

Overview of Current Situation

COVID-19 Situation. Most MENA countries have been experiencing a second or third wave of infections, with new COVID-19 cases spiking in December 2020, new infections have been declining recently¹ (see annex, table 1 and figures 1 and 2). New MENA COVID-19 cases totaled close to 135,000.² Some countries started vaccinations, but considerable inequities in vaccine access and rollout exist across the region.^{3,4}

MENA Economic Forecast. The combination of the COVID-19 health crisis and the collapse in oil prices will continue to negatively impact all MENA economies and thus likely limit available public and private funds for higher education in the foreseeable future. Regional per capita GDP was forecasted to decrease by 5.2 percent in 2020, 4.1 percentage points below the April 2020 and 7.8 percentage points below the October 2019 projections.⁵ Expected macroeconomic losses due to the crisis have surged since March 2020, reaching 7.6 percent of MENA's 2019 Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁶ Lebanon is one of the most severely affected, with its output forecast to contract by 19.2 percent,⁷ while Egypt, the only MENA country to avoid negative economic growth, has experienced a decline from a real GDP per capita growth forecast for the fiscal year 2021 of 3.5 to only about 2 percent.⁸ MENA government revenue is expected to diminish by 25-50 percent. Public debt is expected to increase significantly in the next several years, from about 45 (2019) to 58 percent of GDP (2022). In many countries, food prices have risen by more than 20 percent since February 2020,⁹ greatly impacting livelihoods and expecting to deepen poverty.¹⁰

Status of University Openings/Classes. In contrast to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 when most countries closed their universities and switched to online instruction, MENA countries and universities are now pursuing a range of different approaches. With the ease of the first lockdowns in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, universities resumed some on campus activities, in most cases limited to student registration, attendance of practical classes (ensuring limited number of students) or meetings with faculty members. In Tunisia, universities are all back to regular on-campus operations with face-to-face teaching. By contrast, Moroccan universities have continued online-only courses since the first campus closures in March 2020. After returning to in-person classes, Egypt again switched from face-to-face classes in public and private universities at the end of 2020 to online courses and postponed first-term exams until after the mid-year break as it experiences a second wave of COVID-19 infections.¹¹ In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA),

¹ In the week preceding January 25. Bahrain (57,549), Qatar (53,073) and Lebanon (41,069) continue to have the highest incidence rates. In fragile states such as Libya, Syria and Yemen, weak testing capacity results in fewer reported positive cases.

² In the week of January 18.

³ The highest income countries, the Gulf states of KSA, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman have already vaccinated a substantial number of their populations, e.g. UAE already vaccinated 20 percent of its population, while middle-income countries such as Jordan and Morocco plan to inoculate in the first phase of its roll out.

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/26/middleeast/middle-east-vaccinations-coronavirus-intl/index.html>

⁵ World Bank, 2020, Trading Together: Reviving Middle East And North Africa Regional Integration In The Post-Covid Era - MENA Economic Update October 2020, Washington, DC. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/mena-economic-update-trading-together-reviving-middle-east-and-north-africa-regional-integration-in-the-post-covid-era>

⁶ As of January 12 2021. Relative to the counterfactual scenario of no crisis WB MENA Crisis Tracker, January 25, 2021.

⁷ WB MENA Economic Update October 2020.

⁸ IMF Forecast.

⁹ WB MENA Crisis Tracker, January 5, 2021.

¹⁰ As indicated by early findings from World Bank phone surveys. Relative to the counterfactual scenario without the crisis WB MENA Crisis Tracker, January 5, 2021.

¹¹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210107095800147>

distance learning has continued for the first and at least 10 weeks in the second semester of this academic year.¹²

Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have implemented blended learning for the entire 2020-2021 academic year. Palestine has been using a blended learning approach since the start of the pandemic, i.e. with all theoretical classes (around 75 [percent of total] through open-source learning platforms and practical, lab work in face-to-face sessions postponed until students are allowed to return to campus. Algeria postponed the start of the new university year by about 1 month and opted for a gradual return to in-person classes due to the worsening pandemic situation, the pending completion of some of previous academic year's exams; and transport/affordability problems in the return to university of students from remote areas.

Short and Medium-Term Impacts of the Health and Economic Crisis on Higher Education

1. Impact on Public and Private Higher Education Spending and Institutional Financing

The economic crisis brought about by the pandemic and the oil price shock is starting to and/or likely to have a considerable impact on public and private higher education financing.

(i) Reduced public financing of higher education. In view of the economic crisis, public financing for higher education is likely to be constrained for the next few years, though no figures on sub-sector allocations are currently available for the 2020 or 2020/21 fiscal year(s). However, it appears that the pandemic-related closed or limited campus operations can also result in some cost savings for government financing to the sector. For example, in Iraq, before the pandemic, students needed transportation and living stipends, but some of these expenses have now been saved due to online classes and students' return home to their families.

(ii) Reduced private (household) expenditure on education, including higher education. The pandemic induced recession is already being felt at the household level in MENA, resulting in a reduction in overall private expenditures, including on education and higher education. For example, almost 90 percent of Egyptian households feel the financial impact of the pandemic and about 80 percent of them agree with the need for spending less and saving more.¹³ In Morocco, 60 percent of households indicated a decline in living standards and over one third had to take on debts to weather the crisis (see also the drop in consumer confidence in figure 3).¹⁴ In Lebanon, where families have already been spending more than 10 percent of their total budget on education prior to the pandemic, including 3.5 percent on post-secondary education, the multiple crisis most likely diminished household education spending, including on higher education.¹⁵ Many students and their families may currently or in the near future be unable to pay tuition fees at private universities (or at public universities with tuition fees).

In Lebanon, the pre-COVID economic crisis was aggravated by the pandemic and has caused students to drop out of university, based on anecdotal evidence. Capital controls imposed by the Central Bank left many students enrolled in public and private universities with no option other than to drop out, take a semester off or to only register a minimum number of credits, regardless of whether they work or rely on other sources of income, because they cannot access their money in banks and/or cannot afford the expensive tuition fees.¹⁶ For example, the tuition fee for domestic students at Lebanese University, the only public university, is approximately remains at LBP250,000 and for international students it remains at LBP1,000,000. At the American University of Beirut, 250 out of its about 9,400 students had stopped their studies, while 600 incoming students did not commence their studies even before the recent tuition fee increase.¹⁷

¹² <https://english.alarabiya.net/coronavirus/2021/01/14/Coronavirus-Coronavirus-Remote-learning-to-continue-in-Saudi-Arabian-schools>

¹³ COVID-19 MENA Consumer Sentiment Trackers, Ipsos, April 2020.

¹⁴ Morocco Haute Commission du Plan (HCP, Planning Commission).

¹⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200331142050502>

¹⁶ Based on a recent conversation with 10 students from several public and private universities in Beirut.

¹⁷ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201212141611222>

Although some universities in some MENA countries have offered free tuition or tuition rebates for online courses, there is an even greater need for student financial assistance compared to before COVID-19 to ensure students, especially from low income families, can commence and complete their studies. However, public financing of additional student assistance might be difficult, given the decrease in government revenue and greater spending in areas such as health. Some private universities, for example in Jordan, offered deferred tuition payment or discounts to support and attract students.

Financial implications for public and private universities:¹⁸ The expected drop in private and public funding of higher education has impacted and will continue to severely impact public and private universities in the following ways:

(i) Public funding cuts. Though there are no figures for MENA yet, this trend is likely to affect MENA universities as well and there is some anecdotal evidence.¹⁹ For example in Jordan, at some public universities, faculty members were asked to make voluntary donations. This may lead to staff cuts at public universities. In many economies (for example, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza), higher education was already suffering from budget reductions or freezes prior to the pandemic, while at the same time absorbing growing numbers of students. Any additional decreases in funding and staff are likely to impede universities' functioning and negatively impact the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

(ii) Loss of tuition and other income. The loss of tuition and other income is likely to affect private universities to a greater extent than public universities. Some private universities have been forced to provide tuition rebates or reimbursements, as classes take place online instead of face-to-face and students/parents sued for tuition rebates/ reimbursement. For example, over 1,000 students at the private American University in Beirut, Lebanon, petitioned to reduce tuition fees for the spring term due to the financial crisis and the alleged "inefficiency and lower quality of education of online learning with respect to the normal learning process."²⁰ The economic recession will diminish the amount of endowments and therefore grants from private donors. Some private donors also have prioritized their local communities in their donations rather than universities/their alma mater. In addition, the number of international students in MENA has decreased due to the pandemic, further reducing tuition income of universities in some countries. For example, Egyptian universities mobilized US\$120 million in income, as international students pay US\$5,000 to US\$9,000 annual tuition.²¹

The following examples from Lebanon and Yemen, albeit extreme and, dramatically highlight the impact of multiple simultaneous crises on universities. In Lebanon, the American University in Beirut (AUB), one of the oldest and most prestigious private universities in the Middle East, has been struggling to survive financially due to the impact of Lebanon's deep economic and financial crisis, compounded by the pandemic, and the aftermath of the Beirut port blast in August 2020.²² The university only accepted payments at the platform exchange rate, 3,900 Lebanese pounds, therefore it may seem like increased tuition, as the platform exchange rate effectively doubled the cost of tuition in local currency.²³ At the official exchange rate, annual tuition fees of approximately US\$24,000 equivalent of 36 million Lebanese pounds. With a monthly minimum wage of only 675,000 or 8.1 million Lebanese pounds annually, this has made AUB even more inaccessible to a large number of prospective students and made it difficult for a considerable number of current students, many of them from previously middle class families, to finish their studies. Private universities in Yemen are charging tuition fees in US dollars and creating their own currency exchange rates. As a result, many students can no longer afford tuition fees and drop out of university.²⁴

¹⁸ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200428154746989>

¹⁹ This is already observed at state universities in the US.

²⁰ <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/04/learning-remotely-as-the-only-resort-how-is-lebanon-doing/>.

²¹ Egypt raised international student enrolment from about 12,000 in 2000 to over 90,000 in 2017,

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2020052514244818>

²² <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200711140336150> ; The Beirut port explosion destroyed large parts of the city, killed 200 people and injured over 6,000.

²³ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201212141611222>

²⁴ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201121142410796>

(iii) University budget cuts. Institutional budget cuts have already or will soon result in staff freezes and early retirement to cut operating costs, further reducing already stretched Student-Teaching Staff ratios, and affecting quality. Nonpermanent teaching and research staff on precarious contracts are the most vulnerable and may be terminated more easily. The private university AUB in Lebanon had to lay off over 1,200 faculty and staff last fall, some of which had been at AUB for over 25 years.²⁵ Some private universities also seemed to have suspended staff salary payments due to financial constraints. In Jordan and Iraq, some private universities cancelled contracts of some faculty members or reduced faculty salaries. Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and programs may close entirely due to financing constraints.²⁶ There are anecdotes about private universities with limited financial resources shutting down due to the loss of tuition revenue.²⁷ Institutional mergers are also possible in the medium to longer term.²⁸

2. Impact on Student Enrolment and International Mobility

(i) Impact on student enrolment. The COVID-19 related university closures and the economic crisis are likely to have affected student enrolment in the 2020/2021 academic year in multiple ways, though specific figures are not widely available yet. Many universities indicate that it is still too early to assess the full impact of the pandemic and the 2019/20 academic year's end-of-year exams on this academic year's enrolment and that the effect would be more discernable in the coming 2021/22 year. However, for example, in Palestine, enrolment decreased slightly from 218,126 in 2019 to 217,645 in 2020.²⁹

Factors that might have led to a decrease in enrolment include an increased dropout of previously enrolled university students who failed in the end-of-year exams and/or experienced socioeconomic hardships, for example, unavailability of student commercial loans,³⁰ lack of other financial resources to pay for tuition fees and/or costs of living, or the need to work to help support their family. For example, many secondary school students, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, may choose to drop out to work and support their families, therefore narrowing the pipeline for higher education. Informal conversations with students in some MENA countries indicated that they were not planning to attend the 2020/21 academic year but would rather to take a semester off.

Factors that might have contributed to an increase in enrolment include: MENA students currently studying abroad, or outside MENA returned to local or regional universities, as some households have not been able to afford the higher cost of studying abroad anymore. Unemployment is expected to rise as a result of the economic shutdown, which could lead to an increase in enrolment at local universities. This trend can be typically observed during economic downturns such as the 2008 financial crisis. The opportunity cost of higher education has declined during the crisis as a result of unemployment and a prolonged waiting period for youth to join the labor market. More secondary school students may choose to pursue higher education instead of remaining unemployed and graduating tertiary students may pursue advanced degrees.

Shift in enrolment from private to public universities: Due to financial constraints, students currently enrolled in local private universities may have to transfer to lower-cost or no-tuition public universities. There is not enough available data yet for the university level in MENA, but if secondary schools are any indication for public-private enrolment of students, there has been a dramatic shift in student secondary enrolment away from private secondary schools to public secondary schools, even in well-off countries such as KSA. In Jordan, no significant

²⁵ <https://www.the961.com/aub-laid-off-1500-employees/> and <https://beirut-today.com/2020/07/18/aubmc-lays-off-hundreds-of-staff-members/>

²⁶ For example, in the USA, Ohio Wesleyan University is eliminating 18 majors. In Australia, where public universities depend to a large extent on income from tuition fees, several universities will need to close campuses and eliminate jobs as their revenue decreases due to the COVID-19 crisis. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/04/australian-universities-to-close-campuses-and-shed-thousands-of-jobs-as-revenue-plummets-due-to-COVID-19-crisis>.

²⁷ <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/04/learning-remotely-as-the-only-resort-how-is-lebanon-doing/>.

²⁸ For example in the US, Pennsylvania merged a half-dozen small state schools into two academic entities.

²⁹ As per communication from Ministry of Education.

³⁰ For example, in Lebanon, banks have stopped making most loans.

shifts in enrolment from private to public universities occurred yet, but this is largely due to the fact that it is not possible for students to transfer from private to public universities, although some students may transfer to less expensive private universities. In Lebanon, transfers of students between private universities are more likely due to the recent fiscal challenges, subsequent purchasing power reductions and rise in tuition fees, particularly at private universities.

(ii) International mobility of students and researchers. There has been a substantial drop in international students studying in MENA as well as MENA students and researchers going abroad due to the COVID-19 related travel and visa restrictions and the economic downturn. About 70 percent of international students have returned to their home countries following the onset of the pandemic and only 60 percent of international students continued their studies online.³¹ For example, Morocco experienced a decline in international enrolment in the 2020/21 academic year, particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa.³² With regards to students studying abroad, a survey in Asia showed that 84 percent of students said they were not interested in studying abroad after the pandemic had hit,³³ which is likely to be similar for MENA students. For Lebanese students abroad, strict capital controls by the Central Bank on bank accounts do not allow parents to transfer money to students studying abroad. Thus, Lebanese students studying abroad may lose their international student status, because they cannot use debit/credit cards issued in Lebanon except for a £300 limit per month (US\$372; before, the limit was £3,000) and because paying tuition fees has become logistically impossible and also unaffordable.³⁴

(iii) Impact on other elements of Internationalization. The pandemic has not stopped the effort in internationalization of higher education in some countries. Several Egyptian universities are expanding their reach in Africa by adding campuses and broadening their offerings to promote higher education development and regional cooperation.³⁵ For example, Ain Shams University in Cairo will build a branch campus in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. An agreement for the establishment of a branch of Egypt's Tanta University in Djibouti City, the capital of Djibouti, has been signed with Djibouti University. To encourage more international students to pursue their studies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the government issued a new policy to allow international students to sponsor their families during their stay in the UAE.³⁶

3. Impact on Teaching, Learning and Research Environment

(i) University Course Delivery Modes. There has been a marked evolution in the online course delivery modes from the beginning of the pandemic last spring to the present. Given the sudden nature of national lockdowns and campus closures in the March 2020 and the lack of preparedness of most universities, online learning in the early days of the crisis was characterized by recorded lectures and use of social media apps and platforms for classes and communications with students, e.g. WhatsApp and Facebook. The following semester, many universities have been using a combination of platforms and communication tools, notably: (i) specific e-learning platforms, e.g. Moodle, Blackboard, to post support teaching materials, e.g. in 2020 Egypt launched its first digital platform for distance learning at public universities in partnership with Microsoft,³⁸ (ii) virtual meeting tools, such as Zoom, Teams or Google Meet.

A Tunisia Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOESRS) survey of university students, teaching staff and university leaders on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 showed that universities

³¹ BBL Internationalization of Higher Education, WB-CMI, February 28, 2021.

³² <http://www.mapexpress.ma/actualite/societe-et-regions/quatre-questions-anas-bennani-directeur-cooperation-au-departement-lenseignement-superieur/>

³³ For example, among the 2,739 respondents of a study on students in mainland China and Hong Kong. <https://www.researchcghe.org/publications/working-paper/impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-international-higher-education-and-student-mobility-student-perspectives-from-mainland-china-and-hong-kong/>

³⁴ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200331142050502>

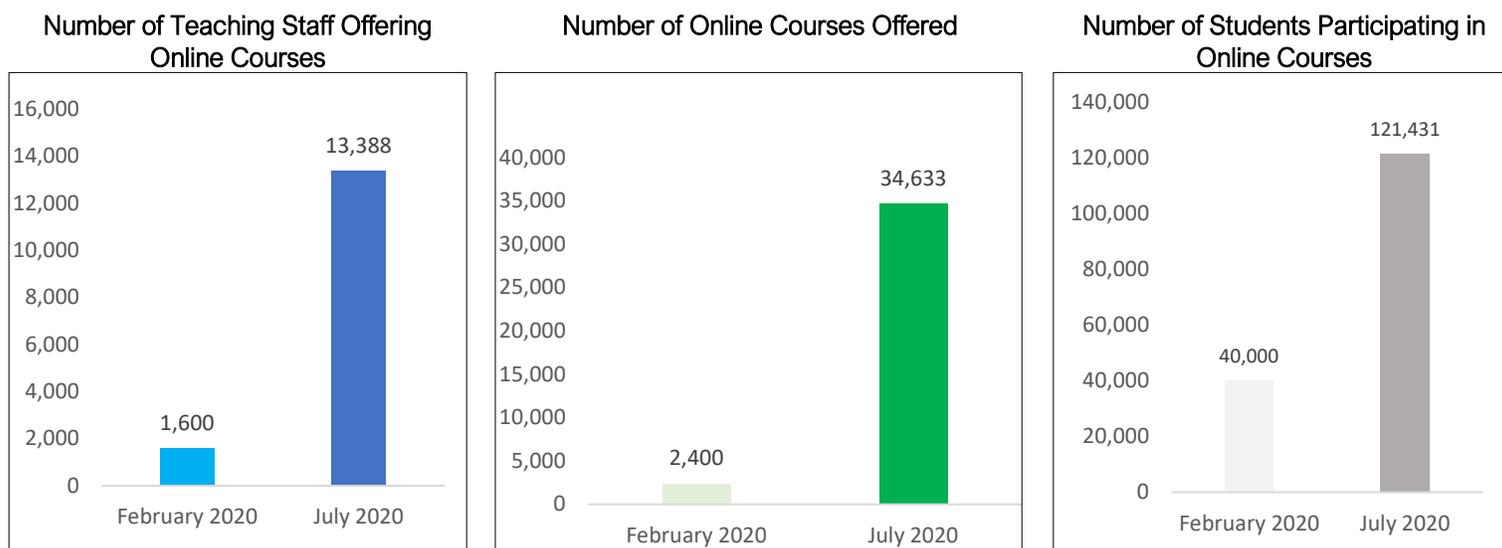
³⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210118135712692>

³⁶ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/education/dubai-universities-expect-influx-of-foreign-students-after-family-sponsorship-move-1.1153790>

made considerable efforts to move courses online and engage students (see figure 1). The main findings of the WB-Tertiary Education for Employability Project (TEEP)-financed survey are as follows:³⁷

- 80 percent of university staff indicated that their university took measures to provide online learning and ensure learning continuity for students
- About 80 percent of teaching staff encouraged their students to participate in online classes

Figure 1: Evolution of Online Learning in Tunisia, April to July 2020



Source : Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Tunisia (Ministere de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique)

The switch to online learning almost overnight last spring was very challenging for many MENA higher education systems due to: (i) previous reticence to online learning and thus lack of preparedness/experience in that area; (ii) relatively poor internet penetration and device ownership among students; as well as several other constraints. Universities that invested in online/blended learning programs as strategic choice pre-pandemic fared considerably better in this transition.

(a) Pre-COVID-19 reticence to online learning and subsequent challenges in moving courses online swiftly. Many MENA countries³⁸ were not in favor of online learning before the pandemic, which forced them to quickly adopt online and/or blended learning. While most MENA countries have their own distance learning universities or are members connected to regional distance learning universities, and while some private universities in the region are well equipped for online teaching and learning through earlier investments in electronic platforms and content, the majority of countries and public universities have been struggling with the sudden necessity of providing large-scale online teaching and learning. Some of these difficulties have been largely resolved, while others, such as poor internet penetration/bandwidth of student households continues.

(b) Internet access, sufficient bandwidth and reliability is still a challenge in many countries, as are frequent power cuts in some countries, making teaching and learning less effective. In MENA countries, almost half of all household do not have internet at home.³⁹ For example, low bandwidth and power cuts persist one year into the pandemic and affect many Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi students and lecturers. In Iraq, many students lose about 10 minutes every session and make accessing online materials and learning a challenge.⁴⁰

³⁷ MoESRS

³⁸ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201023103200335>

³⁹ ITU 2019 data.

⁴⁰ Jawabreh, 2020a, in Salmi, 2020.

(c) In addition, MENA governments and universities have been addressing the following challenges: (a) limited hardware such as tablets and laptops for student use at home, for example in some countries, students don't have devices and use only their phones for online courses; (b) limited availability of online course content/possibility of moving courses online (e.g. of lab work in medicine or chemistry); (c) limited digital/pedagogical skills of instructors for online teaching, student assessment, etc., and limited training in these areas, at least in the beginning of the crisis; (d) limited digital skills of students to access and learn online and/or lack of focus due to online and other distractions; (e) limited face-to-face and social interaction with instructors and classmates, leading to decreased student motivation and learning, affecting disadvantaged students more; (f) social trust in the effective and equitable delivery of online learning emerged as an issue in a number of countries, e.g. Tunisian students demonstrated against the move to online courses out of accessibility/equity concerns.

(ii) Student assessments, end-of-year and university entrance exams. In addition to these teaching and learning challenges, universities have also been struggling with student assessment and end-of-year exams. The majority of MENA countries struggled with⁴¹ designing appropriate assessment tools or simple examinations fit for all faculties and disciplines, and with their logistical implementation with the necessary safety and health precautions. Once national lockdowns were lifted, most universities attempted to conduct exams in person on campus, ensuring social distancing and hygiene, while some countries or universities reverted to online examinations, e.g. Jordan, KSA. The pandemic also led to the abolishment of university entrance exams in some countries, e.g., to some degree, in Egypt.

(iii) Impact on Research. In terms of research funding, it is too early to detect an impact in public and private research funding, as any budget cuts would only be felt in the planning of the next fiscal/academic year. Research activities and funding appears to have been relatively maintained across most countries in the region, e.g. in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. In Jordan, the budget for research at public universities was not impacted (yet) as it is usually identified/allocated at the start of the year and thus remained the same, but this may change in 2021. Some countries re-prioritized their research agenda and made available research funding for COVID-19-related research, e.g. Morocco and Tunisia, which might pull research funding from other, non-health areas. The pandemic travel restrictions also had a negative impact on the mobility of researchers, reducing opportunities for example for post-docs to pursue research abroad, do lab work in close collaboration with international colleagues, and for researchers overall to informally interact in regional and international conferences.

4. Impact on Equity and Graduate Employability

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities in access and quality of higher education. More vulnerable students, such as those from low-income backgrounds, with disabilities or refugees, may not only have limited access to online courses, due to the lack of hardware, internet connection, or digital skills, but might also need to provide support to their families. The large-scale disruptions due to the shutdown may impede student learning and examination performance, and increase student repetition and dropout, as some students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, might not be able to go back to their studies due to economic or family pressures or lower academic performance due to missing out on classes. For example, in Lebanon, university dropout rates are highest among children and youth who come from the poorest families in Lebanon. This indicates the need for remedial instruction and (additional) financial assistance to vulnerable students (this could be part of existing grant/scholarship/loan or other social transfer programs), though government financial resources will be limited going forward. In Tunisia, the main student union condemned the government's decision to adopt online learning as a discriminatory measure and called for a boycott of online platforms.⁴² The year-long health crisis may also lead to higher graduate unemployment due to the economic recession and health and safety restrictions/shutdowns. Higher graduate unemployment may also result in an increase in the

⁴¹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201023103200335>

⁴² Jamil Salmi; Lumina Foundation, COVID HE Impact)

number of graduates pursuing further studies.⁴³ In view of these multiple crises, it would be important for universities to track graduate employment to assess the severity and develop remedial measures.

Building Back Better: Crisis as an Opportunity for Transformation

The crises can also provide an impetus and opportunity to accelerate much needed higher education reforms to address systemic issues and modernize higher education in line with current and future human capital needs, notably through:

Greater openness towards online/blended learning programs and building digital skills of students and faculty. Despite the challenges, a positive effect of the crisis may be that some of the MENA countries and universities that previously were reluctant to formally recognize and move toward online education are now setting up online courses. About 45 percent of KSA adults interviewed in an international survey indicated that higher education in the future would be entirely or mostly online and another 30 percent that it would be about half online/half in person.⁴⁴ This can further help build student and instructor digital skills through online teaching and learning, and help develop students' soft skills (for example, teamwork, peer mentoring, communications), but only if suitable pedagogical approaches are used (otherwise, distance education might actually inhibit development of soft skills). The crisis can also provide an opportunity to build capacity and strengthen system management for higher education institutions. Some countries, e.g. Morocco, see blended learning programs as one element in addressing the growing influx of secondary school graduates into higher education amid capacity and financial constraints.

Prompting reforms in accreditation and quality assurance. Pre-COVID, online or even blended learning programs in many MENA countries were not included in any accreditation legislation or could not be formally accredited as per existing legal texts. Since the pandemic, several countries, e.g. Egypt, have changed their legislation/issued decrees to accommodate accreditation of online and blended learning programs.⁴⁵ In UAE, a non-profit foundation has also launched a consortium for online learning quality assurance (see also annex Box 1 – UAE Consortium for Quality Online Learning).

Reforming high-stakes exams and university admissions criteria. While the pandemic has affected admissions in some countries, reform on high stakes secondary exams and admission test/criteria to improve equal access has continued in other countries. For example, Egypt will shortly launch the pilot phase of a new centralized platform for private university applications similar to the Tansik system used for public university admissions in the 2021 spring semester. Morocco⁴⁶ abolished the entry exams, « *Concours* », to the elite public HEIs, « *Grands Écoles* », and other public HEIs in 2020. The admissions selection will be made based on secondary school graduates' grades, via the online platform « *Tawjih* » for the 2020/2021 academic year. In Algeria, the government issued a policy to ease admission requirements for Master's and Phd programs.⁴⁷

Promoting the important role of research. The COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the importance of research, including university research, and of international research cooperation and innovations for conducting research under challenging circumstances. It may also have led to greater cross-country collaboration and sharing of resources in research. For example, Morocco and Tunisia launched a US\$2.16 million plan⁴⁸ for 30 research projects in health, renewable energy and electricity, energy efficiency, water, environment and climate change, human and social sciences, artificial intelligence and big data, with the objective to promote student and academic mobility and joint doctoral degree awarding by partner universities. The plan would include the

⁴³ This was the case following the 2008 financial crisis in the US.

⁴⁴ In October, more than 27,500 adults in 29 countries were asked how they saw higher education being conducted in their country, five years from now. KSA was the only MENA country included. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/11/higher-education-online-change-cost-covid-19/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201023103200335>

⁴⁶ <https://aujourd'hui.ma/societe/enseignement-vers-la-suppression-des-examens>

⁴⁷ <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2021/02/changes-algerian-admission-requirements-advanced-degrees/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201005185420616>

establishment of joint laboratories, strengthening of university networks and mutually recognition of degrees.⁴⁹ In terms of innovative ways of research collaborations, COVID-19 has been the catalyst behind the development of online labs: universities in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria are implementing remote laboratories in cooperation with universities in Jordan, France, Spain and Belgium as well as with LabsLand under the e-LIVES project.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201005185420616>

⁵⁰ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200715130543961> and <https://e-lives.eu/> The e-LIVES project is an ERASMUS+ project that runs from October 15th, 2017 to October 14th, 2020. The goals of the project are the identification of best practices in e-Engineering, the development of reliable remote laboratory solutions, the development of practical open staff training, the assessment of the pedagogical innovation solutions used, and the promotion of the concept of e-Engineering within the South and Eastern Mediterranean countries. The project is coordinated by the University of Limoges.

Annex

Table 1. Total Cases per Million Population as of January 25, 2021

Country	Cases/Million	Cumulative Cases	Cases Last Week	% change in new cases relative to last week
Bahrain	57,549	99,817	1,877	-21%
Qatar	53,073	149,019	1,515	-8%
Lebanon	41,069	279,597	23,641	-36%
Kuwait	37,454	161,285	3,041	-23%
Jordan	31,232	320,453	4,909	-41%
West Bank and Gaza	30,073	155,414	2,859	-45%
United Arab Emirates	27,913	277,955	21,223	-19%
Oman	25,688	133,044	1,033	-26%
Tunisia	16,602	197,373	15,488	-31%
Libya	16,419	113,688	3,819	-25%
Iran, Islamic Rep.	16,229	1,372,977	36,760	-26%
Iraq	15,070	613,763	4,734	-22%
Morocco	12,549	466,289	6,145	-19%
Saudi Arabia	10,432	366,371	1,272	-1%
Djibouti	5,942	5,919	13	-63%
Algeria	2,384	105,596	1,504	-23%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	1,565	161,817	4,542	-39%
Syrian Arab Republic	768	13,628	496	-35%
Yemen, Rep.	70	2,118	5	-44%
MENA Region		4,996,123	134,876	-28%

Source: World Bank MENA Crisis Tracker January 25, 2021. Authors' calculations based on data from Worldometer (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Color coordination done as follows: Any % decrease is Green, 0-25% increase is Yellow, 25-50% increase is Orange, 50%+ is Red.

Figure 1: COVID-19 Cases in Morocco and other Maghreb Countries

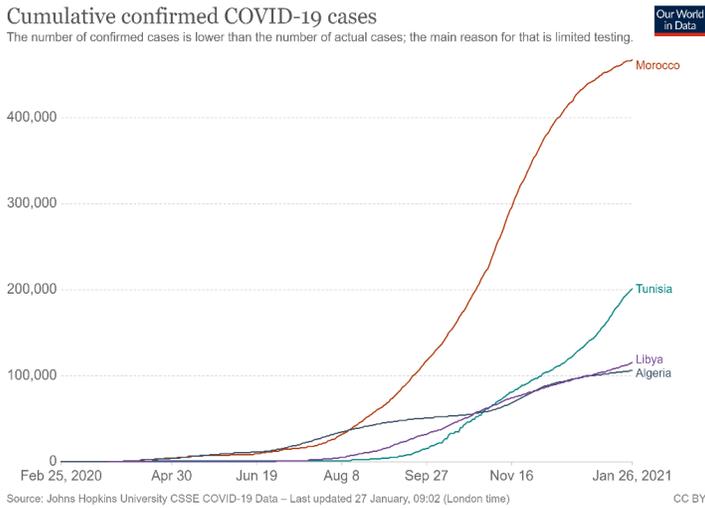


Figure 2: Vaccination Progress

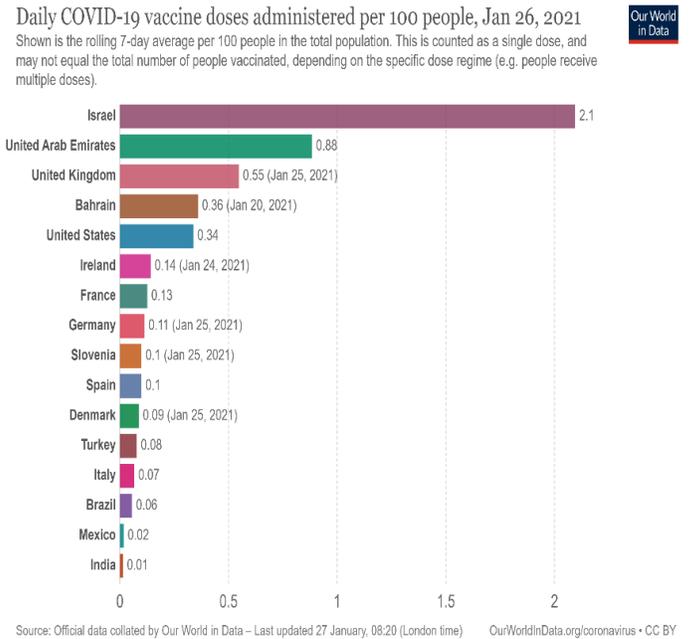
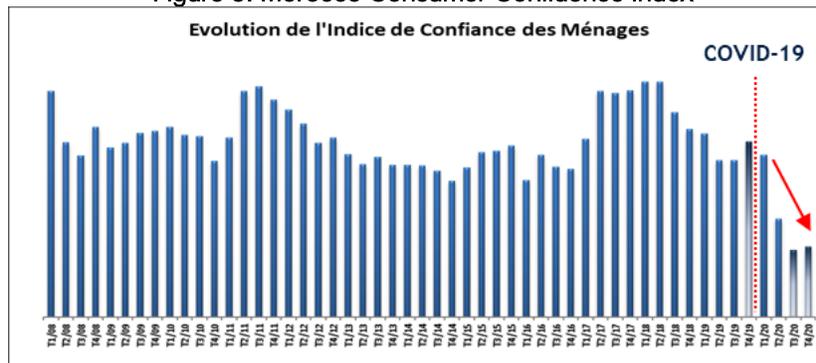


Figure 3: Morocco Consumer Confidence Index



Source: Morocco Haute Commission du Plan (HCP, Planning Commission), in: World Bank Morocco, Brief Covid-19 – Maroc, January 27, 2021

Box 1: UAE - University Consortium for Quality Online Learning⁵¹

The United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education and the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education set up the University Consortium for Quality Online Learning (UCQOL), a new initiative with the objective to support select UAE universities in the development of accredited online learning programs and their implementation by 2022. The public-private partnership aims to make accredited online learning programs of high quality more accessible to a larger student audience in the UAE and elsewhere, to enhance collaboration among and building the capacities of UAE institutions for online learning. This includes a needs assessment of the initiative's member universities, training of academic teaching staff and instructional designers and grants for the design and delivery of online learning programs as well as establishing a network to exchange experiences, collaborate and advocate jointly on online learning.

⁵¹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200725151420692>