

Higher Education Classification in the Middle East and North Africa: A Pilot Study

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Executive Summary

While the number of global and country-level ranking and classification systems continues to expand, a regional classification and assessment of higher education institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has not been developed. Such a system is particularly needed given the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in the region, as new domestic institutions and branch campuses of overseas institutions emerge. As a result, higher education in the Arab countries nowadays is complex and takes disparate forms. Such a situation leads to some confusion in the ranks of Arab educators themselves, as well as among international observers, particularly in terms of meanings and equivalences.

From an international perspective, the varying nature of higher education institutions and degrees in the region has consequences for the way international agencies and higher education institutions can relate to credentials issued in the Arab countries. This is a challenging issue particularly as students' mobility from Arab countries toward the U.S. and other OECD countries has taken a significant leap in recent years. According to the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* report, out of a world total of 723,277 foreign students in the USA in 2010/11, 47,963 or seven percent were from the MENA region, an increase of 24 percent over the previous year. In the meantime, classification of higher education institutions is becoming an international necessity, either within a specific country (for example, the Carnegie classification in the U.S., and the U.K. typology), or within a whole region (the European classification, for example).

The lack of an Arab regional classification or common framework has implications for all of the following stakeholders:

- At the research level: Due to a lack of an empirically developed classification of HEIs, researchers and research agencies are likely to work with an arbitrary selection of higher education institutions in the Arab region, resulting in inconsistent or conflicting results, and unreliable or inappropriate conclusions.
- At the institutional level: The lack of a classification scheme for HEIs in the Arab region also limits the prospects of networking, exchange, mobility, and cooperation between institutions, in the region and abroad, of similar profiles and characteristics.
- At the selection level: The paucity of information on HEIs and their lack of accessibility limits the ability of students and the public to make better informed choices regarding their selection of fields of study and subsequent careers.
- At the policymaking level: The lack of precise data on classified higher educational institutions in the Arab region sometimes misleads policy makers, frustrates initiatives for possible cooperation among institutions, regionally and internationally, and creates confusion regarding: transferability of students, faculty mobility, and the establishment of quality standards and regional frameworks for quality assurance.
- At the industry level: The current lack of a classification scheme for HEIs in the Arab region also results in insufficient research funding from the industry and the lack of university-industry partnerships. Without a clear understanding of different types of institutions and their features, HEIs are often mischaracterized and the distinction between research-oriented and teaching-oriented institutions is not always evident.

All this makes the establishment of a classification system for higher education in the Arab countries more urgent.

Purpose of the Study

Recognizing a significant need for reliable and standardized institution-level data on higher education institutions (HEIs) in the MENA region, the Institute of International Education (IIE), with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York and in partnership with the Lebanese Association of Educational Studies (LAES), initiated a pilot study in May 2009 to develop a system for classifying HEIs in the region. The selected eight pilot countries included: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the UAE.¹ It was envisioned that the new classification model for MENA countries would:

- Help strengthen MENA institutions locally by providing benchmarks and key indicators on which institutions could measure and track their growth and compare themselves to similar institutions.
- Generate international interest in the region's institutions, leading to deeper linkages between MENA HEIs and other institutions around the world to facilitate knowledge sharing, research collaboration, and institutional capacity building.
- Provide critical institutional-level information and data that prospective students from the MENA region or from other parts of the world can use to select a higher education institution.

Incorporating elements from existing classifications such as the Carnegie Classification and the European Classification of Higher Educational Institutions, a comprehensive model capturing a wide range of higher education indicators was developed for the current study. Our study yielded the following eleven dimensions that comprise the *Classification Model for the Arab Countries* (CMAC): institutional characteristics; teaching and learning profile; curriculum; student profile; faculty profile; financial profile; research involvement; cultural orientation; religious orientation; regional engagement; and international engagement. This model formed the basis for a survey of over 300 higher education institutions in the pilot countries. Because of considerable missing data for some of the dimensions and in the interest of space, this report focuses on six of the eleven dimensions that had reasonably sound responses and were found to be the most reliable and valid.

The current study and its findings are a critical first step in gathering institutional data for the higher education sector in the Arab world that attempts to provide a common standard across countries in the region. Our findings help fill a gap that has been identified by groups ranging from the Regional Board of the Arab Quality Assurance and Accreditation Network for Education (ARQAANE) within the region, to multilateral agencies like UNESCO and the World Bank. Subsequent discussion of the report and refining of the CMAC by higher education leaders and policymakers in the region and at forums such as the recent WISE 2011 in Doha, Qatar, will be vital to the future expansion and scaling up of the initial work carried out through our study.

Key Findings

Paucity of institutional-level data on higher education

There was a lack of data on certain key education indicators across all seven countries in our sample. The missing data was due to one or more of the following reasons: the data in question had either never been collected; had not been organized in a form that could be reported; or institutions were reluctant to

¹ Data for Egypt was not ultimately available due to political events unfolding during the survey period.

provide certain types of information such as details of the institution's funding model. This lack of data was most apparent in the following dimensions in our classification model: research involvement; the teaching and learning profile; the faculty profile; and the financial profile of the institution. Recent research by the World Bank in the region has also noted the lack of data on similar indicators such as the qualifications and accomplishments of teaching staff; indicators of research excellence such as memberships in prestigious academies and societies; and awards received by faculty.

At the student level, there is a shortage of disaggregated data by academic level, and more complete data is needed on student enrollment and graduation rates. Another key indicator for which there was substantial missing data is the international mobility of staff and students, two areas of interest that have also been flagged by the World Bank. For most institutions in our study, the missing mobility data indicates one of two things: there are either no international students and/or teaching staff, or the institution has not measured this type of mobility and academic exchange. This point deserves more discussion. In the Arab region, as in other interconnected regions of the world like Europe and Africa, people are often able to move across borders and within the region without any special documentation that identifies them as "foreign" or "international." This makes it difficult then to measure student and faculty mobility. If even one Arab country does not view students from a neighboring country as "international," this leads to a significant undercount of student exchange and mobility for the host country and for the region at large.

A profile of students in the pilot study

Across all seven countries on which data was collected, students were primarily studying at the undergraduate level. In general, there is gender equity in student enrollment, as reported, and co-education is common. However, co-education is interpreted in varying ways: in some countries it simply means that men and women attend the same campus but are segregated in classrooms, while in others it means that the two sexes mingle freely. Citizens make up close to 90 percent of the student body, with the remaining students coming from neighboring Arab countries and other parts of the world. There are some key differences by country, however. The Gulf countries in our study, Qatar and UAE in particular, drew more international students than the other Arab countries.

Shifting cultural models

Given the cultural and political history of the region, most institutions are aligned with a foreign model of education. An institution's cultural orientation is likely to depend on a number of factors, including language, curriculum organization, and historical affiliation, among others. The French model is most prevalent (45 percent of all HEIs), followed by the American (43 percent), while the other models were in place in just a few institutions. About 6 percent of all institutions have in place a mixed cultural model.

Not surprisingly, certain cultural models are more likely to be prevalent in specific countries. The American one prevails in the Gulf States and Jordan, the French model in North African countries, while HEIs in Lebanon are influenced by more than one cultural model. However, the cultural model of HEIs in the region has evolved over time: the American model has witnessed rapid expansion during the last decade, surpassing the French model, which was predominant from 1960-1998. The influence of the American model is seen in academic characteristics such as the structure of courses and the adoption of the semester system. The American influence is also seen most in the Gulf region, probably because Qatar and the UAE are already home to the branch campuses of several American institutions.

It remains to be seen what impact the recent events in the region will have on the cultural model of institutions, but it is likely that the “Arab Spring” will affect the governance system of higher education, probably in the direction of more independence, participation, and partnerships—features that are often found in the American model of higher education. But in terms of language, there might be a resurgence of Arabic.

Regional and international engagement

Overall, Arab institutions' involvement at the international level is relatively low. Very few institutions are engaged in various forms of international collaboration such as twinning. Student mobility among Arab countries is also weak, with non-public institutions more likely to host international students than public institutions. Few if any institutions have offices in other countries, and even fewer have on-campus offices of international affairs and offices for visiting students and scholars. Yet there is a critical need for institutions of the region to engage with those outside, especially as they rebuild their societies after the recent political events and begin to engage a newly mobilized youth population. At the 2011 annual conference of the European Association for International Education (EAIE), academics, ministers, and policy makers from Arab countries emphasized that partnerships between European and “Arab Spring” universities “will be vital to improving higher education in the fledgling democracies...in a period of transition.”²

There are some indications, however, that countries within the region are recognizing the need to be more “outward” oriented. This is apparent, for example, in the languages that institutions use for administration and teaching. Contrary to expectation, Arabic alone is used for administrative purposes by less than half of all institutions. An almost equal proportion of institutions rely on a combination of Arabic and a foreign language, likely English or French. And almost a quarter of all institutions rely solely on English as the language of administration. The typical HEI is dichotomous, using two different languages: one for administration and/or teaching humanities and one for teaching hard sciences. While it is not the most prevalent language of instruction, English has increased in popularity since the 1960s—a trend that is probably related to the growth of non-public institutions in the region and emerging systems of higher education in the Gulf States that often include institutions and faculty from overseas.

Despite the overall low levels of higher education internationalization seen in the region, there are notable differences by country and sub-region. The Gulf countries are leading the region in several areas of international engagement. In our study, institutions in both Qatar and UAE had significant proportions of international faculty and students not just from within the Arab region, but also from non-Arab countries. The large presence of foreign faculty in the Gulf States is not surprising, given that these countries are home to foreign branch campuses that have foreign teaching staff. Other demographic factors might also play a role: to begin with, the Gulf States have a larger foreign-born population, including corporate expatriates. Other institutions in the region, such as NYU-Abu Dhabi and the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), have made concerted efforts to hire world-class faculty from around the globe. Not surprisingly, countries with a higher proportion of foreign teaching staff are also the ones with larger populations of foreign students, suggesting openness at the institution-level to engage globally. All of this being said, the motivations for drawing on an international talent pool are varied: some countries in the region might need to recruit overseas faculty because of a shortage of qualified domestic faculty, while for HEIs in the other countries the recruitment efforts might be part of a carefully articulated strategy to make their institutions world-class, as is the case of Qatar.

² http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/09/22/conference_on_europe_and_the_arab_spring

Impact of branch campuses on the region

The rapid growth of branch campuses in the region, such as those in Qatar and the UAE, is having an impact on the higher education landscape of the region. Our study points to some interesting trends that are beginning to emerge, some of which have been discussed above, such as the presence of international faculty and students. Some of these developments or “innovations” are also correlated with the fact that many institutions in the Gulf countries are private institutions. For example, there is increasing use of international admission exams in the Gulf countries, perhaps because these countries have a large number of private institutions, many of which also happen to be international/branch campuses.

Research support

It is widely acknowledged in the literature and within academic rankings and classifications that the investments an institution makes in fostering research and its research productivity are critical components of academic excellence and competitiveness. To begin with, a large number of institutions in our study were not able to provide detailed data on the types of research facilities and support available. Among those for whom data was available, it appears that overall there is weak institutional investment and engagement in research. There are few research facilities and most institutions provide limited access to print books, e-books, print journals, e-journals, and online databases. Although research activities are taken into consideration in the promotion of faculty members and account for one-third of all criteria for making promotion decisions, teaching is given more weight than research and very few staff are active in research. According to one analysis, “In the world's leading research universities typically some two-thirds of academic staff would be research active, including one-third whose research would be internationally reputable.”³ This ratio was not evident in any of the responding countries in the current survey.

Challenges in Carrying Out the Study

Although the early phases of data collection proceeded as planned, one of the major hurdles that the research team encountered in carrying out the current study was the reluctance of ministries of education and institutions to participate in an endeavor that would result in a reliable and valid classification system for the region. This was due to a combination of reasons. Many institutions reported that they had never been asked before to provide such data and were not able to do so now. Ministries of education and HEIs in the selected countries were slow and/or reluctant to respond because they were distrustful of an initiative that attempted to classify, assess, or rank their institutions in any way; this was especially true for institutions that are strongly linked to central authorities. Even though the study team emphasized the value of the study for the institution/country itself and for raising the quality of higher education in the region, there appears to be widespread concern that the data will be used to expose or critique institutions in the Middle East by trying to compare them with higher quality institutions elsewhere, especially in the U.S. In light of these issues, it is likely that the missing data in the study is for one of two reasons: a lack of transparency on the part of the institution, or the actual unavailability of data on institutional characteristics.

Given the vast diversity of institutions across the seven pilot countries, it was a challenge to construct a classification that would apply to all HEIs in the region. This variation was most apparent in the types of

³ OECD and the World Bank (2010). *Reviews of National Policies for Higher Education: Higher Education in Egypt*. Paris, France: OECD.

institutions (university, University College, higher institute, business school, higher institute, academy, and community college) and sectors (public, private-nonprofit, private-for profit, and mixed). Some non-public HEIs are even identified as “governmental” and “semi-governmental” or “federal.” Non-public institutions are owned by associations (religious and non-religious), by partnership projects, by economic bodies (central bank, chamber of commerce), or by a diversity of groups. For-profit institutions are mainly established by the private sector, although there are some that are established by governments. In terms of identity, the majority are national institutions, while the others are either regional, foreign or branch of foreign universities, or co-projects.

Other variations have to do with academic requirements as well as the predominant higher education model in place in different institutions. For example, some HEIs use international tests for admission criteria, while others do not. Some use institutional entrance exams for admission purposes, others not. Some HEIs continue to function on an annual calendar of study for the Arts and Sciences, though most have adopted the semester system. However, semesters in Arab institutions do not imply the course credit system. A hybrid situation exists in which HEIs may adopt some combination of the American credit system or the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

A final methodological challenge that we faced was that many of the faculties and departments of an institution are widely dispersed and function almost as independent campuses. As a result, institutional data is not centralized. It fell to the researchers to collate and synthesize data, which presents the challenge of ensuring that the information compiled is representative of an institution as a whole.

Last and perhaps most significant, the progress of the study was affected by the political turmoil that swept through the region and involved almost all countries in the pilot. Not only did this cause a delay in gathering data, but it also resulted in not being able to collect any data from Egypt, a key regional player in higher education.

Recommendations for the Future

Higher education in the MENA region is undergoing a period of rapid change and expansion. Our study and the resulting classification provide the groundwork for further research on developing a common framework that enables a better understanding of the institutions in the region.

The data gathered through our pilot study can be used to conduct in-depth country-level analysis. The data can also be used to further study differences across sub-regions within the larger Arab region. The CMAC assumes certain commonalities and similarities (while accounting for key differences by sector and other criteria); however, but further work needs to be done in analyzing any sub-regional trends that exist. The data can also be used by HEIs to benchmark themselves within the country and the region.

Finally, although rankings were not the goal of our study, it is conceivable that data from the study can be used to generate rankings of HEIs in the seven pilot countries, especially on the dimensions for which there is more complete and reliable data. This next step would require relative weighting of various indicators, a task that we did not undertake in our analysis as our goal was to present the data in a descriptive way rather than to rank institutions.

In conclusion, it is clear that to develop a comprehensive classification—with more complete information and that could be scaled up to apply to all countries in the region—more time and effort is needed to mobilize countries, ministers, and institutions in the MENA region regarding the importance of gathering high-quality institutional data and of participating in the classifications initiative. Local and regional buy-

in is essential; without it, there is little motivation for governments and institutions to participate and the initiative is perceived as being externally imposed.

One step to mobilize the higher education sector in the region is to share findings from this pilot study at key events in the region with the goal of engaging representatives of the Arab countries that have participated fully in the study as well as representatives of other developing and non-Western countries that have invested in developing classification systems for their higher education sector. One example of this was a highly successful workshop at the recent 2011 WISE conference in Doha, Qatar. The session was attended by over 60 participants from several different countries. There are many good examples from Latin America, Asia, and the former Soviet states of how to develop a shared set of criteria against which to benchmark or compare HEIs, and of how to use this type of institutional data for improving the quality of higher education. Ministers of higher education from the target MENA countries can learn firsthand through the best practices of these other countries that transparency of higher education systems is critical to increasing the quality of higher education in the region, similar to what China set out to do through the Shanghai rankings (now called the Academic Ranking of World Universities or ARWU), which were originally conceived of as a way to improve the quality of Chinese institutions and to position them as world-class.

A current report on higher education in the Arab world would be incomplete without acknowledging the widespread political upheaval in the region and the potential impact of the “Arab Spring” on universities of the region as they reshape themselves to educate a newly mobilized youth population whose understanding of their political, economic, and social reality has changed dramatically. What role universities will play in preparing future leaders and the workforce of tomorrow in the region remains to be seen, but it heightens the need, at the most fundamental level, for solid institutional data and information.

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