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Strategic Planning in Higher Education in the Middle East: The Case of Non-Gulf Countries

By Hana A. El-Ghali, Managing Director, Institute for International Studies in Education, University of Pittsburgh; Qianyi Chen, Center Associate, Institute for Higher Education Management, University of Pittsburgh; and John L. Yeager, Director, Institute for Higher Education Management, University of Pittsburgh

For several thousand years, the Middle East was the undisputed center of human civilization, the region is the birthplace of several of the world's major religions, and for centuries its achievements in science and the arts outshone those of the rest of the world. However, in recent decades this region has experienced much strife and conflict that threatens its future development and growth. Today, the non-Gulf Middle Eastern developing countries—Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories, and Yemenⁱ—are home to over 87 million people living at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa, between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and bounded by the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. The region's location, climate, access to major transportation routes, and natural resources have resulted in a turbulent history; the ebb and flow of conquering nations, coupled with widespread internal conflict, over time have diminished the intellectual leadership and strength that the region once possessed.

In spite of unpredictable and often disruptive conditions, these countries have steadily and aggressively sought to develop their educational systems. Middle Easterners have historically placed a high value on education at all levels, and today gaining the best possible education remains an essential goal in many families. Although the region has recently witnessed several efforts to reestablish its former competitive position, these nations still struggle with reforming their various educational sectors. Public and private institutions have in many cases undertaken major initiatives to meet the emerging challenges confronting their countries. Concerned individuals in these countries strongly believe that only through the full development of their higher education ministries and institutions can these countries once again become competitive world leaders. The full development of their human capital represents the foundation of their future.

The Importance of the Region for Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Situated in the heart of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Syria, and Yemen present cases that are quite different, particularly when compared to the cases of neighboring Gulf countries. Although both groups are facing a number of common challenges in their higher education sectors, Gulf countries can mobilize their considerable wealth to effect change, while non-Gulf countries must confront the added barriers of ongoing conflict and a paucity of resources (Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon, 2008).

The non-Gulf countries share a number of social and economic trends that have presented many obstacles to their development, particularly in the education sector. Economic instability is one of the most critical challenges facing most of these nations today. In order to address these economic difficulties, non-Gulf countries have long relied on remittance economies, sending many youth abroad to work and receiving local economic returns. However, with the escalation of the global economic crisis, this economic strategy has been severely strained. Although these countries, with the exception of Iraq, do not produce oil, they have been greatly impacted by the downturn of the economic situation of the MENA region at large, and the Gulf countries in particular, since the non-Gulf countries are leading exporters of skilled and semi-skilled labor to the oil-producing countries. Additionally, the youth population of the non-Gulf region is growing rapidly; it is estimated that youth ages 15–24 represent one-third of the region's population. The high level of unemployment as a consequence of economic downturn, coupled with the high growth rate of the youth population, has led to major social and economic challenges (Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon, 2008).

In addition to these challenges, most of these countries are facing great threats to human security. These threats range from political instability to local strife and civil wars that jeopardize one of the most critical sectors for development: education. Concerns about human security draw the attention and resources of governments away from education, especially when higher education is viewed as accruing private returns to individuals and their families. Higher education development is unquestionably one of the most effective potential responses to economic and social crisis in the non-Gulf developing countries. However, without organized and coordinated planning, these efforts may not yield the gains sought. Quality planning both within and among institutions is needed to address the needs of these societies. But in order to understand present challenges, we must first explore the significant growth and development that has taken place over the past few decades in the higher education sectors of each nation.

Overview of National Higher Education Systems

Iraq

Iraq is well known for its long and proud tradition of distinguished universities. However, its education system has been severely damaged by the series of wars and sanctions the country endured in the past three decades. Most of the country's higher education infrastructure was destroyed, and many academics were lost through faculty assassinations and ongoing threats.

The modern history of Iraq's rich higher education system dates back to 1957, when the University of Baghdad was founded (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2009). To meet the growing demand for equity and access to higher education, additional higher

education institutions were established, and today Iraq's higher education system consists of 20 universities and 47 technical institutes under the management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). Most students are enrolled in universities in Baghdad, with women representing 42 percent of the students (UNESCO, 2004). The country's higher education system faces a number of challenges particular to Iraq, among which are the widespread destruction of the infrastructure of the higher education system, lack of reliable sources of utilities, an unstable and dangerous environment for normal academic activity, deteriorating quality of education (particularly heightened at times of sanctions, which isolated the local academic community from international academic communities), deteriorating levels of professionals and academic staff, poorly equipped labs, and a rapidly growing student population. Although there is still no dedicated national budget for higher education in Iraq, ad hoc amounts are regularly allocated. In such an unstable context, planning is a challenging task. Contingency alternatives to assist and improve the Iraqi higher education system have been proposed at a number of national and international meetings, but to date they have not been implemented. It is imperative for a country like Iraq to invest in its human capital and human development in order to generate sustainable socioeconomic development.

The complete text will be available in the printed volume.

ⁱ We have limited our sample to the non-Gulf countries of the Middle East, further narrowing down the selection based on countries' GDP per capita. Israel was not selected because of its relatively high GDP per capita.