

Universities in Arab Countries: An Urgent Need for Change

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Underpinning the Transition
to a Peaceful and Prosperous Future

 Springer



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Foreword

On an historic day, 29 November 2016, the United Nations Development Programme launched its 2016 Arab Human Development Report, subtitled *Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, at a special event held at the American University of Beirut that brought together more than 200 constituents including students and academics from across the Arab world, alongside representatives from civil society, NGOs, government institutions, media, and the private sector. Notwithstanding the talent, energy and dynamism on show in the auditorium, the report made for daunting reading: the halving of growth in the human development index in Arab countries since the outbreak of political instability in 2010; growing inequality; conflict destroying the social fabric of the Arab region; high youth unemployment; low political engagement among the generation that will inherit us; pervasive discrimination against women. “The lives of many young people across the region are marked by frustration, marginalization and alienation from institutions and the transitions that are necessary to begin adult life in a fulfilling manner,” it warned. The AHDR 2016 called for a new model that focuses simultaneously on building young people’s capabilities, by reforming policies and services that affect education, health and their ability to earn a living, and expanding opportunities by addressing macro-level challenges in the political and economic spheres.

With little time to digest the sobering UNDP data released that day, but aware that this was a decisive intervention in our joint efforts to build a better future, I folded up my scripted welcoming remarks and launched into a sobering review of the economic, societal and political situation in the Arab world today, before segueing into my sincerely held belief that Arab higher education, with AUB as a super-ordinate model, and its fruits, represent the best hope for an emerging generation ravaged by self-doubt, exclusion, suppression and expatriation. Arab youth want what they need, which is education and empowerment, I told my audience. I spoke with genuine optimism because our youth has a sense of resiliency; a sense that they are not waiting for a grand intervention to save them. “They want us to help them. But they don’t want saving,” I said. “They want support; they want opportunity; they want to save themselves. They are not relying on dictatorships and autocratic states to create opportunities. They want to create their own opportunities. So, to us

in the universities, to you in the UN, to all of us, our job is to remove the roadblocks and to empower youth, to engage them, to educate them.” I can say with the conviction of someone who has treated some of the deadliest cancers for his entire career that this generation is going to make a difference. We know they can do marvels, because we see it every day. This volume picks up that challenge with some of our most eminent researchers and academicians in the Lebanese, Arab and international spheres sharing their thoughts and data on the key questions and challenges that we face, united under the standard of “an urgent need for change.” Never have those words rung more true, and I heartily commend His Excellency Dr. Adnan Badran and his partners for bringing together these insightful essays for our consideration.

President
American University of Beirut,
Beirut, Lebanon

Fadlo R. Khuri

Introduction

Data published by authoritative organisations such as the United Nations in the Arab Human Development Reports, the World Bank, and reports of the International Labour Organisation highlight that nearly all Arab countries continue to be classified as “underdeveloped”, with widespread poverty and a propensity to severe social unrest. The birth rates are relatively high and the labour force continues to grow rapidly, but there are high levels of hidden and conspicuous unemployment. Prior to 1960, most of the 22 Arab countries had some of the lowest levels of socio-economic development worldwide, and since that time progress has fallen behind that of developing countries in Asia and other part of the world. There has been a prolonged failure to capitalise on industrialisation and exports of value-added products throughout the Arab Region, a land area of more than 13 million square kilometres stretching from its westerly edge at the Atlantic Ocean to its easterly edge at the Arabian Sea, and from the southern edge of the Mediterranean Sea south to the Horn of Africa. Likewise, insufficient attention has been given to the creation of wealth-creating intellectual property and its exploitation. With the exception of the few wealthy oil-exporting countries in the Gulf region, inadequate access to fresh water, food shortages, and a lack of energy security afflict significant proportions of Arab populations. Adding to the economic and environmental difficulties faced by all Arab nations are the spectre of civil war and conflicts, including attempted cultural genocide and population displacement, all interlaced with religious fundamentalism and ethnic incompatibilities. Authoritarian governments, lack of strong civil-society institutions, wide disparities in wealth, and a fragile political fabric coupled to weak national economies do not bode well for the future unless concerted efforts are made to offer a bright future for the people in general, numbering about 460 million, and the young in particular.

Even the wealthy oil-exporting nations with their massive accumulated sovereign assets are coming under economic and social pressures arising from depressed oil prices as new sources of oil and gas come on stream, notably from hydraulic fracturing of oil- and gas-bearing rock formations in other parts of the world. Further challenges come from greatly improved energy efficiency in industry, transport, and the home, as well as from rapid improvements in renewable-energy generation.

In the modern era, universities have a pivotal role in shaping the future and transforming societies. As centres of advanced education and scholarship they produce graduates and postgraduates to populate government and civil society. They conduct original research, and act as custodians of cultures, knowledge, and moral integrity. They have the potential to be at the forefront of enhancing the quality of life and leading in the quest to promote national wealth creation. Indeed, the future of the Arab world is dependent in large measure on the quality as well as quantity of the outputs from its university sector.

As in the world at large, Arab universities have experienced a massive growth in undergraduate numbers, posing a problem for the funding of public universities by governments but offering opportunities for private universities to address expanding market demands for advanced education. Most Arab countries are developing a mixed educational model of public and private universities. With the advent of international ranking tables and greater competitiveness, the deficiencies of Arab universities are becoming manifest at a time when education and training are being revolutionised by major developments in highly sophisticated online courses, some of which are freely available. None of the Arab universities figures in the listing of the leading global universities. Relatively little intellectual property of merit is produced and few spinout companies have been generated. High levels of graduate unemployment in the Arab countries can be regarded as an indictment of both the university sector and national economic management. The need for change has never been greater.

This book uniquely focuses on the Arab universities, detailing the challenges they face, considering the option for change, and outlining opportunities to thrive in a highly competitive world. In successive annual international meetings of the Arab Academy of Sciences, it has been clear that most universities in the Region are failing to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances in academia. Many of the brightest young graduates leave the Region to pursue their careers in the rest of the world, giving rise to a worrying “brain drain” of much-needed talent. There was a groundswell of opinion in these Academy meetings to produce this book as a matter of urgency using authors with special international expertise in academia, advanced research institutes, and government, and offer possible roadmaps for the diversity of Arab universities in their quest for improvement, and perhaps even for survival for some. Comparisons with leading universities in developed countries demonstrate that most Arab universities fail to meet the substantive requirements of their students and their parents, their staff, and the countries in which they operate. Clearly, Arab universities have more to gain than those in other parts of the world by analysing, adopting, and exploiting recent developments in teaching and developing a vibrant research community. The modern academic environment now encompasses entrepreneurialism, distance and blended learning for students of all ages and backgrounds, sophisticated facilities, external advice, and links with professional bodies and companies in the host country and abroad, thereby promoting the growth of a knowledge economy and lifelong learning. Crucially, leading universities in developed countries operate openly and transparently by providing open access to substantial levels of information. They also operate with a great deal of autonomy.

This book explores and evaluates major issues and opportunities in Arab academia. It opens with an overview chapter (*Hillman & Baydoun: The Future of Universities in the Arab Region: A Review*) that outlines the origins and purpose of universities, describing the structures and governance of institutions of higher education and research. The need for science parks and company-incubator facilities is analysed, followed by suggestions as to how the wellbeing of the Arab university sector and its relationship to government can be restored to its proper position. Recommendations are made on governance and managerial issues, setting priorities, and options are outlined for adopting quality-assurance measures and improving societal relevance. The next chapter (*Waterbury: Governance of Arab Universities: Why does it Matter?*) deals specifically with the crucially important issue of governance and autonomy of Arab universities currently and in times past, and offers advice to both universities and governments. In the third chapter (*Badran: Landscape of Higher Education in the Arab World: Quality, Relevance, and Student Mobility*), higher education throughout the Arab world is reviewed in detail, focusing on quality of education provided, its relevance to the needs of society, and the issue of student mobility. There is a gross underinvestment in STEM-based subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

Research is a fundamental feature of any institution that claims university status. Thus, in Chap. 4 (*Badran: Landscape of R&D in the Arab Region Compared with the Rest of the World*) comparisons of research and development in Arab countries are made with the rest of the world, highlighting deficiencies in the levels of investment and the way in which investments are utilised. Chapter 5 (*Atta-ur-Rahman: Building a Knowledge Economy*) relates research that leads to a functioning and successful knowledge economy, providing a widely admired case study in leadership and government-university partnership in Pakistan. Fully utilising the skills and talents within universities for the betterment of both the university and society at large is a primary responsibility of all senior academics. Chap. 6 (*McKellar: Business Engagement is No Longer an Optional Extra for Universities*) makes the crucial point that engaging with business is no longer an optional extra for virtually all universities around the world. Such engagement brings benefits beyond financial security because it ensures that at least part of the work of the university sustains societal relevance, and its graduates and postgraduates have the necessary attributes to be readily employable. For various reasons, not all research and scholarship produced in the Arab world is used, and this aspect is analysed mainly from the standpoint of the social sciences in Chap. 7 (*Hanafi: Knowledge Produced but Not Used: Predicaments of Social Research in the Arab World*).

Uncomfortable as it is for those universities struggling to adapt to modernity, young people around the world are proving to be competent in computing and using smartphones for social media and accessing information. Access to the Internet means that before they submit applications for admission, they are able to compare institutions using their websites and internationally available ranking lists. Within the education and research environments, the availability online of high-quality teaching materials delivered by internationally acclaimed experts puts pressure on the staff of universities to raise their standards and improve the competitiveness of

their institutions. At the same time, universities need to update and substantially revise their websites. Chap. 8 (*Sebaaly: Online Education and Distance Learning in Arab Countries*) presents an account of recent and exciting developments in online education and distance learning in Arab countries, and notes the profound reshaping of teaching, training, and research currently taking place. Production of these sophisticated online tools demands a spectrum of skills normally beyond the capability of a single person.

Debate on what constitutes a balanced university-level education, one that equips students to be curious, questioning, and be willing to pursue knowledge, has not reached a unanimous position, but in Chap. 9 (*Guessoum: Is Liberal Arts Education a Good Model for Arab Universities?*) the question as to whether a liberal arts education is a good role model for Arab universities is carefully and positively examined. Especially in the Arab world, religion occupies a prominent position in society at large and particularly in education at all levels, most notably in respect of the interface between rapid and dramatic advances in modern science and religion. In Chap. 10 (*Guessoum: Science and Religion Issues in Higher Education*), this science-and-religion interface is adroitly examined with specific reference to Arab academia. Chap. 11 (*Sabra: Christianity and Science: From Conflict and Divorce to Mutual Influence and Enrichment*) concerns Christianity and science and examines whether the strained relationship in times past has given way to mutual enrichment. As food security has special resonance in most of the Arab world, Chap. 12 (*Daghir: Higher Agricultural Education in the Arab World: Past, Present, and Future*) reviews advanced agricultural education in the Region, noting previous arrangements and how they have evolved into the present system, followed by analysis of the challenges that need to be addressed in future.

Country-specific chapters illustrate issues that have relevance throughout the Region. Chapter 13 (*Badran: Who Pays What for University education in the Arab World Compared with the Rest of the World: Context of Jordan*) discusses the costs of university education in the Region compared with the rest of the world, and relates the costs and processes to the situation in Jordan. This account is then followed by Chap. 14 (*Kanaan: The Political Economy of Higher Education in Jordan: Cost-Sharing Revisited*) on the political economy of higher education in Jordan, with specific reference to cost-sharing arrangements. University reform in the Maghreb countries presented in Chap. 15 (*Benjelloun: University Reform in the Maghreb Countries: Institutional Autonomy as a Lever for National development*) emphasises the point that institutional autonomy, as analysed in Chap. 2, is an effective lever for national development and social progress. The loss of talent from Arab countries to the rest of the world – the “brain drain” – is a serious issue for the Region but in Chap. 16 (*Badr: Reversing the Brain Drain in Healthcare Education in Lebanon: A Success Story*) there has been a successful reversal of this undesirable phenomenon with respect to academic-led healthcare in the Lebanon. Finally, in Chap. 17 (*Mourtada: The Syrian Higher Education Sector: Past, Present, and Future*) the higher-education situation in Syria is reviewed from its development up until the war, its current complex state of affairs, and prospects for the future taking into account the special circumstances the country faces.

We are preparing to publish another book on Arab universities, concentrating specifically on both quality-assurance measures and societal and economic relevance in academia. These two areas – quality and relevance - are pivotal to the future of Arab universities that have increased substantially in number to more than 700 public and private universities without a concomitant improvement in the competitive position of the Region relative to other parts of the world. Greater prominence of quality assurance and relevance in the reform of its universities will ensure the Arab world truly realises its full potential.

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Adnan Badran
Elias Baydoun
John R. Hillman

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