

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World  
2011 U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers

# Higher Education Reform in the Arab World

CONVENED BY:  
Safwan Masri  
Katherine Wilkens

AUTHORED BY:  
Katherine Wilkens



at BROOKINGS

AUGUST 2011



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Brookings Doha Center

SHIBLEY TELHAMI  
Anwar Sadat Chair  
University of Maryland

For the first time in its eight-year history, the 2011 U.S.-Islamic World Forum was held in Washington, DC. The Forum, co-convened annually by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and the State of Qatar, once again served as the premier convening body for key leaders from government, civil society, academia, business, religious communities, and the media. For three days, Forum participants gathered to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing the relationship between the United States and global Muslim communities.

This year, the Forum featured a variety of different platforms for thoughtful discussion and constructive engagement, including televised plenary sessions with prominent international figures on broad thematic issues of global importance; smaller roundtable discussions led by experts and policymakers on a particular theme or set of countries; and working groups which brought together practitioners in a given field several times during the course of the Forum to develop practical partnerships and policy recommendations. For detailed proceedings of the Forum, including photographs, video coverage, and transcripts, please visit our website at <http://www.usislamicworldforum.org>.

Each of the five working groups focused on a different thematic issue, highlighting the multiple ways in which the United States and global Muslim communities interact with each other. This year's working groups included: "America and the Muslim World: The Tale of Two Media," "The Roles of Muslim-Majority and Muslim-Minority Communities in a Global Context," "Higher Education Reform in the Arab World," "The Role of Entrepreneurship and Job Creation in U.S.-Muslim Relations," and "Developing Leadership and Capacity in the Muslim Nonprofit Sector as a Building Block for Sustaining Partnerships and Change."

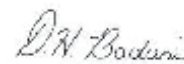
We are pleased to share with you the third of our five working group papers, "Higher Education Reform in the Arab World." Please note that the opinions reflected in the paper and any recommendations contained herein are solely the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the participants of the working groups or the Brookings Institution. All of the working group papers will also be available on our website.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the State of Qatar for its partnership and vision in convening the Forum in partnership with us. In particular, we thank the Emir of Qatar, HRH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani; the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Qatar, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani; the Assistant Foreign Minister for Follow-up Affairs, HE Mohammad Abdullah Mutib Al-Rumaihi; and the entire staff of the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support and dedication in organizing the Forum.

Sincerely,



Dr. Stephen R. Grand  
Fellow and Director  
Project on U.S. Relations with  
the Islamic World



Durriya Badani  
Deputy Director  
Project on U.S. Relations with  
the Islamic World



# HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN THE ARAB WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

The youth-led revolutions that rocked the Arab world earlier this year have refocused attention on the region's 100 million-strong youth demographic and its critical role in the transformation of existing political, economic, and social structures in the Middle East and North Africa.

Youth under the age of 25 represent an estimated and unprecedented 60 percent of the region's population, and in many of the region's countries, approximately 30 percent of the population is between the ages of 15 and 29.<sup>1</sup> They have heightened expectations for themselves and their societies, but are constrained by the economic and political realities in which they live. The current demands of Arab youth for change are rooted in deep frustrations with the existing status quo—not least of which is the failure of the social contract for advancement that should be offered by higher education.

Despite more than a decade of dramatic expansion—in enrollment, female participation, numbers of institutions, and programs—higher education in the Arab world continues to fall far short of the needs of students, employers, and society at large. In most countries, the majority of students

are enrolled in institutions that lack key human and physical resources for success and suffer from overcrowding and poor quality. Efforts to address these chronic problems have had only marginal success. High unemployment among university graduates is only one measure of the reality of an educational system that is not producing graduates with the skills needed to succeed in the modern global economy and economies that are not producing opportunities for massive numbers of new entrants.

Higher education has a critical role to play in the national and regional restructuring of Arab economic and political institutions that is currently underway. The long term success or failure of today's reform initiatives will rest, to a large degree, on the ability of these societies to place higher education where it belongs—as the engine of social and economic progress. The new pressures for political change may provide a unique opportunity to break free from some of the obstacles that have held back meaningful educational changes in the past.

This working group, convened at the 2011 U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Washington, DC, brought together educators, specialists, and public sector officials from the United States and the Middle East to review the current state of higher education in

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program, "Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries" (Arab Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program, New York, 2009), 3, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2009e.pdf>; Silatech, "The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs" (Gallup, June 2009), 13, [http://www.silatech.com/media/pdf/20100302\\_silatech-report-poll.pdf](http://www.silatech.com/media/pdf/20100302_silatech-report-poll.pdf).



the Arab world and consider the key challenges facing this critical sector of society. How are different actors in the diverse landscape of Arab higher education advancing or impeding the goals of improving educational outcomes? To what degree do regional partnerships and cooperative efforts offer

opportunities to overcome local obstacles in specific areas? Finally, where has important progress been made and what policy responses and initiatives should be encouraged to improve the ability of Arab educational institutions to meet the challenges of this transformational period?

### Working Group Participants

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**M. Badr Aboul-Ela**

Commission for Academic Accreditation, United Arab Emirates

**Hessa Al-Aali**

Supreme Education Council, Qatar

**Ala Al-Hamarneh**

University of Mainz, Germany

**Wadiyah Atiyah**

Laureate International Universities

**Barbara Brittingham**

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

**Ernesto Cuadra**

World Bank

**Ahmad Dallal**

American University of Beirut

**Adnan El Amine**

Lebanese Association for Educational Studies

**Mona El Baradei**

Cairo University

**Barbara Hill**

Institute for Higher Education Policy

**Atif Kubursi**

McMaster University

**Safwan Masri**

Columbia University Middle East Research Center

**Hani Mourtada**

Damascus University

**Abdel Moneim Osman**

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

**Driss Ouaouicha**

Al Akhawayn University, Morocco

**Seteney Shami**

Social Science Research Council

**Mohammed Shtayyeh**

Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction

**Winfred Thompson**

American University of Kuwait

**Hillary Wiesner**

Carnegie Corporation

**Katherine Wilkens**

AMIDEAST



## AUTHOR AND CO-CONVENER

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**KATHERINE WILKENS** is Vice President for Communications at AMIDEAST, an American nonprofit organization engaged in education, training, and capacity building in the Middle East and North Africa. Over the last two decades, Katherine has held a number of senior positions in the U.S. government and nonprofit sector. She is the former Staff Director of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East and served as a Senior Advisor on International Energy Policy at the U.S. Department of Energy during the Clinton Administration.

From 2004-2007, she was President of the World Affairs Council of Washington, DC. A former International Affairs Fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, she has authored numerous articles on Turkey, the Kurdish issue, and U.S. foreign policy. Throughout her career, Katherine has been active in promoting expanded international education and grassroots outreach on foreign policy issues. She is a graduate of Cornell University, the London School of Economics, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

## CO-CONVENER

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**SAFWAN MASRI** is Director of the Columbia University Middle East Research Center and Professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Business. Safwan joined the Columbia faculty in 1988 and served as Vice Dean of the Columbia's Graduate School of Business from 1993 to 2005. His expertise is business development in the Middle East, with an emphasis on education and economic reform, and his academic work has focused on supply chain management, structural change in the financial services industry, and the impact of manufacturing flexibil-

ity on firm performance. Safwan is Chairman of Queen Rania Teacher Academy, Founding Chairman Emeritus of the Board of Trustees of King's Academy, Trustee of International College, and Trustee of the Children's Museum in Jordan, and he serves on the boards of a number of NGOs. He earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in Industrial Engineering from Purdue University. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management.



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## INTRODUCTION

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Higher education plays an important role in society because it creates new knowledge, transfers it to students, and promotes creativity and innovation. Higher education institutions are key actors in the production and dissemination of knowledge through research and instruction, and therefore bear a unique social responsibility for fostering values, citizenship, and civic engagement. They are also producers of human capital, which is demanded by employers in the labor market and critical to social and economic advancement. When the quality and appropriateness of human capital produced align with the needs of society, employment opportunities are expanded and economic actors are better able to achieve their goals and objectives.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge facing the higher education sector in the Arab world is that, even as it has expanded in recent years to try to accommodate a historically large youth contingent, it has not kept pace with the shifting demand for human capital. Governments have “educated” a growing cohort of students without ensuring that they have the skills needed to succeed and without laying the economic groundwork to employ them. As a result, many countries in the region are suffering from a chronic oversupply of university graduates, while experiencing a shortage

of workers with the skills sought by employers in the marketplace.

The 2002 United Nations Development Program’s Arab Human Development Report highlighted the key role of education as a force for accelerating the pace of change, development, and progress and called for “a radical revision of education systems in Arab countries.” The report declared poor quality “the Achilles heel of education in the Arab world” and called for action in three broad areas: “enhancing human capabilities, creating strong synergy between education and the socio-economic system, and formulating a programme for education reform at the pan-Arab level.”<sup>3</sup>

In the decade since the 2002 UNDP report was released, the landscape of higher education in the Arab world has changed significantly, largely in an attempt to accommodate the high number of new entrants into the system. Governments have diversified the programs available, ranging from university graduate and undergraduate programs to technical and professional degrees granted by polytechnic institutes, community colleges, and even on-line programs. There has also been a related expansion in the quantity and types of institutions and a shift away from near exclusive emphasis on

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Cassidy and Mathew L. Miller, “Higher Education in the Arab States: Responding to the Challenges of Globalization” (Conference Summary Report of Higher Education in the Arab World: Preparing for the Global Market Place, AMIDEAST, Washington, DC, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Program, “Creating Opportunities for Future Generations” (Arab Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program, New York, 2002), 55, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regional/arabstates/RBAS\\_ahdr2002\\_EN.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regional/arabstates/RBAS_ahdr2002_EN.pdf).



public institutions. While wide differences exist between countries across the region—in particular in demographic pressures and resource availability—most have experienced rapid growth in non-governmental/private institutions, foreign universities with local campuses, virtual universities, and partnerships between local and foreign universities in the last decade.

In that time span, the number of universities in the Middle East and North Africa has more than doubled from 178 to 398. If community colleges, teacher-training institutes, and other institutions not affiliated with universities are considered, the number rises to 1,139.<sup>4</sup> Non-public sector institutions account for about 36 percent of the total and their share is even greater in some countries. Non-public sector universities exceed 80 percent of all universities in Bahrain, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, while they represent less than 20 percent in Algeria, Iraq, Libya, and Morocco.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the early American private universities established in the region, many of these new institutions operate under a “for-profit” model. In addition, there has been a dramatic expansion of foreign branch campuses and the establishment of

free trade educational centers, such as the Knowledge Village in Dubai. This global trend led to the doubling of branch institutions to 162 in just three years, between 2006 and 2009—over thirty percent of these in just two Arab countries, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.<sup>6</sup> Branch institutions are fully functioning universities which provide degrees and other educational opportunities for host nation and international students, and offer courses and programs which are as internationally recognized as those offered at their main campuses.

Despite these achievements, most of the non-Gulf countries have not been able to stay ahead of the ever-increasing number of students seeking to enter the tertiary system. In addition, in much of the region, the quality of Arab higher education has not kept pace with international standards. This dual challenge of quantity and quality needs cannot be addressed through stopgap measures. Comprehensive reform of the higher education system is needed to address the skills gap, fuel economic development, and put the region on better footing for advancement and competition in a technologically driven, knowledge-based world.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, “Towards an Arab Higher Education Space: International Challenges and Societal Responsibilities” (Proceedings of the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education May 31–June 2, 2009, Cairo, Egypt, 2010), 17–18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Veronica Lasanowski, “International Branch Campuses: Motivations, Opportunities, and Challenges” (presentation, The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, March 26, 2010), [http://www.obhe.ac.uk/what\\_we\\_do/Going\\_Global.7e.26\\_March\\_Lasanowski.pdf](http://www.obhe.ac.uk/what_we_do/Going_Global.7e.26_March_Lasanowski.pdf).



## THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF REFORM

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Several factors influence the quality of higher education and the capabilities of universities to set and achieve high standards and better align educational outputs with the broader needs of society. The building blocks of reform include: inputs into the educational process, systemic factors such as public policy and governance issues, and external considerations—such as synergies with the local community, labor market, and other stakeholders.

### INPUTS INTO THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Inputs are the components of teaching and learning, including students, teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy. The academic preparedness of the graduates of primary and secondary schooling that seek to matriculate in the higher education system represents an important factor to system success. When students lack the requisite language, science, math, and critical thinking skills needed to study effectively at the tertiary level, universities must spend time and resources to address these deficiencies. This is an issue in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, the quality of teachers and the incentives in place to reward, train, and retain top educational professionals are also critical to sustaining and advancing the goals and

objectives of tertiary institutions. Poor pay, restrictions on conducting research freely, and obstacles to publication have all contributed, to varying degrees, to difficulties in recruiting and maintaining quality teachers in many of these countries. Finally, program quality, pedagogy, and other elements related to program standards represent other important inputs into the quality of higher education. In recent years, the number and types of programs offered has dramatically increased, but the ability to monitor the quality of these programs and the skills of their graduates has not kept pace.

A lack of financial resources is an often overlooked, but decisive, issue for higher education. The costs of higher education are substantial, and tertiary systems across the Middle East and North Africa heavily rely on public resources—despite the expansion in recent years of private institutions. Few countries in the world can sustain expansion of state-funded higher education, particularly in countries which offer free tuition as a matter of policy.<sup>7</sup> The current absence of available alternatives for educational funding has placed enormous pressure on some countries, and in some cases—such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria—“parallel” educational opportunities are increasingly offered in public universities on a fee basis as a means of raising much needed funds.

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<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Peace Lenn, “Higher Education and the Global Marketplace: A Practical Guide to Sustaining Quality,” *On the Horizon* 8, no. 5, (2000): 7-10.

## SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Systemic factors include public policy and governance issues, including accreditation, regulation, and assessment, and how these enable both quality and access in higher education. Reform efforts can be advanced or impeded by how governments promote policies that ensure quality. Examples of such policies are the accreditation of institutions and programs, as well as the establishment of financial incentives and national enrollment criteria that allow individuals of diverse backgrounds and incomes to enter the higher education system. Greater autonomy and independence enable institutions to respond more quickly and efficiently to the changing skill demands of the market and encourage innovation and strategic thinking that are critical to high quality institutions. Restrictive public policies and administrative practices stifle independent thinking and restrict the important contributions of higher education to societies and economies.

At the institutional level, differentiation and specialization among institutional types (such as vocational and technical institutes, community colleges, and research universities) and within each type is crucial to improving the fit between the skills of graduates and the needs of the labor market.<sup>8</sup> Despite strong societal pressures for college degrees, no one path fits all students. The missions and objectives of individual institutions should align with overall national goals to ensure their relevance and

improve educational and societal outcomes. Furthermore, enlightened institutional governance requires transparency and accountability tools to advance successful reform. This means openness to data collection, evaluation, and assessment to monitor performance and promote desired outcomes. An important element of establishing sustainable oversight and accreditation is to expand the small cadre of local professionals trained and experienced in evaluation techniques.

## EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

Higher education does not take place in a vacuum. It is a critical element of a nation's socioeconomic system. Educational outputs are eventually assessed in the context of their relevance to local, regional, and international labor markets and their contribution to broader national objectives. Effective institutional governance can provide strategic vision for strengthening the partnership and cooperation between universities and their economic surroundings and tightening the interface between market forces and higher education. Higher education institutions need to engage local stakeholders, including institutional alumni and firms that hire or would potentially hire institutional graduates. Instruction should both advance linkages to the global economy and contribute to strengthening local culture and achievements. In this context, foreign partnerships and decisions on matters such as languages of instruction, publication, and knowledge creation should be considered.

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<sup>8</sup> Cassidy and Miller, "Higher Education in the Arab States: Responding to the Challenges of Globalization."



## THREE KEY CHALLENGES

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**T**he working group focused its discussions on three key challenges facing higher education in the Middle East and North Africa region: quality, governance, and educational outcomes for development.

### QUALITY

The large number of students who have sought entry into the tertiary system in the last decade has put incredible pressure on higher education systems across the region. Efforts to absorb these students and to widen overall access have strained government resources and led to a focus on expanding quantity rather than quality. Despite successful efforts to increase higher education enrollment, enrollment ratios are still low in many countries, and the regional average is still low by international standards.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the boom of private universities and paid programs across the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, these institutions have not dampened the effects of the demographic dilemma facing the region. The proportion of private institutions is as high as 40 percent in some countries, yet these institutions absorb less than 11 percent of the student body for higher education.<sup>10</sup> In many cases,

governance and accreditation systems are insufficient to guarantee that quality, rather than profit, is at the core of new for-profit institutions' missions. With some exceptions, new private institutions are viewed as further undermining quality and equity and producing graduates at high personal cost without the knowledge and skills needed to succeed.

In large public sector institutions—which continue to serve the overwhelming majority of the population throughout the region—overcrowding and resource shortages make it difficult to place more emphasis on the key ingredients of quality: teaching, pedagogy, curriculum, and faculty. In addition, the continuing emphasis at the secondary level on traditional rote memorization methods, rather than critical thinking techniques, has contributed to a pool of applicants that are unprepared for higher level learning—creating a greater burden on the system and requiring additional resources.

In recent years, a handful of countries in the region have established national agencies for quality assurance. In 2007, a regional Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) was established with World Bank support. However, these institutions have limited regulatory capacity and have not focused their efforts on evaluation. In

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<sup>9</sup> The international average is around 22 percent, and most countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have at least 25 percent of their populations educated at a tertiary level.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, “Towards an Arab Higher Education Space,” 44.

addition, they are largely governmental bodies and lack the independence and scope to push for more fundamental reforms.

How can the region and individual institutions begin to address the problem of advancing educational quality in this difficult environment?

First, there is a need for more and better information on what is happening in the education process. This requires data collection—information from institutions on the starting and graduating profiles of students—to assess their progress, benchmark results, and inform decisions for change. Improved information can introduce greater transparency and provide a valuable resource for students, faculty, and potential employers.

Second, institutions need to embrace a culture of evaluation and, more specifically, self-evaluation, which are at the core of successful higher education institutions in the developed world. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating tertiary education outcomes are scarce across the region. Faculty should be evaluated by peers and by students on a regular basis. Educational outcomes, such as success in the job market, should be evaluated through alumni networks and working together with community stakeholders. At every level, excellence must be incentivized, recognized, and rewarded. Faculty accountability requires identification of clear learning outcomes, an accepted measurements system, and remediation when outcomes fall short.

Third, issues of teacher training, recruitment, and reimbursement are at the core of the quality dilemma. Many countries face a shortage of teachers due partly to poor pay and a lack of prestige associated with the profession. Improvements in quality must be built on the backs of strong faculty and greater attention is needed to address this problem. A new emphasis on schools of education and teacher training in the region should focus on building partnerships to advance reform.

Fourth, governments have an important role to play in raising the bar for educational quality, by

encouraging the process, rewarding those who embrace reform, and penalizing those who do not. Governments must also be willing to step back and empower institutional leadership and independent commissions on higher education to take the lead in reform efforts, recognizing that internal reforms cannot be dictated—they must be internalized to succeed.

Finally, it would be a mistake not to recognize that quality is costly. In the case of public institutions, governments will need to financially support the process of internalizing quality assurance. Establishing internal structures for quality and accountability requires building a new evaluations bureaucracy that includes institutional offices and committees for assessment, university statistics, program review, and strategic management. In an environment where resources are scarce, difficult choices need to be made. Institutions are being asked to do more with less. Nevertheless, results cannot be expected to improve without tackling this difficult task.

## GOVERNANCE

Across the region, governance structures for higher education have not adapted to modern demands for change. In many countries, higher education institutions are run as extensions of the high authority of the state. Public policies and laws that enable and facilitate autonomy and transparency of educational institutions are largely absent in the tertiary education system.

Governance and regulation of public sector institutions are rigid across the region, with important implications for the function of the university in society and its ability to respond to the needs of students, faculty, and employers. Slow government-run bureaucracies still control the rules of the game, including curriculum design, the standards for approval of new degrees, and the regulations for teacher certification. This system is unable to nimbly implement the priorities for reform and respond to the rapidly changing environment of higher education. In addition, institutional actors at every level are accountable to state authorities,

not to boards of governors or other stakeholders in society. Higher education cannot fully take its place as a resource for society until the governance of the country is not intimately intertwined with the governance of the university.

In most countries in the region, presidents of public universities are nominated by a state authority. There is no system of announcing vacancies or establishing search committees to interview and consider candidacies. In many cases, university deans are also nominated by government authorities. Financing, fee structures, and other returns are in the purview of the minister of finance. Under such a system, higher education leaders have little accountability to society or university faculty, who play no role in their selection, appointment, or retention.

Private universities are not much different, but are beholden to a different hierarchical system. Presidents are nominated by the owner of the university, and the funders make critical leadership decisions for the institution. In the case of private, parochial schools, the church or similar entity wields nomination power.

Admissions procedures also tend to be centralized in most countries across the region and managed by government authorities. Student applications do not go to universities for consideration, but instead are sent to central government-run entities tasked with making decisions about which institution each applicant can attend. These decisions have broader societal implications. For example, placing top students into sciences instead of into liberal arts, wittingly or not, has implications for social, political, and economic development. As do quota systems, such as the one used in Jordan, which are used for distributing available seats at university. Decisions to accept unqualified students also contribute to low completion rates in public universities, which represent another financial drag on resource-poor systems.

Over the last decade, there has been progress in the establishment of independent accreditation and

licensing systems in the region. However, these structures are still in an embryonic stage. While national accreditation bodies exist in ten countries, they are, by and large, not autonomous from government institutions or engaged in the rigorous development and definition of standards—therefore not positioned to serve as “buffers” to state involvement. New independent structures and associations have not yet emerged to fill the gap in this area. The United Arab Emirates is one of the furthest ahead in developing its accreditation function. An independent accreditation body operates in the country as a counterbalance to private educational institutions’ owners, viewed by many as hindering academic progress and increased quality.

In the United States, independent accreditation bodies were first established to serve as a buffer between the state and the university. There is a need for such institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. Quasi-independent higher education councils at the national level would serve as those buffers. This step would help ensure that governmental concerns or priorities would not detract from strategic objectives of educational institutions or undermine the goals of meritocracy, openness, and excellence that are critical to reform.

## EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AND DEVELOPMENT

Linkages between higher education institutions and local and regional labor markets are of paramount importance to sustainable economic development. These linkages are critical to the task of supporting broader societal goals, fueling the creation of knowledge, advancing research, and educating a new generation of leaders able to engage in the global knowledge economy but also steeped in their own cultural and linguistic traditions. In the Middle East and North Africa, these linkages have been less developed and have not effectively served the broader goals of society. There is a growing recognition that Arab higher education systems should focus more on improving the “relevance” of their services in terms of knowledge and research and in linking them to the labor market and economic development.



The university is a major economic actor in society. In many communities, it is the largest employer of local labor and enjoys a larger budget than many cities. It has significant economic impact through its role in attracting outside “consumers” and as a consumer itself of local goods and services. The university also has a critical role to play in society as a producer of human capital and a creator of knowledge for broader dissemination into society. The university’s role in society has become more crucial as regional economies have moved away from state-run models, and as the global shift to a knowledge-based economy has put higher premiums on tertiary education and human capital. In this environment, closer interactions between the education sector and the business sector are increasingly important.

High levels of graduate unemployment alone do not tell the full story of higher education outcomes. While part of this problem lies in the failure of educational institutions and curriculum, another component reflects the lack of demand in certain sectors of the economy. Greater attention needs to be paid to the distribution of employment figures by college major to better understand the economic dynamics at work among and within different countries. Information should be collected and published periodically to show graduate employment, broken down by degree, and to inform decision making of students, parents, and educators.

Another factor affecting employment among university graduates is the existing disconnect between what the labor market offers and the expectations of young people seeking jobs. Traditional government jobs are much scarcer today in the region than they were in the past. Yet, indications are that most young people still aspire to work in government. Private sector jobs are often considered too

demanding, and self-employment is often not seen as a viable option.<sup>11</sup>

Some countries have begun to respond to the need to strengthen linkages between educational institutions and the private sector, and to take much needed steps to improve social dialogue around education and employment. One way to do this is to encourage co-op and internship programs, which expose students prior to graduation to real world situations. This is done in many developed countries but is much less common in the Arab world. An exception in the region is the United Arab Emirates, where private education institutions are required to have advisory councils that include business and industry representation. The objective is to include private sector input in discussions of curriculum and degree requirements. National shortages in areas such as engineering, for example, have broader implications for economic development plans and need to be factored into educational planning.

Vocational training stands out as one of the most difficult challenges facing post-secondary education in the region. In many countries vocational schools are dysfunctional and considered dumping grounds for students that no one else wants. Major efforts are needed to improve both the quality of teaching and curriculum in these schools, which will require financial resources that many countries may not have. However, improving quality alone will not be enough. To make vocational schools desirable options for further education and not as a path to a lower paid job, public perceptions will also need to change significantly. Given the massive number of students in the region, vocational education is badly needed as a viable alternative for a portion of the student population and as a place to train individuals to fill jobs in different sectors of the economy.

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<sup>11</sup> International Labor Organization, “Global Employment Trends 2011: The Challenge of a Jobs Recovery” (International Labor Organization, Geneva, 2011), 52, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_150440.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_150440.pdf).



## SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND ACTION ITEMS

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The working group discussions drew on the extensive experience and diverse backgrounds of its participants. The meetings took place in the context of the revolutionary climate of change happening in the Arab world. These events added a greater sense of urgency and purpose to the deliberations, as well as hope that systemic obstacles that had blocked higher education reform efforts in the past might give way in the current climate.

Working group discussions focused on the need for improvements in the quality, delivery, and management of higher education and, in particular, the linkages between higher education and jobs. This was not meant to undervalue the critical importance of these institutions to the advancement of social and political transformation in these countries, but rather to show why reform is sorely needed in the region. The group's ten recommendations are as follows:

- The primary goal of governments' involvement and intervention in tertiary education in the region should be to raise the bar for higher education quality. Namely, this means ensuring that tough regulations and quality assurance structures are in place and functioning effectively to guarantee a certain quality of teaching and learning in all institutions. Government funding of public institutions should be linked to results and standards. Government should play an overseer role
- focused on maintaining quality and a baseline of standards, while ensuring that public funds are spent wisely.
- Private, for-profit institutions in the region should be better evaluated to ensure that their performance is consistent with accepted standards and that their graduates are receiving the education they were promised. These institutions need to be better monitored and regulated, and systems for assessing their outcomes and performance, along with methods of holding them accountable, need to be improved.
- Governments should also establish higher education councils—comprised of serious educators and other professionals—that are tasked with establishing quality benchmarks and enforcing quality assurance standards. These councils should be independent from government entities and retain sufficient enforcement and regulation power to effectively perform their role. These quasi-independent bodies, which would serve as a buffer between government authorities and educational institutions, should also be tasked with overseeing institutional accreditation bodies and interacting with university leadership.
- There is a need to move away from top-down decision making on education policy, and to open up university governance structures

to better respond to social demand, market forces, and reformers. Governance structures in higher education institutions should be democratized; for example, university leadership should be elected, not appointed. Higher education enrollment and admissions systems should move toward a more student-driven system, where students can choose where and what they study, and institutions can begin to manage their academic and operational affairs, including, but not limited to, the enrollment process.

- Higher education institutions across the region need to focus on adopting and internalizing a culture of evaluation and accountability at every level among administrators, faculty, and students. Attention should be given to assessing teaching, program quality, and student outcomes. A standards-driven system is the only way to ensure that educational outcomes achieve individual and societal needs.
- Investment in teachers is crucial, both to address the shortage of teachers in the region and to improve the recruitment, quality, and training of university faculty. One way to do this is to improve education departments in local universities. Another way is to adopt public policy initiatives to improve the perception of teaching as a profession and attract more qualified individuals to this field.
- Alternatives to university education should be improved and enhanced to address the demographic tsunami facing higher education in the region. Governments in the region need to focus on improving the quality and desirability of higher education alternatives, such as technical institutes and vocational schools.
- More attention should be given to addressing the preparedness of secondary school graduates and applicants to universities. Efforts in this area should include the development of

specialized exams, where appropriate, to assess language, reasoning, and thinking skills for admissions purposes.

- Universities must develop sustainable funding strategies for their activities. While the promise of free public education is difficult to retract, the reality is that very few will get an education if the system is not able to sustain itself. Countries and institutions will have to experiment with increases in cost sharing, improvements in needs-based assistance, and other new approaches to meet public expectations in this area. This must be done in a manner that maximizes higher education goals and enables those who cannot pay to pursue their tertiary education within the system.
- Universities should explore expanded partnerships with the private sector in areas such as internships and co-op opportunities. More emphasis should be placed on real world experience as a corollary to education and as a way to provide high-value career counseling to students.

## STEPS FOLLOWING THE FORUM

The challenges facing higher education reform in the Arab region are formidable and are linked to demographic, political, and economic developments that are difficult, if not impossible, to control in the short term. The working group struggled with the question of how it could best make a contribution to this process, but four areas stood out as possible areas for further action and engagement following the Forum. They are outlined here and will be considered at a proposed follow-up meeting at the Columbia University Middle East Research Center in Amman, Jordan.

- Create advocacy and independent stakeholder organizations at the national level to engage the public, employers, and others in pushing for critical reforms and to open up the higher education reform process to involve all sectors of society.

- Address prospects for advancing solutions to the problem of data scarcity. Labor market, institutional, and program data (i.e., the breakdown of graduates from different degrees who are employed) would be critical to establishing transparency, competition, and accountability.
- Support an intensified regional effort to recruit and train quality teachers with an emphasis on student-centered learning and critical thinking techniques.
- Examine opportunities to help advance the goal of regional Arab cooperation and integration in higher education, an objective advocated in the first UNDP Arab Human Development Report in 2002, but which has seen little progress.

## About the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

*The Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World* is a major research program housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The project conducts high-quality public policy research, and convenes policy makers and opinion leaders on the major issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project seeks to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on developments in Muslim countries and communities, and the nature of their relationship with the United States. Together with the affiliated Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, it sponsors a range of events, initiatives, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together key leaders in the fields of politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from across the Muslim world and the United States, for much needed discussion and dialogue;
- A Visiting Fellows program, for scholars and journalists from the Muslim world to spend time researching and writing at Brookings in order to inform U.S. policy makers on key issues facing Muslim states and communities;
- A series of Brookings Analysis Papers and Monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the U.S. and the Muslim world;
- An Arts and Culture Initiative, which seeks to develop a better understanding of how arts and cultural leaders and organizations can increase understanding between the United States and the global Muslim community;

- A Science and Technology Initiative, which examines the role cooperative science and technology programs involving the U.S. and Muslim world can play in responding to regional development and education needs, as well as fostering positive relations;
- A Faith Leaders Initiative which brings together representatives of the major Abrahamic faiths from the United States and the Muslim world to discuss actionable programs for bridging the religious divide;
- A Brookings Institution Press Book Series, which aims to synthesize the project's findings for public dissemination.

The underlying goal of the Project is to continue the Brookings Institution's original mandate to serve as a bridge between scholarship and public policy. It seeks to bring new knowledge to the attention of decision-makers and opinion-leaders, as well as afford scholars, analysts, and the public a better insight into policy issues. The Project is supported through the generosity of a range of sponsors including the Government of the State of Qatar, The Ford Foundation, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation.

The Project Conveners are Martin Indyk, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow and Director, Saban Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland; and Salman Shaikh, Director of the Brookings Doha Center.

## About the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Vice President of Foreign Policy at Brookings, was the founding Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director. Within the Saban Center is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers. They

include Bruce Riedel, a specialist on counterterrorism, who served as a senior advisor to four presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council and during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic development; Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Salman Shaikh, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Ibrahim Sharqieh, Fellow and Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Shadi Hamid, Fellow and Director of Research of the Brookings Doha Center; and Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.



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THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., NW  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036-2103  
[www.usislamicworldforum.org](http://www.usislamicworldforum.org)