Global Innovators Conference 2013
College of the North Atlantic-Qatar, 4-7th April 2013

TVET Education Reform in the MENA region following the Arab Spring

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Abstract
The Arab Spring of 2011 deconstructed enduring post-colonial dictatorships that perpetuated propaganda politics and penalized democratic expression. Within four months of the start of the revolutions, intellectuals began actively discussing how the uprisings of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, along with resistance movements in neighbouring countries, offered "a particular opportunity to switch pedagogic and scholarly modes and strategies" in the region (Jadaliyyah, 2011). Indeed, it is an opportune time to discuss fundamental education reforms – amendments that remedy specific ideological paradoxes and incongruences that have obstructed education for a democratic society and thwarted civil empowerment in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. This study provides an overview of the major factors that plague MENA education systems which include increasing educational disparity, a decrease in the quality of education despite high per capita education expenditures, and a mismatch between labour market needs and the outputs of education systems. It specifically highlights the post-revolution evolution technical and vocational education and training systems must undergo to effectively address one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world – a significant contributor to ongoing unrest among the 85 million youth in the region. Specific recommendations for ways in which TVET reforms can positively impact this demographic through measures that address education quality and relevance are presented.

Background
The following statistics, derived from sources noted in the References section, were noted in the presentation:

Discussing high youth unemployment and meaningful education reform in the MENA region is particularly critical for the following reasons:

- The MENA region has what's called a youth bulge – half of the population is under the age of 25. This is a primary reason for the enormity of the Arab Spring where youth played a leading role asking for freedom, dignity, and a means to earn a living.
- The 85 million youth in the region is a primary factor in the push for significant policy and practice changes in Arab education systems, including TVET.
- At over 25%, the MENA region suffers from the highest youth unemployment rate in the world. Female youth unemployment is above 30%. The worldwide rate of unemployment is half this figure at 12.7%.
• Participation in the labor force by youth in the region is 35% compared to the global average of 52%.
• The economic loss of youth employment is estimated as exceeding $40-50 billion USD annually across the Arab world – this is equivalent to the GDP of Tunisia or Lebanon.
• A recent Brookings Institute paper argued that though educated youth played (and continue to play) an important role in the revolutions, and despite the fact that many MENA countries invest heavily in education, the education system is ineffective with a very low return on investment in terms of meaningful educational outcomes.
• Education systems throughout the region are hindered by inequity, low quality, and irrelevancy.

This paper focuses on addressing these latter factors of quality and relevance in TVET environments.

In terms of low quality, we have data that indicates that:

• Some of the world’s richest countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have between 80-90% of students who fail to meet the lowest benchmarks in Math and Science. The performance levels of students in Qatar and Saudi Arabia are comparable to students living in Ghana and El Salvador.
• Further studies indicate that Grade 8 students in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Qatar are below the minimum math threshold; basic understanding of whole numbers, decimals and simple graphs is lacking.
• 90% of students in Kuwait, Qatar, and Morocco score below the minimum benchmark in reading test scores.
• Although government education spending is high (Tunisia spends 7% of its GDP on education – compared with an average of 5% in Canada and the U.S.) the education system itself performs poorly. Economic mismanagement has contributed to economic waste and high youth unemployment.

Recent studies reported by The Economist also echoed criticism of Arab education:

• The 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) indicated that out of 48 countries tested, all 12 participating Arab countries fell below average.
• Less than 1% of students aged 12-13 in ten Arab countries reached a notable benchmark in science, compared with 10% in the United States and 32% in Singapore.
• Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s annual listing of the world’s top 500 universities does not list any Arab universities.
• Egypt ranks 124th place in the quality of its primary education according to the World Economic Forum.
• The higher education quality of Libya is stated as placing in 128th place (despite a per capita income of $16,000) lower than “dirt-poor Burkina Faso, with an average income of $577.”
• Poorly trained and compensated instructors, rote learning teaching methodologies rather than critical thinking, teacher-centered approaches, emphasis on theory rather than technical proficiency, and curriculum that trains students for fewer and fewer public sector jobs were also listed as reasons leading to low education quality.

In terms of irrelevancy:

• Studies consistently show that one of the primary reasons for high youth unemployment is the failure of the education system to meet the needs of the market – “...education systems are geared towards a public sector job market that is shrinking.”
• The term “education for unemployment” has been coined to describe this cycle in the MENA region;
• Weak or nonexistent strategies between practical and technical skill development in the education system and developing job markets exist. The result has been a failure to produce graduates who are job-ready;
• Perpetual ‘waithood’ between graduation and a graduate's first job describes the predicament of many who pursue post-secondary/higher education to secure good jobs;
• In this quandary, many graduates seek informal jobs with inadequate compensation, job security, and the likelihood of further career development;
• A further problem is highlighted – in countries like Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Bahrain, those who obtain higher diplomas or university degrees experience even greater hardship securing employment than their less educated peers. Again... “education for unemployment” is increasingly becoming the norm;
• Some researchers have argued that the Arab Spring has been analyzed from different perspectives, but one lens showing the role education quality has played in spurring the revolution has been absent. It is not the well-educated that have incited the revolution, but “the needs and demands of poorly educated youth, whose knowledge and skills do not meet the demands of a rapidly-advancing world.”

Recommendations that target quality and relevance
Recommendations that target the above described issues plaguing MENA education/TVET systems have been presented by various international and MENA regional bodies. The following presents a summary of these recommendations, followed by a case study of a MENA TVET institution that, through academic and institutional policy, has succeeded in providing technical and vocational education that is relevant to stakeholder needs and abides by quality standards.

1. The World Bank recently recommended education reforms in the MENA region that focus on the teaching of relevant skills;
2. High engagement of local industry in areas such as curriculum content, training, and internship opportunities to ensure that curriculum is up-to-date and in line with industry requirements is advised;
3. Targeted curricula that provides core technical, language, critical and soft skills offered through practical training models is needed;
4. Qualified faculty with recognized credentials and experience that offers students robust and relevant learning environments.

These summarized recommendations provide a starting point for engaging in meaningful discourse pertaining to TVET education reforms that can remedy high youth unemployment in the MENA region. Are these recommendations achievable in the region? A case study of one institution in the Middle East that has integrated these guidelines and principles to some measure of success is presented.

Case study of a MENA polytechnic institute
The case study institution is a branch campus of a technical college in North America, but operates under the direction of its host country under a well-defined mandate. The College, which has enjoyed notable growth over ten years of operation in the Middle East, offers day and evening, full and part-time, corporate and continuing education and training in the fields of Engineering Technology, Trades, Business Studies, Information Technology, and Health Studies. The organization's mission, and the purpose it was contracted to fulfill in the region, is to deliver industry-responsive, internationally-recognized and accredited programs that prepare graduates for active contribution to the local job market. With over forty certificate, diploma, advanced and post diploma programs, the institution enjoys one of the highest enrolment rates in the country.
The most pronounced factor leading to the College’s success, one which stands in stark contrast to many tertiary and higher education institutes in the region criticized for low quality and irrelevance, is its engagement of stakeholders in the development and delivery of programs. To ensure active involvement from stakeholders for viable programs that successfully prepare students for jobs, the institution follows a set of academic policies that strictly govern the program delivery process – from market analysis, to design, development, implementation, evaluation, and maintenance (revision) of all programs. These academic policies, some of which are expanded upon below, include procedures for stakeholder engagement, pedagogical and logistical requirements, minimum faculty qualifications, ideal student to faculty ratios, and other quality assurance measures across all programs.

Advisory Councils – The institution requires that all College schools form advisory committees that guide programs with respect to state, industry, community and student needs. Participation in program advisory councils includes industry representatives from the public and private sectors, current students, alumni, faculty and Deans, subject-matter experts from other education institutions, as well as members of the community. Members are recommended to the Council from within and outside the College, with a Council Chair nominated (by the committee) on an annual basis. These advisory councils meet a minimum of once a year to review current program purpose, content, and structure, report on graduate performance in relation to industry need, recommend new programs, as well as identify market trends, challenges, and opportunities.

The installation of advisory councils across schools, as described in this case study MENA technical College, creates exceptional collaboration between the institution, industry, and the community – and fosters an atmosphere of empowerment. Both quality and relevance of the education system’s outputs in this context, are continually measured and evaluated by a diverse group of people representing a cross-section of society.

Faculty Qualifications – Faculty qualifications are also regulated by institutional policy. Minimum faculty qualifications for all programs across schools include the following requirements:

- Recent, relevant industry experience
- Graduates of recognized/accredited programs
- Certifications/memberships with governmental/Quality Assurance bodies
- Experience teaching in adult education environments and teacher certification

Teacher qualification and professional development is cited as a significant factor in low education quality in the MENA region. Policies and practices that favour instructors with recent and strong connections with industry, recognized credentials tied to quality frameworks and accreditation bodies, and exposure to adult learning contexts can positively contribute to program/student success.

Program Design – Perhaps one of the most critical factors that influences education quality and relevance is curriculum. Within the institution studied, program design is guided by key principles, summarized below:

- Program objectives are outcome-based, focused on job-ready skills
- Developed with national and international competency frameworks in mind
- Time-conscious/not longer than required for the student to achieve competency
- Program is reviewed every 4-5 years to ensure continued quality and relevance
- Program validation is passed by the advisory council and an academic senate to ensure pedagogic/academic rigor, and compliance to accreditation/certification standards
- “Learners First” strategic direction where student success is the primary goal
• A focus on learning outcomes not deliverables (program objectives are articulated with what the student will know/learn/be able to do, rather than what the teacher will deliver
• High quality course outlines written in clearly measurable terms (appropriately accounting for Bloom’s Taxonomy)
• Outlines are viewed as contracts between the institution and the student
• Program design that incorporates practical experience through practicums, clinicals, field placements, and work exposure
• Modular and flexible learning options for corporate and continuing education deliveries.

Conclusion
Advisory Councils, Faculty Qualifications and Program Design governed my institutional policy are successful features of the college studied that can guide TVET reforms in the MENA region. Exceptional collaboration among the institution, industry, students and the community leading to collective empowerment, programs that are aligned to jobs available in the market, and are learner and job-ready focused, contribute to overall education quality and relevance.

In addition to the above attributes of a stakeholder-accountable TVET institution, consideration needs to be given to the incorporation of research activities into faculty duties to further advantageous relationships between industry and the institution, and to support innovation and leading-edge techniques that give students an advantage before graduation.

The MENA youth bulge demographic means that the sheer number of youth in the region have increased education and training needs and that the failure to strategically address those needs has contributed to the desperate pitch of the Arab Spring. Some of the key demands emanating from the revolutions in this region were secure and fair employment and adequate resources for market-oriented education and training. This paper set out to offer some practical ways of addressing the problem of relevance and quality in MENA education systems – as a means to address the larger issue of high youth unemployment, lost opportunity and unrest in the Arab region.

References