Higher Education in the Arab World: Government and Governance

EDITED BY ADNAN BADRAN, ELIAS BAYDOUN, AND JOHN R. HILLMAN
Springer Cham, 2020, 344 pages.

The Arab world has more than 700 public and private universities that enroll more than 13 million students and have 183,000 faculty members. *Higher Education in the Arab World: Government and Governance*, edited by Adnan Badran, Elias Baydoun, and John R. Hillman, addresses the issue of education in the Arab context from the perspective of the lower standing of Arab universities in international ranking tables and the relative weakness of the Arab economies relative to those of the West. The volume’s topics range from the need for urgent change in Arab universities because of the unique challenges they face to potential pathways to a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship and improved government and governance in these institutions. The individual chapters for the most part shed light on essential aspects of higher education in Arab and Western countries to identify key challenges, update the current status of the issues, and offer possible models and solutions to address the underperformance of Arab universities.

The three distinguished editors of this volume joined the 19 other contributors to produce 14 chapters that explore and analyze the key governance issues facing universities in today’s Arab world. The perspective of government and governance that runs through all of the contributed pieces is one of proposing constructive recommendations for improvement. Taking the position that in the modern era governments and universities are inextricably linked, Shibli et al. claim that “Governance with respect to academic systems is the central tool for improving quality in all aspects of higher education” (p. 122). With that in mind, it is noteworthy that the book focuses more on universities than on other institutions of higher learning: “Although university education is a post-secondary level of education, it has to be differentiated from tertiary education that includes all education after the secondary cycle of technical, vocational, and community-college models of education” (p. 98).

While the earliest universities were established in Arab countries, such as Al Zaytounah in Tunisia and Qarawiyun in Morocco (734 AD and 859 AD, respectively), modern universities in Arab countries were established only as recently as the 20th century. Against that long historical arc,
however, Shibli et al. note in their contributed chapter that despite “the countless efforts of the Arab world to improve its educational sector and make it more rewarding and contributing, little, if any, has come to fruition. Instead, socio-economic development over the years has exhibited a downward trend” (p. 119). Several of the book’s contributors pick up on the historical aspect by identifying what governance and government mean and the origins of these words that were derived from the Greek verb *kubernao* (Chapters 1, 2, and 8). The governance concept was first implemented in early modern England in the late 15th century, when it referred to the arrangements governments undertook to govern and rule a country. The practical aspect of governance began to change in the 17th century, however, when an early corporate dispute in Denmark reflected ongoing changes in the social environment.

The book’s lengthy first chapter provides a contextual background that delves into the social-political factors, such as colonialism and the policy context following independence, that had an impact on national government policies and higher education in the Arab world. Hillman and Baydoun claim that “Arab governments are incapable of such an undertaking and since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire have fully deserved international assistance” (p. 69). They list a wide range of factors to include political instability, ingrained corruption, poor infrastructure, weak public finance, and inadequate quality and relevance of education systems. Their assertions in this regard could be interpreted as making a case against decolonization.

Hillman and Baydoun go on to state that

> complaining about governments is a long-standing feature of most countries. The level of dissatisfaction varies according to prevailing economic and social conditions and is not always dependent on the standard of living because expectations rise with time, particularly as comparisons are made with other seemingly more successful economies. (p.7)

They point out that Arab countries have generally been viewed as zones of conflict and crisis in the period since the Israeli occupation of Palestine, a characterization that was bolstered by the Arab Spring and the effect that had on democratic norms. For example, “several governments show great reluctance to allow people unrestrained use of the internet” (p. 22). According to the analysis of Shibli et al. in chapter five, corruption, political instability, and security-oriented governments continue to underpin socio-economic crises and human-rights violations that impede the growth and prosperity of academic institutions. To avoid such failings, Hillman and Baydoun maintain that “governments should base their policies on Adam
Smith’s values of an ‘ethically based liberal democratic system’ and ‘moral commitment’” (p. 28). Nonetheless, “governments are expected to plan for the future, not least by supporting or permitting the advancement of soft infrastructures . . . [and] . . . should be obliged to invest in universities and advanced education institutions through various mechanisms” (p. 5). At the same time, universities should be expected to foster independent social and analytical analysis and develop learners’ competencies.

A number of chapters in the book are devoted to different paradigms of university governance such as Trackman’s model (academic, corporate, trustee, and representational) and Braun’s cube of governance (Findikli, 2017) which, according to Zabalawi et al., positions higher-education systems into three blocks: 1) A non-utilitarian/utilitarian culture, with a degree of service and client orientation; 2) A loose/tight procedural model, allowing for a degree of administrative control by the state; or 3) A loose/tight substantive model, where there is a degree of goal-setting capacity of government. (p. 201)

There is also a fairly wide-ranging geographic orientation among the volume’s chapters that explore different aspects of education governance in Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco (Chapter 6), Jordan (Chapters 7 and 8), Lebanon (Chapters 9 and 10), Morocco (Chapter 12), Suwar University in Oman (Chapter 11) and Syria (Chapter 13). These case studies for the most part describe models and examples of governance that have been deemed by most observers to involve practices that have improved the quality of the education systems.

Hillman and Baydoun summarize the factors that affect universities’ complex relationships with governments. The wide-ranging analysis delves into funding models, legal and organizational structure, and decision-making capabilities, as well as overregulation, management transparency, and the need to reform corruption. Chapter 9 presents a detailed study of Lebanon to show how government and governance has evolved in a society with a variety of religious and ethnic minorities. Throughout most of the book’s chapters the authors try to portray models or guidelines that can help identify the indicators and dimensions in different forms of governance because “higher-education institutions need to develop a creative balance between academic mission and executive capacity, and between financial viability and traditional values” (p. 128). At the same time, these analyses sometimes conclude that indicators such as ranking systems may not always give an accurate picture. For example, wealthier universities can use the tactic of “appointing established eminent foreign-based academics,
often without those new staff members actually being based in the university but [benefit from] their publications and other measures of esteem” (p. 42). The point also is made that “at the professorial level, university professors currently lack a much-needed motivation; in general, they have lost their morale and sense of good citizenship towards their institutions and countries” (p. 128).

Education leaders in the Arab world clearly need to develop competencies that will help them address the introduction of new specialized areas of learning, the adoption of new teaching methodologies, and the impact of internationalization and technological change on higher education. The book appropriately emphasizes that the dissolution of stakeholder involvement poses an unprecedented challenge. Sharaf and Helal suggest that the most critical competencies will be those that facilitate networking with other local and international academic institutions and building relationships with university boards of trustees and other governance bodies. The dominant underlying theme of the book is that institutions of higher learning will have to connect with other national groups, remove the gaps within their own industry, and connect with their international counterparts. Entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary mobility, self-learning, competition, and innovation skills will frame the right pathway for the future of students and institutions.

The book sheds light on an important and timely topic as it uses contemporary voices to reimagine education in the aftermath of the pandemic, but the editors and authors do not effectively clarify an underlying epistemology or methodology in the presentation. While higher education is the title’s subject, the individual chapters focus only on universities and neglect to mention other institutions, such as international branch campuses, community colleges, and vocational centers, that are of increasing importance to the education process. One exception appears in chapter eight by Zabalawi et al., where they state that community colleges “should not be viewed as a refuge for students who perform poorly at school but rather as a valued and valid experiential means of learning as an alternative to the traditional academic pathway” (p. 210). The fact that many highly valued companies, such as Google and Microsoft, offer certificates instead of traditional degrees, and that many countries have changed their policies might have been mentioned.

Despite the overall strength of the book’s presentation, many sections should have been supported by references and the authors could have been more straightforward in clarifying their positions on the issues discussed.
For instance, some chapters lacked a clear connection to the main theme, such as the discussion in the second chapter on universities in the UK that offers no linkage to similar institutions in Arab countries. This omission seems particularly pertinent as universities in Arab countries often have international branch campuses. In addition, several of the authors focus on defining governance and government without adequately clarifying their own definitions of leadership, management, and administration. The book essentially follows Western approaches in exploring higher education without bringing into the discussion the uniqueness of Arabs’ and Muslims’ contributions during the Golden Ages or how educators could build on an approach focused on both this life and preparing individuals for the afterlife (Sellami et al., 2022).

Religion affects higher education directly or indirectly, so this text might have been expected to explore and highlight clearly either issues related to Islamophobia or the depth of curriculum design and research methods. Religion also is connected to the scope of academic freedom, which affects not only scholars but student leadership and international contributions as well. The book presents several organizational structures without clarifying how to promote a research culture that supports administrative and non-teaching faculty or pracademics (Chaaban et al., 2022) to open a pathway for higher-education communities in these nations. The book nonetheless offers encouragement to researchers to investigate higher-educational leadership in Arab countries with a focus on producing knowledge and recognizing indigenous Arabs’ and Muslims’ contributions.

References

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DOI: 10.2979/jems.5.1.09