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Internationalisation in the Middle East and North Africa: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

This policy brief addresses the topic of the internationalisation of higher education, a means for improving the quality and relevance of higher education, with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It draws on analytical work undertaken by the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) - UNOPS, the World Bank and other key partners, as well as on experience and evidence gathered from events and unpublished research undertaken by the CMI.

The policy brief outlines what is hidden behind the word internationalisation, in simple terms. It gives an overview of the current status of internationalisation in the MENA region. The brief then explores how Covid-19 has impacted higher education and its internationalisation, providing some reflections on the challenges and opportunities for the future in this context. It finally gives some recommendations for internationalisation in the MENA region and beyond in the post-pandemic context.

In terms of main messages, the brief highlights how the MENA region could take further advantage of internationalisation and significantly benefit from it, were it to make internationalisation a higher priority. The brief suggests that, despite the challenges brought about by Covid-19, the pandemic has also highlighted an opportunity for MENA to make progress in this direction. Lastly, it purports that the keystone of internationalisation - and

the element on which higher education institutions ought to focus going forward - is the *mobility of knowledge*.

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Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is a key means for improving the quality and relevance of higher education, in particular through its strong capacity to build students 21st century skills and boost their employability. Drawing on analytical work undertaken, research done and events held by the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) - UNOPS, the World Bank and other key partners, this policy brief aims to demonstrate how the deeper and wider implementation of internationalisation would be beneficial for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region - and beyond.

The policy brief outlines what internationalisation refers to as well as its main benefits, before giving an overview of internationalisation underway in the MENA region's education systems. The brief then explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education and its internationalisation, highlighting in particular some opportunities for the future underlined by the pandemic. It finally gives some recommendations for internationalisation in the MENA region and beyond in the post-pandemic context.

The MENA region is demonstrably lagging on the internationalisation front and yet, considering the strong advantages of internationalisation, the region could significantly benefit by increasing and further mainstreaming internationalisation. Despite the challenges brought about by Covid-19, the pandemic has highlighted an opportunity for MENA to make serious progress in this direction.

For this to happen, however, it must be recognised that the keystone of internationalisation is not any one particular activity, such as international student mobility, but rather something more fundamental: the *mobility of knowledge*. If higher education institutions - both in MENA and worldwide - were to focus on internationalisation as mobility of knowledge, they would be better positioned to reap the important benefits of internationalisation, even in a global pandemic context.

What is the internationalisation of higher education?

Over recent decades, the global landscape of higher education has changed significantly: widening access has been witnessed, with enrollment increasing on an unprecedented scale, and the effects of the technical revolution have rendered higher education more sophisticated and global. One important trend amongst these has been the rise in the internationalisation of higher education (CMI & World Bank, 2020).

The many and varied elements of internationalisation

Internationalisation is a wide-reaching term which covers many elements or activities, including, but not limited to:

- International student and staff mobility;
- Program mobility, such as twinning and franchise programs, provision of joint and double degrees...;
- Provider mobility, such as international branch campuses...;
- Education hubs;
- The ensemble of activities undertaken domestically coined internationalisation “at home”, such as intercultural activities, internationalisation of the curriculum, virtual exchange...

Following much debate in the literature on defining internationalisation, a definition which englobes the phenomenon in its broad sense as well as highlighting internationalisation's important advantages - going beyond economic benefits to include the deeper benefits for wider society - is the following:

“The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (De Wit et al, 2015).

Such a definition highlights the fact that, although internationalisation is sometimes equated with its perhaps most visible element - international student mobility - internationalisation is in fact much broader, and its essence much deeper, than any one particular activity. What appears as truly key in the building of important 21st century skills, improving education's quality, and making a real contribution to society, is having *access to a diversity of knowledge*, which is enabled through this “international, intercultural or global dimension”, or in other words, through the *mobility of knowledge* (Marchesini & Johnstone, forthcoming 2022).

Misleading terminology: is internationalisation the right word to use?

It is perhaps partly due to the term “internationalisation” that international student mobility in particular springs to mind and has become too strong a focus. But to reduce the phenomenon to this specific activity would be to render it less inclusive, even elitist. Only very few students worldwide actually travel to study abroad - less than 3% of total students around the world according to UNESCO's definition of internationally mobile students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019) - and in many MENA countries, this proportion is even lower. If countries and higher education institutions want to progress on internationalisation and have it benefit the highest number, a move away from this reductionist understanding of internationalisation is thus necessary.

“Internationalisation” can also bring to mind the idea of uniformed curricula across countries, leading to the trap whereby a “Western” model of higher education is seen as the “right” one, to be copied in countries around the world. Yet this too goes in the opposite direction of what is needed from internationalisation. On the contrary, rather than a uniform model, cooperation and co-construction (of courses, curricula...) are inherent to internationalisation and represent its strength. Moreover, it is the global dimension, and true diversity (of knowledge, of approaches, of cultures...), not uniformity, which is important and at the heart of internationalisation, and the intercultural exchange, dialogue, and learning through this diversity which will allow students and higher education institutions to really benefit from internationalisation.

Why is internationalisation relevant for higher education, and why does it matter for the Middle East and North Africa?

Advantages of internationalisation

Internationalisation of higher education holds many and varied advantages, for students, institutions, and even at the country level:

- Financial gains: international students represent an important source of revenue for both higher education institutions and the economies of host countries, to such an extent that internationalisation (specifically, student mobility) has been labelled an “exporting industry”.
- International relations: the international partnerships established in the framework of internationalisation can contribute to improved relations between countries, and help build reputation and influence.
- Improving education quality: international cooperation, exchanges with peers, adapted methods of teaching and innovative solutions, introduction of common standards, mutual learning, cross-cultural understanding, and foreign language acquisition, are all likely to increase the quality of higher education.

Internationalisation and skills development

Perhaps the most significant advantage of internationalisation lies in its capacity to improve students’ key soft and 21st century skills, and thereby their employability. To give just a few examples:

- Study abroad programs: in impact studies, students have reported significant increases in their 21st century and employability skills, including independence, intercultural understanding, and self-confidence (European Commission, 2016; UK HE International Unit & British Council, 2015).
- Internationalised curricula and contact with international students on campus: these have been shown to improve students’ intercultural competence and their “world-mindedness” (Parsons, 2009).
- The technology-enabled internationalisation “at home” activity Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has been shown to act as unique internationalisation tools, supporting the development of students’ soft skills and preparing them for the expanding world of work in international virtual teams (Rubin, 2019).

The development of soft and socio-behavioural 21st century skills is increasingly important for today’s world, as the nature of work - and the skills needed for its performance - shift continuously, and as adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking, and so on, become imperative for entry into changing labour markets.

This need is exacerbated by the fact that many of the jobs that will emerge over the coming decades do not yet exist, and has been yet further underlined by the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the world of work: today more than ever, young people need to be equipped with skills such as innovation and resourcefulness, and capable of adapting and seizing opportunities that present themselves in the “new normal”.

Internationalisation and the MENA context

In the MENA region, the fact that internationalisation may help improve the quality of its higher education and lead to stronger acquisition of students’ 21st century skills and improvements in their employability appears as a clear motivation for governments and higher education institutions to make internationalisation a priority.

The quality of education in the region is often perceived as lacking, or at least uneven: for many young people, education is failing to equip them with the right mix of knowledge and skills for today’s world of work. Such shortcomings, coupled with the private sector’s inability to provide enough secure and stable

jobs, contributes to the fact that the MENA region witnesses the highest youth unemployment rate of any world region, at around 26% (World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2019). Indeed, many young people in MENA find themselves in a position of significant frustration, suffering from exclusion on social, economic and political levels (CMI, 2021).

While internationalisation may not be a fix-all solution to such challenges, against this backdrop, increasing internationalisation does appear as a clear policy priority in order to help reduce youth unemployment, build human capital, and foster stronger youth inclusion.

What is the current status of internationalisation in MENA?

Higher educational context in MENA

The MENA region has a long and rich history of higher education, with many of the world's first universities established there, and a significant history of what could be called "internationalisation", with students and scholars travelling the region widely over the centuries in the search for knowledge. As such, it has even been labelled the "cradle of higher education" (Devarajan, 2016). More recently - since independence for many countries - MENA governments have been investing significantly in higher education and, in recent decades, the region has seen explosions in both enrollment and the number of higher education institutions. Yet today, the region's higher education systems face challenges in delivering quality and, in terms of internationalisation, the region taken as a whole is not the most advanced (CMI & World Bank, 2020).

The MENA region lags behind on the internationalisation front

The MENA region struggles with weak attractiveness, both in attracting "inbound" international students (and in retaining its own students within the region) and in establishing partnerships with other higher education institutions.

With regards to partnerships, a 2019 survey undertaken by the International Association of Universities (IAU) showed MENA institutions to be the least prioritised, by institutions from regions around the world, for establishing internationalisation partnerships with. When grouped by region, higher education institutions from no single other world region listed those from the MENA region as their 1st, 2nd or even 3rd priority, with even institutions from the region itself only listing MENA as a 2nd choice (IAU, 2019).

When it comes to international student mobility, in absolute numbers (pre-pandemic data, since naturally Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the landscape of international mobility), no MENA country figured in the top ten *destination countries* for international students, with only Saudi Arabia figuring in the top ten *countries of origin* of international students.

With regards to inbound and outbound mobility rates (measured as percentages of total enrollment, and again, pre-pandemic data), some MENA countries do manage to attract huge proportions of international students, as well as sending a significant proportion of their own abroad. Indeed, these countries' high rates have pushed up the whole-of-MENA inbound and outbound mobility rates to above the world average: the inbound mobility rate for MENA reached 3.1% with the outbound rate at 4.5%, compared to a world average of 2.4% for both (CMI & World Bank, 2020; all calculations made based on data from UNESCO's Institute for Statistics).

However, at least three observations help nuance the picture and highlight the weak attractiveness of the region, for both home and international students:

- The high rates are mostly found in a handful of countries (mainly in the Gulf) steaming ahead, for example, the UAE's inbound rate of 48.6% and Qatar's of 35.8%, as well as Qatar's outbound rate of 23.3%, Oman's of 13.2% and Bahrain's of 13.6%. Most others in North Africa and the Middle East, however, are in line with the world average or below: all of the North African countries' inbound rates were under 2%, with the exception of Tunisia at 2.2%, for example. Some higher outbound rates were found across the region, however, this is in line with the region's lack of attractiveness and capacity to retain its students (CMI & World Bank, 2020).
- More than half of MENA's "inbound" students come from within the region itself (around 55%): apart from around a third of its inbound students who come from Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-East Asia, MENA struggles to attract those from further away (CMI & World Bank, 2020).
- A higher number of MENA's "outbound" students choose to leave the region entirely to study elsewhere outside of MENA than to stay within MENA - and this proportion is increasing.

Beyond student mobility, much less exhaustive data is available with which to measure progress on other elements of internationalisation, but some evidence does exist. For example:

- Internationalisation "at home" activities are found throughout MENA, from efforts to internationalise the curriculum at numerous universities in Egypt, to the participation in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange program of a range of institutions across MENA, to the COIL modules implemented in partnership with State University of New York, in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco.
- Some (mostly Gulf) countries host huge numbers of international branch campuses, and a more Euro-Mediterranean partnership is witnessed in the establishment of several Franco-Tunisian and Franco-Moroccan universities in North Africa.

Yet on the whole, it appears that there is still progress to be made. Whilst internationalisation is taking hold in the MENA region, this has so far been happening rather unevenly, and it is plagued by the region's weak attractiveness. What is clear is that the region as a whole could benefit from increased internationalisation of its higher education systems and that further mainstreaming internationalisation ought to be a policy priority for governments and higher education institutions across the region (CMI & World Bank, 2020).

How has Covid-19 impacted internationalisation in MENA (and beyond)?

Covid-19 and education

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought disruption on an unprecedented scale to education systems globally, with around 1.6 billion learners (at all levels) out of education at the height of the first wave (UNESCO, 2020), and much discussion revolving around years of lost learning and further negative effects. At the higher education level, universities too were subject to closures, and many made a swift move to as much online learning as possible.

- A 2020 survey by the International Association of Universities (IAU), only 2% of institutions surveyed worldwide reported that teaching had not been affected, with two thirds of institutions surveyed reported being able to switch to online learning (IAU, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 on internationalisation

In terms of internationalisation, the main impact of the pandemic and its lockdowns and travel restrictions was the huge decrease in international student mobility.

- The IAU 2020 global survey showed 89% of institutions reporting that the pandemic had an impact on student mobility (IAU, 2020);
- A European-level survey, almost three quarters of institutions reported the impact of Covid-19 on student and staff mobility as “somewhat significant” or “very significant” (EAIE, 2020).

Moreover, considering the likely prolonged economic impact of the pandemic and the effect of this on potential international students’ plans, as well as the developing global reflections on the need for education to adapt to a “new normal”, it seems likely that international student mobility will not bounce back to pre-pandemic levels very quickly in the near future.

Opportunities underlined by Covid-19

While the pandemic naturally generated many challenges for both students and higher education institutions - from students’ learning losses, to the financial hit taken by institutions due to losing international students; from issues of Internet access and limited digital skills of students and teachers, to the unpreparedness of institutions for online learning - it also highlighted certain opportunities. In particular, the decrease in international student mobility and the move to online learning together led many higher education institutions to develop further their internationalisation “at home” activities, especially those enabled by technology, such as virtual exchange or virtual mobility, COIL modules, and so on.

- 60% of institutions surveyed in the 2020 IAU report reported the pandemic and its related decrease in student mobility leading to increased virtual mobility or COIL (IAU, 2020).

More widely, the pandemic has led to much discussion about the need to rethink education, its mission and role, and the idea that higher education institutions ought to consciously adapt to the “new normal” by adapting teaching methods, implementing hybrid learning, and more generally, recognizing that there is no going back to the pre-pandemic status quo. In terms of internationalisation, a key lesson to be learned is that despite travel restrictions and economic fallout, internationalisation can and should continue.

This depends upon a recognition about what the essence of internationalisation is: it is not dependent on one particular element, such as international student mobility, but pertains to something broader and deeper: the mobility of knowledge. The mobility of knowledge can be promoted through all sorts of internationalisation activities, including, of course, international student mobility and, also, those activities undertaken domestically - internationalisation “at home”. Whichever the activity, for internationalisation to be effective and beneficial it rests upon international cooperation, co-construction of curricula and courses, meaningful collaboration and movement of knowledge. Through this, promoted via all relevant activities, students are enabled wider access to a diversity of knowledge, and through this, can develop their 21st century skills and employability (Marchesini & Johnstone, forthcoming 2022).

Covid-19 and internationalisation in the MENA region

In the MENA region, too, the effects of the pandemic have led towards increased interest in internationalisation “at home” activities, reflecting once again the understanding that internationalisation might continue, even during a global pandemic, and that its benefits can be reaped through activities that do not depend only on international student mobility. Evidence and testimonials in line with this were given at a 2021 CMI-Qatar Foundation event, which launched the CMI-World Bank report, by representatives from higher education institutions from across the region.

Following this, MENA higher education institutions surveyed in a small-scale piece of research undertaken by CMI as a follow-up to the report indicated similar things.

- All of the institutions surveyed reported that the pandemic had impacted internationalisation, with a majority reporting at least an 80% decrease in international student mobility, and more than two thirds reported having increased the implementation of internationalisation “at home” activities, in particular virtual exchange.
- A majority indicated that they would be increasing the implementation of such activities in the coming years and, despite acknowledging that the pandemic also caused significant challenges, institutions talked mostly of positive opportunities.
- One noted that internationalisation “at home” was now necessary both to remain connected with the outside world and to provide accessible education to students, and that the recognition of this necessity may lead to the adoption of interesting new solutions which, until now, may have been taken less seriously; another highlighted that internationalisation “at home” may now represent a key strategy for institutions to strengthen their capacities for internationalisation in the future.

These testimonials, added to the growing body of research showing higher education institutions to be rethinking and reshaping internationalisation in the face of the pandemic, adds further credence to the idea that it is mobility of knowledge, implemented through a variety of means, which is at the heart of internationalisation and which ought to be promoted.

Challenges and opportunities: how could internationalisation be increased in MENA (and beyond) in the post-pandemic context?

In the MENA region, analysis has shown that internationalisation is happening, but this is uneven; the region is not considered a major player in the global landscape of internationalisation, nor is it always included in global conversations around higher education and its internationalisation. Yet the region could benefit significantly from increased internationalisation to help overcome such challenges as youth unemployment and exclusion and shortcomings in its education systems. Today, despite - and partly because of - the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an important opportunity for MENA countries and higher education institutions to take a more meaningful place at the table in the global discussions on higher education and, through implementing adapted strategies with a focus on the mobility of knowledge, to somewhat “catch up” on the internationalisation front. And understanding internationalisation as mobility of knowledge appears as pertinent at the global level. In this context, the following key recommendations emerge:

- **Make internationalisation a priority for MENA governments and higher education institutions and put MENA at the heart of global discussions on internationalisation:**

- Raise awareness amongst all relevant stakeholders in the MENA region on internationalisation and its benefits.
- Promote regional policy dialogue on internationalisation, which allows space for exchange and discussion of best practices, and which gives significant room to MENA stakeholders, such as the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC). The CMI is engaged in such a regional dialogue, having held several regional events on the topic in 2021 with key partners (the Qatar Foundation, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Tethys Consortium of Euro-Mediterranean Universities, UNESCO, and others), with further events upcoming, including at the WHEC.
- **Promote internationalisation as *mobility of knowledge* in the MENA region (and beyond) in the post-pandemic context:**
 - Internationalisation ought to be seen as a means to an end: the end pursued is the improvements to the quality and pertinence of higher education, and the building of students' key soft and 21st century skills and employability, which can be achieved through widening access to a diversity of knowledge.
 - The Covid-19 pandemic has helped highlight that going forward, despite reductions in international student mobility, internationalisation can and should continue, and higher education institutions worldwide ought to focus on widening access to diversity of knowledge, through mobility of knowledge.
 - In the MENA region, one key way of doing this is to place a stronger focus on internationalisation “at home”. Such an approach is particularly pertinent in the pandemic context, and also holds a variety of wider benefits: its activities are often easier and less costly to implement and, crucially, being undertaken domestically, *all* students are able to benefit from their advantages, not just the few who are able to travel abroad to study. Internationalisation “at home”, through its wide reach, can thus contribute to making higher education more inclusive.
 - At the global level, recognise that whether implemented through internationalisation “at home”, study abroad, or other activities, the essence and heart of internationalisation, and what is important for skills development, is the mobility of knowledge: further promote internationalisation's global dimension, meaningful collaboration and cooperation, in order to expose students to confrontation with otherness and a diversity of knowledge and approaches.

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Annexes

This policy brief draws, either directly or as background, on the following reports, articles, chapters, and events, where the authors and/or organisers are the CMI, its staff members, and key partner organisations:

[[Report](#)] Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) & World Bank. 2020. Internationalisation of Tertiary Education in the Middle East and North Africa. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35316> Licence: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

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