

Context: Impact of COVID-19 in MENA

The coronavirus circulated without detection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) beginning in February 2020. As of March 26, 2020, Iran's epidemic was by far the largest in MENA, with 137,724 cases, followed by the Gulf states Saudi Arabia (74,795 cases), Qatar (45,465 cases), and the United Arab Emirates (30,307 cases) and; as well as Kuwait (21,967 cases), Egypt (17,967 cases).¹ For all countries, the number of detected cases has been rising quickly in the past four weeks, with an upward trend. MENA countries have had to prioritize prevention and containment, as their hospitals will be unable cope once containment is breached. Therefore, current school and university closure policies can be expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

Due to the dual and intertwined shocks of the COVID-19 spread and related closures and lower oil prices, output in MENA is estimated to decline in 2020, from a growth forecast of 2.6 percent of GDP in October 2019 to a 3.7 percentage-point growth downgrade in 2020.² For example, the Algerian government plans to reduce current spending by 30 percent (7.2 percent of GDP or US\$12 billion) in response to the oil price shock, while keeping public sector wages intact and protecting health and education spending.³ However, across MENA countries, the dual shocks will result in negative supply, demand, and income shocks and risk further aggravating preexisting economic and social challenges, notably youth unemployment, especially of tertiary graduates.⁴ Frustration over youth unemployment was one of the major drivers of the revolutions that triggered the 2011 Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt and could create the potential for social unrest.

In most MENA countries, stay-at-home orders are still in place, and all universities have been closed since early March 2020 until further notice. Approximately 103,276,469 tertiary education students and 830,272 teaching staff⁵ are affected by the closures across MENA. Ministries of Education/Higher Education, like the majority of government agencies, have been placed on home-based work, with only a few essential staff working in the office (for example, in Morocco and Tunisia), which creates an added layer of difficulty in coordinating the response and communicating clearly and consistently among agencies and with universities, students, and university staff.

Impact and Mitigation 1: Teaching and Learning

While most MENA countries have their own distance learning universities or are members connected to regional distance learning universities, and while some private universities in the region are well equipped for online teaching and learning through earlier investments in electronic platforms and content, the majority of countries and public universities are struggling with the sudden necessity of providing large-scale online teaching and learning.

The key challenges governments and universities in the MENA region are facing with regard to moving courses online are the following:

- Lack of access to internet/WIFI and lack of sufficient bandwidth in many student households
- Lack of hardware such as tablets and laptops for student use at home

¹ The Johns Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center; <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. The high numbers of cases in some countries compared to other MENA countries might also reflect differences in testing.

² World Bank 2020a.

³ World Bank 2020b.

⁴ For example, in Tunisia, the unemployment rate for tertiary graduates in 2011 was 29 percent, higher than that of any other group, and more than double the 13 percent figure in 2005.

⁵ Student enrolment figures: Arnhold and Bassett (2020); teaching staff: World Bank Edstats (2017).

- Limited availability of online course content/limited possibility of moving courses online (for example, due to the nature of the subject, such as lab work in medicine or chemistry)
- Lack of online platforms for teaching and learning
- Limited digital and pedagogical skills of instructors for online teaching, student assessment, etc., and no training in these areas
- Limited digital skills of students to access and learn online and/or lack of focus due to online and other distractions
- Limited face-to-face and social interaction with instructors and classmates, which can lead to decreased student motivation and learning, affecting disadvantaged students more.

Despite these substantial challenges, MENA countries have made an enormous effort, and have largely succeeded, in implementing distance education. They moved most of their courses online, almost from day one

Box 1. Examples of ad-hoc higher education distance learning initiatives in MENA due to COVID-19

Tunisia:

- The Virtual University of Tunis (VUT) (<https://www.uvt.rnu.tn/>), which offers courses via distance learning, made its platform, content, and IT and training capacity available to other universities in Tunisia to help them move their courses online. An estimated 110,000 students have already signed onto the VUT online learning platform to take classes, and 18,000 professors are involved in online teaching activities.
- The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is currently in the process of establishing a COVID-19 window under the competitive fund to provide financial support for distance learning at tertiary institutions under the ongoing Tertiary Education for Employability Project (TEEP).

Morocco:

- Several distance education channels are being used to reach as many students as possible: (i) the national sports TV channel has been dedicated to broadcasting lectures for university students 12 hours a day, (ii) national and university MOOC (massive open online course) platforms are also providing course content online for a number of university courses (<https://www.mun.ma/>), (iii) some universities/faculties are using Microsoft teams/Google classrooms, and (iv) local radio broadcasts course content for four to eight hours per day to reach students without internet access in more rural regions.
- Internet providers/telecommunications firms have agreed to provide students with free internet access and large bandwidth.
- Lessons useful for other countries: University presidents, but especially teaching staff, are highly committed to ensuring quality instruction and have embraced online courses, but also public engagement (for example, weekly TV roundtables are presented on different aspects of the COVID-19 situation; and research is underway on projects related to COVID-19, such as developing medical masks by the engineering school).

Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar:

- Temporary lifting of a ban on communication via the VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) to facilitate the organization of virtual classes.

and are providing as many students as possible with course content through various channels (see box 1). This enormous commitment by all stakeholders to work together gives hope for enhanced future coordination in higher education, if sustained beyond the crisis. For example, in Tunisia, an estimated 110,000 students have already signed onto the Virtual University of Tunis online learning platform to take classes. Similarly, 18,000 professors are involved in online teaching activities. In Saudi Arabia, universities have achieved unprecedented results with over 1,200,000 users attending 107,000 learning hours in over 7,600 virtual classes.

Despite the challenges, a positive effect of the crisis may be that some of the MENA countries and universities that previously were reluctant to formally recognize and move toward online education are now setting up online courses. This can further help build student and instructor digital skills through online teaching and learning, and help develop students' soft skills (for example, teamwork, peer mentoring, communications), but only if

suitable pedagogical approaches are used (otherwise, distance education might actually inhibit development of soft skills). The crisis can also provide an opportunity to build capacity and strengthen system management for universities and higher education institutions.

Impact and Mitigation 2: Exams, Admission, Graduation

Given the fluidity of the current situation, not much reliable information is available on how countries are managing end-of-term or end-of-year exams. Many MENA countries are still in the consultation and decision-making process. Some countries have cancelled or postponed exams and/or replaced in-class exams with online exams or alternative, project-based assignments. For example, Egypt cancelled midterm university exams, but second-semester exams will still take place, and final exams will be held at the end of May, with a possibility of postponing the exams until September or the end of the year if the crisis continues. With few exceptions, most countries, including Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, are subscribing to the principal to “keep the problems of this current academic year in this academic year and not let them impact the following academic year.” Prospective tertiary education students preparing for entry or admission to universities in fall 2020 may also be impacted due to postponement of secondary school-leaving exams and uncertainty around entrance exams and procedures for higher education institutions. During and after the school and university closures, academic guidance and remedial measures for vulnerable students are particularly important to ensure they are not disadvantaged in the examinations due to less access to online classes and lower performance. In deciding whether to hold the examinations, change the format, postpone, or cancel them, it is critical to ensure that students do not have any disadvantages due to the closures and that there are ample opportunities to retake examinations if they go forward (see box 2).

Box 2. Decisions by Egypt and Saudi Arabia on university student assessments and examinations

Egypt:

- Project-based student evaluation for the decision to promote students to the next academic year
- Electronic tests/examinations provided the required infrastructure/connectivity are available.

Saudi Arabia: After consultations with university administrators to discuss the mechanisms for university final examinations in light of the current situation, the Minister of Education decided that:

- Students would have the option to withdraw from one course, several courses, or the whole semester until April 23, 2020, with the withdrawal not reflected in their records.
- Final exams to be held on time (April 26), and not before that date, noting that some universities may choose to hold them in the evening out of consideration for individuals who fast during Ramadan.
- Universities and colleges to increase student grades for their semester work to 80%, with a 20% weight given for the final assessment.
- Deans of admission to coordinate with IT to review student information systems and ensure that the analysis of students’ cumulative average from previous semesters is used in a way that boosts students’ GPA, such as changing final grade to a pass/fail system.
- In case of technical difficulty, students could be given the option to choose between the approved grading system or the pass/fail system before they take the final exam.
- Universities should hold final exams remotely for advanced enrolment programs one week or so before the predetermined test dates.
- Students who are not able to take the online test on time can be given an “incomplete” grade, with the option to take an alternative test at a later date.
- Judgement may be exercised to postpone the comprehensive exam for doctoral students.

Issues and Potential Solutions

- **Equity:** More vulnerable students, such as those from low-income backgrounds or with disabilities, may not only have limited access to online courses, due to the lack of hardware, internet connection, or digital skills, but might also need to provide support to their families. The large-scale disruptions due to the shutdown

may impede student learning and examination performance, and increase student repetition and dropout, as some students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, might not be able to go back to their studies due to economic or family pressures or lower academic performance due to missing out on classes. For example, in Lebanon, university dropout rates are highest among children and youth who come from the poorest families in Lebanon. This indicates the need for remedial instruction and (additional) financial assistance to vulnerable students (this could be part of existing grant/scholarship/loan or other social transfer programs), though government financial resources will be limited going forward.

- **Staffing:** In the short term, nonpermanent teaching and research staff on precarious contracts are the most vulnerable and may be terminated during the crisis. Some private universities also seemed to have suspended staff salary payments due to financial constraints. In the longer term, government budget cuts due to the economic shutdown and resulting revenue shortfalls may reduce public funding for higher education. This may lead to staff cuts at public universities. Private universities, as well, may cut their staff due to loss of tuition revenue. Another factor that needs to be considered is that university administrative staff may need extra time to support reorganization of university operations during the closures and once on-campus operations resume.
- **Internationalization:** There will be a substantial drop in mobility. The number of regional students, lecturers, and researchers going abroad, as well as international students, lecturers, and researchers moving to the region, will be severely reduced due to travel restrictions (which are likely to continue at least until the end of the calendar year or longer), health and safety concerns, and financial hardships as a consequence of the economic shutdown and oil price shock. Therefore, it is particularly important to ensure “internationalization at home” opportunities, such as foreign language learning, virtual research or learning partnerships with foreign students, or other such opportunities.
- **Financing:**

Student aid: Some universities and governments have provided financial assistance for students to return to their families and for their nationals studying abroad to return home. In the medium to long term, a greater number of students may need financial support in the form of student loans and grants to continue or begin their studies due to the expected recession.

Institutional financing: Many students and their families are already feeling the economic impact of the shutdown and may currently or in the near future be unable to pay their tuition fees at private universities (or at public universities with tuition fees). For example, over 1,000 students at the private American University in Beirut, Lebanon, petitioned to reduce tuition fees for the spring term due to the financial crisis and the alleged “inefficiency and lower quality of education of online learning with respect to the normal learning process.”⁶ There are anecdotes about private universities with limited financial resources shutting down due to the loss of tuition revenue.

- **Recognition of online course attendance:** One key emerging issue is the credit recognition of student online course participation, such as on Edx and Coursera, as not all universities or programs have been able to move their content online so quickly. If universities can give students credit for the currently free university courses offered by Edx and Coursera, this could save substantial resources and ensure continuity of recognized learning.
- **Governance/management:** Given the multitude of agencies and actors in higher education, which include ministries, councils of higher education, quality assurance agencies, and the universities themselves, with not always clear responsibilities and sometimes overlapping mandates, many countries (such as Egypt) have been struggling with a coordinated response and clear, consistent communication with university administrations, students, teaching, research, and administrative staff, more so than in basic education.

⁶ <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/04/learning-remotely-as-the-only-resort-how-is-lebanon-doing/>.

The crisis highlights these long-standing overall government challenges of sometimes overlapping responsibilities and mandates and partially implemented autonomy reforms.

Outlook and Recommendations

Medium- to long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in MENA

Decreases, increases, and shifts in enrolment in the next academic year

It is not clear how the COVID-19-related closures of schools and universities will affect enrolment, especially in the next academic year, as factors that would result in a decline in enrolment could counterbalance other factors that could boost enrolment.

Factors that might lead to a decrease in enrolment include:

- Fewer secondary education graduates may be entering universities due to higher failure rates, since secondary students missed out on class time in preparation for exams.
- Dropout of currently enrolled university students may rise due to failure on end-of-year exams and/or socioeconomic hardships, for example, unavailability of student commercial loans,⁷ lack of other financial resources to pay for tuition fees and/or costs of living, or the need to work to help support their family.

Factors that might contribute to an increase in enrolment include:

- MENA students currently studying abroad or outside MENA may return to local or regional universities, as some households will no longer be able to afford the higher cost of studying abroad.
- Unemployment is expected to rise as a result of the economic shutdown, which could lead to an increase in enrolment at local universities and a withdrawal of current employees from the labor market or the non-entry of graduates into the labor market. This trend can be typically observed during economic downturns (such as the 2008 financial crisis in the United States). The opportunity cost of higher education has declined during the crisis as a result of unemployment and a prolonged waiting period for youth in the labor market. More secondary school students may choose to pursue higher education instead of remaining unemployed, and tertiary students about to graduate may pursue advanced degrees.

Shift in enrolment from private to public universities:

- Due to financial constraints, students currently enrolled in local private universities may have to transfer to lower-cost or no-fees public universities.

Decline in teaching and learning quality:

- Funding cuts to public university budgets are likely, and private universities will suffer from loss of tuition revenue. In many economies (for example, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza), higher education was already suffering from budget reductions or freezes prior to the pandemic, while at the same time absorbing growing numbers of students. Any additional decreases in funding and staff are likely to impede their functioning and negatively impact the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

Short-, medium-, and long-term responses

Short-term response: Assessing and mitigating the impact of the crisis on higher education service delivery (during closure)

World Bank response:

⁷ For example, in Lebanon, banks have stopped making most loans.

- **Operational:** Use of ongoing higher education projects (for example, in Tunisia, the West Bank, and Gaza) for crisis response (see box 1 for the example of Tunisia on the setup of a COVID-19 window for universities under the existing competitive fund).
- **Technical assistance:** Many ministries of education or even ministries of planning (for example, Egypt and Kuwait) have reached out to the World Bank MENA education team for ad-hoc support, information resources, best practices, and capacity building for distance education at scale, facilitation of partnerships in this area, and on coordination and planning (including costing) for different crisis scenarios and preparation for restarting university on-campus operations. While ministries and universities by now have mostly covered as best as possible moving courses online and providing students with as much content as possible via various media, they would appreciate immediate technical assistance in the following areas: (i) planning different examination scenarios, (ii) when and how to reopen campuses and resume on-campus operations, (iii) planning for and organization of the next academic year (given the combined repercussions of the secondary school closures and examinations and university closures), and (iv) developing financial scenarios and targeting criteria for additional student assistance, among other issues.

Medium- to long-term response: Building system resilience and improving the quality and employability of graduates (upon resumption of regular operations)

World Bank response:

- **Technical assistance for:**
 - Development of a national strategy of higher education technology
 - Assessment and tracking of the impact of COVID-19 on universities (financially, academically, research-wise, administratively), as well as graduate employment
 - Building higher education system resilience, and instructor and student digital skills through strengthening university capacity for blended learning and distance education, something specifically requested, for example, by the Moroccan Vice Minister for Higher Education in a video conference.
 - Adaptation of quality assurance regulations to ensure agile and simple procedures for recognition of online courses and blended learning.
- **Operational:** As public funding cuts to higher education are likely due to government and household budget constraints, continued adequate financing of higher education will be critical to maintain and continue to improve quality and enhance labor market relevance, which is particularly important in the MENA countries, given the potential for social unrest of unemployed university graduates based on previous experiences (for example, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia).

References

Arnhold, N., and R. Bassett. 2020. "The COVID-19 Crisis Response: Supporting tertiary education for continuity, adaptation, and innovation." World Bank, Washington, DC, April 9.

World Bank. 2020a. *MENA Economic Update*, April 2020. World Bank, Washington, DC.

— — —. 2020b. *MENA, COVID-19 Maghreb News Bulletin*, Issue 2, April 10.