactive forums increased to twelve dealing with Human Rights, Environment, Economics, Law, National Security, Foreign Policy and Education. The Model United Nations (MUN) forum included discussions on the Arab League, Security Council and Crisis Committee in its agenda. The Arab League, Senate and Council of Ministers forums were introduced for the first time in this JMP, where students discussed various issues related to Jordan and the Arab world.

With the opening of the new Middle School at King's Academy in 2016, the JMP Secretariat proposed to invite Middle School students to the JMP. Soon afterward, some eighty-five students from Jordanian public and private schools joined forces in November 2016 at the first JMP Middle School Conference. Designed for a younger audience, the Middle School confer-

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ence incorporated more interactive activities and fewer debate and writing sessions, instead focusing on teaching skills needed for the conference.

In 2017, Middle School students joined the JMP preparatory group that increased the number of members from twenty-five to one hundred twenty-five students. The JMP became the largest officially recognized co-curricular activity on campus.

JMP Secretary-General Amr Almghawish, Batch 2017, noted that “Students are interested in JMP because it is a way to apply and work towards His Majesty King Abdullah II’s vision: ‘In order to create positive change, we need to start with the youth of our country because they are the ones who will go on to become its future leaders.’”

The use of Arabic in JMP was a big draw for many students who saw the activity as an opportunity to express themselves in their own language, in an otherwise English-speaking school. “All other school conferences in Jordan are in English, so having one in Arabic makes the conference unique,” said Almghawish. “It reminds us that we need to solve our problems in our own language and embrace our identity.” “The fact that it is in Arabic, our mother tongue, helped me connect more with my community and country,” said Dina Dawood, Batch 2020, a JMP delegate who represented Irbid Governorate at the conference.

International students took the chance of immersing themselves in an activity where they can learn more about Jordan, be part of something that is stimulating change in Jordanian society and pick up some Arabic words and phrases in the process. Although not proficient enough in Arabic to become participants, they can be involved as organizers, photographers and volunteers. “Speaking strictly in Arabic during JMP helped improve my grammar and vocabulary a lot,” said student organizer Abboud Hassan, Batch 2018, who grew up in the United States. “I used to get lost talking to students from all over Jordan who sometimes had different accents. Now that I’ve had more exposure, I find it easier to understand and talk with people.”

“When international students come to a new country they want to learn about its culture, and how it works and its politics; they want to meet its people,” said Almghawish. “They get to meet people at the JMP conference they never met before because of the diversity of students taking part from across the country.”

“I joined JMP to learn about this country I’m living in for four years,” said Chinese student Zhiwei Lin, Batch 2019. “At school we are in a bubble; JMP

is our access to connect with the real Jordan and real Jordanians.” “It’s interesting to hear people arguing when they get passionate about a topic,” she added. “It gives me a sense of the strong emotions they have on these issues.”

Preparation for the 2017 JMP included training for teachers from other schools to enable them to reach out and prepare more students in their own schools. Sessions for other schools are held at King’s Academy in preparation for the JMP. In 2017, four sessions for eighty schools were organized to help spread the JMP message to the schools.

The members of the Secretariat doubled in number to cope with the workload, and over five hundred students representing eighty schools across the country converged on the King’s Academy campus to participate in nineteen forums including new ones on Technology and Communications, Arts and Culture and the Court of Justice.

“The nice thing is we get to communicate with people from different places who have different perspectives,” Dawood said. “We see their points of view and share ours, which helps to shape our arguments and create resolutions.”

In 2018, under the helm of Secretary-General Ramsey Abdulrahim, Batch 2018, the conference grew even larger in size reaching over eight hundred students from across the Kingdom and making it the biggest student-led event at King’s Academy to date. “During the 2018 conferences, our focus was to meet the high demand for JMP from both public and private schools across Jordan,” noted Abdulrahim. “This led us to create two separate conferences during the same academic year. That decision was unprecedented because it required that we double the size and efforts of our already large leadership team.”

At the conferences in the 2018-2019 academic year, research guides were introduced that allowed students to learn how to research material critically, while providing training materials that prepared students for the conference. “We aimed to create both a positive oriented learning environment and an experience that students can use to further their education after the conference,” said Abdulrahim.

Adaptations

In order to give all students an equal opportunity to take part in the JMP, an English-language forum was introduced in 2018 that enabled non-Arabic





speakers to get a better understanding of Jordanian society and key local issues.

Over the past seven years, JMP has evolved from a small workshop to the biggest co-curricular activity on campus, and one of the most eagerly anticipated interscholastic events nationwide. Its success lies in its mission, which mirrors that of His Majesty King Abdullah II: to empower young leaders to drive change within and beyond their communities, to think for themselves, and to discover that the differences between us enrich our experiences and broaden our horizons.

Debating Topics

Students debate subjects across a broad range of areas which they choose themselves, based on issues they have seen in the news, or situations they recognize personally. Teachers provide guidance where necessary, for example, to help the students make an issue more specific, or to recommend an issue that they might wish to consider.

The subjects of debate include human rights, the environment, economics, law, national security, foreign policy and education. Some of the hard-hitting debates that have taken place in previous years have touched on tribal conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, freedom of the press, women's rights, the Syrian crisis and refugee rights, the Arab Spring, the threat of ISIS, the Tawjihi system¹ and solar energy in Jordan.

Most satisfying was when the topics discussed converged with a real political debate within the country. In 2018, the students debated Act 308, a law that allowed rapists to escape prosecution by marrying their victims and staying married for at least five years. Giving students the platform to debate this at the same time as their representatives in the real Jordanian parliament made this issue acutely real for the students. The government subsequently repealed this law and the students, having discussed the issue at length, and the associated subject on women's rights in the country, could understand the significance and impact of this important decision.

Organizing the JMP

The successful organizing of the JMP can be attributed to several factors, such as the following:

a. Organizing structure

JMP is organized by student teams consisting of:

1. A secretary-general and three deputies, responsible for overseeing the management of the event;
2. Twenty-five presidents (student representatives from other schools). The presidents choose the topics, write the research guides distributed to all students, and help train the students;
3. An organizational team, an external affairs team, and a staff team to support the students.

The process for allocating the roles is rigorous: students apply and are interviewed, usually by the previous team's volunteers, with school officials being present to ensure objectivity.

b. Participation

Students from private and public schools across the country are invited to participate in the three-day event. The students are accompanied by adult delegates from the schools.

c. Preparation

Formal training takes place in the lead-up to the parliamentary conference over a weekend with the aim of preparing the students to talk around the issues being discussed. This ensures all the participating students understand the background of the parliament and its philosophy, so that their engagement is based on a shared vision of what JMP is trying to achieve. The training sessions also help students understand the tools and techniques they need to employ to effectively engage in the debates: the principles of running a debate, respecting alternative views, taking turns to speak, and not interfering when others share their views.

The students are then asked to write a document on the issue they are planning to discuss, in order to prepare their thoughts and consider what research they need to undertake to come armed to the debate with the information at hand.

Participating King's Academy students are able to do their research and gather information during their allocated co-curricular time or after school. The school also helps build their learnings in other ways, for example, through expert speakers and by taking them to events, such as live political campaigns.

d. Structure

In lieu of countries, students represent the twelve governorates in Jordan. There are also forums which mirror the different governmental agencies in Jordan: Senate Committee, Arab League, Council Ministers and Supreme Court.

JMP Format

JMP starts at the end of the week and runs across the weekend with the general format as follows:

- **Day one:** Registration and division into discussion committees, lobbying and a guest speaker;
- **Day two:** Opening entrepreneurship speaker panel followed by two discussion sessions before lunch, and two after. The day concludes with an international dinner and dance;
- **Day three:** Student delegates come armed with the solution statements they would like to make following their discussions the previous day. Nominations are presented, and awards received, for the best committee representative. There is then a closing ceremony and final guest speaker. Guest speakers have included ministers, inventors and writers.

Impact

JMP inspires Jordanian students to learn more about their country, lifting the lid on the real experiences of citizens — their aspirations, their challenges, and how the modern world will impact their future. As the debates are conducted primarily in Arabic, they provide an opportunity for the students to express themselves in their own language, in an otherwise English-speaking school. The participation of Syrian refugee students has also added another very powerful dimension to the discussions, giving this often-overlooked community a voice.

The event also benefits international students as by researching and debating the issues involved, they gain a deeper insight into their adopted culture. They also have the opportunity to be part of something that is stimulating change in Jordanian society and pick up some Arabic words and phrases in the process. Although not proficient enough in Arabic to participate fully

as delegates, they are involved through some additional English debating sessions, and also as organizers, photographers and volunteers.

The impact on the pupils has been considerable. They have opportunities to exercise their leadership and management skills, show their creativity and sensitivity when tackling problems, and gain an outlook on national and global issues helping them become more informed citizens in the future.

The JMP format continues to go from strength-to-strength. It is officially the largest co-curricular activity on campus and was expected to draw involvement from over four hundred students from across the country at each of the two annual conferences for the 2019-2020 academic year, before they were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The King's Academy Jordan Model Parliament has been profiled in the local news and social media and has also caught the attention of local universities that have expressed interest in participating at upcoming conferences. At least one university plans to introduce the concept on their own campus, to raise the level of active citizenship among their own student body. One of JMP's former secretary-generals, now studying at university in the US, has started a similar parliamentary initiative at his new school, helping students to better understand the Arab region.

Challenges

The logistics of organizing JMP has been challenging in a number of ways including preparation, school participation and costs:

- a. Procedure and process: In order to communicate with Jordanian public schools, approval from the Ministry of Education is required. Although there was initial difficulty getting the approval of the then Minister of Education, the current Minister immediately saw the benefit of the project and enthusiastically encouraged the school to engage with the public school system;
- b. School engagement: A further consideration was the best way to get public schools to participate in JMP. There was no incentive for adult chaperones to get involved — it meant time out of their weekend — and as a result, the chaperones tended to work in shifts over this period — there was no consistent participation of staff. That was why an adult training program was adopted to provide additional value to the attending chaperones;

- c. Costs: Ensuring that cost is not be a barrier to the participation of public schools, King's Academy funds the transport of their students to the school and ensures that they are accommodated at the school.

Advice

The success of JMP can be summed up through the following learned lessons:

- a. Empower the students: They are full of ideas and eager to implement them! Allow them to steer the ship and they will reap the benefits in terms of their leadership experience — just be there to guide them;
- b. Work collaboratively: What started with one faculty member coordinator has now become a team of four. This ensures that if one part of the puzzle is not quite right, working collaboratively you have lots of minds on the task to find a solution;
- c. Invest in the exercise: It was a big leap to transpose and adapt the format, for example, by extending the parliament opportunity to Middle School pupils. However, the results were very positive. Never shy away from the opportunity to try something new; the benefits are likely to extend even further.

The Future

King's Academy is eager to make the Jordan Model Parliament as inclusive as possible; to that end, the opportunity was given to students with physical disabilities to participate starting in 2018. In addition, Asia A. M. Yaghi, president of the I Am a Human Society for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Jordan, was invited as a guest speaker to address the conference on local and international laws and challenges facing persons with disabilities in Jordan. The plan for future conferences is to continue inviting more students from a diverse background, range of abilities, and other nations, to participate.