Degrees of Dignity

Buckner, Elizabeth

Published by University of Toronto Press

Buckner, Elizabeth.
Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era.
University of Toronto Press, 2022.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/109106.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109106
DEGREES OF DIGNITY
This page intentionally left blank
In 2016, I spent a summer in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. At the time, due to political gridlock the country had been without a president for over two years. Meanwhile Beirut was in the middle of a garbage crisis: the authorities had closed the city’s main landfill and given residents no alternative disposal, so trash was literally piling up on the streets. Every day I would walk the length of the city centre from my apartment in Mar Mikhael, an artistic, gentrifying neighbourhood in the east, to the American University of Beirut (AUB), a symbol of elite higher education overlooking the Mediterranean in the western part of the city. As I wound through the narrow streets, I passed crumbling colonial-era buildings that had not been rebuilt after the end of the civil war in 1990; garbage heaps, a symbol of current government dysfunction; and churches and mosques side by side, testifying to the country’s sectarianism. I then passed through the ostentatious, empty downtown, which had been rebuilt with luxury boutiques to cater to the wealthy, a neighbourhood-sized manifestation of the country’s crony capitalism.

Along the way I was greeted by Beirut’s infamous street art: walls, bollards, and construction sites that were all covered in murals and graffiti, serving as public commentary on political issues. Scrawled behind a pile of trash was the phrase “The government is trash,” and on a wall leading into the new downtown was the phrase, in English, “When injustice becomes law, rebellion becomes duty.” On the ad hoc barriers of a construction site was the phrase, in Lebanese colloquial Arabic, “We are the country. We are the voice.” You simply cannot walk the streets of Beirut without seeing the city marked visibly by the spirit and creativity of its people, demanding more from their government.

Eventually I would make it to the university, which seemed to shimmer in comparison. Its historic ivy-covered buildings were spotless, and its campus filled with majnouneh vines and their bright pink
flowers and with shady groves of banyan, cypress, and olive trees. Visitors were greeted by a banner proudly celebrating the university’s one hundred and fiftieth anniversary: “AUB 150 – We Make History.” On its business school façade another banner celebrated its position on the QS World University Rankings by Subject in 2015: “Among the elite we rank, leading the Arab world.”

The contrast was clear: outside these gates there was a complicated and politicized Lebanon, but inside there was a private, elite, English-speaking, world-class institution devoted to providing a non-sectarian, liberal education. Throughout its history AUB has been a symbol of prestige, educating generations of the region’s political and cultural elites and promising to be a bastion of liberal values in an illiberal region. And yet, as I entered its iconic main gate, I could not help but see the stark contrast between these two worlds as reflecting the most pressing issues facing Arab higher education today – the seeming inability of the government to meet its citizens’ needs; the divide between the public and the private; economic inequalities and the role of language in perpetuating them; tensions between serving a local community and pursuing global status; and, fundamentally, the university’s isolation from or integration into the political and social life beyond its gates.

While in Beirut, I met with Dr. Adnan El Amine, director of the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies and an expert on Arab higher education. Dr. El Amine reflected on his life’s work to improve higher education in the region, much of it focused on the topic of quality assurance. He explained: “After the Arab Spring, I thought about all our work on improving quality. But now, I don’t think that quality is the problem. The more pressing questions are: What is the role of higher education in creating civic values? What is the university doing to promote the stability and social cohesion of the society?”

His questions proved remarkably prescient. Three years later Lebanon witnessed unprecedented nationwide protests, which started in October 2019 and upended society over the next few months. These spontaneous protests called for an end to the government’s crippling sectarianism and corruption and ultimately led to the prime minister’s resignation. University students and professors were important players in this movement; they took to the streets, calling for change and demanding a better future. Higher education policy was also on the reform agenda, with protesters calling for the government to address graduate unemployment and grant the Lebanese University greater autonomy.

Lebanon’s 2019 demonstrations were only the latest in a string of protests throughout the region that have defined much of the decade since the Arab Spring, the term coined to describe the various
people-led demonstrations and revolutions in the Arab world that began in late 2010. Starting in December 2010, Tunisians of all backgrounds took to the streets to outcry at economic stagnation and regime corruption. Peaceful protests then spread to Egypt in early 2011 and led to more violent revolutions in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria (L. Anderson, 2011). In academic circles and the popular media the Arab Spring’s call for “bread, freedom, and dignity” has been understood as a demand for economic and political justice, motivated by inequality, poverty, unemployment, repression, and corruption. Young people and their discontents have been central to understandings of the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and they continue to be protagonists in ongoing protests in the region.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, higher education in many parts of the region has been indelibly changed. Conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have resulted in attacks on universities, in scholarly flight, and in the fragmentation of national academic communities (Dillabough et al., 2018). Civil conflict in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have displaced millions, mostly within the region, including hundreds of thousands of university-age refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt (Barakat & Milton, 2015). Crackdowns on academic freedom have occurred in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), signalling rising authoritarianism occurring across many parts of the region (Holmes & Aziz, 2019). Meanwhile, university students and professors in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon have staged large-scale strikes and boycotts to protest low-quality employment or high rates of unemployment among university graduates, proposed austerity measures, and privatization.

Yet conversations about the causes and consequences of the Arab Spring have barely touched on the role of education generally, or of higher education in particular, in shaping young people’s lives and opportunities. Scholars of Middle Eastern politics have tended to focus on who holds power and how they maintain it, largely ignoring what they do with their power to shape social policies such as those on education. In the decade after the Arab Spring their interest focused on explaining the region’s return to authoritarianism. Meanwhile, international development agencies, such as the World Bank, have much to say about education: they draw on economic theories of labour productivity to criticize higher education in the region as inefficient and ineffective. Technical and policy reports suggest, and subsequently fund, a host of reforms based on generic best practices in international development, frequently with little consideration of the specific national context or the reasons such reform efforts often fail.
Even worse, policy discussions of higher education in the region often adopt a neocolonial or orientalist gaze that casts the region’s educational systems as failures, largely because they lack the financial resources of systems in Europe and North America. When a lack of resources cannot be blamed, some critiques resort to cultural accounts, suggesting that the region’s “traditional” values are incompatible with modernity or that the region’s Islamic heritage stymies intellectual inquiry (Lavergne, 2004; Sukarieh, 2017). A recent article in the *Financial Times* offers a typical assessment of education in the region, stating that “stultifying rote learning is overlain with a narrow-minded religiosity that stifles curiosity, critical thinking, originality and self-expression” (Gardner, 2017). These discussions of higher education in the Arab world are then linked to broader discourses on youth disenfranchisement, regional instability, and terrorism (Chaaban, 2009; Chakir, 2008; Fuller, 2003; Hendrixson, 2003; Street, Kabbani, & al-Oraibi, 2006).

Clearly, higher education policy in Arab societies is a dynamic arena that invokes both normative questions and contentious policy debates. However, as long as political scientists largely ignore education, and economists ignore its social and political aspects, important questions regarding higher education reform in the Arab Middle East remain largely unaddressed. There is a pressing need for more nuanced conversations about higher education in the Arab Middle East that view higher education as a socio-cultural and politically consequential institution, while also fully rejecting stereotypes of Arab societies as inherently lacking.

This book critiques technical and universalizing prescriptions and instead brings a comparative perspective to analyse contemporary higher education in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. It asks why countries adopt certain policies and what their effects are. I document how the entrenchment of particular discourses in development, namely the knowledge economy and neoliberalism, has resulted in the legitimation of certain policy models for higher education reform that have dramatically shaped the nature of educational reforms in the Arab world. Through multilevel and comparative analysis, I examine how globally circulating discourses map onto specific national contexts across the region, to identify the diverse ways in which reform is occurring and the ways in which external reform models are contested and undermined by different actors. Ultimately I argue that higher education in the Arab world is a socio-political institution that links the fates of students and states, and discussions of reform must recognize the role and interests of local constituencies, the power and inertia of institutionalized
practices, and the inherently politicized nature of state-sponsored educational reform.

Higher Education and the Arab State in the Global Era

In the years before the Arab Spring, policy analysts expressed concern over the inability of Arab states to incorporate youth into socioeconomic life, and the region’s many disaffected unemployed young people were viewed as ripe for mobilization or radicalization (Assaad & Roudi-Fahimi, 2007; Dhillon & Yousef, 2011; Sukarieh, 2017; Yusuf, 2008). For many observers, concerns over Arab youth came to fruition in the Arab Spring. The story now told about the Arab Spring characterizes it as a movement led primarily by young people connected by mobile phones and social media. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Yemen were young people dissatisfied with their lack of opportunities for political and economic participation (al-Momani, 2011; L. Anderson, 2011). University students and professors helped organize anti-regime protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, often marching from campuses to public squares (Kohstall, 2015; Slama, 2013), and campus demonstrations have been integral to ongoing protest movements in the region (L. Anderson, 2012; Dorio, 2017). Yet, this narrative also erases the significant roles that others, including religious movements, labour unions, and political parties, have played, and it places undue blame on young people for the repression and violence that has followed (Sukarieh, 2017).

Young people cannot become the scapegoats of the instability that the region faces. Yet, their discontents were real then and remain important today. The problems that Arab states face are not only those of non-representative political systems, heavy-handed militaries, or high rates of corruption; in fact, these are manifestations of low levels of state legitimacy linked to the perceived lack of social and economic opportunity (Cammack et al., 2017; Guazzone & Pioppi, 2012; Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2015; Zemni, 2017). Political scientists have argued that one of the underlying causes of the Arab Spring was the “breakdown” of “the social contract in which the autocratic regimes had offered limited socioeconomic benefits in exchange for loyalty” (Weipert-Fenner & Wolff, 2015, p. 3). Echoing this sentiment, Abdelwahab Alkebsi, the former director of the Middle East division at the National Endowment for Democracy, a US-based non-profit foundation that seeks to strengthen global democracy, stated in 2012 that the “uprisings were not just a rejection of leaders. They were a rejection of an archaic and dysfunctional social contract that left citizens dependent on their states”
The inability of Arab states to provide their young people with economic opportunity, social mobility, and a sense of progress continues to undermine their legitimacy. Discussions of state legitimacy are closely related to higher education. A country’s higher education system establishes both material and ideological links between young people and the state. Commenting on an earlier wave of social unrest, the social theorist Immanuel Wallerstein (1969) stated: “the government needs the university, as it needs the church, as it needs the arts, as it needs the major political and economic structures ... to say over and over that it is worthy of support” (p. 32). As the most easily recognizable and legitimated source of knowledge and advanced training, the university has been a catalyst of state- and nation-building for over two hundred years (Herrera, 2006; Mazawi, 2005). In the period after independence, universities in the Middle East became symbols of social mobility, national unity, and economic development, playing their part in the larger efforts to consolidate power under a centralized state, strengthen the political legitimacy of the ruling regime, and educate civil servants for an independent post-colonial nation state. Yet, in the wake of the Arab Spring, it has become clear that higher education systems are no longer fulfilling popular aspirations for opportunity and mobility. Wilkens and Masri (2011) explain that young people have “deep frustrations with the existing status quo – not least of which is the failure of the social contract for advancement that should be offered by higher education” (p. iii). One reason for this seeming disconnect is that the world has changed. In the era of globalization, national university systems are being called upon to fulfil a new mandate: to produce highly educated and entrepreneurial workers for a globally competitive and mobile economy. This shift involves new models for how to provide, govern, and fund higher education, which have had profound impacts on young people’s pathways to adulthood.

The Limits of Technical Approaches

The shift from higher education for nation-building to higher education for global competitiveness is no easy undertaking. By many accounts, the Arab world is failing. John Waterbury, who previously served as president of AUB and adviser to the government of Abu Dhabi on higher education, begins his recent book, Missions Impossible: Higher Education and Policymaking in the Arab World (2020), by stating that “a premise of this study, so widely held that I doubt it would arouse any dissent, is that Arab higher education has been and remains in a state of structural crisis” (p. xii). Similarly, among international development
experts and national governments alike, a constant stream of reports decries the problems of higher education in the region – admissions, financing, governance, quality assurance, and scientific research.

Within development studies, critiques of the region’s higher education systems are typically rooted in human capital theory, which argues that formal education makes labour more productive and hence more economically valuable. For decades economists have argued that educational institutions in the region are of low quality and are not preparing youth with the knowledge and skills needed for productive employment (Chaaban, 2008; Kabbani & Kamel, 2007; World Bank, 2008b). Within policy studies, scholars have focused on issues of poor governance (Waterbury, 2020). In international development, studies focus on the inputs and outputs of the higher education system. People are rarely mentioned, except to the extent that they undermine effective implementation when they are unable or unwilling to carry out policies fully. To reduce the higher education system to its numbers – budgets, admission rates, quality assurance indicators, and research productivity (as technical approaches do) – is to largely ignore the reality of the everyday lived experiences of people as they navigate higher education systems and structures. The varied reasons for which young people attend university, including social status, parental pressure, boredom, and marriage, are largely ignored.

Moreover, reform approaches tend to look for quick-fix technical solutions in the form of privatization, public-private partnerships, quality assurance mechanisms, or the wholesale importation of international best practices or foreign university campuses. Waterbury (2020) laments the fact that not only is much of the empirical research on higher education in the Arab world carried out by donors and international governmental organizations, but it is overwhelmingly prescriptive, focusing on what should be done, with little contextualization of how such reforms could be accomplished. Andre Mazawi (2005) has similarly criticized the narrow focus on issues of management or policy, arguing that “scant research attention is given to the social, cultural, and political underpinnings” of higher education in the region (p. 133). For decades, scholars in the region have pushed back against the idea of quick-fix technical reforms. In 1997, A. Halim stated that “the World Bank propose[d] to ‘reform’ our education to open the country to a modern, competitive economy, while not recognizing the role of education in forming either the character of students, or their national identity” (Emran, 1997, p. 6). Yet, large-scale, foreign-funded reform projects continue.

In contrast to dominant technical approaches, anthropologists and qualitative researchers have made important contributions to the study
of education in the Arab world, shedding light on the ways in which educational systems socialize young people as loyal national citizens and gendered subjects or sort them into different life paths (Adely, 2012; Boutieri, 2016; Cantini, 2016; Cohen, 2004; Vora, 2018). Their studies are based on in-depth analyses of young people’s lived experiences within particular educational institutions and communities. Development actors, however, rarely engage with these studies. In general, qualitative accounts of young people’s lives seldom seem to inform pressing policy debates in higher education development. Moreover, despite their important insights, given their focus on particular local contexts, ethnographic studies rarely explicitly compare countries, leaving many important and policy-relevant questions unanswered, such as how and why higher education systems in the region vary.

In short, current approaches to studying education in the region tend to be either one-size-fits-all, grounded in universalizing economic theories, or localized ethnographic accounts. Despite a few notable exceptions (see Mazawi, 2005, 2007, 2009; Ridge, 2014; and Waterbury, 2020), there have been few studies that draw on the theoretical and conceptual tools offered by comparative education to examine how global trends and local dynamics intersect to affect Arab higher education systems in different ways. This book draws on a comparative and multilevel analysis to examine how global models intersect with national political factors to shape higher education in the Arab world, while also exploring how individuals are navigating the changing policies and opportunity structures in their own lives.

A Multilevel and Comparative Approach

To move beyond the technical and universalizing perspectives that dominate the development literature, a new approach is needed. This book adopts a multilevel and comparative perspective to analyse higher education systems in the region. Its starting premise is that higher education systems are inherently social and political institutions. In line with this view, neither higher education reform nor its implementation is a purely technical process of determining what works and just doing it, but rather they occupy what Mazawi (2005) calls “contested terrain” (p. x). In taking this approach, I draw on Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) who argue that education policy must be viewed as “a deeply political process of cultural production engaged in and shaped by social actors in disparate locations who exert incongruent amounts of influence” (p. 132). This socio-cultural perspective calls attention to the role of powerful ideas, institutions, and actors in shaping policy reform and implementation.
In my multilevel approach I draw on a long-standing tradition in comparative education that situates educational systems within global, national, and local contexts. Scholars of comparative education have shown how global actors, processes, and institutions affect national higher education policies throughout the world (McNeely, 1995; Mundy, Green, Lingard, & Verger, 2016). Those writing from the perspective of sociological neo-institutionalism and its application to global phenomena in the world society tradition have documented significant shifts in ideas about education over time that have filtered down and shaped reforms in diverse national contexts (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Ramirez, 2012). These global discourses and policy models are being adopted in Arab higher education systems that vary geographically, economically, and politically. The process of adaptation to the national level generates wide-ranging outcomes, and scholars of the region have argued that we must pay more attention to how global discourses and policy models interact with long-standing local structures to effect change, including how global models are adapted and resisted by local actors (Cantini, 2017; Guazzzone & Pioppi, 2012). To understand and theorize local variation, I draw on the comparative method to examine how global discourses and policy models affect national education systems, why reforms do or do not take hold in a given context, and how they become modified in distinct national contexts.

The Global Arena in Education and Development

Over the past three decades a rich literature in comparative education has shown that even seemingly national policy domains such as higher education are affected by global processes. Scholars writing from the world society tradition in comparative education have shown that since the Second World War there has been an intensification and diffusion of particular cultural norms at the global level that emphasize ideals of human rights and commitments to progress through rationality, science, and development (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). A central argument in the world society tradition is that the global cultural environment is imbued with, and circulates, particular scripts or models that serve as normative prescriptions. These models are powerful because they confer legitimacy to the actors who implement them, and serve as evidence that actors are in accordance with wider norms and standards (Meyer et al., 1997; Ramirez, 2012). Discussing how discourses are adopted in the Arab world in particular, Farag (2010) explains that alignment to global standards constitutes the proof
that “rulers are willing to adapt societal realities to what seems to be rational and modern norms” (p. 288).

Changes in the global cultural environment have had a profound effect on educational systems. Throughout the world, states have legitimized geographic boundaries through claims to a common linguistic or cultural heritage (Zemni, 2017). Mass educational systems were used to inculcate and socialize citizens, and higher education systems were used to train elites to run modern states and economies in the name of modernization and development. In terms of policy, states’ legitimacy has become increasingly linked to economic development and social welfare. Fourcade (2006) calls this the “reconstruction and rationalization of states as economic actors” (p. 165), in which “‘acting’ upon the economy was redefined as a normal and desirable expression of state power” (p. 162).

The fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ushered in a new era of intensified global integration, spurred by the liberalization of trade and increased global mobility. Two of the most powerful ideas in current approaches to development are the knowledge economy and neoliberalism. Their rationales have become taken for granted to justify particular reforms in higher education. They have been diffused by powerful global actors, including the World Bank (WB), the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and donors such as the United States and the European Union, in the form of specific policy models, such as privatization and quality assurance (Dale, 2005; McNeely, 1995).

The knowledge economy discourse positions the creation and application of knowledge as central to national economic development (Robertson, 2005). Its idea is underpinned by the seeming consensus that knowledge is playing an increasingly important role in promoting economic growth (C.W. Jones, 2012; Powell & Snellman, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). While economists have long recognized the importance of human capital in the form of skilled labour in increasing economic efficiency, the idea that underpins the knowledge economy discourse is that knowledge itself supports economic growth by spurring innovations and technological progress. Economists have found that returns to knowledge-intensive industries have increased relative to other sectors such as manufacturing. Furthermore, economists of education have found that the pay-off to a university degree has increased relative to the pay-off to secondary education in countries around the world (Carnoy, Froumin, Loyalka, & Tilak, 2014). However, even while the knowledge economy has become a policy buzzword, there is actually no theoretically precise definition of a knowledge economy (C.W. Jones, 2012; Robertson, 2005).
Lack of definition notwithstanding, one of the most striking effects of the knowledge economy discourse is the idea that education at all levels, including higher education, is both possible and desirable for ever larger proportions of youth. This global commitment to access, grounded in a belief in education as a human right and a catalyst for development, has put pressure on most countries to expand access to higher education (Frank & Meyer, 2007; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). It has also had implications for the content of curricula and pedagogies and is associated with national reforms and initiatives at all levels of education. Specifically, knowledge economy discourses are associated with the need to develop particular individual traits, including achievement motivation and risk-taking. Scholars are interested in the extent to which education can promote particular outcomes, which are deemed important in helping countries prepare their young people to participate in competitive labour markets and knowledge-intensive industries; these attributes include the motivation to succeed and an interest in working in the private sector or in entrepreneurship (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2006; Souitaris, Zerbinati, & al-Laham, 2007). Education in the knowledge economy is also associated with high rates of global labour mobility, which has put a greater emphasis on cross-cultural competencies (Nielsen, 2012).

The knowledge economy discourse has also put pressure on the university as an engine of development through its knowledge-production role (Frank & Meyer, 2007). Inter-governmental organizations, such as the WB and UNESCO, have encouraged national investment in research and development and pressured universities to prove their status as world-class institutions that are contributing to national and global development (World Bank, 2000). The knowledge economy discourse has been both powerful and contested in the Arab region (Mazawi, 2007, 2009). In Mazawi’s (2007) critical take, the knowledge economy discourse cannot be divorced from “unequal power frameworks associated with Western colonialism and imperialism” that continue to affect knowledge production in the region (p. 255). Other scholars argue that at issue is not the knowledge economy discourse per se but rather a simplistic equation of abstract secular science with knowledge. They call for a reclaiming of the idea of the knowledge society within an Islamic epistemology, recognizing that knowledge and learning have always been important to Islam and Muslim-majority societies (Akdere, Russ-Eft, & Eft, 2006; Halstead, 2004).

A second powerful discourse that has dominated development thinking since the 1980s is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an ideology that extends principles from classical economic theory to broad
domains of social life (Colclough, 1996; Harvey, 2007). It contends that social policies of all sorts, including education, should adopt market principles, including deregulation and consumer choice. Neoliberalism manifests in particular policy prescriptions, but also it has a broader impact on many domains of social life. In particular, it bases social policy on notions of competition, efficiency, and rational choice. This ideology has had an impact on both nation states and individuals. In terms of policy, neoliberalism has been associated with the deregulation of labour markets and the reduction of government spending. Programs that provided economic security have been dismantled as expensive and inefficient. In their place, workers are encouraged to compete with one another for positions in education and the labour market. In addition, nation states are increasingly portrayed as in competition with one another for resources, such as investments, jobs, and human resources. In education, rather than viewing themselves as purely or primarily national institutions, universities are engaged in international competition and comparison. Sociologist Gili Drori (2000) calls this perspective “public and political interest in international comparisons of educational performance” (p. 28).

Moreover, by relying on market-based conceptions of service delivery, neoliberal policies have resulted in commodification, thereby changing the relationships between students and their educational institutions – with students being increasingly viewed as “consumers” or “clients” in a global market for credentials. In the Arab world the embrace of neoliberal economic policies in higher education and the labour market has dismantled former sources of economic security and nation-building and left young people isolated and economically insecure (Cohen, 2004; Dhillon, Dyer, & Youssef, 2009). Additionally, neoliberal policies have been associated with growing socio-economic inequalities and raise concerns about the entrenchment of class hierarchies and social divisions through privatized spaces and services.

The entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies has also had well-documented consequences on individuals. Anthropologists and others have documented how neoliberal ideologies have changed state-citizen relations by extending market principles to social interactions (Sukarieh, 2016); individuals are expected to attain success through competition and self-reliance. In this conception, education becomes “recast as the individual’s personal investment in his or her own future, rather than as a common or public good” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 2). In the Arab world, Mazawi (2007) argues that neoliberal
education reforms have sought to “produce a civic identity associated with an autonomous, flexible, and economically productive citizen” (p. 263). Similarly, young people are framed as autonomous “choosers” who have greater choice over their education and labour-market paths (Adely, 2009). Competition is framed as inherently efficient, and, relatedly, the negative effects of competition, such as the creation of “winners” and “losers,” are often ignored. The pervasive sense of competition is not always benign – young people are coming of age in societies, with greater economic insecurity and increasing anxieties about the future (Shirazi, 2020).

Reconstituting the Local

Global ideas and expertise often change national policies. Global ideas and actors, including international financial institutions that lend money to low- and middle-income countries, have the power to change policies, systems, and opportunity structures in societies worldwide, particularly in those low- and middle-income countries. In examining the power of international development on economic policies, Fourcade (2006) argues that foreign experts have the ability to “impose their own definition of reality – their norms, concepts, language, tools, and so on – to eventually engage in a profound reconstruction of the local economic setting” (p. 150). Despite Arab states’ long histories of public commitments to individual opportunity and prosperity through education and public-sector employment, discourses of the knowledge economy and neoliberalism increasingly recast the purpose of education more narrowly as “work” and position individuals as carrying the primary responsibility for their fates (Mazawi, 2007).

Yet, changes to national and local systems are messy and impartial because global models are carried into contexts that have long-standing, distinctive, often contrasting traditions, and they frequently encounter groups whose interests are not compatible with desired reforms. Farag (2010) explains that global scripts must “work with, on, and around national histories and political constraints” (p. 289). Similarly, Cantini (2017) explains that while the discourses affecting higher education in the Arab world “are truly global” (p. 262), the outcomes are diverse and include “appropriation, mixing, rejection, and resistance” (Cantini, 2016, p. 61). Understanding why and how similar reform models result in different outcomes requires comparative analysis. In the chapters that follow, I examine specific policy domains across countries to understand how global policy models are reconstituted, negotiated, and
resisted in local settings, and to shed light on the factors affecting the implementation of national policies.

Local Contestation, Power, and Privilege

Within their distinct country contexts, individuals interpret and navigate their changing higher education systems in various ways, with diverse goals and substantially different levels of resources at their disposal. Educational systems in the Arab region from pre-school to higher education, as around the world, are deeply unequal in terms of access, attainment, and outcomes (Assaad, Salehi-Isfahani, & Hendy, 2014; Salehi-Isfahani, Hassine & Assaad, 2014). Privileged groups, including upper classes and political elites, are able to take advantage of the expanding higher education systems and changing opportunity structures for their own benefit (Jackson & Buckner, 2016). They also have the resources to evade the consequences of academic failure that groups from lower classes likely do not. Part of the story of higher education reform in the Arab world, then, involves understanding how young people from different backgrounds understand, interpret, and differentially navigate their changing educational systems and societies. This includes bringing attention to the fact that educational opportunities and responses to changing environments vary across social classes.

In the chapters that follow, I weave together the complex and often contradictory stories of young people and their perceptions of opportunity, as they are shaped in and by experiences of higher education. I show how young people are acutely aware of the inequality of opportunity they face, and discuss both the many emotions that this situation generates, from frustration to anger, and the strategies that those studying and working in higher education use to navigate that changing opportunity structures.

In figure 0.1, I visualize the comparative and multilevel analysis that guides the book’s analysis. The figure depicts the multiple scales and the myriad actors involved in higher education reform in the Arab world. At the global level, the figure highlights the powerful role of development discourses and organizations to generate specific policy models. At the national level, I outline various country characteristics, including demographic, economic, and political factors, that shape the adoption of these policy models in different countries in the region. Finally, at the individual level, I label the major stakeholders who then absorb and navigate such reforms, while also recognizing that there is great diversity within each group.
This book focuses on the Arab Middle East and North Africa, a multilingual, multi-ethnic, and geographically and religiously diverse region of the world. I concentrate on eight countries from three subregions where I have lived, studied, and conducted research over the past fifteen years: Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in the Middle East and Levant; Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa; and the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. Although these countries today use Arabic as an official language, and the majority of their citizens identify as Muslim, they also vary economically, culturally, politically, and geographically. Recognizing the region’s diversity, I do not consider the peoples of the Arab Middle East and North Africa to have a common history, and I acknowledge the many divisions and ongoing political conflicts within the region. Nonetheless, in the post–Second World War era, the countries from Morocco to Iraq have been grouped together as a world region in the field of international development, and, not coincidentally, their approaches to education policy have many commonalities.

Over the past fifteen years I have studied the role of higher education in the Middle East and North Africa, inside and outside of classrooms – in lecture halls, formal and informal interviews, academic conferences,
and campus visits. I have spoken to a broad range of stakeholders in higher education, including current and former ministers of higher education; civil servants; university presidents, deans, professors, students, and graduates; and those who never completed secondary school. I have also consulted with journalists, civil society organizations, and researchers at think-tanks to understand diverse perspectives on higher education in the region.

In 2006–8, I was a Fulbright scholar in Morocco, teaching English at the Mohammed V University in Rabat. In 2009–10, I lived in the old medina of Damascus and spent my evenings interviewing university-age students in Syria to understand their perceptions of higher education opportunity. Throughout 2013–14, I lived in Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, researching higher education reform and the growth of private higher education. In 2015–17, I was a visiting scholar at the Al Qasimi Foundation in the UAE, and in 2016, I was a visiting fellow at the American University of Beirut. In this book I draw on numerous sources of data including national and international statistics; media accounts; policy documents; and interviews with students, university professors and administrators, as well as higher education policymakers. I also draw on my own experiences living and travelling throughout the region; having countless informal daily conversations, including stories shared by taxi drivers, Arabic tutors, and family friends; and visiting public and private universities, sitting in on lectures, and teaching my own courses.

**Organization of the Book**

Although much of the research on higher education in the Arab world deals with individual countries, this book focuses on comparisons across countries. Each chapter addresses one of five key policy domains: access, quality, privatization, internationalization, and research. It first discusses how the issue is approached in international development, drawing on documents published by the WB, think-tanks, or other development agencies. It then reconsiders the technical approach by repositioning each policy issue as an arena of political and social contestation. I argue that hidden beneath each of these technical discussions are normative questions and contested visions of the role of the university, and the state, in its citizens’ lives: Who should reap the benefits of higher education? What benefits should a university credential confer? Who should pay for or profit from young people’s aspirations for higher education? What should the role of the university be in forging national unity? And what types of knowledge are valued?
Chapter 1 contextualizes subsequent discussions of higher education in the Arab world by providing a brief history of higher learning in the region and offering an overview of contemporary higher education in the book’s eight focal countries. It prefaces later debates by arguing that higher education in the region has never been apolitical; rather, it has always been closely linked to the legitimacy of leaders.

The first debate in which I engage concerns the question of access: who gains admission and how do they do so? Chapter 2 argues that admissions systems in every country in the region reflect broader socio-political contracts between the state and society. It also shows how, in the global era, admissions systems are being contested or evaded through cheating and being manipulated through private tutoring or private higher education.

Next, I go inside the university to examine how countries have been reforming policies to improve quality. Chapter 3 deconstructs the “quality crisis” in the region and the way that development actors and foreign experts have pushed countries to adopt a particular model of quality assurance in the region. It argues that the technical literature, which focuses on quantitative indicators of the quality of higher education, ignores the relational and positional aspects of higher education, and that new definitions of quality are necessary. It calls for new ways of defining and conceptualizing higher education quality.

Chapter 4 addresses the rapid growth of private higher education in the region. Privatization is touted in much of the development literature as an apolitical approach to expanding access without additional public funding. Drawing on interviews with students and families, I argue that private higher education in the Arab world is, in fact, highly political. Private higher education is viewed as undermining commitments to public education in many Arab nations, while also allowing the wealthy and well-connected to profit from students’ desires for education. Even in the countries where the private sector is not contested, it reflects and likely reproduces existing demographic divisions.

Chapter 5 focuses on the international dimensions of Arab higher education systems. The technical literature portrays internationalization as an imperative for systems around the world and as synonymous with high quality. I examine patterns of international student mobility and branch campuses in the region. I argue that current approaches to internationalization tend to associate prestige with Western models of higher education in ways that reinforce existing academic and geopolitical hierarchies.

Chapter 6 discusses the nature and implications of the university’s role as a knowledge producer. The technical literature on research is highly
critical of Arab academia – numerous reports detail the Arab world’s lack of research and its low level of impact. This chapter argues that the discourse of productivity misses the fundamental and structural reality: research production is highly unequal globally. Moreover, because research involves defining and defending the truth, it can be threatening to those in power, and recent orientations towards neoliberalism and securitization have undermined academic research in the region.

The book concludes with a call to rethink current technical approaches to higher education development by asking not how the Arab world can improve its higher education system but how the field of higher education development can learn from the Arab world.

Towards a New Narrative

When I was twenty, I travelled to Morocco to study at the Center for Cross-Cultural Learning in Rabat. On my first day the centre’s director, Dr. Abdelhay Moudden, told a room of eager students: “Americans are smart. Moroccans are also smart. They don’t do things differently because they don’t know better, but because their lives are different.”

At the time I thought it was wholly unnecessary to remind us of our essential equality. After all, in the wake of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, we were the ones who had chosen to come to learn the Arabic language, experience a different culture, and live with Moroccan host families. But over the past fifteen years I often reflect on how rare, and profound, it was to remind ambitious American undergraduates that their ways of being and doing were not better or more rational than those in other parts of the world that seemed so distant and different.

As a scholar of comparative higher education, I continue to draw on Dr. Moudden’s wisdom: deeper understanding must start with the rejection of implicit stereotypes about Western superiority, including the inherent rationality of Western higher education and the implicit assumption of irrationality in Arab higher education.

This book seeks to reframe the conversations on higher education in the Middle East that are occurring among think-tanks, development agencies, and donors located primarily in Europe and North America. One of the most harmful and pervasive stereotypes in development is the portrayal of the region’s higher education systems as “lacking” or “in crisis.” The sense of inferiority is perpetuated by a deficit orientation, which continues to view non-Western societies as underdeveloped or lacking in capacity and knowledge (largely because they are under-resourced), while continuing to reify European and North American universities as models for reform.
To begin a fundamentally different conversation, I propose an alternative narrative about higher education in the region: the Arab Middle East and North Africa has a long history of indigenous scholarship and an intellectual tradition that not only contributed to the Enlightenment but has continued and contributed to the resistance of colonization and invasion until the present day. Higher education institutions in the region have long been highly international and cosmopolitan, educating young people from around the world in Muslim teachings and, more recently, training them to become economic and political leaders. The national universities of the region are high-quality institutions that train the best and the brightest in their countries. Faculty members are as intelligent and talented as those working in North American universities, although they tend to have less access to resources and scholarship due to the exploitative practices of the contemporary publishing industry and the hegemonic power of the English language. Arab academia is full of dynamic and engaged academics who are active in print and social media, interested in influencing policy, and committed to solidarity with the communities they study. University leaders in the Middle East and North Africa are among important thought leaders in their countries. In response to global changes, Arab higher education systems have been adept at responding to the changing needs of their societies by introducing new degree programs and training their youth to be civically minded through participation in student activism and engagement. Moreover, rather than focusing exclusively on employment, Arab universities continue to educate young people to be well rounded and virtuous, to engage deeply with ideas about the nature of the world, and to understand inequalities in the contemporary global arena. Higher education institutions in the Arab world have, and continue to be, at the forefront of calling for change, and for that they deserve our respect.

Of course, this is only one side of the story. But how might conversations about higher education reform in the Arab world change with this as our starting point?