

Excerpt from a forthcoming publication (June 2010):

Innovation through Education: Building the Knowledge Economy in the Middle East

Report Four in a Series of Global Education Research Reports published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the American Institute For Foreign Study (AIFS) Foundation

Classifying Higher Education Institutions in the MENA Region: A Pilot Project

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While several international-level rankings and as many as 20 country-level ranking and classification systems exist around the world, a regional classification and assessment of higher education institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has not been developed to date. Such a system is particularly needed given the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in the region, which has recently seen the appearance of new domestic institutions as well as branch campuses of overseas institutions.

In several countries, rankings have come to occupy an important place in the higher education sector, influencing student applications, funding, graduate recruitment, and public policy. As higher education discourse has shifted from local to global, with universities seen as critical to preparing globally competitive citizens, rankings too have become more globalized, and several current efforts compare institutions across the world. In recent years, perhaps the best-known worldwide rankings have been the Shanghai Jiao Tong University rankings and the Times Higher Education–QS World University Rankings.

Although they provide an easy metric by which to compare higher education institutions, rankings have received a great deal of criticism. Research has increasingly shown that although rankings are useful snapshots of world-class institutions, they typically suffer from several flaws, including subjective assessment criteria, a bias towards the natural sciences, cultural biases, an over-reliance on peer review and the use of subjective opinions of respondents unfamiliar with institutions in other world regions, and constantly shifting indicators and criteria that make long-term comparisons impossible. In addition, comparisons across ranking systems are difficult as each uses a different set of weighted indicators or metrics to measure higher education activity.

Recognizing a significant need for reliable and accurate institution-level data on higher education institutions in the MENA region, the Institute of International Education (IIE) recently received support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to develop, on a pilot basis, a system for assessing and classifying higher education institutions in the MENA region. This short chapter provides an introduction to this new project and an

update on its current status and partnership with the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES).

Purpose of Project

The project's primary goal is to develop a new classification system that will better inform the global higher education community and provide a deeper understanding of the region's diverse range of institutions and their characteristics. The project will aim to include a representative makeup of the region among its focus countries, which will include Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Morocco, and Tunisia.

With coordination from LAES as a local partner, the project team will aim to develop a classification system for higher education institutions in the MENA region, using key academic and internationalization indicators. Because of the inherent limitations of a ranking approach, the focus of the study is to identify a set of relevant and objective indicators that can be used to assess institutions in the MENA region, rather than to develop a rigid ranking system that yields a single hierarchical list of institutions.

Two key advantages to developing a classification or typology for the MENA region as opposed to a ranking system are that the classification approach accounts for key differences among higher education institutions, and that classifications help identify meaningful similarities and differences among institutions without necessarily making a judgment about quality. In contrast, in their reductionist approach, rankings often disregard the fact that higher education institutions can differ significantly in mission, history, and size, and that it is often meaningless to reduce these variations into a single score or rank.

Anticipated Outcomes of the Project

The project will help to strengthen MENA institutions locally by providing benchmarks and key indicators against which they will be able to measure their growth, as well as a means to compare themselves to similar institutions. The new classification system will also help generate international interest in the region's institutions—which supports a secondary goal of the project, which is to deepen linkages between MENA higher education institutions and other institutions around the world to facilitate knowledge sharing, research collaboration, and institutional capacity building.

Long-term impacts should reveal a greater awareness on the part of MENA institutions and institutions worldwide of the unique characteristics of institutions in the region. The project team also expects to see other indirect long-term impacts, for example: an increase in the number of MENA institutions listed in other global rankings systems, more inter-regional research and exchange collaboration between institutions in MENA countries, and expanded international collaboration with institutions outside the MENA region.

Progress Update and Partners

To date, the project team, led by research staff at IIE, has carried out an extensive literature review and also consulted with a wide variety of experts in the classification and rankings field to identify stakeholders and an appropriate local partner in the MENA region. IIE, as a lead partner in the project, brings over 60 years of experience in collecting institution-level data, including the mobility data published annually in the widely cited *Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange*. IIE's research and evaluation capabilities extend into policy research, program evaluation, and other key projects conducted on behalf of governments, foundations, and private sponsors.

IIE's local partner, the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES), is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization whose membership consists of 54 members, including academics and researchers in the field of education at Lebanese universities. Dr. Adnan El-Amine, a well-known regional expert on higher education, will lead the association's work on this project. The author of dozens of articles and papers on higher education reform in the Arab world, Dr. El-Amine is a member of the UNESCO national commission for Lebanon, has served as a member of the coordinating committee of the Arab Education Forum, and was a Fulbright Scholar at Boston College in 2005.

Since 1995, LAES has been actively engaged in comprehensive research activities and projects conducted on behalf of ministries of education and higher education in Lebanon and other Arab countries, UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank, among others. In an effort to expand its reach, the Association recently opened its membership to members of non-Lebanese nationalities representing the broader region.

Together with LAES, the project team has identified the specific criteria and key indicators that will be used to collect data on institutional characteristics and internationalization at higher education institutions. As an immediate next step, the team will develop survey instruments to be disseminated widely to all institutions via national ministries of higher education. At a local level, LAES will coordinate survey development, outreach, and data collection among institutions in the summer of 2010.