

Chapter 3

Higher Education in MENA through Global Lenses: Lessons Learned from International Rankings

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ABSTRACT

The Higher Education sector has witnessed heightened interest in global rankings and rating systems, particularly since the 1990s, due to increased internationalisation. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the main rankings systems of world universities, and to respectively analyse the performance of Arab universities in the MENA region. The region's performance in global rankings clearly highlights the need for increasing commitment to research by MENA universities and academic authorities. It also illustrates regional disparities among different countries and institutions, as a result of increasing investment and awareness of international competitiveness. Further development for the region's universities would benefit from understanding the overall scenario presented by global rankings and from using such rankings and other policy tools to drive institutional and national development.

INTRODUCTION

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region¹ are today faced with future-defining challenges. One of the most urgent priorities

is the exceptionally high rate of youth population coupled with widespread unemployment in many countries across the region.

The regional unemployment rate is in fact the highest in the world, and the share of youth is two-times the international rate at 25% (Ahmed,

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Guillaume, & Furceri, 2012). The MENA region is also characterized by very young demographics; an astounding one-third of the region's population is under 15 years and a further one-fifth is aged 15 to 24 years (Mirkin, 2013). The significant rate of unemployment, particularly among the youth population, signals wasted national resources, with economic and social instabilities as a looming consequence. Indeed, with such young societies, the need to channel the dynamism in their structure is paramount, where challenges can be transformed into opportunities which can drive economic development.

Higher Education institutions have a crucial role to play in this mission, but this role would require concentrating development efforts on transforming such countries into knowledge-based economies. In a knowledge-based economy universities need to have compound missions. Educating and training individuals in skills sets those are relevant and adaptable to market changes remains the focus. This said, universities also need to invest in the creation of new knowledge and innovation streams. According to the "new growth theory" (OECD 1996) through investing in research and development, education, training and new managerial work structures productivity and economic growth can be driven.

With such an important task facing universities in today's dynamic and rapidly changing world, the higher education sector is responding and witnessing instrumental change. Policy makers and development agents across the world are increasing investment in the Higher Education sector and experimenting with different patterns of governance. There is a particular interest, for example, in evaluation and accreditation and curriculum reforms (World Bank, 2002). Hazekorn (2013) respectively lists four main drivers for the rapid change in tertiary education. These include the rapid creation and application of new knowledge as a foundation for prosperity; migration of young talents which limits their original countries capacity to participate in world science;

the increasing need for transparency and demonstrating value for investment in higher education and the increasing power of talented students as consumers in higher education. These drives are more paramount in MENA countries, owing to heightened demographic pressure and the political environment over the last few years.

Although MENA countries evidenced good improvement by expanding access to Higher Education compared to OECD countries, a gap nevertheless remained (Jaramillo and Melonio, 2011). Whereas since 2010 performance was hit by political and economic changes in some parts of the region, performance prior to 2011 attests to the vitality of this sector in the region. In practice, various levels of commitment to the sector are given in different countries in the region, and this brought about varying performance among universities and higher education institutions. Policy makers would benefit from an overall and objective perspective of the region and the results of investment in higher education in various countries. To provide such an assessment of this sector, our research seeks to present an overview of the best performing institutions in the region through a global lens, namely the QS World University Rankings®. The following analysis involves the characteristics of higher education in the respective country in terms of the number of universities present in the rankings and the presence of a star-performing university.

RANKINGS AND POLICY MAKING

There are three co-existing mechanisms for evaluating the performance of higher education institutions: rankings and league lists developed mainly by media, quality assurance measures created by quality assurance agencies (QA), and accountability measures imposed by governments (Shin, Toutkoushian and Teichler, 2011).

Rankings is the practice of listing the universities in an ordered list based on performance

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