Current Issues in Higher Education in the Arab World

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It is a daunting task to attempt to cover a region so vast as the Arab world in such a short article. Stretching from Mauritania to the Persian Gulf, the region is composed of nations of varying wealth, disparate geographies, and differing ethnic and religious characters. Yet despite their national particularities, Arab systems of higher education do manifest certain common, overarching, regionwide trends and phenomena that are leading them to greater convergence. Arab nations as a whole have, in their relatively short postindependence histories, placed great emphasis on the expansion of schooling as the cornerstone of nation building. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GNP is higher in the Arab world (about 5.5 percent) than anywhere else in the developing world. The region has traditionally had high birthrates, with annual population growth rates ranging from 2 to 3.5 percent. Until fairly recently, most efforts were placed on expanding primary and secondary schooling in order to absorb the growing masses of young people, to reverse low literacy and schooling levels, and to reduce urban-rural inequalities. These efforts have been highly successful, but have yielded numbers of secondary graduates that far outstrip university capacities, which is the most crucial issue in higher education in the Arab world today.

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Throughout the region, education at all levels is highly centralized, with ministries maintaining tight control over curriculum, admissions, and recruitment. In every Arab nation, it is success on the end-of-secondary exams—usually patterned after the French or British exams, depending on each country's colonial history—that grants access to university studies. Ministries of education find themselves in a delicate and ambivalent position every year, as they publicly hope for higher success rates on these exams in order to legitimize reforms enacted to improve instructional quality at the primary and secondary levels, while at the same time fearing that an overly high rate will result in thousands of additional students to squeeze into already overcrowded universities. Success on the exams is thus as much a political decision by ministries as to where to "set the bar" as it is an objective measure of a student's academic performance. Rates can range considerably from country to country and from year to year; examples are 18.73 percent (1994) on the Tunisian *baccalaurwat*, 49.1 percent (1993) on the Jordanian *tawjihi*, and 71.17 percent (1993) on the Egyptian *thaanawiya*.

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As higher education institutions become overburdened, one current strategy is to treat the problem as stemming partly from internal inefficiency within universities. In line with World Bank directives, part of Arab higher education's structural readjustment consists of attacking the problem of waste and repetition. In Morocco, the average undergraduate student takes six years to complete the four-year degree program; in Tunisia and Algeria it is seven years. Furthermore, throughout the Arab world, a very small percentage of those beginning their university studies ever obtain their degree. These problems are seen as partially the result of poor channeling of student flows. Thanks to centralized placement of university aspirants, ministries have begun to use computerized systems to channel students into disciplines and institutions based on "rational" criteria (secondary exam grades, type of secondary studies, individual wishes) that will maximize their chances of success. Another measure increasingly taken is shifting to American-style credit-hour systems that reduce unnecessary repetition of coursework and allow a freer flow through a degree program.

Another major issue is directly related to the problem of student numbers; the privatization of higher education. Whether we speak of those countries with well-developed private systems (Lebanon, Jordan) or those with nascent ones (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen), privatization is on the move in the Arab world. In Lebanon, more students are enrolled in private institutions than in public ones. In Jordan, the public universities were only able to accept one-third of secondary graduates in 1989; the other two-thirds sought further education in the private sector or abroad. In Yemen, six or seven private universities have recently

been created as 125,000 students try to squeeze into a 35,000-capacity state university system. Governments view privatization with ambivalence—although it is educationally and politically useful in absorbing the growing spillover from the public system, it also represents a threat to government control over standards, curricula, and recruitment of personnel. For this reason, all Arab governments have made licensure of private institutions contingent upon close ministry oversight. As most countries have authorized the existence of private universities only in the last 5 to 10 years, many issues remain unresolved, most importantly the validation of degrees granted. As economies liberalize—particularly in those countries with highly state-controlled economies—the distinction between an educational institution and a private business is becoming blurred. The issue is— are private universities to be regulated by the ministry of finance or the ministry of education?

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The issue that receives the most attention today throughout the Arab world is that of strengthening the link between university studies and the needs of the job market. It is recognized everywhere that the university has not been producing graduates with skills needed by the economy—hence the growing problem of educated unemployment. To one degree or another, every Arab country is seeking to replace foreign personnel with local manpower. In the Gulf region, this is a very high priority, as expensive foreign skilled workers outnumber locals. Governments loudly tout their intentions to reform higher education to better match market needs, but these same governments have rarely conducted serious studies into exactly what these needs will be several years down the road. Without exception, every country has made a push toward expanding postsecondary vocational and technical programs, usually meaning two to three years of training. Still, far more engineers are graduating from universities than lower-level technical experts, despite the much higher unemployment rate among engineers. The salaries and status of engineers in Arab societies, however, make the potential payoff of high-level studies irresistible to most students. Recent World Bank–funded reforms in Algeria and Tunisia attempting to channel students into the shorter-term technical tracks have not been very successful.

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Arabization of higher education has been an ongoing issue for nearly 30 years, but remains a highly charged one today. Because of the dearth of scientific and technical vocabulary and books in Arabic, university instruction in science, technology, and business is conducted in English or French. In the countries of the Gulf and the Levant, where the Arab identity is more solidly rooted, the use of foreign languages is more accepted as necessary. In the former French colonies of North Africa, where individual identity and national cultural ideologies are still hotly contested, language is a burning issue. It is extremely difficult for a regime or movement espousing Arabness or Arabism to admit that Arabic is incapable of serving as a medium of instruction to students. In 1989–90, the exploding Algerian fundamentalist movement made Arabization of the university its primary demand. At that moment, the first fully Arabized high school graduating class arrived at the university, only to find the sciences taught in French.

Arab universities have been centers of activity for Islamist movements as well as the sites of much of the formulation, distribution, and exchange of Islamist writings. The recent fundamentalist challenges to the Algerian, Tunisian, and Egyptian regimes have brought every Arab regime to perceive the Islamist movement as a very real threat. Whereas five years ago Islamist student groups dominated university campuses, particularly in North Africa, governments have taken strong measures to repress, or at least defuse, such activity. A large and visible police presence on campuses, as well as an effective network of student informers, has kept fundamentalist activities under control. In Tunisia, instructors are banned from wearing Islamic garb or beards. In Egypt, student demonstrations broke out in several Egyptian universities in response to reforms that would ban female students from wearing the veil and prohibit suspected Islamists from residing in student dor-

mitories. Other Arab regimes have used appeasement tactics to defuse tensions. In Kuwait, where primary and secondary education is sexually segregated, the parliament recently voted (by a tie vote) not to segregate the university, although it will likely pass in the near future. In Algeria, the government has tolerated a certain amount of de facto Islamization in the university—segregation in classes, Islamist garb, Islamist student associations—in order to avoid serious confrontations.

A final trend to note is that throughout the Arab world there is a greater and greater realization that the highest-quality training and research is to be found in the United States. Those countries with traditional links to Britain or France, where the majority of students going abroad are headed, have begun to seek ways to send more of their students to the United States. In short, they are saying to themselves, "If the Europeans and Japanese are going to study in the United States, then there must be a good reason." Those Arab countries with historical, economic, and linguistic ties to France are slower in making the shift, but not less eager. University curricular reforms to better imitate the American model are very popular. The Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education last year did away with the two-level doctoral degree structure patterned after the French system in order to establish a single doctoral degree to match the American Ph.D. Throughout North Africa and in Lebanon, calls are being made to shift all French-language scientific and business training into English. Public and private universities are seeking ways of setting up twinning arrangements with American universities in order to allow short-term exchanges of professors, researchers, and students.

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Ironically, as interest among Arab students for study in the United States has risen, student flows abroad have steadily decreased since the early 1980s. This is due to a collection of factors: declining economies, strained political relations between the United States and certain countries, the expansion of in-country higher education, and greater difficulties for Arab students to obtain visas. However, alternative strategies are evolving in order to allow Arab students access to U.S. university instruction. The first is the growing trend of setting up degree programs in the Arab world that are conducted by American universities in English. In Morocco, a consortium of Texas universities contributed to the setting up and staffing of the new Al Akhawayn University, which opened in 1993. It offers an American curriculum, American professors, and English instruction. Several U.S. universities have developed plans to set up programs in Arab countries, usually limited to bachelor's and master's programs in business administration, computer science, or management of information systems. The reactions to such plans among the Arab public are usually very enthusiastic. This represents the ideal for most parents of students: American know-how, an American degree, much lower expense than sending their children abroad, and the avoidance of the dangerous acculturation associated with a prolonged stay in the United States.

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Another strategy to provide American instruction to Arab students in-country is still in the planning stages, but it has already begun in conjunction with French universities. Through the use of new computer and telecommunications technologies, over the last year Moroccan and Tunisian students at certain engineering schools have been able to "attend" classes conducted in French universities through direct satellite connection. The students in Morocco and Tunisia can even interrupt the professor for questions and talk to their "classmates" in France. In my opinion, this use of high-tech distance learning to circumvent the financial constraints to international student flows will explode in the coming years, changing the face of higher education in the Arab world—and causing considerable political controversy as well. At the same time, the next few years will certainly see a great expansion in the exporting of American higher education in science and business to the Arab world in the form of small programs, probably in partnership with local private universities and with part of the degree program in the United States. This foretells not only a greater convergence among Arab educational systems, but an overall convergence with the American model.