

The World of Education Podcast

Episode 1.6: Higher Education in the Arab World

Guest: Elizabeth Buckner, Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

This week's *The World of Higher Education* podcast features the work of Dr. Elizabeth Buckner from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Dr. Buckner is the author of [Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era](#), published by the U of T Press in 2022. It's an excellent book on a topic that doesn't get a lot of space in English language presses so I was very happy to see this book appear and even happier to get the chance to speak to Elizabeth for this show.

While there are some commonalities among higher education systems across the Middle East and North Africa, the "Arab World" is a huge, sprawling diverse space, and Elizabeth is a wise guide to its variants. I very much like the way she breaks this space down into three broad zones: that of the francophone Maghreb, the six countries that make up the ultra-rich Gulf Cooperation, and then a broad in-between space of "Egypt and the Levant" (or more broadly, areas that at least in some points in the 19th century were part of the Ottoman Empire). I think as a way of systematizing these countries, this method works pretty well.

Much of Elizabeth's case in this book centres around the notion that Arab higher education – form whichever of the three zones – has a hard time mimicking the properties of western higher education, particularly when it comes to issues such as preparation for the labour market and on research production. Put simply: it's hard for universities to imitate western models when the societies they come from have different traditions around meritocracy, academic freedom, and institutional management – specifically, the traditions of "rector feudalism", centralization of academic power within institutions leading to a choke on creativity.

I especially appreciated Elizabeth's take on how international financial institutions could work more productively with countries in this area, and on her optimism for the future, and how Arab higher education might build out from some interesting domestic models, particularly in Morocco and Qatar.

I hope you enjoy this discussion: here's Elizabeth.

AU: When talking about something as big as Arab Higher Education, there obviously aren't going to be many ways in which, you know, a single answer can hold true over the entirety of the Middle East and North Africa. But for our intro purposes, what is Arab higher education like? Your book breaks the Arab world down into three big types, Egypt and the Levant, Francophone North Africa, the Gulf States. What's unique about each of these types of higher education systems and how do they differ from one another?

EB: I grouped them together and think of the region as a whole and as Arab Middle East and North Africa, because I think too often, we do look at countries only. So instead, I am trying to look at trends across this region, but you're right, that we really need to think in terms of sub-regions. These three are widely used in Middle East studies, for example, to recognize the historical and linguistic and cultural differences between countries in this broader region. With respect to higher education, the colonial history obviously very much matters. So, in the Maghreb's, the Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria, they're colonized by France, so historically their higher ed systems were modeled off of France and still heavily-oriented and influenced by Europe, including the Bologna reforms. And also they do have more linkages to Africa, which is

becoming sort of important. Then I put Egypt with the Levant, which is not always done, but including Jordan. These are in many ways the core of the Middle East region geographically and they have been colonized by Britain or influenced by it also very much by the US in the post-war era. They were, in some cases, more willing to take on neoliberal reforms than North Africa. Then there's the GCC, the Gulf countries, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Saudi, to less extent, these are high-income countries, they experienced rapid development, and are resource dependent on oil or natural gas and it's a very different model of development. They're demographically very different. They have a lot more non-nationals. So, they tended to create systems: public systems for the citizens and the private systems for the non-nationals, while also pursuing these really resource intensive, high profile projects like branch campuses.

AU: That's the way in which they're all quite different, but in what ways are they the same?

EB: I group this region together because I think that they have been treated as a region, and that's very much this legacy of the Cold War in many ways. If you think about how the US divided the world, they grouped Arabic. So, they do also have like predominantly Muslim populations across, and Arabic is an official language across all of them. So even if they have a different secondary language of English or French, those are the two commonalities. Then I put them together because I see them as treated the same by development agencies. My book really focuses on higher education as a sort of objective development.

AU: One area where there does seem to be some consistency across all three of these subregions is the use of high stakes exams to control access to higher education. When I was reading that chapter in the book, I was thinking, "well, this actually sounds a lot like China or India in, in the use of exams to control access and for stratification" but the Arab world doesn't seem to throw out the same kind of test prep culture that India and China do. There's nothing, to my knowledge, like an Arab equivalent to Korean cram schools or the kind of test prep industry that we see in India in the, in the Netflix series, Kota factory. What are the consequences of these exams and why might the Arab response to them be different from other countries further east in Asia?

EB: I will say that I agree with you. High stakes exams and the consequences of them are not an Arab phenomenon. They are a global phenomenon. We see this worldwide and also in the Arab board generally the countries that do use high stakes tests, they are highly consequential. They determine what students can study, what university and what program in many cases as well. So many students are accepted to a program that they really have no interest in. And this leads to disengagement generally, that is something I talk about in the book. and so I think though that there is a test prep culture, or at least that families do engage in a lot of private tutoring often in the home, often with teachers to give themselves an advantage like we do globally. We see that everywhere. But I have thought about this, is it the same as cram schools? One of the thoughts that I've had is why it might differ from China and India, for example, is that there isn't really the equivalent of the IITs or the double first rate class, you know, 985's in China. We're talking about much smaller countries, right? In many cases, you know, Qatar has 200,000 people or something. So, the funnel is not nearly as hierarchical for the massive numbers of students getting into these high prestige institutions. But families do engage in lots of different ways of trying to give themselves advantage.

AU: One thing that a lot of observers right across Northern African and Middle East point to about higher education in the region is the disconnect between higher education and the labor market. Is there something about Arab higher education structures that make them particularly rigid and

resistant to outside stakeholder demands with respect to curricula? Or is it rather something to do with the nature of Arab economies? So much of the economy is dominated through connections that the kind of the meritocratic run from higher education to the labor market doesn't work the same way?

EB: I think that globally we're concerned about that disconnect, right? We hear that critique made in a lot of places. Is it more severe in the Arab world is a great question. I argue in my book that it is not because universities are particularly rigid or resistant. We have many, many examples of universities systems and trying to be more responsive to the labor market, right? We see the Maghreb countries implemented professional stream masters really quickly to adopt Bologna and countries are trying to adopt these, what we consider, global best practices, moving away from memorization tests. I also think professors in the region have been educated in Europe and North Africa. I mean, a huge percentage of them. So they're bringing that content back, they're bringing those pedagogies back to their classes. And so I think that there are just so many ways that sort of mapping onto international accreditations that we have evidence of Arab higher education system trying to be responsive. And so then I argue, yeah, we need to look to the labor markets, right? The public sectors in the region have historically been very inflated. The labor markets remain extremely segmented by gender and class and nationality in the GCC. In so much of the employment is still in the informal sector. There's a lot of corruption., there's political instability, there's economic crisis like inflation in Lebanon. There's a lot of brain drain to Europe and North Africa. There are so many reasons why the labor markets are not particularly strong in the region and I think that the university systems are capable and able to respond, even if a little bit, maybe slowly at the system-wide level, but there are a lot of dynamic pockets that are well-linked. So, I essentially say, look at the labor market if we want to understand this disconnect.

AU: Another commonality across the Arab world is the relatively low level of university research output. That's been remarked upon in various UN human development reports. Saudi Arabia's been pouring money into this problem, creating new research universities, importing huge numbers of non-Arab professors. And a couple of its universities have cracked you know the top tiers of some of the big ranking schemes. But apart from that, there really hasn't been that much progress in the last couple of decades. Obviously, funding's one potential reason for this, but are there any others?

EB: Oh, yes. I would say it's not only funding, it's history, really. I think an apt metaphor here is the difference between like individual level outcome and inherited family wealth, right? We can see that newcomers can attain equal income in a relatively short time, but if they don't inherit that land or cottage that's been in the family for generations, then they don't always attain the same family wealth. And that is really the way I think of especially the GCC countries. They are pouring lots of resources into research, but research is complicated. Let's just say it's they can equalize funding or even spend more, but they don't have the institutionalized research systems and structures and communities that produce the research. So in many cases, they literally just opened up PhD programs at some of their universities, they were not producing doctorate level graduates. So how do you create a robust research ecosystem without PhD holders? They sent them abroad and many never returned. We also know that if we are using rankings to assess output, that ranking systems show universities around the world are highly unequal. And a lot of this is around the influence of English. I write a lot about that. So North American universities are research powerhouses, but a lot of that comes down to the history of the having these resources and being able to publish in English and still dominating the top journals. And so I say, you, we can't really compare a small Arab country like Qatar with its 200,000 people to China or India with 1.4 billion people, you know? But I do also say we need to acknowledge

academic freedom. Higher education in the region does not enjoy academic freedom. There are many constraints for the most part. You don't have freedom of speech or civil liberties. That constraints not only the research that can be done, but also the development of the culture, or who wants to be there as a professor to do their research, or build their lab there if you don't have security or academic freedom. So, I think there's a real conflict of factors.

AU: At least in some places around the world if you've got a public higher education system which seems a little bit stodgy, or worst case sclerotic, they can be rejuvenated by competition with private universities. There are some countries in the Arab region where leading universities are private; so Lebanon, Qatar, or at least foreign controlled, the Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. What role are private institutions playing in Arab higher education systems right now?

EB: That's a great question because private higher education has been growing in the region like it has globally over the past few decades. I would first say that we need to understand private universities as incredibly differentiated, both within and between countries. Meaning there's a lot of diversity in the sector. Obviously some of the oldest universities in the region are private. These are the American University of Beirut (AUB) or American University of Cairo (AUC). They're prestigious, they're selective, they teach in English, they are seen as very high quality, and that's at the top end, like you mentioned. But there are also the branch campuses that are privately owned or operated that are very high profile and seen as very high quality. They're very selective, right? So, they are playing this role in being this sort of high prestige, high quality institutions that often are seen as having very good international alumni or good links to the labor market. But there are also many private universities that really we can understand as profit-making even if they don't claim to be for-profit, and that these are operating like businesses in many cases, right? This is happening throughout the region, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, but also the UAE lot, right? So, are they better? And I think that there's really good research out there that, at least in the middle-income countries, like Egypt and Jordan, that the private universities are not better. The students are not learning more or getting better labor market outcomes from the public universities. So, I don't think that private universities are the solution to the weak link to the labor market, but it doesn't mean they don't play a role. I think that there are many, many reasons why families are choosing private universities. The main reason, going back to the first question, is really that students often want to pay to study a certain topic. If they can pay to study medicine or engineering at a private university because they didn't get into the public university, they might choose that because it's a good investment for the family. But there are other reasons as well, private universities might be smaller, they get more personal attention. So I think that they are helping diversify the sectors.

AU: One commonality that I've always noticed in Arab institutions is what some people call Rector Feudalism. That is a tendency to centralize power within the institution at the level of the Rector's office. This seems to be to be a real source of weakness for the system as a whole. It clamps down on creativity in a lot of ways and as well as individual instructor freedom. Is there anywhere in the Arab world where this isn't the case and what's the possibility that this cultural or institutional norm might change?

EB: This is a major issue with many of the higher education systems in the regions. Rectors are not only very powerful, but in many cases they're also political appointees. So it becomes an avenue for political nepotism or corruption even in some cases. So, honestly I see this as a difference in traditions, right? Of how higher education grows and the norms that are institutionalized. So when a university is seen as a community of scholars, where faculty have

academic freedom, and have unions or associations that play a role in governance, and have authority over the institution and their teaching, then, you can create this system where they have power and then they are able to create that sort of atmosphere around that's focused on teaching and learning. But when higher education is viewed more as like part of the ministry of education that is responsible to the government and the labor market alone, then we don't create that space for the professors. I think there aren't many, I would say. Branch campuses, for example, throughout the region have managed to secure more independence, at least at the institutional level, because they're modeling themselves off of the governance systems in the home campuses, right? And then anywhere where you're seeing faculty strikes, like in Lebanon, massive faculty strikes show the power that faculty do have to protest over their working conditions and whatnot to try and push back on the power of the Rector. I don't think you see that, for example, in the other universities in the GCC.

AU: You're quite critical in the book of the role that international agencies like the World Bank have played in the region. In particular the way the bank assumes that universities are technocratic non-political actors, when in fact the highly politicized nature of Arab society makes that virtually impossible. I'm curious, if I had a magic wand and I could turn you into a higher education staffer at the World Bank and an Arab government came to you saying, we need to improve our higher education system, how would you approach to assisting them differ from the standard bank approach?

EB: My first response would not be like, "okay, let's implement these reforms." It would actually be to go back to that government and question them, what do you mean by improve? And what are the specific concerns that you have with your higher education system? Because there are going to be trade-offs with any approach. I think too often the government's interest is in creating a high profile world class university in some cases, that is for reputational reasons. And I would say, that can't be done at the system level, right? It's a huge investment in a single university. They might get you into the world rankings, okay? But they're going to be extremely expensive and they're only going to serve a few students. This may create resentment as it has in the Gulf, or it might leave the rest of the public system unfunded. So then if you're saying, "no, no, we don't care so much about just high rankings, we want to create quality at the system level as a whole". I would say, "well, what do we really mean by quality?" Because too often, especially from the World Bank, quality just means the human capital factory, right? Narrowly defined skills and competencies for the labor market. If that's all you mean, then yes, by all means follow our global best practices around more professional degrees, internships, career centers, work-integrated learning, et cetera. But I think this is a limited view of what universities do. And my vision for quality is how do we create a more dynamic and tailored system because not all students want or need the same thing and that diversity is actually needed in our changing world and changing labor markets. So how do we create university systems that are dynamic? Universities should be exciting places where we're forming the next generation of citizens to be leaders. So, if we want to think about that, how do we return dynamism to the universities and foster that? So what different models can we look at and how can we look at what's already going well and build on that? How can we listen to the professors and the students who inhabit these institutions daily about what they want and what works well for them?

AU: What makes you most hopeful about Arab higher education? If we come back 20 years from now and have this conversation again, what's going to be better and why?

EB: I see a lot that inspires me, and that's because I see and meet the graduates of Arab Higher Education systems. We have many of them here at the University of Toronto, and they're intelligent, they're thoughtful, they're skilled, they're ambitious. I also know the faculty, I collaborate with faculty in Arab higher ed systems. I know that they're inspiring and dedicated as well. And so partly just through my personal relationships, that is inspiring. But I also see a lot of interesting experiments and models that are going on in the region that inspire me. So for me, what inspires me is not replicating the best practices globally, but rather creating these homegrown visions of what higher education can and should be for the region. For example, Mohammed VI Polytechnic is a new university. It's a public university in Morocco, it's in the south and it's positioning itself really as a leader, not only in North Africa and the Arab world, but also for the African continent as a whole. It's focusing on innovation for the future. It's really taking issues like climate change and sustainability seriously. I look at it and I say, that is an exciting new model that is not just the same old, same old, and it's not a branch campus at all. I also have always thought that the Doha Institute, for example, which I write about in the book, is a unique and important model that's trying to sort of reclaim Arabic as an equal language of scholarship. We need universities in the region to be pushing back against these colonial legacies of the dominance of English that shape sort of what counts as important research. My thinking is it takes resources, it takes stability, it takes freedom, and it takes time to build a great higher ed system.

AU: Elizabeth, thank you so much for joining us today.

EB: Thanks.

*AU: It remains for me to thank the show's excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you, the listener for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@higheredstrategy.com. Join us next week when my guest will be National Chengchi University's Yi-Lin Chiang, author of *Study Gods: How the New Chinese Elite Prepares for Global Competition*. Bye for now.*