

Transnational Higher Education: Offshore campuses in the Middle East
Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Elizabeth Hanauer
May 2011

This paper maps the landscape of transnational higher education in the Middle East, focusing on the recent expansion of satellite, branch, and offshore educational institutions and programs that foreign, mostly American, institutions have set up in the region. Of the estimated hundred branch campuses currently operating worldwide, over one-third are in the Arab region and the majority have opened since 2000; two dozen additional transnational programs and universities exist in the region as well. We consider the rapid growth of this educational model in the Arab states in the context of two prevailing theories in comparative and international education: the neoinstitutionalist approach, which posits a global convergence of educational systems, and the culturalist theories, which argue for the importance of local borrowing and transfer of educational models. We argue that neither of these two theories is sufficient to explain the uniformity and rapidity with which the offshore transnational educational phenomenon has expanded in the Middle East, and call instead for a regional approach that combines elements from both theories.

In this paper, we identify four regional trends that can explain this phenomenon, specifically as it occurs in the countries from the Persian Gulf. The first of these are the historic, cultural, political, and tribal commonalities and interconnections between the Gulf states that define their regional identity. There is a tendency for these states to pay close attention to, and emulate, what their peers in the region are doing. This therefore can explain the adoption of similar higher education reform strategies across the region.

The second trend is based on regional economic and demographic transformations, particularly the shift toward post-Fordist ways of organizing economic-political power. This shift, identifiable on a global scale, is characterized by flexible and deterritorialized labor processes, markets, and patterns of consumption. In terms of training and education, this means moving away from rote learning and fixed curricula and toward an emphasis on practical skills, critical thinking, and creativity. It also means less reliance of the economy and the labor market on natural resources and physical strength and greater emphasis on human capital and developing the skills necessary for a knowledge-based global economy.

The emphasis on human capital has been evident in the Persian Gulf in several ways. First, regional instability over the past two decades led to a push for improved domestic human capital to make the region both globally competitive and less dependent on foreign and regional alliances for security. Second, demographic trends have also played a role. Almost 65 percent of the population in the Middle East is under the age of thirty, and some 20–40 percent of youth are unemployed—the lowest employment rate in the world. This results partly from a skills mismatch (the regional educational systems do not provide the competencies required for the countries' economic needs) and partly from the high dependency, particularly in the Persian Gulf, on an ex-patriot labor force. Finally, to compound the problem, the Arab world is faced with an eventual decline in what are currently substantial natural resources of oil and gas reserves, and alternative bases for local economies need to be developed.

As a third explanation of the current educational expansion, then, one has to look at the systems of higher education in the region. Traditionally, the Arab higher education landscape has been dominated by large, public universities that prepare graduates for high-status, stable public-sector jobs. There is an acknowledged problem with the poor quality of many institutions and

their ability to prepare the region's growing youth population for the twenty-first century knowledge economy where, according to the statistics, most of the jobs will be in the private sector. Further challenges are the high degree of centralization of the system, the lack of incentives for improvement, and limited mechanisms for reform or for evaluating reforms.

In some places, the development in the region of satellite and branch campuses of foreign institutions has gone hand-in-hand with comprehensive reform of higher education more generally. For the most part, satellite campuses are therefore not replacing local higher educational institutions, but rather appear to be offering specialized professional degrees (in fields such as business, IT, and health sciences, for example) that are not offered in existing universities in the region. One exception are the liberal arts programmes, which are rather unique in a region where technical skills are more highly valued. Even where offshore university programmes do not overlap (and thus compete) with local offerings, however, transnational offshore higher educational institutions may provide direct competition to local universities in other ways. Because they can pay higher salaries than local institutions, there is a risk that they would be able to attract the most qualified and talented students, faculty, and administrative staff from across the region (although most faculty are recruited from overseas). It is also significant that many of these institutions recruit students not only locally but regionally.

The final regional trend relates to the broader political liberalization taking place in the region over the past fifteen years. In the Persian Gulf, reforms have included the introduction of electoral practices, new rights for women's participation in elections, and changes in media and press laws. Educational reforms are seen by some Arab leaders as a necessary step in creating an educated public that can participate in the countries' economic and political life. Relatedly, as a result of a general interest in improving the education of women, increasing numbers of young women in the region are receiving formal education, leading to a demand for high-quality postsecondary opportunities.

A regionally-derived theory would examine the ways in which the four trends outlined above both draw on global reform ideas and recursively influence and respond to local policymaking decisions. A regionally-sensitive research approach to transnational higher education in the Middle East will recognize the need to place local developments in the context of the economic, political, and educational transformations in the region more broadly.

Several areas of this subject warrant further research. To begin with, more information is needed about foreign institutions setting up campuses or programs throughout the Middle East as well as about the opinions of students, faculty, and administrators at both offshore campuses and at longstanding local higher educational institutions. One way of achieving this is to track and classify institutions on a regular basis and to collect opinion surveys with students and teaching and administrative staff about their general attitudes toward the new campuses, student motivation for enrolling, faculty motivation for accepting positions, et cetera. In addition, we need more research about ordinary people's voices and the impact that such campuses have on local identities, culture, and education. We need to know more about how non-elites in the region are affected by these sweeping changes. Similarly, we need additional research on the social context in which these institutions are established. For example, there are no data tracing regional variations in whether and how the rights of faculty and students who are religious minorities or who are not heterosexual are being protected. Finally, we need to know more about the long-term impact of satellite and offshore campuses and programmes on youth unemployment and "brain drain" throughout the region, as well as on the long-term prospects of offshore educational programmes and campuses more generally.