

Towards a More Effective Social and Public Role for Higher Education Institutions in the MENA Region

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Abstract

The role of higher education institutions (HEIs) has been redefined in the twenty-first century, with heightened expectations about how they can better serve society. More emphasis is given to the quality of the education provided, and more attention is directed to the competencies graduating students acquire, preparing them to serve their nations better. Many HEIs in the MENA region remain hampered by challenges, including limited academic freedom, low performance in international rankings, ineffective governance, and a gap between the educational content provided and the needs of the labour market. However, the current paper points how HEIs can better serve society and highlights some success stories. Amongst the suggested reforms for a more effective social and public role for HEIs in the MENA region are: Focusing on the production of relevant, impactful research that benefits society; figuring out creative and effective ways to communicate this research to different stakeholders; intensifying community-based learning and students' community development activities; building a stronger link between theory and practise in all disciplines; providing non-economically oriented education, and a better match between the curricula taught and market needs.

Higher Education institutions (HEIs) have an important public service role to play. Traditionally, universities have mainly focused on education and research: first educating young people and preparing them for the job market, and then producing research that occasionally got read but was more often than not shelved and rarely utilised beyond the confines of HEIs.

Moving into the twenty-first century, expectations are changing, and the role of HEIs is being redefined. It is no longer sufficient to count the number of graduating students, focusing on outputs. There is now more emphasis on outcomes, that is, the quality of education

they have acquired, the competencies and skills they have developed during their time at the HEIs, and the extent to which these competencies prepare them for what lies ahead and make them ready, not only for the job market, but also to develop their nations in all possible ways. Similarly, it is not enough to produce theoretical research, although this is undoubtedly important, but additionally to come up with research that can be put to good use in benefiting society and contributing to its development.

This paper mainly focuses on the expected social and public role of HEIs in the MENA region, presents some of the challenges faced, highlights selected achievements and points to some possible recommendations for a more effective social and public role.

There is huge diversity in the conditions of HEIs in the MENA region. The region is sometimes used to refer to anything from 19 to 24 countries (Chen, 2021). There is also huge economic diversity between the countries in the region. 12 countries in MENA are part of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), with bountiful resources, while other countries are resource challenged (Wan et al., 2016). The number of enrolled students at HEIs per country also varies widely, with Egypt having the biggest number of enrolled students at HEIs, with more than 3.3 million in 2019/2020 (Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics [CAPMAS], 2020). Historical and political contexts have affected the governance of HEIs in the region in many different ways and over time there have been repeated attempts at reform. One of the latest trends in reforming HEIs in several parts of the MENA region is the move towards establishing branches of international universities in the region, as has happened in Qatar, in the United Arab Emirates (Wan et al., 2016), and recently in the new Administrative Capital in Egypt. Despite the attempts at reform, the majority of HEIs in the region still face severe challenges.

Challenges faced by HEIs in the MENA region:

HEIs in the MENA region face many challenges that hinder their capacity to fully contribute to the betterment of society. Some of these challenges include:

- *Limited academic freedom:* The most significant challenges facing HEIs in many of the countries in the MENA region relate to restricted academic freedom, difficulties regarding data collection and fieldwork, and the reduced transparency exercised by governments in public policymaking in general. Without academic freedom, we cannot develop critical thinking in students, a much needed and called for competency that would prepare them for their jobs later on, and enable them to lead the development of their nations.
- *The pandemic situation:* COVID-19 presented a huge challenge to HEIs in the MENA region and to all universities globally. However, many of the HEIs in the MENA region were relatively unprepared, technology-wise, to shift rapidly to online teaching during the peak times of the pandemic that necessitated intermittent periods of lockdown in many educational institutions. Two years of the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all that we do not need to be in class and in face-to-face sessions in order to continue with the learning process. Many faculties managed to continue their operations amid the pandemic by relying on Zoom sessions, but some were more successful than others.
- *Increased competition:* HEIs in the region face increasing competition, not only from the private sector and non-profit universities opening up at an escalating rate on a local level, but also from the splurge of new international universities opening up branches in the region, Gulf countries being a case in point. Additionally, Western universities are becoming ever keener on receiving international students; the MENA region being one of the main target markets. Degrees offered either virtually, or in a blended format, are often more attractive to MENA students.
- *Low performance of MENA HEIs on international rankings:* In 2017, only three MENA countries were included on the Shanghai Ranking: Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Leiden Ranking in the same year had only five MENA countries, with Lebanon and Tunisia added to the three mentioned above (Salmi, 2020).
- *Limited resources:* Some public universities, like in Egypt, face challenges, especially in some faculties, such as Law and Commerce, related to high student density in lecture rooms and a very high faculty/student ratio. Faculty are underpaid and often resort to moonlighting in order to make ends meet, seek parallel part-time employment in private universities, or travel for years on end to work in better paying Gulf universities; all issues that have a negative impact on the quality of their teaching and research.
- *Perceived gap between theory and practice:* In some HEIs, graduate students complain about outdated curricula and the insufficient links established between taught theory and what happens in practice. In many of the MENA HEIs, the emphasis is still placed on memorising rather than on teaching students how to solve practical life problems (Salmi, 2020).
- *Pressure to prepare students for employment:* The question of whether HEIs manage to adequately prepare their students for employment is constantly being raised and debated. Employers look for specific sets of competencies and skills and HEIs either unintentionally fall behind, or intentionally disagree about limiting their knowledge dissemination to fitting market needs.
- *Increased number of private universities that sometimes focus more on profit maximisation than on education quality:* Anecdotal evidence has pointed to cases of forged certificates for students who did not meet the degree requirements in several private universities in Egypt, Bahrain and Jordan, although this situation was later rectified through the establishment of stricter oversight by national regulatory and accreditation bodies in the different countries.
- *Ineffective governance of universities:* Too much interference by central government leaves little room for universities in the region, especially public universities, to be creative in fund raising or resource allocation, and acts as a disincentive against their focus on improving research or education quality (Salmi, 2020). In Egypt for example, public universities have their hands tied regarding their financial management. Salaries are fixed and government-subsidised tuition is capped (Radwan, 2016). Many schools in public universities have started revenue generating 'special programmes' that are distinguished from the mainstream by being referred to as language programmes, credit programmes or otherwise. However, these programmes have been seriously criticised for their negative impact on social equity,

where students who can afford to pay are offered a better-quality educational service in the same institution.

How HEIs could have a more effective social and public role

There are many different ways in which HEIs might have a more effective social and public role and overcome many of the challenges faced. In presenting each of the suggested reforms, one or more good practices currently taking place in HEIs in the MENA are also highlighted in the boxes.

Producing relevant research in the various fields

This requires a number of things: firstly, more investment in higher education by governments and incentivising faculty to do more high impact and society relevant research. More financial flexibility needs to be given to universities to recruit qualified professionals who can produce the needed research, giving them an attractive compensation package and the time and resources to enable them to be more productive, as well as implementing a performance appraisal system for faculty that is research intensive. Additionally, academic freedom needs to be guaranteed as a key prerequisite for the production of research in all fields. Universities in the region also need to reconsider their mission and stop perceiving themselves primarily as teaching universities, rather than research universities (UNIMED, 2021).

Science to Benefit the Community: The School of Science and Engineering at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and the test kit for Virus C developed by Professor Hassan El Azzazy: As Egypt has the highest rate of virus C infections in the world, the invention of a detection kit was of great importance. This is what Professor El Azzazy, Professor of Chemistry at AUC, managed to do. He led the invention of a fully automated robotic machine for hepatitis C diagnosis and was the first to turn his invention into a spinoff company, D-Kimia, which was also recognised as the first university spinoff in Egypt in 2013. Azzazy won first place in the industry section of the Arab

Innovation and Entrepreneurship competition, organised by the Arab Science and Technology Foundation, in recognition of his commitment to responsible business (AUC News, n.d.).

Effectively communicating the findings of the research produced to different stakeholders

Faculty often produce research that literally never sees the sun. HEIs can develop partnerships with industry to better understand and respond to their needs, so there is a higher chance of the research produced being relevant to the problems encountered by industries in the various sectors of the economy. More investments in conferences, seminars and webinars open to the public and creative communication means simplifying research results and disseminating them to the different stakeholders as needed. Technology and social media can be very useful here and universities have to be up to date with the ways in which they can be used for research dissemination and communication.

Support for Policymakers and Effective Communication of Research Findings: The Public Policy Hub project at the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP): Established in 2017, the Public Policy Hub (PPH) is a pilot project that aims to build the capacity of young Egyptian scholars in developing evidence-based public policy research and effective public policy advocacy and communication. Through the adoption of a demand-based approach, it reaches out to different government organisations, asking them to suggest policy issues that they are working on and on which they would like the young scholars at the PPH to do policy research. Participants joining the PPH in any round of operations receive intensive training on public policy analysis and are divided into teams. Each team is assigned a policy issue to work on, is supervised by a faculty mentor, and within three to four months is expected to come up with a policy research paper, a policy brief and a creative graphic video in Arabic slang that summarises their findings and recommendations.

The motto of the PPH is: “Where Rigour Meets Creativity”. They are able to combine the rigour of scientific research, guaranteed via the presence of faculty mentors, with the creativity of the young researchers. It is a win-win situation where the government receives sound policy advice on problems they are working on and the young university graduates are exposed to the reality of policymaking outside of their lecture halls.⁽¹⁾

Nurturing student clubs, philanthropic and community development activities & offering community-based learning classes and programmes: There are a lot of students’ activities in many HEIs in the MENA region, all of which take different shapes and forms, whether they are student associations, clubs or projects. Further nurturing and mentoring are required because these activities are sometimes even more important than the set curricula in building the life-long skills that prepare students for their later careers.

Alashanek Ya Baladi (AYB), literally translated as ‘For You My Country’, is now a registered non-profit organisation that has franchises in twelve different universities in Egypt. AYB started out as a student club at AUC. The nongovernmental organisation offers micro-credit to the needy and organises capacity-building workshops in marginalised areas to help young people find employment (AYB webpage, n.d.). It is living proof that when students’ clubs are nurtured and mentored, they not only benefit the community they are in while operating during their university years, but may also upscale their activities and expand their operations beyond the confines of the university to the benefit of society at large.

Building a stronger link between theory and practice in all disciplines

HEIs in the MENA need to move away from an emphasis on memorising knowledge to using knowledge to solve real life problems. This paradigm shift should be reflected in all aspects of the education process, from the design of curricula, to assessment methods, faculty training and evaluation.

Linking Theory to Practice: The Egyptology Programme at AUC: Through the work of the distinguished Professor Salima Ikram, Professor of Egyptology at AUC, the name of AUC is constantly mentioned in BBC news programmes and National Geographic documentaries featuring archaeological missions and discoveries throughout Egypt, where Professor Ikram plays a leading role. She teaches during the academic year and spends the rest of her time excavating in different parts of Egypt, often accompanied by her students (BBC, 2015). Making this important link between what the students study in class and their first-hand experience of excavations with a prominent ‘archaeologist extraordinaire’, as Professor Ikram is referred to in the media, is a great added value.

Providing “non-economically oriented and democratic education” (Amsler, 2017) where higher education is available to all members of society and not only those who can afford to pay. Offering scholarships and fellowships to make their educational services affordable to qualified students who cannot afford to pay, is one way in which HEIs can ensure diversity within their institutions and contribute to social equity and mobility. Governments need to understand that higher education expenditure is an investment in the future and that the educational service in HEIs should be available to anyone who is qualified regardless of their ability to pay. If free education for all is unaffordable and inefficient, perhaps a move towards funding scholarships and fellowships that are a mix between merit and needs-based should be considered.

1. Links to a sample of PPH publications and media advocacy videos can be found here: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/policyhub/> Public Policy HUB YouTube Channel

There are many examples of generous externally funded scholarships at undergraduate level, and fellowships at graduate level, that are offered by private universities in the MENA region in order to attract qualified students who cannot afford to pay and also ensure diversity in the student body. Examples include the LEAD program that was funded by the USAID at AUC for top-performing students from the twenty-seven governorates of Egypt and continued for ten years. Also ongoing is the US Department of State's funding for "Tomorrow's Leaders Undergraduate Scholarship Programme (TLU)" for qualified students from eleven different Arab countries to study either at AUC, the American University in Beirut (AUB) or the Lebanese American University in Lebanon, fully covering their tuition, housing and other study expenses (U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative, n.d.).

Providing a better match between taught curricula and market needs: this includes developing students' entrepreneurial skills and helping them develop their own businesses and start-ups. There are a number of initiatives that have successfully found a better match between students' skills and market needs, as shown in the examples below.

Support for Start-ups: The Venture Lab at the School of Business: AUC's venture lab was recognised as the Best Accelerator/Incubator Programme in North Africa at the Global Start-up Awards based in Copenhagen. To date, the AUC Venture lab has helped create more than 8,500 jobs and graduated 233 start-ups (AUC News, 20 December 2021).

Cairo University: Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS): the Business Incubator: the Business Incubator at FEPS has been operating effectively for five years. Although business incubators are usually situated in business schools, the belief at FEPS was that since they are teaching students about economics, they might as

well nurture their business ideas and start-ups and help them contribute positively to the economic development of their nation, even if it is on a micro scale. The FEPS business incubator is the first in Egyptian public universities. It provides three different types of services to aspiring businesses: a programme to raise awareness of entrepreneurship among young people; an incubation programme where seed funding is provided to selected start-ups, plus intense coaching and mentoring; and a business clinic programme where consultancies are offered to start-ups that have been in the market for more than two years (FEPS Business Incubator, 2022).

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