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**Higher Education in the Arab States:
The Realities and Challenges of Regionalization
L'enseignement supérieur dans les États arabes :
les réalités et les défis de la régionalisation**

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of higher education regionalization in the Arab states using the Functional, Organizational and Political Approaches model (FOPA) as the analytical framework. Drawing on data from different international, regional, and national organizations, the article shows that the Arab states are engaging in a variety of collaborative activities and alignment efforts related to improving quality assurance, academic mobility, and joint research. The article concludes that the process of higher education regionalization in the Arab states is currently oriented more towards bilateral and multilateral activities by universities and higher education actors than through regional-based frameworks, policies, and plans. The commitment to the regionalization of higher education is challenged by lack of a robust governance structure, funding, political instability, and a keen interest in collaboration and partnerships external, not internal, to the region. Thus, higher education regionalization in this region is yet to evolve to a more strategic and planned approach.

Résumé

Cette étude explore le phénomène de la régionalisation de l'enseignement supérieur dans les États arabes à l'aide du modèle *Functional, Organizational, Political Approaches* (FOPA) (Approches fonctionnelles, organisationnelles et politiques) comme cadre analytique. S'appuyant sur des données provenant de diverses organisations internationales, nationales et régionales, l'article montre que les États arabes participent à toute une variété d'activités collaboratives et à des efforts d'alignement visant à améliorer l'assurance de la qualité, la mobilité universitaire et la recherche commune. L'article conclut que le processus de régionalisation de l'enseignement supérieur dans les États arabes s'oriente actuellement davantage vers des activités bilatérales ou multilatérales de la part des acteurs universitaires et de l'enseignement supérieur plutôt que vers des cadres de travail, des politiques et des plans régionaux. L'engagement envers la régionalisation de l'enseignement supérieur est remis en question par des facteurs tels que le manque de structure d'une gouvernance solide, le financement, l'instabilité politique et un intérêt marqué pour la collaboration et le partenariat externes à la région, et non pas internes. De ce fait, la régionalisation de l'enseignement supérieur dans cette région doit encore évoluer vers une approche plus stratégique et planifiée.

Keywords: higher education, regionalization, harmonization, internationalization, Arab states, FOPA

Mots clés : enseignement supérieur, régionalisation, harmonisation, internationalisation, les États arabes, FOPA

Introduction

A growing interest in regionalization has been one of the unexpected consequences of globalization. More attention is being given to regional-level issues and new developments in a variety of sectors including trade, environment, labour mobility, science and technology, and higher education. The Arab states are engaging in a variety of regional collaborative activities among higher education national systems and institutions across a wide range of programs, networks, and conferences. This growth in higher education collaboration in the Arab states corresponds to the significant new developments in internationalization. A key assumption is that the processes of regionalization and internationalization of higher education coexist and are

compatible and complementary. In fact, both processes include similar activities, actors, and outcomes but regionalization emphasizes “intraregional initiatives” over “interregional activities” (Knight, 2014).

This article investigates the intraregional development and collaborative activities among national higher education in the Arab states drawing on the data from different international, regional, and national organizations. While there are extensive analysis and information on higher education regionalization in other parts of the world, especially in Europe (Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012), Asia (Hawkins, Mok, & Neubauer, 2012), and Africa (Knight & Woldegiorgis, 2017), to date there has been little focus and few scholarly articles or robust research on the situation in the Arab states. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the progress, prospects, and challenges of expanded collaborative initiatives and partnerships in higher education in the Arab world and to encourage scholars and policy makers to give more attention to the phenomenon of higher education regionalization.

The primary objectives of this exploratory study are (1) to examine the conceptual underpinnings and analytical framework for understanding the phenomenon of higher education regionalization; (2) to identify key developments and actors involved in regionalization in the Arab states during the last two decades; (3) to discuss the key issues and challenges facing the Arab states region in terms of promoting and enabling great harmonization of policies and collaboration among national higher education systems and institutions; and (4) to encourage more reflection, robust research, and policy making on higher education regionalization in the Arab states.

A common understanding of regionalization related terminology is a priority. For the purposes of this article, regionalization of higher education is defined as the “process of building closer collaboration and alignment among higher education actors and systems within a defined area or framework called a region” (Knight, 2013, p. 7). Regionalization is an intentional process that aims to build a more planned approach to cooperation within a particular region. The rationales for regionalization differ by region but in general include improving partnerships and quality of higher education in the region, capacity building in terms of policy and program development, and strengthening regional identity and cultural understanding. Regions engaging in cooperation are able to improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility, and to address common regional challenges due to intensifying competitive pressures to remain relevant in the current globalized world (Woldegiorgis, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012).

The concept of region has many different meanings; diverse actors and sectors interpret it differently. It can be defined in geographic, cultural, or linguistic terms. Geopolitical frameworks and protocols are also used to define a region. The designated region of analysis for this article is the Arab states. UNESCO identifies 22¹ Arab states with the Arab League as a regional organization that combines them together economically and politically. This area is tied together as a region because all states are Arabic-speaking.

Three premises underpin this discussion of higher education regionalization: (1) while regionalization is an ongoing and evolutionary process, this article is based on a snapshot analysis of the current status in the Arab states; (2) there are a diversity of actors, at institutional, national, subregional, and regional levels and from different sectors; these actors are involved in the process of regionalization; and (3) the Functional, Organizational and Political Approaches

¹ The 22 Arab countries are Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Framework (FOPA) (Knight, 2014) is used to examine the higher education regionalization efforts.

The article is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the process of higher education regionalization in general. Key concepts related to regionalization are discussed and mapped on a proposed continuum to illustrate the relationship of the terms to each other and the FOPA model is explained. The second part focuses solely on the higher education regionalization initiatives in the Arab states. The political, historical, social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the region are discussed as regionalization cannot be analyzed or understood without an understanding of the context, both past and present. This is followed by an examination of the key national and regional actors and the most important developments for each of the three approaches (functional, organizational, and political) to regionalization. The challenges facing regionalization in the Arab states are many and they are discussed in the last section.

Understanding Higher Education Regionalization

The analysis of the process of higher education regionalization involves a multitude of terms such as collaboration, harmonization, and integration. At times, these terms are used interchangeably, and at other times they have very different meanings. While this confusion of terms is not unusual with new developments, it does lead to misunderstandings and muddles. The terms and concepts that are most commonly linked to regionalization include the following: cooperation, integration, harmonization, convergence, collaboration, community, coherence, partnership, and alignment. Worth noting is the number of words that start with “co” indicating the notion of “togetherness.” The similarity among these terms is striking but when studied more closely, subtle and important differences emerge (Knight, 2013).

Given this diversity of terms related to regionalization, it is prudent to ask what principal factor groups the terms, and what movement represents along the continuum or scale. As illustrated in Figure 1, the groups include terms of similar levels of activity intensity and the continuum represents the degree of intended “togetherness” or what is often labelled “regionalness.” At one end of the continuum is the concept of cooperation while integration is at the opposite end. Cooperation represents a fairly loose and open kind of relationship while integration denotes a much stronger cohesion and collective type of arrangement often referred to as a “community” or “common area.” Whereas the objectives and anticipated outcomes of regionalization differ significantly, it is important not to place these terms on a linear continuum as change rarely happens in such a systematic way.

Figure 1: Mapping of higher education regionalization terms.

Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of the mapping of terms related to regionalization. This mapping is just one approach to exploring the evolutionary process of regionalization. The

first group includes cooperation, collaboration, partnership, and networking. These terms denote an open, voluntary, and perhaps informal type of relationship among actors. In practical terms, the diagram describes the multitude of bilateral and multilateral collaborative activities by universities and other higher education actors.

The second group of terms—coordination, coherence, and alignment—introduces an element of organization and some adaptation to ensure that the interactions among higher education actors in the region are complementary, productive, and bring added value. In practice, this would include the organized networks, joint education programs, or research partnerships among higher education institutions and systems.

The third group of terms—harmonization and convergence—involves stronger and more strategic links, and can involve systemic changes at both institutional and national levels. This can include the development of regional-quality assurance schemes; an academic credit system with a common currency for determination of credit or workload; similar interpretations of degree levels such as BA, MA, and PhD; regional citation index; or compatible academic calendars.

The fourth group of terms—integration, community or common area—represents more formalized, institutionalized, and comprehensive levels of connection and relationships. In practice, this would involve regional-level agreements and bodies that aim to facilitate a more robust and sustainable type of regional work such as a common higher education and research space. It is important to emphasize that this is a mapping of concepts, not a depiction of the phases of the regionalization process.

It is equally interesting to look at concepts which are intentionally not included in this conceptual mapping but which are used and appear in the literature. Terms such as “standardization,” “conformity,” “uniformity,” “compliance,” and “homogenization” are omitted because they do not acknowledge the important differences among systems and actors within a region. This underlines a fundamental value or tenet of higher education regionalization, which is respect for and recognition of differences and diversity among key actors, systems, and stakeholders. Failure to recognize this diversity can lead to the “zipper effect.” This occurs when regionalization neglects differences, stifles innovation, and leads to homogenization (Knight, 2013).

Functional, Organizational and Political Approaches (FOPA) Model

Three interrelated approaches—functional, organizational and political approaches constitute the core of the FOPA model. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Instead of three separate silos, they work in unison complementing and reinforcing each other. While this is the optimal situation, it does not always happen in practice because conflicting priorities or politics can cause tension among the three approaches. At any one time, one approach could be more dominant than another. But, ultimately there needs to be progress on all three to ensure sustainability. Current realities will dictate the emphasis attributed to one approach over the other. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship and intersection of these three approaches.

Figure 2: The FOPA Model of Higher Education Regionalization

The first approach, as detailed in Table 1, takes a functional perspective of regionalization and focuses on the practical activities of higher education institutions and systems. Functional approaches can be put into two distinct groups: (1) Strategies that facilitate closer alignment and transparency among national/subregional higher education systems. (2) A variety of programs that include student mobility schemes, cross-border collaborative education programs, pan-regional universities, and centres of excellence. The relationship between these two groups is critical, as the systems/policies in the first group are needed to facilitate and expedite the programs in the second group. For instance, compatibility among quality assurance systems and academic credit systems will help student mobility programs within a region.

The second approach refers to the organizational architecture that evolves to develop and guide the regionalization initiatives in a more systematic manner. It is labelled organizational approach because frameworks, structures, and agencies are necessary to help establish and oversee regional-level and intraregional initiatives. A diversity of networks and organizations are emerging which include government and nongovernment bodies, professional organizations, foundations, and networks. These entities assume a variety of responsibilities—policymaking, funding, research, capacity building, regulation, and advocacy among others.

The third approach involves political will and strategies that put higher education initiatives on the agenda of decision-making bodies. The political approach helps to launch major frameworks, programs, or funding schemes and to formalize initiatives. Declarations of intent, binding conventions, treaties, protocols, agreements, and special meetings like summits or policy dialogues are instruments for generating political support and visibility in order to make regionalization of higher education a priority. This approach can be characterized as having more of a top-down, formal, and intentional orientation, and is normally seen as key to gaining financial and political support.

Table 1: Generic Examples of the FOPA Model of Higher Education Regionalization

Approach	Generic Examples
	ITC platforms.
	Research citation index.
	Interlibrary loan systems.
	<i>Collaborative Academic Programs</i>
	Academic mobility schemes—students, professors, scholars.
	Research networks, clusters, and projects.

Approach	Generic Examples
	Cross-border programs—double, joint, twining, branch campus. Regional centres of excellence. Institutional agreements—bilateral and multilateral. Open Educational Research (OER) and Open Distance Learning (ODL). Pan-regional university.
<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Organizational Architecture</i> Networks and organizations. Foundations. Governmental/nongovernmental agencies. Levels: pan-regional, regional, subregional.
<i>Political</i>	<i>Political will</i> Declarations. Agreements/ Conventions/Treaties. Summits/Task Forces/ Dialogues.

The next section focuses on the Arab states region and uses the FOPA model to identify key developments, actors, and challenges, and to analyze the regionalization process over the past two decades. Scholarly literature, policy documents and secondary data from different international, regional, and national organizations reports and websites have been used as the primary source of information. Important to mention is that only information available in English has been used.

Cultural, Political, Economic, and Social Context of Arab States

The Arab states region consists of 22 countries of the Arab League with 10 countries in Africa and 12 in Asia. In 1945 the Arab League was formed as a political entity to represent the interests of the Arab states. The organization's main goal is to strengthen the relations between the member states, the coordination of their policies, and to safeguard their independence and sovereignty. The Arab states occupy an area stretching from Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean in the southeast. According to UNESCO statistics, the Arab region has a combined population of around 414.7 million in 2017 with over half under 25 years of age (UIS, 2018a). Important to note is that because the Arab states are largely Muslim countries, they are active members in many international Islamic organizations that promote collaboration in various areas including higher education such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Within the higher education sector, Arab states are members in intergovernmental bodies such as the League of Islamic Universities and the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World that works within the framework of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). As this article focuses on intraregional collaborations, activities between the Arab states and other regions are outside the scope of this article.

Arabic is the dominant and official language of the region and Islam is the religion of the vast majority. The Arab states have similarities and differences in manners, customs, political, economic, and social systems. Key common characteristics of the region are the rapid population growth in recent decades and young populations; continuing high rates of illiteracy, especially among women; high rates of emigration and forced migration causing significant brain drain; and

rising levels of unemployment, especially among young people. It is estimated that 60 million new jobs need to be created in the next decade to absorb the large number of workforce entrants (UNDP, 2016, p. 78). Whereas the problem of unemployment may be challenging in some of the poorer Arab countries, it is more manageable for the richest countries in the region such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

The key differences among Arab states include the uneven pace of spread of literacy and modern education. In countries like Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, earlier access to education and development of newspapers created a more informed citizenry, which stimulate development of civil society (Najm, 2015). By comparison, Gulf states remained closer to tribal values; however, their higher education has witnessed unprecedented development and expansion during recent years through collaboration with Western universities. Another significant difference is the uneven distribution of wealth. While oil-rich Gulf states are emerging, other states are among the world's least developed. For example, Sudan ranked 165th and Yemen ranked 168th on UNDP's Human Development Index in 2016 compared to Qatar that ranked 33rd, Saudi Arabia ranked 38th, and United Arab Emirates ranked 42nd (UNDP, 2016, p. 231).

Examining Higher Education Regionalization Developments in the Arab States

Universities in the Arab states vary greatly in terms of age, size, quality, program diversity, modernity, and funding. They are mostly criticized as having modest interaction with society and contribution to social and economic development. Higher education in the Arab states is seen as a national symbol and a political tool. Thus, throughout the region, "higher education went from class to mass" (Romani 2009, p. 3) and is regarded as a tool for geographical communication among other Arab states and between their non-Arab neighbours (Herrera, 2006).

The interest in the collaborative efforts among the Arab states in the field of education began since the creation of the Arab League in 1945. The first step towards this direction started with the establishment of Arab League Educational Culture and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) in 1970 as a specialized organization with the mandate to support a common Arab action in the field of education and higher education, and the Association of Arab Universities (AArU) as a regional institution that aimed to enhance the collaboration among universities and institutions of higher education in the Arab world (see Organizational Approach section below).

The following sections describe and analyze the status of the regionalization of higher education in the Arab states region using the functional, organizational, and political approaches of the FOPA framework

Functional Approach

National higher education institutions in the Arab states are engaging in a variety of activities, initiatives, and collaborative programs that attempt to facilitate closer alignment among their systems as illustrated in Table 2 which shows some recent activities. For example, The Network for the Expansion of Convergent Technologies in the Arab Region (NECTAR), launched by the UNESCO Cairo office in 2011, aims to help improve the mismatch between the skills markets and the programs provided by most universities in the region. A top priority for NECTAR has been to modernize the curricula of the Arab region's universities through collaboration with prominent Arab scientists based at universities in the United States of America (USA) and the region (UNESCO, 2015).

Table 2: Examples of Functional Approach in the Arab States Higher Education

Alignment of National Higher Education Systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional Qualifications Framework by The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) 2012 - The Network for the Expansion of Convergent Technologies in the Arab Region (NECTAR) 2011
Collaborative Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arab Open University (AOU) 2003 - The Forum for Exchange of Student Training Offers organized by The Association of Arab Universities (AArU) - Scholarships & awards for best research, thesis, scientific projects, and emerging Arab researchers - The Forum for Students' Inventions organized by AArU - Development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for Arab countries by The Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) 2013 - Arab e-Marifa Database for Arabs Theses and Dissertations 2013 - Arab Educational Information Network (Shamaa) 2006

Source: Authors

Academic Mobility

A key aspect of regionalization is academic mobility for students, faculty, or institutions. The Arab Council for Training of Arab Universities Students, a body under the AArU, facilitates intra-Arab student mobility from various universities to get short-term professional training opportunities at different Arab universities, companies, and organizations located within the region. As a subregion in the Arab states, the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) has approved the equality of GCC students in admissions and treatment in universities and institutions of education and higher education, which will help to facilitate student mobility in the future (GCC, 2016). While there are bilateral agreements between universities in the GCC, there are no region-wide students mobility programs such as Erasmus in Europe and AIMS in the ASEAN region. Nevertheless, statistics show a rise in student mobility within the region during the past few decades.

The latest UNESCO statistics show that in 2015, 31% of internationally mobile students from Arab states stayed within the region (UIS, 2018b) compared to just 12% in 1999 (Bridgestock, 2015). Table 3 shows that in terms of destination countries for student mobility, several Arab states have one or more other Arab states in their top five destinations. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the leading destination for hosting Arab students coming from Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. This trend could be attributed to three primary reasons (1) the increased number of international branch campuses and Western style universities, (2) the large number of Arab expatriates living in UAE who influence their children to stay and study in the UAE, and (3) the shared language, culture, religion, and history in the region (Wilkins, 2013 ; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012).

Table 3: Intraregional Students' Mobility in Selected Arab States (2015)

Country of students origin	Total Number of outbound students	Top destination countries	Number of students
Saudi Arabia	85,345	United States of America	53,637
		United Kingdom	8,469
		Canada	5,883
		Australia	4,681
		Jordan	2,138
Iraq	29,225	Jordan	6,012
		Turkey	3,033
		Malaysia	2,750
		United Arab Emirates	2,705
		Ukraine	2,611
Egypt	26,120	United Arab Emirates	4,700
		Saudi Arabia	4,560
		United States of America	2,928
		France	1,916
		Germany	1,743
Palestine	25,692	Jordan	10,960
		United Arab Emirates	4,180
		Saudi Arabia	4,174
		Malaysia	1,062
		Turkey	976
Jordan	21,862	United Arab Emirates	5,782
		Saudi Arabia	4,031
		United States of America	2,174
		Ukraine	1,911
		United Kingdom	1,513
Lebanon	14,470	France	3,929
		United Arab Emirates	1,611
		United States of America	1,323
		Saudi Arabia	1,278
		United Kingdom	873

Source: UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2018b.

Regarding faculty mobility, Arab academics are engaging in a variety of activities—primarily teaching and consultation—within the region. However, no statistics are available to show the trend of intraregional mobility of faculty. Many Arab academics look towards other Arab countries, especially the Arab Gulf states, for better teaching and research opportunities to overcome financial, employment, or political hurdles. Nevertheless, political instability in many Arab states and the preference of many universities, particularly Western and international branch

universities, to hire academics with Western credentials preclude this kind of academic mobility (Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

Program and provider mobility within the region is also limited. In the last two decades large number of Western and international universities were established in many Arab states including Egypt, the UAE, and Qatar. By contrast, only three (two under development) universities from other Arab states have established branch campuses within the region largely in the UAE (Global Higher Education, 2017).

Research collaboration is another important aspect that facilitates regionalization collaboration. Within the context of the Arab states, many studies stress the lack of cooperation and coordination among universities from the same country and among Arab universities (Hanafi, Arvanitis, & Hanafi, 2013; Almansour, 2016). Table 4 shows that the number of publications coauthored are greater interregionally than those which are coauthored by scholars within the Arab states.

Table 4: Coauthored Publications from Selected Arab States Inside and Outside the Region (2012–2017)

Intraregional				Interregional		
	Country	Coauthored publications	Growth %	Country	Coauthored publications	Growth %
UAE	Saudi Arabia	1,067	189.9	United States	4,514	77.3
	Egypt	941	114.6	United Kingdom	2,215	108.6
	Jordan	548	161.7	Canada	1,886	105.9
Jordan	Saudi Arabia	1,386	80.5	United States	2,273	5.7
	United Arab Emirates	548	161.7	United Kingdom	1,066	26
	Egypt	362	75.7	Germany	883	-9
Egypt	Saudi Arabia	16,173	89.7	United States	9,155	65.9
	Qatar	1,220	429.8	Germany	4,739	42.7
	United Arab Emirates	941	114.6	United Kingdom	4,226	43.3
Iraq	Egypt	348	408.3	Malaysia	2,642	240.4
	Saudi Arabia	311	327.8	United Kingdom	1,614	235.1
	Jordan	169	45.5	United States	924	271.1
Morocco	Saudi Arabia	664	-21.6	France	6,067	27.3
	Algeria	571	65.8	Spain	2,131	24.1
	Tunisia	539	36.5	United States	1,505	15.7

Source: Elsevier (2018)

While research and innovation in the Arab region have grown exponentially in recent years, it appears that few scientists collaborate to bring their expertise to serve the needs of the entire region. Hanafi et al. (2013) stress that the effort to build a functioning research structure requires the development of multilateral action plans that engage different countries, which is a political choice. According to Currie-Alder, Arnanitis, & Hanafi (2018) the preference of researchers in the Arab region to collaborate with scientifically proficient peers abroad is driven by scarcity of domestic-funding opportunities in some countries like Jordan, or by a deliberate emphasis on establishing the country as a hub within global networks for science collaboration like Qatar in the Gulf region.

Organizational Approach:

Since 1960s Arab states have developed multiple network of organizations and agencies at both national and regional levels to support and guide institutions of higher education regionally. Table 5 lists the major pan-Arab bodies and actors that coordinate, support, and facilitate greater higher education collaboration at the regional level.

Table 5: Examples of Organizational Approach Activities

Organization	Objectives
The Association of Arab Universities (AArU)—founded 1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhance cooperation amongst Arab universities and to coordinate their efforts with a view to raising the quality of university and higher education. - Support and encourage mutual mobility of students and staff members among Arab universities. - Promotion of joint research projects within Arab universities.
The Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)—founded 1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support all aspects of education including adult education, culture, and science in Arab countries.
The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE)—founded 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a mechanism between the Arab countries to exchange information about quality assurance (QA) - Disseminate good practice in QA and strengthen liaison between quality assurance bodies in the different countries in the region.
The Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education (AROQA)—founded 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve higher education in the Arab region through awareness, capacity building, and QA and accreditation services.
Arab Regional Bureau UNESCO	Support national capacity building in higher education.

Source: Authors

ALECSO is a vital actor in the region and serves as an Arab information centre through

the collection of data, publisher of research, annual statistical books, bibliographical guides, plus many reports on the development of education, culture, and science. One of its important projects is the Arabic-Language Enhancement that supports the use of the Arabic language in the Arab states by encouraging Arabic translation, writing, and publishing. As presented in Table 5, two quality assurance organizations were founded in the last decade in the region. One significant accomplishment of ANQAHE is the development of the Arab qualification framework (AQF) that aims to “Provide a single transnational reference point to compare qualifications nationally, regionally and internationally” and “provide a regional benchmark of qualified graduates, defined in a common language” (ANQAHE, 2012, p. 3).

The development of regional-level associations and networks of universities, quality assurance bodies and research centres have helped to improve the overall quality of higher education and enhanced cooperation across the Arab states. However, these organizations face a variety of difficulties and obstacles to operationalize their missions, which impact, to some extent, on having solid outcomes of the regionalization efforts within the higher education landscape. For example one of the difficulties facing ALECSO is the lack of coordination among the member states in the implementation of the organization’s programs and the lack of financial recourses (ALECSO, 2017). Similarly, ANQAHE faces difficulties to activate and validate the framework given the diversity of the nature of quality assurance in different Arab states and the absence of any concept of quality assurance in others. Other challenges include financial constraints, lack of professional QA expertise, communication deficiencies with the QA bodies in different countries, and political intervention and domination of the state-owned institutions that resist competition and change (ANQAHE, 2012).

Political Approach

The third and most important approach in facilitating the regionalization efforts is a political approach. Without political and financial support, regionalization programs stay as “initiatives of intent” and are not implemented (Knight, 2014). One of the main political instruments that is utilized to realize the agenda of the higher education regionalization in the Arab states region is the Conference of the Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The Conference is one of the three ministerial conferences managed by ALECSO—an arm of the Arab League. The conference serves as a forum for the ministers to coordinate their policy positions and to deliberate on matters of common concern, and to promote a joint action regarding the development of higher education systems in the region. During the 2011 biannual conference meeting, the University Governance Screening Card was endorsed as a regional Arab League initiative that has governance as its central topic for discussion (World Bank, 2012). This initiative is a joint effort to reform governance in Arab universities that aims to modernize the higher education systems in the region and to enhance the quality and effectiveness of institutional management. This project was supported by the World Bank and the Centre for Mediterranean Integration and over 100 universities, public, private, and not-for-profit across 10 Arab states that applied in two rounds, one in 2012 and the other in 2015–16 (El Hassan, Abu Orabi, & Al-Zoubi, 2018). The latest conference held in December 2017 focused on a plan to build relations between Arab higher education institutions and the job market that ends with some recommendations in this regard (ALECSO, 2017).

The 2006 Arab Summit adopted Resolution 354 and commissioned ALECSO to prepare, identify funding mechanisms, and to execute a plan—Education Development Plan in Arab Countries 2008–2018—to reform the education sectors in the Arab states. The summit

invited Arab countries to encourage the establishment of nongovernmental organizations and funds to support scientific research activities and to encourage bilateral, multilateral, and regional cooperation programs between research institutions and Arab universities, and between them and international universities to implement joint research projects (ALECSO, 2017). The latest Arab summit held in March 2017, emphasized the importance of developing innovative mechanisms to promote joint Arab action and to boost intra-Arab cooperation and integration, particularly in the economic and social fields including higher education.

In 2014, 22 Arab states signed off on a Regional Strategy for Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI). The rationale for the strategy is to address the gap between the existing knowledge and the application in science and technology knowledge in the region and to stimulate an effective regional and multidisciplinary collaboration between the public, private, and higher education sectors. The strategy aims to realize the potential of STEM fields for economic development and reversing the brain drain. Universities encourage Arab states to increase the financial assistance for research and development from the current 0.3% of GDP to 3%, with more investment from the private sector (General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, 2014). As a result of this strategy, UNESCO and ALECSO have established an online Arab observatory of science and technology. The observatory hosts a portal for research projects and an inventory of Arab universities and scientific research centres, as well as patents, publications, and master's and PhD theses in digital format; scientists will be able to use the forum to organize virtual conferences (UNESCO, 2015). Although there are many political initiatives to support higher education regionalization in the Arab states, there are also numerous challenges, which are discussed in the next section. The Arab states are facing various challenges in higher education regionalization. The following section highlights the main challenges in specific key areas.

Quality Assurance

In spite of two new regional QA organizations, it appears that efforts to harmonize QA practices and policies and to develop regional frameworks remain mostly as recommendations. In many Arab countries the majority of higher education institutions are public and owned by the state. They are regulated and funded by the ministries of higher education (ANQAHE, 2012). Hence, there is political influence on both institutions and quality assurance bodies, which can have a negative impact on efforts to increase greater collaboration. Thus, the combination of political influence plus competition among higher education institutions regarding quality assurance and accreditation can inhibit the desire and intention of developing closer collaboration among the quality assurance agencies and institutions within the region. Overall, while there is certain progress in capacity building for QA among the Arab states, the goal of developing a more harmonized and regionalized approach to QA is yet to be realized.

Research on Higher Education

Arab universities are active members of a number of bodies. Besides the associations and networks presented in Table 5, they are member of the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World and the Association of Arab and European Universities; however, none of them focus on research in higher education. These regional bodies are mainly used as tools for consultation, exchange of information and cooperation among higher education institutions as well as representing the higher education community on regional and international levels. This results in little applied research being done on higher education in the Arab states.

The Arab region has several journals focusing on education research, mostly associated

with faculties of education at Arab universities—*Gulf Perspectives* focuses on teaching and learning in higher education in the Arab Gulf region; the *Arab Journal of Quality in Education* focuses on quality assurance and accreditation in all levels of education; and recently *Al Fanar* media started publishing news and opinions on higher education in the Arab states as of 2015. Nevertheless, these journals have not focused on policy research that could contribute to a strong educational change in the region and the focus on higher education is often limited.

Academic Mobility

Intraregional mobility of students, scholars, staff as well as programs and providers has been used very effectively in other regions of the world to develop a strong and more cohesive sense of regionalization and regional identity (Asian Development Bank, 2012; Knight, 2014; Melo, 2016). But in the Arab states a structured academic mobility has not reached its potential, despite the increasing number of agreements, protocols, and bilateral memoranda between countries and universities. While the data shows that pan-Arab mobility is increasing, it still involves a very small percentage of students and is very low compared to the global trend of intraregional mobility in Europe and ASEAN region. The international branch campuses and foreign institutions are attracting more students from the region but the public universities are not actively engaged in students, staff, and scholar mobility schemes on a bilateral or networked basis. This points to the importance of structured mobility programs to be embedded in institutional partnerships and agreements at the regional level as is done in Europe and other regions of the world.

General obstacles to mobility include the economic and security challenges of the region, the isolation of Arab public universities due to the emergence of private education sector, lack of collaboration in research at graduate level (PhD), and lack of legal frameworks that facilitate and encourage the mobility of researchers. The lack of a system for recognition of credits and qualification is another factor that contributes to the low intraregional academic mobility. Visa delays and refusals are problems even between Arab countries. Ben Hafaiedh (2010) argues that the low level of student mobility is attributed to “the absence of a strong regional negotiator capable of catalyzing that mobility, as was the case in some countries like China, India, and South Korea” (2010, p. 95).

There is a clear recognition to the importance of developing a pan-Arab mobility program along the lines of European programs such Tempus and Erasmus but to date no such program exists. While bilateral arrangements may exist between universities, they are not adequate. More political will and funding at the regional level are necessary pre-requisites to launch a sustainable and effective pan-regional mobility program.

Development of Subregional Frameworks

Other regions of the world such as Asia Pacific and Africa are working towards greater harmonization of higher education policies and systems by developing subregional frameworks and protocols (Ogachi, 2009; Neubauer, 2012). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is an example of a subregional group in the Arab states. It presents an opportunity for a subregional alignment of higher education policies and the development of programs (Aljafari, 2016). Such programs could facilitate the exchange of faculty, expertise and teaching resources, establishing joint academic programs, promoting collaborative research projects, developing mutual trust, and recognition of quality assurance processes among the GCC countries.

Governance of Regionalization Efforts

The proliferation and necessary coordination of associations and organizations present another challenging factor that impacts the realization of an integrated higher education system in the region. For example, as presented in Table 5, many bodies are engaged in quality assurance and accreditation programs. Each organization has specific mandates and focuses on specific issues but the challenge is to have effective and efficient coordination of the activities in order to prevent duplication or competition among organizations for scarce resources and to ensure maximum impact.

Interregional Collaboration

The Arab states are engaging and exploring other collaborative activities outside the region (interregional) such as through the Arab-Malaysian Higher Education Summit for Arab and Malaysian universities, periodical Summit for Arab and Turkish universities, Arab-Euro University Conference on Higher Education in collaboration with the European University Association (EUA), and the Arab-ASEAN International Conference on Higher Education. All these activities are organized by the International Islamic University in cooperation with the Association of Arab Universities (AArU). Interregional collaboration can also be strengthened by subregional activities such as the Gulf states who are looking for more collaboration with the European Union in the fields of higher education and scientific research (Al Mukhaini, 2014). In addition, the five Arab states in North Africa, referred to as Arab Maghreb Union, and five European states are part of The Dialogue 5+5 forum. The 5+5 network has approved a cooperation plan for capacity building, quality assurance, and access (Dialogue 5+5 Research, Innovation and Higher Education, 2017).

While these collaborative activities are important to keep the region connected with the international community, they can also redirect the efforts and resources towards more interregional rather than intraregional collaboration. There is great attraction for Arab states members to collaborate with the West, specifically Europe, because of the opportunity to participate in formal funded programs, which are lacking in the Arab region.

Political Stability

It is abundantly clear that political instability, civil wars, and military conflicts seriously jeopardize the development of regional partnership and cooperation efforts whether it is in trade, labor mobility, or higher education and research. For instance, a major impediment to the region's economic development has been the persistent political conflicts in many Arab states. These conflicts cause many Arab countries to divert resources towards security, military, and defense budgets at the expense of resources earmarked for development and educational reforms.

Concluding Thoughts

It is clear that enhancing both intraregional and interregional cooperation in the field of higher education and scientific research is a pillar of educational development in the age of globalization and interdependence among nations. Effective Arab cooperation has become a pressing necessity to bring about needed educational reforms in the Arab countries. The regionalization of higher education is embedded in economics, politics, cultural, and societal norms of the region and focuses on improving the access to and quality of teaching and learning, research production and application of new knowledge, and service to society. Building regional capacity and collaboration is about setting agendas that can be achieved locally, subregionally, and regionally

using the expertise, programs, research, and technology transfer across the region. The key is collaboration that strengthens the region and creates opportunities for economic and social development that would transform the lives of all citizens in the region.

This article has examined the key functional, organizational, and political approaches and strategies to higher education regionalization in the Arab states. The first objective was to examine the conceptual underpinnings and analytical framework for understanding the phenomenon of higher education regionalization, which was done by discussing the FOPA model and applying it to the Arab region. The second objective focused on identifying and analyzing key developments and actors involved in regionalization in the Arab states during the last two decades, which demonstrated the multitude of organizations involved in higher education but the lack of major regional policy frameworks to promote and enable greater harmonization of policies and collaboration among national higher education systems and institutions. The third objective examined the major issues and challenges facing the Arab states region, which were many and included the lack of a governance structure and funding, political instability, and keen interest in looking outside the region for opportunities to participate in funded research, mobility and academic partnerships. The fourth objective was to encourage researchers, leaders in higher education institutions and organizations, government officials, and the academic community in general to undertake more reflection, robust research, and policy making on higher education regionalization in the Arab states.

Overall, the analysis shows that the Arab states have been actively engaging in a wide range of collaborative activities among their national higher education organizations and institutions through building regional networks and fora, establishing regional databases, and conducting summits and conferences that emphasize the importance of an integrated and harmonized regional higher education system. Nevertheless, the commitment to the regionalization of higher education is negatively impacted by governance and resources issues, political instability, and the proliferation of many actors at national, regional, and international levels without effective coordination to maximize the impact of their work. This jeopardizes the realization of having a more integrated higher education system in the region to improve quality, access, research and knowledge production, and service to the community. While this study has highlighted factors that affect realizing an effective regionalization process, it is important to explore how other forces such as globalization and internationalization imperatives have affected developing a common higher education space in the Arab states.

Important to note is that the goal to advance regional Arab cooperation in higher education was first advocated in the UNDP Arab Human Development Report in 2002, yet it has seen little progress (Masri & Wilkens, 2011). In 2009, the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education launched an initiative and suggested to create an “Arab zone for higher education” (Ben Hafaiedh 2010, p. 99). While there is no further update about this initiative, it reflects the awareness of the importance of creating such common space in the region. This finding is supported by this current FOPA analysis of activities, plans, and programs to strengthen Arab states cooperation and improve higher education and research. While the intention may be strong, the implementation is still weak. There is progress in recognizing the importance of greater alignment of national policies for key areas such as QA, credit transfer and accumulation systems, qualification awarding, and recognition systems, but the operationalization of these new regional frameworks has been limited. Similarly, there is a recognition that developing regional collaborative initiatives such as regional centres of excellence, student and scholar exchange programs, intraregional mobility of programs and providers, postgraduate program guidelines,

regional data bases will bring multiple benefits, but there is lack of convincing evidence that significant advances are being made.

Higher education collaboration in the Arab states appears to focus more on bilateral and multilateral collaborative activities by universities and organizations than through regional based frameworks and programs. While this is a necessary and very important step, the regionalization process is yet to evolve to a more strategic and planned approach with a clear emphasis on operationalization through adequate investment and clear political commitments to implementation. In essence, the regionalization of higher education in the Arab states remains at the advocacy and planning stages for several core strategies.

The Arab states region is rich in history, culture, traditions, ethnicity, philosophy, religious values, and much more. Combined, these elements make of the Arab nation a distinguished entity that holds the Arab people together in one unified region. These assets can be utilized to build a stronger higher education and research landscape across the region. A fundamental prerequisite to embrace increased collaboration and harmonization among national higher education systems in the Arab states starts with a strong belief that education has the ability to transform the entire region. The contemporary examples of higher education regionalization in other parts of the world have resulted in achievements that would have remained beyond the reach of individual states and serve as an inspiration to the Arab region.

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