

Chapter 2

Towards a Paradigm Shift in Higher Education in the MENA Region

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has not been able to deliver the needed knowledge and technology transfer to generate productivity and innovation in this part of the world (Arab Economic and Social Summit, 2009; Thomson and Reuters, 2007). Youth unemployment in the MENA region remains the highest in the world, with the Middle East rating 21% and North Africa rating 25%, out of whom one-third are university graduates (World Bank, 2013). The chapter aims to address issues pertaining to the need to shift perspective in higher education in the MENA region, in the light of its growing importance as a developing entity with natural and human resources. The chapter identifies the role of higher education, in policies and practice, in addressing the needs of the region and transforming its resources, human and physical, to further its economic development.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region comprises of 19 countries that extend over a vast territory and contain significant wealth of oil reserves, accounting for 31 percent of the world oil production (Global Monitoring Report, 2013). The region has geographical and strategic significance as it manages access routes to the Red Sea, Suez Canal, the Gulf and Mediterranean.

Higher education became the focal point of investment in the oil producing countries of the

MENA region and improving policies and practices to maximize its benefit became the next milestone for these countries (UNDP, 2002). Population growth in the MENA region has been paralleled with expansion in primary, secondary and tertiary education specifically after independence (UNDP, 1997).

Recent figures from the MENA region indicate that higher education rates have doubled during the period extending from 1960 to 1995. Statistics confirm increase specifically in primary education, which soared from 61 percent to 98 percent in the

region. In addition, female literacy increased in the region following the spread of higher education (World Developing Indicators, 2013).

The region is making considerable effort in order to be able to face contemporary challenges and compete in the vocational market through enhanced performance and productivity (UNESCO, 2002). Higher education is perceived to contribute to broadening intellectual abilities of learners and increasing their skills in modern technological and market orientations.

Most MENA countries look at higher education as a symbol of national achievement, rather than a financial goal (World Bank, 2013). Higher education is interlinked with development on more than one facet. On the one hand, higher education has been perceived to contribute to increasing the value and efficiency of the workforce. At the social level it was found to mould the working class of the poorer sections of society and create lower middle class that is more self sustained and hence less burdensome on the country's economy (KAM, 2008).

Despite the progress made, the region's current education strategies have not been able to fulfill the aspirations of the region on many accounts. Higher education in the MENA region is unable to provide the cognitive, behavioural and social skills needed to promote new ideas and engage in diverse exchanges. Current practices favour a non-egalitarian distribution of human capital spread because of rural, gender and equal opportunity issues (World Developing Indicators, 2013). The spread of predominantly agricultural rural communities, the uneven distribution of wealth, the limited employment opportunities, and the reliance on public resources, have all contributed to the growing frustration on the inability of the education system, and specifically higher education, to make a difference, help integration in global economies, and meet the expectations of contemporary market trends. Limited specialization offering, slow school to work transition, low quality basic education and training, mismatch

between labour supply and demand, inadequate policies, fragmentation, lack of research and narrow technical provisions are amongst the primary factors that have been identified to contribute to this failure (World Bank, 2013).

In addition, the public sector in most MENA countries dominates the labour market and limits the role of private enterprise, and this does not reflect well on diversifying job opportunities and labour market at the local level. Moreover, utilizing oil revenues efficiently to build industries and facilitate integration in global economy is still in its primary stages in oil producing MENA countries.

Another impediment relates to the limited capacity of the MENA region, as reflected from its low productivity and competitiveness. This has been correlated with limited infrastructure in technological and communication provision, the outdated education practices and the lack of national strategies to identify national concerns and foster an enabling environment. Moreover, the region is still unaware of the importance of research for identifying immediate national needs and proposing solutions (Al-Khatib, 2012). In most Arab countries there is not much awareness of the benefits of grounding education and specifically higher education in areas of relevance to the immediate civic society, in order to address its national problems and provide solutions that can benefit the country's economy and attract global investment. In addition, expenditure on research and development in the MENA region is meager, as compared to research budgets of the developed world (Porta, Arcia, MacDonald, Radyakin and Lokshin, 2011). Recent attempts are starting to identify the link in foreseeing weaknesses and proposing research based solutions. Resolutions from the 2007 Arab Summit, held in Saudi Arabia, urged Arab Countries to increase expenditure on scientific research to 2.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) within the next 10 years.

Securing sustainability through funding and resources adds to the problems in the MENA region. On the whole, resources of public funding for

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