



# Quality Assurance and a Bologna-type Process in the Arab world

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## Abstract

*The economy in an age of globalized and knowledge-based economies has become heavily dependent on university-educated and highly skilled human resources, who are employable and mobile across national borders. Harmonization of educational systems of the Arab countries and the setting up of shared academic quality assurance standards are essential steps towards facilitating employability and mobility of human resources. These issues are explored in the context of the Arab world in this mainly expository paper in which it is argued that the Bologna process, as a further step towards European integration, can serve as a model which is relevant to the harmonization of educational systems of the Arab countries.*



## I. Introduction



We live in the age of globalized and knowledge-based economies where development has become heavily dependent on university educated and highly skilled human resources (Steger, 2009). This has been demonstrated in recent decades in India and South Korea and in the case of China after it embraced a capitalist economy. This is not a new phenomenon: Going back a couple of centuries, Japan started its own path to economic development during the Meiji period from about 1860 by introducing Western knowledge and technology into its feudal society. In the case of the USA, the immigration of educated and highly skilled Europeans and other nationalities made a fundamental contribution to its development, especially after the civil war (about the same time as Japan opened its doors to foreigners). This evidence is sufficiently compelling to make it reasonable to expect that facilitating the movement of highly skilled human resources might lead to further economic development of the Arab world. The main attractor is of course the availability of better pay and conditions of employment. But it is the harmonization of educational systems that facilitates the employability of the highly skilled human resources from one country to another. The term 'harmonization' is used to mean a process of setting standards for education at all levels, promoting good practice in curriculum development, teaching, assessment and research, setting up mechanisms for the conversion

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and recognition of qualifications obtained in various Arab countries, facilitating the movement of students and academics between institutions and setting standards for academic quality assurance whilst respecting diversity across the Arab world. As will be seen shortly, robust systems of quality assurance are central to any effort towards harmonization, and for this reason increased co-operation between the agencies responsible for academic quality assurance in the Arab world is a necessity.

In this paper some of the significant initiatives to harmonize educational systems in the Arab world since WW II are reviewed in Part II, The Bologna Process and its relevance are outlined in Part III. Quality Assurance in the Arab world and GCC as a suitable environment for introducing an adapted version of the Bologna process is discussed in Part IV, and a possible way forward is explored in Part V.

## II. Harmonization of higher education in the Arab world

### 1. An overview

Initiatives to harmonize educational systems and facilitate the conversion of academic awards in the Arab world started around the middle of the 20th century for geopolitical, cultural and economic reasons. The resulting treaties and pacts can be classified into two types, those signed by all Arab countries, and those treaties signed between individual Arab countries. Historically, two treaties have significantly influenced subsequent developments. First, the Cultural Treaty concluded over half a century ago at the end of World War II in 1945 between the members states of the Arab League. This treaty provided for the exchange of teachers and students at various levels of studies and education. It was a great step towards promoting mobility in the Arab world. As a step towards its implementation, the signatory states expressed their intention to standardize their own stages of education, while maintaining the basic tenets of their national educational systems. A Commission on Equivalences whose membership included academic experts was given the task of implementing this treaty, mainly by promoting local agreements between individual States, as suggested by its 3rd Article, (Guiton, 1977; UNESCO, 1974).

About twenty years later in 1964, a second step towards harmonization was taken by the Arab Cultural Unity Pact, which was intended to extend the scope of the co-operative work carried out since 1945. This pact proposed exchanges of teachers and students, some of its articles (for example the 24th) confirmed the need for establishing a system for equivalence of diplomas through bilateral agreements. Other articles proposed the standardization of entrance requirements, the length of various educational levels, and also the harmonization of curricula, assessment systems, etc, (Guiton, 1977; UNESCO, 1974).

Efforts among Arab countries continued in subsequent years. For example, in 1970 the Association of Arab Universities, set up a special Commission to study such questions as the standardization of admission requirements by the Arab universities. This commission produced its first official report in 1974, which was endorsed by the Council of the Association of Arab Universities. Its recommendations included that Arab countries should recognize the secondary school diplomas if awarded by the respective Ministry of Education of each state. Moreover, it recommended that every university student in the Arab world beyond the first year was to be entitled to transfer to another Arab University and continue his/her studies there. The most far-reaching recommendation was that undergraduate university degrees awarded by any accredited university in any Arab country should be recognized by all other Arab countries.

Under the auspices of UNESCO, over the last thirty years efforts to bring about harmonization

among various educational systems in the Arab as well as in the other regions of the world such as Africa have continued, for example actions related to the recognition of higher education degrees following the Arusha Convention (UNESCO, 2001).

## **2. Cooperation Council of the Arab countries of the Gulf (GCC)**

The countries involved in the GCC, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have undergone a far-reaching economic and social transformation accompanied by a rapid expansion in their higher education systems. Evidence (www.gcc.org, 2009; UNDP, 2006) shows that over the recent years much has been invested in infrastructures, to develop and encourage the growth of educational institutions and improvement of educational standards. These countries have been aware that higher education should be contributing more effectively to the development of skills and knowledge required in the regional job markets and economies in general.

## **3. Outcomes**

Looking back at these efforts from our vantage point in 2009, one can only admire the idealism of all those who were involved in and sponsored, these efforts.

In terms of concrete outcomes of these treaties and pacts, there is no doubt that important achievements have been made in the Arab world, including GCC countries. For example, a new generation of Arab specialists educated in American and British universities have joined the academic staff of many universities in the Arab world; curricula have been modernized; research has flourished; programmes for graduate studies leading to doctoral degrees have been established. In addition, governments have created national accreditation and validation authorities to regulate private universities. On the issue of harmonization of educational systems, for example, Oman reported to UNESCO that they will “recognize all diplomas and degrees in higher and secondary education obtained in any Arab country, provided that they are recognized in the country granting them and are awarded by a university or institute that operates under the supervision of the official authorities” (UNESCO, 1984).

However, there are some thought-provoking observations by authoritative sources such as the World Bank that “While the countries here invest a higher proportion of their gross domestic product on education than other regions in the world, the region continues to face challenges in developing a high-quality education system at all levels and promoting life-long learning and training that responds to the needs of the labour market.” (World Bank, 2007; UNESCO, 1998). Reaching objective and evidence-based conclusions about the outcome of these initiatives, treaties and pacts is impeded by a number of factors, including:

- a. Availability of comprehensive longitudinal studies leading to reliable evaluation data about the implementation of these treaties.
- b. Availability of comprehensive information about educational systems, for example detailed information about curricula, assessment results, comparative assessment of research, decision process etc. regarding recognition of academic awards, different stages of higher and secondary education in each country, comprehensive directories, etc.
- c. Detailed information about the role of the labour market and the prospects for future employment as a decision factor in the introduction of new programmes of study.
- d. Detailed information about life-long learning programmes.
- e. Detailed information about co-operation between agencies responsible for academic quality assurance in the Arab world.

In the case of the GCC countries, some of the possible reasons for these problems have been described with admirable candor "...the political decision required for providing enough financial support and moral cover to render those efforts successful, the existence of an organizational gap between political decision-making and implementation, and the need for translating the political will into a tangible procedural reality...", (GCC, 2002).

Over the last two decades, the IT revolution, the delivery of courses by internet and international agreements for free trade have led to 'trans-border' and 'borderless' higher education where providers from the US, UK and Australia offer university education in almost all Arab countries through conventional as well as open and distance learning systems. This has increased access to higher education and has speeded up the introduction of Western liberal ideas and the concept of liberal arts education. At the same time, they have complicated the task of accreditation, comparability and recognition of academic awards. Examples include the link with the parent institution (whether it is only a business venture), the nature of the curricula offered, the quality of teaching and assessment, etc. In particular, it would be extremely difficult at the present time for employers to compare applicants holding similar degrees, without having access to a publicly available, independent and reliable method of comparison. Regulating this "market" requires close co-operation between Arab countries to provide objective information to young Arab students who see their future in pursuing university education in a properly vetted, accredited and validated institution.

It should be emphasized that problems of this kind are not limited to the Arab world; The West has had to deal with similar problems for a long time. American, British, French and German systems of education are organized along different educational philosophies and institutional structures, for example different credit systems, course and programme assessment requirements and a variety of doctoral degrees with varying standards.

The European Union, since its inception in the 1950s, following two world wars within nearly twenty years, has recognized that modern economic development requires highly educated human resources and that these resources should be made mobile and employable across the EU. An important step in this direction has been to set up the Bologna process (initiated in 1999) to facilitate the comparability of university degrees and the recognition of university awards. A part of this process is to foster closer co-operation among the agencies responsible for quality assurance in member states with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies. Although there is no Arab version of the EU, Arab countries explored a similar process as outlined above in 1945, before Europe. Nevertheless, the Bologna process, outlined below, can serve as a model, motivating further cooperation and ultimately leading to more extensive economic advancement of the Arab world.

### III. The Bologna Declaration

1. This Declaration (signed by 29 EU countries on 19 June 1999)<sup>3</sup>, is a further step towards European integration. It embodies the earlier Sorbonne declaration (May 25, 1998) which stressed the creation of the European Area of Higher Education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility, employability and the continent's overall development.' The term 'employability' in this context is defined as "the ability to gain employment, to maintain employment, and to be

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<sup>3</sup> [www.Bologna-berlin2003.de](http://www.Bologna-berlin2003.de); [www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/maindoc/bologna\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/maindoc/bologna_declaration.pdf)  
Bolognadec/process.2009

able to move around within the labour market” (Bologna Follow-up Group, London, May 2007). The Bologna declaration proposes that in this area university graduates should be able to move freely between European countries, using qualifications obtained in one country as acceptable entry requirements for further study in another. More detailed principal aims of the Bologna declaration are as follows:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to master and doctorate degrees as in many European countries.
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.
- Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognized by concerned receiving Universities.
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement for students and teachers:
  - For students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services
  - For teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorization of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights.
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

The European Ministers of Education (EME) in a joint declaration have accepted the challenge of being one of the main contributors in the construction of the European area of higher education, reaffirming their commitment to the fundamental principles of the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988. They specifically promised to the following: “...engage in co-ordinating our policies to reach in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the third millennium, the objectives which we consider to be of primary relevance in order to establish the European area of higher education, ([www.bologna-berlin 2003.de/](http://www.bologna-berlin 2003.de/)). These aims are expected to be achieved by 2010<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. Quality assurance in the European higher education area**

As stated above, comparability of quality assurance systems across the EU is an important factor in achieving the aims of the Bologna declaration. For this purpose the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in Higher Education was established in 2000 to disseminate information, experiences and good practices in quality assurance in higher education to European QA agencies, public authorities and higher education institutions. Its work is based

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<sup>4</sup> [www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/maindoc/bologna\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.aic.lv/bologna/Bologna/maindoc/bologna_declaration.pdf) Bolognadec/process.2009

on the following principles (1) respecting the diversity of higher education systems in Europe instead of trying to establish a unified, pan-European quality assurance regime, (2) accepting that the fundamental responsibility for quality rests with academic institutions, (3) promoting co-operation of quality assurance agencies at the European and international levels, for example by supporting joint international projects in the QA field, (<http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>).

Institutions within Europe are expected to set up quality assurance standards for (1) the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards, (2) the assessment of students using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently, (3) the quality of teaching ensuring that staff involved in the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so, (4) learning resources and student support, (5) information systems for the collection, analysis, and the use of relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities, and (6) public information which should be up to date, impartial and objective about the programmes and awards they are offering<sup>5</sup>.

ENQA gives priority to facilitating the mobility of students and academics within Europe. It intends to provide detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions.

#### **IV. Quality assurance in the Arab countries**

In this section some of the initiatives towards the formulation of national and inter-Arab QA systems will be briefly reviewed. These efforts were motivated by the desire to strengthen collaboration and cooperation in quality assurance among the Arab countries, a region, as mentioned above, where there has seen an expansion in the number of newly established higher education institutions as a response to increasing demand by increased number of students. At the UNESCO's Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education, Beirut 1998, the Arab ministers agreed on a «resolution calling for the establishment of a regional mechanism for quality assurance and accreditation under the auspices of the Association of Arab Universities...» (UNESCO, 2003) Similar efforts were made at Arab Summits (8th conference for the ministers of higher education in Egypt 2001, 9th conference, Syria 2003 and the 10th conference in Yemen 2005). As a result, some Arab countries have established national quality assurance and accreditation councils.

At the regional level, 'The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (ANQAHE) was launched in 2007 as an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization established in association with the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The ANQAHE works in connection with the Association of Arab Universities and serves» as a platform to exchange information; disseminate knowledge; and improve professional expertise of the national quality assurance agencies, to enhance the collaboration between similar quality assurance organizations in the Arab countries as well as to develop cooperation with other regional and international quality assurance networks.", ([www.anqahe.org](http://www.anqahe.org)). In addition, a network called the Arab Quality Assurance and Accreditation Network "ARQAANE" was established in Belgium in July 2007, as an independent, non-profit organization aiming at raising the quality of higher education in the Arab world and cooperation between the Arab Quality Assurance and Accreditation Networks. These networks are intended to complement the national quality assurance frameworks for the recognition of qualifications (both domestic and international), institutions, courses and programmes and also assist the creation of a national

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>



registers for institutions, courses and quality assurance agencies, ([www.arqaane.org](http://www.arqaane.org)). Despite these efforts, El Amine (2008) and Anqahe (2009) reported that the “QA status of higher education in the Arab countries and the prevailing quality assurance practices showed that QA systems are still falling short and identified some major challenges and limitations to quality assurance, for example:

- Insufficient funds and resources.
- Absence of a national QA system and a developing QA culture in many countries of the region.
- Lack of professional quality assurance expertise.”

Returning to the special case of the GCC countries, the Supreme GCC Council has played an admirably constructive role in updating the educational system of the region and in promoting quality assurance. A survey of their efforts can be found in Cooperation in the Field of Education, (<http://www.gccsg.org>). All these states have established various forms of quality assurance and accreditation councils. Some are linked with international accreditation boards. Most of their private universities are affiliated or are in partnership with foreign universities.

The 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of the GCC higher education ministers in UAE, March 30 2009 addressed such topics as the promotion of educational cooperation in the Gulf region. The meeting also focused on the promotion of cooperation in educational development in the Gulf, the creation of academic exchange programs, and the expansion of lifetime education in the region to boost the economies of the region and create new job opportunities, ([www.gcc.org/edu](http://www.gcc.org/edu) ).

At the 17th meeting of the Presidents, Vice presidents and Directors of GCC institutions of Higher Education, promotion of cooperation and coordination between Arabian Gulf countries in higher education was a focus of attention.

There is currently a proposal to establish a GCC Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ([www.gcc.org](http://www.gcc.org)). This reflects the understanding that a regional approach to quality assurance in higher education offers the possibility of reducing national costs and improving both national and regional competitiveness in the global market. In the beginning, the focus of the Gulf network will be on building national systems to carry out accrediting functions. It is possible that, in the future, the introduction of this Network may facilitate the establishment of a regional accreditation agency, but the initial goals of the Network, as with INQAAHE, are centered on sharing expertise.

Another proposal is that the GCC Ministers establish a process to determine standards for professional programmes for medical doctors, engineers, accountants and teachers. The outcome would be one common set of regional standards established for all professional programmes in the GCC countries.

However, more needs to be done in order to transform and build a culture of quality assurance in the region's higher education institutions.

## **V. Establishing a Bologna-type process in the GCC**

Among the Arab countries, GCC countries provide a most suitable environment for establishing a Bologna-type Higher Education area. The main reasons include:

- The GCC nations have a common linguistic, cultural and religious heritage, prosperous economies, and similar geopolitical and security concerns.
- There is a well-established general cooperation framework, i.e. the Gulf Cooperation Council.



- The GCC nations are considered a natural strategic block headed toward a common currency in the near future, ([www.gcc.org/economic/](http://www.gcc.org/economic/) ).
- Similarities between their educational systems, supported by the Governments and the existence of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS).
- There are already thousands of highly qualified foreign experts working in the GCC who have made a fundamental contribution to its economic advancement in recent years.

The experience of the GCC in establishing such an area can serve as a model for other Arab countries to establish their own regional higher education areas or indeed establish a more global area covering the entire Arab world.

It is not the intent of the authors of this paper to suggest a particular administrative structure, or a new layer of bureaucracy, for the establishment of a Bologna process in the GCC. Together, the existing governmental and private institutions probably have the capacity to adopt the idea of the Bologna process to their own region and develop the framework and the mechanisms for implementing their adopted version. Indeed there are many structures within the GCC governments whose responsibilities include promotion of harmonization among their educational systems. The responsibility to do so is with the GCC Ministries of Higher Education, policy makers and senior university administrators, to work together with all concerned parties including international and regional organizations. In that case, all they may need would be certain adjustments in policy and practices to meet the challenges of harmonization in the GCC. We will suggest some strategic aims which can be considered as a guide for the basic steps and adjustments.

1. Revisit the existing treaties, pacts, official statements, etc. and choose those aspects which are acceptable to all, and applicable to the 21st century world, whilst respecting differences of opinion among the GCC countries to produce a modest realistic action plan based on the advice of academic experts in each country.
2. Entrust an appropriate body within the GCC with the task of formulating a suitable GCC-analogue of the Bologna process to produce a proposal and action plan for harmonization of the educational systems of the GCC countries and to ratify the final proposal, including the necessary resources, by the legal authorities in each of the GCC countries such as the national parliaments.
3. Expand cooperation between the agencies responsible for academic quality assurance in the GCC, as the key dimension of harmonization discussed in this paper. This may involve systemic changes to be made to modernize existing practices and bring varied systems of quality assurance together within the existing national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. In particular, a core of performance indicators shared among all QA practitioners would facilitate comparability among educational institutions.
4. Commission a group of specialist academics in each of the GCC countries with the task of evaluating the results of the implementation of the proposal and the action plan on a longitudinal basis.
5. Produce comprehensive information about the educational system of each country, including information about curricula, assessment results, comparative assessment of teaching, research, etc., and use the internet to disseminate that information.
6. Facilitate the exchange of students and academics among universities across the GCC by providing scholarships and research fellowships.

UNESCO, as an impartial international organization, with world-class experts from all nationalities is able to continue its important contribution towards the harmonization of education in the



Arab world, as can be seen in its historical track record. Therefore it would serve some of the fundamental interests of the Arab countries if they continue to give their unqualified support to UNESCO's efforts.

## VI. Summary

In this expository paper the main initiatives to harmonize higher education in the Arab world have been reviewed. The Bologna process was briefly introduced and its relevance to economic development of the Arab world mentioned. Finally, it was suggested that the GCC countries provide a most suitable environment for establishing a Bologna-type process, and certain steps towards its implementation were suggested. The GCC experience can serve as a model for the entire Arab world in the future.

All these suggestions are meant to serve as flexible general aims; the details are a matter of negotiation between the Arab countries. What connects these suggestions together is the belief that economic development in the globalized world can be achieved only through cooperation.

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