

# COVID-19 and Internationalization in the MENA Region

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## Abstract

In the Middle East and North Africa, both higher education and internationalization face challenges. Young people experience high levels of exclusion and unemployment. The attractiveness of the region is limited. A World Bank/Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) report analyzes the status of internationalization in the region today. It suggests that, in the COVID-19 context, internationalization at home represents a key starting point for MENA to catch up on the internationalization agenda.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has a long and rich academic tradition, and in recent decades there have been huge increases in access, enrollment, and number of institutions. However, the region lags in terms of internationalization. According to the most recent Internationalization of Higher Education Survey by the International Association of Universities (IAU), MENA is the least attractive region for institutions worldwide to develop partnerships.

## The Regional Context

Young people in MENA, especially disadvantaged groups, face serious problems of access to higher education and extremely high unemployment. For many, education has failed to fulfil its promise to prepare them to enter the labor market and take on active roles in the political and social life of their countries. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate these challenges. As a result, so far institutions have been closed, courses have been cancelled, and international students have remained stranded. The longer-term effects of the pandemic on education and international mobility, and the expected economic recession are likely to intensify its impact. This is set against a global backdrop of increased nationalism and anti-immigrant resentment, likely to increase pressure on governments to continue hardening their borders and looking inward. Yet this same crisis is showing just how essential mobility is for the world today.

Two elements are imperative for the MENA region: a shift toward opening up to the world, and serious investment in human capital, by rethinking education in terms of skills to equip the region's youth for a globalized world. Internationalization can help reach these objectives. And currently, the COVID-19 crisis may be an opportunity for MENA to invest in internationalization at home, where it has a comparative advantage.

## Status of Internationalization in MENA

Despite MENA's rich history in tertiary education and mobility of students, scholars, and knowledge, today the region is lagging behind in terms of internationalization. When developing international partnerships, few institutions worldwide consider MENA a priority.

The region does host a very high number of international branch campuses (IBCs), albeit mostly concentrated in the Gulf countries: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) figure in the top five host countries worldwide for IBCs. Among the six internationally recognized education hubs, these same two countries are characterized as such. In addition, there is significant evidence of internationalization at home activities, including internationalization of the curriculum and instances of collaborative online international learning (COIL). Further internationalization efforts include the cross-Mediterranean partnership model, which during the past decade has led to the establishment of several international universities in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Student mobility, both from and to MENA, is relatively high. The inbound mobility rate to the region is close to double the world average, and the outbound rate is significantly higher than average. However, upon closer analysis, a more nuanced picture emerges. Inbound mobility concerns only a handful of countries; notably, in the UAE and Qatar, international students make up just under half and just over a third of all students, respectively, while most other MENA countries fall in line with—or below—the world average. Nonetheless, over the past decade, inbound mobility to the region has grown steadily, and in almost all MENA countries international enrollment has grown faster than

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domestic enrollment—at a faster rate in some countries than in others. Most countries can be classified either as “emerging” destinations (the Gulf countries and Morocco), where foreign student populations have been growing rapidly, or as “mature” destinations (Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon), where both domestic and foreign enrollments have been growing moderately.

Outbound mobility rates also represent a mixed picture in terms of distribution across the region. Several Gulf countries and some Mashreq countries experience high outbound mobility rates, while numbers in some countries in North Africa are significant too, with Morocco and Tunisia sending abroad more than double, and around three times, as many students than the world average, respectively. Analyzing where mobile students come from and travel to helps explain the region’s limited attractiveness: Just over half of the region’s inbound students come *from within* the region itself, while a large and increasing majority of its outbound students leave to study *outside* the region.

### COVID-19 and the Way Forward

To develop pertinent policy recommendations, certain elements must be recognized. First, internationalization efforts will only have a significant impact if part of wider reforms: Addressing the issue of institutional governance, including autonomy, is key, since without this, internationalization is unlikely to take hold. Second, context matters: Some Gulf countries are indeed advanced in terms of IBC concentration and student mobility, but given the huge differences in political and socioeconomic contexts across the region, strategies that are appropriate in those countries may not be relevant in others. Third, more research on internationalization, its implementation, and its benefits, is necessary. Finally, this is a fragile region, ridden with conflict, and with considerable numbers of refugees and displaced people. Refugees’ access to tertiary education is a critical issue, so a move toward increased internationalization in the region would also need to focus on including refugee students and faculty.

Internationalization needs to become a higher priority, mainstreamed into institutions’ and governments’ tertiary education policies. In a post-COVID-19 world, given mobility restrictions, economic challenges, and wider impacts, higher education institutions will need to radically change and adapt. Before the crisis hit, an approach focusing more on internationalization at home already stood out as a key starting point, thanks to its proven benefits in terms of skill boosting and employability gains—and also its relatively low cost and ease of implementation. Today, these benefits are combined with changes that are necessitated by the crisis. Strengthening internationalization at home appears more relevant than ever. MENA institutions stand to benefit if they intentionally embrace and adapt to the post-COVID-19 “new normal,” by adopting new and innovative learning models. One example would be to capitalize on the move toward online learning and push forward with elements such as virtual mobility, international coteaching, etc. In the current context, seizing the opportunity to increase internationalization at home activities across the region could enable MENA to truly advance on internationalization and further reap its benefits. ▲

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