

Higher Education and Youth Unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa

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Today, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is facing a fundamental challenge to provide its overwhelmingly young population with job opportunities. The youth unemployment rate between the ages of 15-24 in MENA is hovering around 25 percent compared to the world average rate of 14 percent.

Many argue that the Arab uprising is the result of economic failure to provide the MENA youth with employment. In fact, studies that have been conducted in this regard proved that protest participants were mostly unemployed educated citizens who were frustrated by a lack of employment opportunities. The December 2010 uprising in Tunisia reflects the tipping point of the above mentioned problem. The story is similar in other MENA countries.

The youth unemployment crisis can be traced, however, to many issues including the lack of sound development strategies, weaknesses in the business environment, poor governance, lack of transparency and accountability, and widespread corruption. Also crucial is the lack of quality education to prepare youth for work. Many studies indicate severe educational deficiencies within the higher education systems in most MENA countries. The lack of connection between what students learn in universities and what industry expects them to know upon graduation has created a huge unemployment dilemma and a serious loss of opportunities.

An example of this disconnect is Jordan where the major challenge for the education system is to produce “employable” workers with a spectrum of skills and proficiencies that are sound and flexible enough to close the gap between the competencies that the industry expects and what the Jordanian labor force can offer. In Lebanon, the inconsistencies between the structure of

the higher education programs and the real needs of the job market has contributed to youth unemployment and intensified the rate of youth migration.

In Iran, as in many other countries in the region, the formal labor market has provided the implication that those with a university degree are more likely to find a “good” and secure job. Therefore, the country developed an education system that is geared towards granting degrees and diplomas rather than addressing the skills and training that are needed in the job market. Furthermore, the university admission is determined by a stringent exam (*Konkur* or *Concours*) which for the most part measures the applicants’ capacity for memorization rather than critical thinking abilities and problem solving.

Similarly, the Egyptian labor market suffers from a substantial gap between supply and demand as millions of graduates seek job opportunities. This paradox stems from a severe mismatch between the skills and training actively sought by the labor market and the quality of graduates. That imbalance, in turn, is the result of an education system that fails to meet the needs of the job market. Therefore, it can be predicted that the youth unemployment will continue to increase as long as education policies and the higher education quality remain the same.

Overall, the most commonly-shared deficiencies within the education systems across the region are lack of creativity and teaching of critical thinking, outdated curricula, and lack of technical/vocational popularity as these programs are still heavily stigmatized as the destination for those rejected by the formal schooling system.

In an attempt to remedy the pressing issue of youth unemployment, over time, policy makers across the region have come to recognize the immediacy of addressing the problem by introducing reforms and initia-

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tives. While specific solutions may differ from country to country, the initiative objectives have proven to be relevant across the whole region. Those initiatives, such as education for employment (e4e)¹ have a common theme which is to reform the education systems in MENA so that students gain relevant skills.

To reach this goal, the e4e initiative's recommendations call upon universities to assume leadership in collaborating and partnering with the industry. This collaboration would culminate in practicum elements that would characterize university degree programs. Furthermore, this calls upon a new generation of faculty members who would have an appropriate mix of academic theory and practitioner skills. As for students, they would have access to internships facilitated by the universities. The initiative also encourages universities to consider offering both part-time and on-line programs through evenings and week-ends in order to expand their reach.

While such initiatives may demonstrate real achievements, no country in MENA can claim to have sufficiently addressed the fundamental challenges fac-

ing its young citizens. Unfortunately, youth unemployment is exacerbated by the current political instability due to uncertainty following the so called Arab Spring. Higher education in the MENA region needs to address youth unemployment by analyzing the roots of the problem and put into effect aggressive policies that would reinforce the linkages between educational training and employability.

Note

¹Education for employment (e4e) is an initiative headed by the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group, and the Islamic Development Bank. Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan is the Honorary Chair of this initiative, which is focused on positioning education as a major priority to drive improved employment prospects.