

Education Reform: A Generation in Waiting

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Significant and growing numbers of young people across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are being inadequately educated and are emerging from education systems with little or no employment prospects.

The evidence of underperformance in education systems in many countries in the region is well documented; low literacy rates, low secondary and higher education enrolment, high drop-out rates and high levels of unemployment.

Basic schooling that is taken for granted elsewhere is falling short. Education systems struggle to attract and retain good teaching staff and use old pedagogies with traditional models of learning, which leave students poorly equipped to function in more modern knowledge-based economies.

The issue is critically important because good quality education is a contributor to, but not in itself, a sufficient condition for economic growth. In spite of progress made recently, this does not seem to have translated into economic growth – and jobs – for many. Explanations for this might be the low level of quality of schooling and educational outcomes, but a more plausible explanation is that it is symptomatic of the structural imbalances in MENA economies. The absence of a vibrant private sector is critical in this regard. The scale of the problem is immense and growing, and unlike more mature developed economies, MENA doesn't have an ageing population, but one that is dominated by a large proportion of young people [two thirds of the population across the region are aged below 24.] What this means is that [x million] young people across the region are being short-changed, with the largest numbers unsurprisingly being in Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, Iraq and Libya.

How has the issue contributed to recent events?

In spite of increasing levels of spend across the region over many years, expectations have not been met. Basic schooling hasn't delivered the levels required in mathematics and literacy meaning many young people are unemployable in any occupation requiring basic numeracy and communication. Greater emphasis is required on science and mathematics, as currently almost two thirds of students graduate in social sciences and humanities. There is insufficient supply of students with competencies best suited to the economic development needs of the region. Also, the mismatch between expectations and economic return are most acute for those who stay in the system the longest. For those who have progressed to higher education, there is insufficient payback; the returns to higher education are low, and unemployment has disproportionately impacted on those who have graduated from higher education.

As a result of these failures, many young people feel not only disillusioned and economically disenfranchised, but also powerless to influence change for the better.

What does the vision of 'better' look like?

Better outcomes at primary, secondary and tertiary levels are all essential. Improvements in quality, primarily, but accompanied by the necessary increases in capacity and focus on technical skills. An education system needs to be able to respond to the needs of commerce and industry as well as government.

In our view, the three components that can help improve quality and develop a system that is responsive to the needs of economies are;

- Resources. Study after study reinforces the need for high calibre teaching staff as the main driver for successful outcomes. Experience needs to be imported – which is often expensive to attract and transient in nature.
- Performance management. Often an anathema to the teaching profession, but the need to link rewards and incentives to educational outcomes is an imperative. This type of mechanism is more familiar to those in the private sector than the public sector, and necessitates the availability of timely and accurate information.
- Accountability to stakeholders. Herein lies what is perhaps one of the key issues at the heart of the protestors complaints; the opportunity to influence how systems such as education and health are constructed and financed. In many MENA countries, there is no such mechanism.

What are the options for making change?

More of the same will not suffice. This does not mean that those MENA nations able to rely on greater spending to achieve their outcomes should seek to do so, but that reform should consider a wider range of options to generate change.

Options that leaders and policy makers should consider for education reform include:

- Giving more power to the people. Be willing to cede control to the local or institutional level, and allow people to influence the shape of education institutions, the ownership of institutions, or to play a role with schools (for example) that enables them to influence what education is delivered and how;
- Playing the role of market maker, by acting as a regulator and a buyer of services, not a provider. Governments should consider extending the role of the private sector – not just in infrastructure but in the full education value chain – in order to embed in the system the incentives that will drive change;
- Developing closer ties to industry and commerce and becoming more responsive to their needs. This may mean, for example, being prepared to partner in new ways. Government can be the co-ordinator of contributors rather than the benefactor and provider.
- Focus on delivering more vocational training that delivers increased employment rates. Programmes that do not require four year commitments for the prestige of a degree by a big name international partner.
- Be radical in thinking about performance management. Incentives, system information, measures of quality will all be necessary if much is to be achieved in a short timeframe.

Many such initiatives or approaches have precedents in international markets from which MENA governments can learn, but the imperative to accelerate reform on such a scale across the region is a unique challenge. Now more than ever, MENA governments need to think and act radically in reforming and investing in their education systems to secure sustainable change.

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