

Policy Commentary



Interpreting Reform of the Academic Field of Education in the MENA Region

تفسير إصلاح مجال التعليم الأكاديمي في الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

Ted Purinton

Founding Dean, Sharjah Education Academy

Abstract

This policy commentary paper reviews the scope and impact of government-led educational reforms in the MENA region, with a particular focus on the role of academic institutions in the improvement of teacher education, educator professional development, and the alignment of educational outcomes with international standards. The paper analyzes the integration of international practices within local contexts, with emphasis on how the academic field of education is understood and how it has evolved within the MENA region.

الملخص

تستعرض هذه الورقة الخاصة بمراجعة السياسات نطاق وتأثير الإصلاحات التعليمية التي تقودها الحكومات في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على دور المؤسسات الأكاديمية في تحسين تأهيل المعلمين، والتطوير المهني للمربين، ومواءمة نتائج التعليم مع المعايير الدولية. تحلل الورقة دمج الممارسات الدولية في السياقات المحلية، مع التركيز على كيفية فهم المجال الأكاديمي للتربية وكيف تطور داخل منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا.

Keywords: Education reform, Teacher education, Evidence-based professional development, Comparative education, Policy adaptation, Education research, Education in the Middle East & North Africa

الكلمات المفتاحية: إصلاح التعليم، تأهيل المعلمين، التنمية المهنية القائمة على الأدلة، التعليم المقارن، تكيف السياسات، البحث في التعليم، التعليم في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا

Corresponding Author: Ted Purinton; email: trpurinton@sea.ac.ae

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1. Introduction

The transformation of educational research and the academic role in educational reform in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the past few decades has been deeply intertwined with broader societal and governmental objectives. For example, elevating the status of teaching as a profession has been a priority for many governments in the MENA region given that the profession has historically failed to attract ambitious and talented individuals. Rhetoric prompting change is fueled in part by such reports as the World Bank's Human Capital Index for 2020, which indicates that advances in educational investment, particularly in improving the quality of educators, have been associated with advances in human capital (World Bank Group, 2021). As governments across the region increasingly recognize the value of teacher education reform as an effective strategy for enhancing human capital, they have sought to align with international standards, increase the selectivity of teacher education programs, and align teacher education curriculum with broader school reforms (Al-Ghassani, 2016; UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2019). Teacher education is often perceived as a catalyst for economic and social development (UNESCO, 2014; United Nations, 2015). While the introduction of globalization into the region has necessitated the production of well-prepared teachers who can adapt to evolving educational paradigms (e.g., student-centered learning, personalized learning, project-based learning), global standards (i.e., benchmarks that promote equitable, quality education, e.g., United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes education), and new economic models (i.e., knowledge-based economy, privatization, collaborative labor arrangements, etc.), ambitious governmental reforms have impacted teacher education in ways that often seem contradictory to the scientific aspirations of top tier higher education institutions in the region. In other words, comprehensive universities, in order to increase research rankings, must compete in a global marketplace for generalizable knowledge (i.e., scientific knowledge that is applicable across borders) (Waterbury, 2020), whilst faculties of education have been increasingly encouraged to emphasize local relevance (i.e., producing teachers, shaping knowledge solutions, or developing interventions that are contextualized for local schools). For example, teacher education programs are offered at independent professional faculties such as Jordan's Queen Rania Teachers Academy, the Bahrain Teachers College, and the Sharjah Education Academy. These faculties have received dedicated funding, often at higher levels per capita student enrollment than traditional higher education institutions (Consultancy-me.com, 2022; Oxford Business Group, n.d.). In general, education spending increased considerably after the Arab Spring (MEED, 2013). Teacher education reforms have been a part of governmental schemes to enhance the stature of teacher trainees, with the goal of making the teaching profession more competitive. These reforms are perceived to contribute positively toward higher quality teaching, which is considered a precursor for human capital development (World Bank, 2019).

This paper offers a reflection on the rapid and substantial changes to the academic field of education which broadly includes (1) teacher education, (2) educator professional development, (3) advanced qualifications and professional development for experienced teachers and/or senior leadership, and (4) educational research and scholarship. The academic field of education has been referenced in relation

to improvements in educational outcomes in the MENA region, specifically in relation to the shift in teaching strategies away from an emphasis on memorization and/or narrow skill-building toward critical and creative thinking (Dakkak, 2011), and an increase in reliance on evidence in educational policy and practice (Purinton & ElSawy, 2014). This recent recognition of the importance of the academic field of education contrasts sharply with its previous low regard (Chapman & Miric, 2009; Heyneman, 1997). This shift reflects a broader societal change in recognition of the crucial role that well-trained educators play in shaping future generations and driving economic and social progress. This paper explores this shift by discussing trends and theoretical constructs related to the reforms.

2. Trends

Until around the 1990s in Western countries, the academic field of education was regarded with minimal esteem (Labaree, 2006). The empirical foundations underpinning the education discipline were tenuous and perceived as marginally relevant by practitioners (Ball & Forzani, 2007; Labaree, 2006; Lagemann, 2000; Purinton, 2011). Ball and Forzani (2007) suggest that education research, in its nascent stages, did not provide a comprehensive set of practices that were deemed effective and reliable by educators and the general public. By contrast, other established professions (e.g., medicine, academia, law, engineering) adopted consistency in practice based on empirical knowledge, recognized by societies to be efficacious within their respective domains (Abbott, 1988; di Luzio, 2006; Freidson, 2001). Many scholars identify the 1980s and 1990s as a period in which this perception shifted, especially in Western countries, mostly as a result of advanced research methodologies, strengthened ties between faculties of education and schools, and a more robust knowledge base on which to practice and construct policy (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Nuttall, et al., 2017). Further, evidence-based practice, bolstered by empirical research and expected as curriculum in teacher preparation programs, has been the subject of policy and governmental support. A few examples include Singapore's implementation of mastery learning approaches (Goh & Burns, 2012); Canada's inclusive educational practices within mainstream classrooms (Florian & Spratt, 2013); the UK's implementation of its National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education, 2013); and Australia's National Quality Framework, which was based on empirical research on early childhood development (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011). Where evidence-based teacher preparation has failed to appear in practice, think tank-driven policy pressure has been exerted (e.g., the National Council on Teacher Quality in the US, which has attempted to embarrass universities in the US that fail to include recent empirically proven teaching strategies in their teacher education curricula). Thus, the field of education in many countries has taken a strong turn toward professionalization, in the classic sociological sense, by increasing not only the standards of qualifications but of the connections between qualifications and practice outcomes (Ingersoll & Collins, 2018).

Yet, despite such advancements, the prevailing belief is that educational outcomes are chiefly governed by factors beyond a teacher's control, such as student intelligence and student socioeconomic background, thereby diminishing the perceived impact of a teacher's empirically driven influence

of practice (Cohen, 2011). In countries that have attempted to set the field on a course toward professionalization, the cycle cements a connection between university-based research, university-based qualifications for practice, practice-based mediation of performance quality, and formal governmental recognition of professional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Glazer, 2008). Specifically:

...such knowledge is best developed and disseminated from the modern university, in that the university is an institution which both generates knowledge and passes it to professional actors through what often becomes a governmentally-mediated certification... This knowledge, and its subsequent certification, construct the boundaries of practice within the field. These boundaries form because the knowledge is seen in society to be of value and because its practice is too complex for the non-specialist to perform consistently. (Purinton & Skaggs, 2022, p. xvi)

Increasingly since the 1990s, faculties of education in North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Southeast Asia have rapidly ascended in their financial contributions to comprehensive universities, whereby they are increasingly able to compete with traditionally more profitable faculties, such as engineering and medicine, on grants, patents, and donations¹.

This growth underscores the professional significance, as well as the political salience, of the evolving knowledge base, now more frequently utilized by graduates of the education field. In other words, the field of education globally has been able to advance its professional status by demonstrating to governments, donors, and society its performance efficacy; in the traditional professional sense, this occurs through the academic certification of specialized knowledge which is then adjudicated by peer mediation within boundaries of practice (as opposed to bureaucratic evaluation or market mechanisms) (Adler et al., 2008). Thus, faculties once least regarded in universities are now being recognized as the bright stars of their institutions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

In a recent book on the global academic field of education (Purinton & Skaggs, 2022), we explain how educational research turns into practical evidence, by way of the two primary functions of academia: research and the delivery of academic programs/courses. This process, the professional cycle, fortifies the education profession, where society recognizes that academic evidence propels practice and outcomes (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Purinton, 2011). Professions in the hard sciences such as medicine and engineering have an easier time crossing national boundaries because their applications can easily generalize across culture, politics, and language, undeterred by traditions, value preferences, and economic conditions. In recognition of the potential of this professional cycle application in the MENA region, policymakers have avidly sought its implementation. This is evidenced through an increase in MENA–Western bilateral educational partnerships, such as contracts between the University of Helsinki and the Sharjah Education Academy or Teachers College Columbia and the Queen Rania Teachers Academy in Jordan.

I personally have been intimately involved in this evolution over the past decade and a half. I was the second dean, first associate dean, and a founding faculty member of the faculty of education at the American University in Cairo (AUC), offering both graduate and undergraduate programs for elite educational policymakers and change agents, as well as affordable professional development to tens

of thousands of public-school teachers in Egypt and throughout North Africa. I have also contributed to teacher education development in autonomous academic institutions in Bahrain and the UAE—first as Dean (also referenced as Chief Executive by the Office of the Prime Minister to denote the institution's semi-autonomous structure) of the Bahrain Teachers College; more recently as the Founding Dean of the Sharjah Education Academy. During this period, I have observed how teacher education and the academic field of education align with broader educational reforms. Drawing from this experience, in the following sections, I discuss several transformative trends and their implications for education reform in the region and the education profession globally, especially to the benefit of countries leveraging the academic field of education to enhance their human capital outcomes.

I organize my analysis into four reform agendas and five reform challenges. In terms of reform agendas, I discuss internationalization, accreditation, autonomous structure, and selection schemes. Regarding challenges, I focus on regional changes, conflict with traditional academia, model conflict, language of instruction, and specialization.

2.1. Internationalization

As is widely recognized in the vast literature on educational internationalization, the MENA region has avidly shaped or taken advantage of transnational educational innovations (Marchesini, 2020). From branch campuses to country-branded independent universities, the region has often been the first to experiment, with the most prominent examples as the American Universities in Cairo and Beirut, founded in 1919 and 1866, respectively. AUC's venture into the academic field of education aimed to highlight the importance of recent advances in educational research through its inception into Egypt's most prestigious and elite university. Much of the education faculty's funding came from American sources, such as American donors and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), influencing its American character of knowledge and associated scholars; but over time, an increasingly larger share, such as the European Union and from MENA-based corporations and donors. This increased the influence from scholars from other countries, and it shaped new educational reform ideas based on the local needs of corporate social responsibility programs. This all occurred at the same time as the tumultuous government changes due to the Arab Spring, given the faculty's inception in 2010. Despite multiple shifts in the politics, and the regularity of unrest and violence, of the country in the years that followed, the university expressed dedication to the necessity of a flourishing faculty of education.

In Bahrain, there was a concerted effort to model the country's education system after Singapore. This inspiration was partly due to similarities between the two nations: both are small in size and lacking in natural resources, especially in comparison to their neighboring countries. Singapore's transformation from a lower-tier education system to a high-performing one, driven by targeted educational policies and a strong emphasis on high-quality teaching, served as a compelling model for Bahrain. In 2008, a contract was established between Singapore's National Institute of Education, Bahrain's Economic Development Board, and the Ministry of Education. In later years, the Prime Minister's Office oversaw the college

directly, alongside an independent governing board chaired by the Director General of Schools of the Ministry of Education. This collaboration and governmental prioritization aimed to replicate key aspects of Singaporean teacher education, including the supporting structures such as incentive systems designed to boost competitiveness and attractiveness of pursuing a career in teaching.

Subsequent initiatives in Bahrain expanded the international character of its faculty, incorporating educational models and collaborations with universities from Switzerland, Finland, and New Zealand. For instance, a master's program offered by Boston University, but managed through the Bahrain Teachers College, introduced yet another educational model to the region. These efforts were part of broader reforms led by international figures, including former ministers of education and other experts from countries such as New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and the UK. The diverse array of reform pathways through internationalization exemplified the extensive efforts to elevate the country's educational landscape.

In the United Arab Emirates, I have been involved in a project which introduced Finnish teacher education methodologies. While not all components of the Finnish system are replicable, such as the mechanisms that render teacher education highly competitive within the broader society, the strong influence of Finnish scholars and practitioners has been pivotal in shaping the governance and implementation of these educational reforms in Sharjah. This transnational relationship highlights the shifting nature of teacher education in the Middle East—a field in flux, eagerly incorporating best practices from around the world, but also aiming to shape localized knowledge from within the country.

The concept of internationalization in the Middle East, especially in the realm of teacher education, is not a quest for a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it embodies a journey of adaptation, seeking the most effective practices tailored to the region's unique needs and contexts. This approach is evident in the various initiatives and collaborations with countries like Singapore, Finland, and New Zealand, each contributing different perspectives and methodologies to the educational landscape. These efforts highlight a commitment to exploring a diverse range of educational models, rather than simply importing foreign systems wholesale, as has been the theoretical assumption under policy borrowing research (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016), described in greater detail later in this paper.

Importantly, there is an emerging dialogue within the region that questions the future direction of educational reform. This conversation centers around the idea that while international insights have been invaluable, the time may be ripe for the region to develop its own reform strategies, rooted in local insights and experiences. This shift in perspective suggests a growing confidence and maturity in the region's educational sector, recognizing that the most sustainable and impactful reforms may ultimately emanate from within, shaped by the region's own educators and policymakers.

2.2. Accreditation

Accreditation has emerged as a crucial indicator of quality in the educational landscape of the Middle East, spanning across institutional types, academic disciplines, and even contributing to national branding

(Blanco Ramírez & Berger, 2014). A prime example is the American University in Cairo, which has maintained long-standing institutional accreditation, as well as accreditation for most of its academic disciplines, from the United States. Similarly, many educational institutions in the region either find themselves compelled to obtain accreditation or recognize its benefits in reinforcing their standing. Such recognition is often viewed as a significant marker of excellence (Blanco Ramírez, 2014). For instance, at the school level, numerous institutions strive to secure and maintain accreditations related to their curricula, such as British Schools Overseas (BSO) standards.

Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in the region of faculties of education seeking accreditation from the US-based Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). This multi-year accreditation process guides education faculties through comprehensive evaluations, bolstering their confidence in the effectiveness of their internal assessments. In the United States, this accreditation is either mandatory or considered a hallmark of quality, depending on a state's policies. It underscores a unique aspect of US teacher education, where faculties are required to demonstrate the value of their qualifications within the constraints of state qualification systems and labor market demands. Currently, such institutions as the Queen Rania Teachers Academy, the Bahrain Teachers College, the United Arab Emirates University College of Education, Zayed University, and Al Ain University have obtained CAEP accreditation.

Although such accreditations are often sought for the purpose of public recognition, they have a positive impact on faculty operations. For example, CAEP accreditation targets various public perceptions about teacher education in its accreditation system, as CAEP assesses institutions on their connections with schools and classrooms: the institution must prove that it collects impact data from the schools in which its graduates are employed. Another accreditation standard assesses the extent to which institutions admit only highly qualified candidates. So while public perception may be the starting point, the accreditation process can have long-term benefits for overall quality. As such, it is a worthwhile policy mechanism that serves as a form of insurance against the watering down of standards or overly academic behavior that has little impact on practice.

2.3. Autonomous structure

A distinctive reform in the Middle East has been its adaptation of the independent teacher education model, akin to Western initiatives like Teach for America or Teach for All, as well as various school- or district-based certification programs, such as School Direct in the UK or New York City Teaching Fellows managed by the New York City Department of Education. Despite the cultural emphasis on academic qualifications, non-university-affiliated teacher education institutions have emerged in the region. The earliest examples include the Queen Rania Teachers Academy in Jordan (established 2009), the Bahrain Teachers College (2008); and the Emirates College for Advanced Education (2008). These developments drew inspiration from prestigious institutions like Singapore's National Institute of Education, London's Institute of Education, and Columbia's affiliated Teachers College, among others. A significant impetus

behind this movement is the recognition that comprehensive universities may not always provide the ideal environment for teacher education. Independent faculties of education have thus been established to spotlight the profession's significance, which may be overshadowed in a comprehensive university setting.

The importance of organizational structure in these reforms is paramount. For example, throughout its history, the Bahrain Teachers College has gone through periods when it was more closely tied to the University of Bahrain and periods when it was more closely following the directives of its independent board. The college was founded with the intention of being autonomous, even though it awards a diploma from the University of Bahrain. This autonomy enables it to prioritize its mission, as set forth by its sponsor, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister, which is to rapidly prepare Bahrainis to become teachers in the country's public schools. By contrast, a comprehensive university may wish to see all disciplines improve the research rankings of the institution; whilst this is a noble cause, it was not the purpose for the institution's creation.

The comparison of research impact in different fields is also crucial to this process. The high "impact factors" of disciplines related to medical and natural science research, often due to their generalizability across countries, contrast with the typically lower impact factors in applied social sciences like education (Light & Harrison, 2022). An independent faculty of education can thus produce more locally relevant and practically applicable research. For instance, in Bahrain, faculty research focused on initiatives directly beneficial to entities like the Ministry of Education, the Bahrain Quality Assurance Authority, and the Economic Development Board of Bahrain. One notable research initiative involved faculty from its Leadership Centre, a research center initiated by the Deputy Prime Minister, enhancing the quality of chronically underperforming intermediate schools. In these cases, the organizational aspect transcends mere academia, encompassing a comprehensive approach to educational improvement and reform. This underpins the purpose of such reforms, as they have sought practical outcomes on a local level rather than the international rankings so often pursued by comprehensive universities through research meant to enhance the discipline at a global level.

2.4. Selection schemes

A notable reform mechanism which holds potential for broader impact across the region revolves around selection schemes aimed at increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession. For example, in Bahrain, the bachelor's degree programs in education became among the most selective in the country, largely due to the incentives offered, such as salary during study and a guaranteed position at the Ministry of Education. This initiative began with modest interest but gained significant momentum over time, such that the acceptance rate for the undergraduate programs reached nearly 5% of all applicants by 2022.

This model of enhancing the appeal of the teaching profession through financial and job security incentives is now being replicated in other areas, such as the UAE (e.g., a program in Sharjah called *Proud to be a Teacher*, as well as a national program now being applied to teachers called *Nafis*).

However, with increasing governmental incentives in the region to encourage citizens to pursue private-sector employment as opposed to governmental positions, there will be a need to devise new strategies to make teaching a desirable career choice for nationals (even in public schools, which primarily serve citizens, not expatriates)—further emphasizing that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Despite these challenges, there is a clear drive and commitment to implement such changes. The successes of such existing schemes provide a promising template for countries across the region, suggesting that with the right incentives, the teaching profession can be made more appealing, thereby attracting a larger pool of qualified and enthusiastic candidates. This shift is crucial for the overall enhancement of educational quality and the long-term sustainability of educational reforms in the region.

3. Theoretical Considerations

In this section, I briefly outline five analytic frameworks from existing research commonly utilized in comparative education studies, each with an illustration of how the framework may be applied to the trends discussed earlier. The frameworks are (1) international policy borrowing, (2) neo-institutional theory, (3) professionalism theory, (4) human capital theory, and (5) global governance theory. The references in this section highly only the most seminal papers related to each theory. More comprehensive reviews can be found in elsewhere (Purinton, 2011; Purinton & Skaggs, 2022). From this brief theoretical review, I analyze the challenges that reforms to and alongside the academic field of education in the MENA region may face.

First, policy borrowing refers to the process through which educational practices and policies are transferred from one country to another, influenced by the larger forces of globalization (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). It underscores the importance of adapting these policies to fit local contexts, acknowledging cultural, economic, and political differences. This theory emphasizes evidence-based policymaking and the critical analysis of policy adaptation and outcomes, highlighting the role of international organizations in disseminating educational practices. Scholars often use this framework to emphasize the importance of adapting borrowed policies to local contexts, as blind importation can lead to ineffective outcomes (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). Mohamed (2019) contends that many importations of policy into the Arabian Gulf countries have “sacrificed longer-term improvements for short-term political expediency” (p. 264). An example of policy borrowing is when countries adopt standardized testing models from leading education systems to improve academic achievement. For instance, many nations have looked to Finland’s education system, known for its student-centered approach and lessened emphasis on standardized testing; they have attempted to integrate similar philosophies into their own educational frameworks, often not considering the layers of social, historical, and political elements within Finland that have allowed success with such an educational policy. Singapore has likewise, particularly in teacher education, served as a policy source for many MENA countries, given the international distinction of its National Institute of Education. However, they often fail to consider the social structures and political or economic frameworks within Singapore that allow Singapore’s teacher education system to be effective for the nation of Singapore.

Second, neo-institutional theory explains how organizations, including educational institutions, adopt similar structures and practices in response to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, striving for legitimacy and survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Coercive levers are usually regulatory; across borders, they may be voluntarily embraced through the pursuit of an accreditation or the striving toward an international benchmark. Mimetic levers are usually driven by competition and the intrinsic desire to match institutional constructs of other organizations within a field. Normative levers come from employee mobility, social consensus, professional expectations, or other elements of social networks that dictate behavior. An illustration of this theory in the MENA region is the diverse expatriate academic staff who work in faculties of education; for example, the Bahrain Teachers College, while over time increasing its overall share of Bahraini faculty to nearly 40%, still hosted academic staff from over 30 nationalities, each bringing practices and knowledge from their home countries and institutions.

Third, professionalism theory focuses on the role of specialized knowledge and formal education in establishing professions (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). It emphasizes the importance of academic credentialing as a gatekeeping mechanism and the regulation of professional practices and ethics by professional bodies, aiming to ensure competence and protect the public interest. In education, professionalism is reflected in the requirements for teacher certification and ongoing professional development. Countries that have successfully elevated the status and quality of teaching, such as Singapore, focus on rigorous teacher training programs and continuous learning opportunities for teachers. This approach underscores the theory's emphasis on formal education and professional regulation to maintain high standards in the profession.

Fourth, human capital theory posits that education is crucial for economic growth, viewing the development of individuals' skills and knowledge through education as an investment in human capital (Becker, 1964). This theory supports the alignment of educational policies with the goal of enhancing economic competitiveness. The practical application of human capital theory is seen in policies prioritizing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, driven by the belief that these fields are critical to a nation's economic development. Initiatives to increase participation in STEM education reflect efforts to build a workforce capable of sustaining innovation and economic growth, aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands.

Finally, global governance theory examines how international organizations influence the creation and enforcement of global norms and standards, including in education. It suggests that these entities, through initiatives and benchmarks, shape educational policies and practices worldwide without relying on formal authority. An illustration of this theory is the widespread adoption of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Countries participating in PISA often reform their educational systems based on the results, aiming to improve their international rankings by aligning their policies with the implied global standards of quality education set by the OECD. Schleicher's (2019) interpretation of the PISA 2018 results offers insights into how these assessments impact educational policy and practice globally.

The emphasis on the academic field of education through concerted governmental effort within the MENA region demonstrates a careful balance between global inspiration and local customization. Policy borrowing, for instance, has indeed been central to many of the region's policy efforts, across sectors; but it is particularly acute in the adoption of international models for teacher education and accreditation standards. Accreditation within the region is likewise understood to be a response to global norms and standards, suggesting alignment of evidence-based practices. The aspiration toward accreditation drives structural reforms within faculties of education, reverberating out to policy that directs either teacher education specifically, or university management of faculties of education more generally. We can also understand such reforms to be pursuits of legitimacy, particularly given that human capital challenges facing the region, which lead to dampened confidence of labor markets, increased migration, and so forth. Pursuing international accreditations, akin to earning a global stamp of approval, signifies that faculties are now able to meet high international standards.

The establishment of independent academies dedicated solely to teacher education delineates a specialized domain for the nurturing and development of educators, effectively insulating them from the multifaceted competitive dynamics prevalent within comprehensive university environments (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Ginsburg & Lindsay, 1995). By segregating teacher education into focused institutions, the strategy not only elevates the prestige associated with the teaching profession but also operationalizes a targeted recruitment mechanism designed to enhance the selectivity of program admissions. This heightened selectivity serves as a dual-purpose tool: first, to elevate the perceived value and status of the teaching profession, positioning it as a career path commensurate with the highest standards of professional achievement; and second, to institute a meritocratic gateway into the profession, ensuring that only the most qualified and motivated individuals are recruited into the teaching ranks. This is underscored by a nuanced understanding of the competitive landscape within higher education and the labor market's dynamics. In comprehensive universities, where diverse academic disciplines vie for resources, recognition, and research accolades, education faculties often struggle to assert their value and attract high-caliber students. By contrast, the autonomy afforded to independent teacher education institutions allows for a concentrated focus on pedagogy, innovation in teaching methods, and the integration of educational research.

4. Challenges

4.1. Regional changes

Although it may seem apparent, an important aspect to acknowledge in the context of educational reform is the impact of regional conflicts and transformations. While various events, such as the Arab Spring and the recent war on Gaza, have not necessarily halted progress, they have at times slowed down or impeded advancements. A notable reflection of this dynamic within the leadership team of AUC was a common campus-wide adage: *We did conflict management by morning, strategic planning by afternoon*. It was often noted that the university, and particularly its new faculty of education, had the same pressures

of academia in the US, but with the addition of the tumultuous events following 2011. The university's president at the time, Lisa Anderson, wrote the following in a book I coedited (Purinton & Skaggs, 2017) about leadership of American international universities:

During my five-year term as president of the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt itself was governed by four presidents and a field marshal. Of my ten semesters and five summer sessions, only one was not disturbed by unanticipated interruptions, including closures due to violent protests, sunset-to-sunrise curfews and security alerts, and national holidays occasioned by unforeseen constitutional referenda and snap elections. It was, in other words, a tumultuous and distracting time. But in many ways the trials we faced, and the accomplishments we celebrated, were merely distillations of the challenges and satisfactions of higher education around the world, though further concentrated by the high stakes of revolutionary fervor and existential anxiety. (Anderson, 2017, p. 27)

Interestingly, it has often been noted that crises sometimes catalyze more vigorous efforts toward educational reforms. This increased dedication could stem from a perception that crises highlight the urgency of reforms, underscoring the idea that improvements cannot be postponed. Alternatively, it might be that focusing on educational reform provides a diversion from the frustrations and difficulties experienced in other areas of life. The experiences in Egypt, marked by upheaval and adversity, exemplify this phenomenon. The resilience demonstrated by people working on educational improvements amidst such challenging circumstances are indicative of a belief in the transformative power of education, and it perhaps highlights an underlying optimism within the region.

4.2. Conflict with traditional academia

A recent analysis of higher education in the MENA region argues that governments rely on their universities to achieve three goals simultaneously: mass production of graduates, research rankings, and super-efficiency in cost (Waterbury, 2020). In publicly prioritizing the academic field of education, many of the institutions in the region have been able to garner larger budgets, and their targets for research output have been tailored to meet country-specific needs, as opposed to generalizable research findings. This evolution of teacher education reform in the region presents a unique challenge, as it diverges from the typical trajectories observed in other academic disciplines within universities, and thus often confuses or frustrates them. Unlike other disciplines, which may not be inherently smaller but are not tasked with producing a high volume of professionals, teacher education bears the responsibility of preparing thousands of educators essential for societal development. This has placed faculties of education under heightened scrutiny, not just for their research contributions but also for their societal impact, given the sheer number of graduates they produce. This scrutiny extends to evaluating their efficacy in delivering large-scale, evidence-based strategies to meet the demands of a profession that is expansive in both size and influence.

Further complicating this scenario is the applicability of educational research across different national and cultural contexts. Findings in the field of education, deeply rooted in specific traditions, philosophies, languages, and policies, often struggle to find relevance beyond their original context. This stands in stark contrast to the natural sciences, where discoveries and empirical principles typically transcend national borders and cultural barriers. In education, a research finding that resonates within one country may be dismissed as irrelevant or inapplicable in another, due to varying educational systems, cultural values, and societal norms. This inherent challenge in the generalizability of educational research underscores the complexity of implementing global reforms in education, as it requires navigating a diverse tapestry of cultural assumptions and deeply rooted pedagogical practices.

This situation highlights a crucial tension within the educational reform movement. As the science of instruction evolves to account for cross-cultural differences, the remaining reality of the current nonuniformity of educational sciences implies an inevitable intrusion of belief and tradition. The drive for reform aims to replace subjective approaches with evidence-based practices. However, in regions where schools and parents have yet to demand such practices, the gap between theory and application widens. Faculties of education, therefore, find themselves at a crossroads, choosing between their core mission of student education and the university's broader goal of enhancing research output. This tension is particularly palpable in applied fields like education, where the generalizability of research often diminishes its perceived relevance to specific educational contexts and needs.

4.3. Model conflict

Building upon the previous discussion, it is pertinent to consider the impact of cultural constructs on instructional models. The perception of student achievement, often gauged through international rankings, leads to the categorization of certain educational models as either successful or unsuccessful. This dichotomy influences educational systems globally, as countries striving for higher rankings may adopt these models, such as creating an inspectional regime that assimilates into a national approach. This phenomenon necessitates substantial citation support, as it aligns with the literature on policy borrowing, a concept widely recognized but often critiqued for its limited effectiveness.

The assumption that a country's success is intrinsically linked to its instructional model leads to a practice of model adoption, which is seen as a benchmark for good practice. However, this approach is frequently insufficient to produce the desired effects in totality. In practice, countries initially pursue a foreign model, often laden with connotations of Western imperialism. Yet, as this pursuit evolves, there is a growing realization that mere replication is inadequate. Countries gradually recognize the need to tailor these models, infusing them with local nuances and cultural specificities. This evolution underscores the importance of customizing educational approaches to fit the unique cultural and social fabric of each nation.

4.4. Language of instruction

The early stages of teacher education reform within the region highlighted two predominant traps: reliance on empirical research and the allure of international models. A significant observation during this period was the perceived importance of the English language in implementing these changes. The prevalent belief was that mastery of English was essential to fully embrace the international knowledge base. This emphasis on English, however, posed substantial political challenges within countries, particularly in the Middle East. It inadvertently marginalized the Arabic language, not only in terms of its perceived value but also in its practical use in education. This shift created barriers for learners and future teachers, as the implementation of English in educational systems clashed with the native linguistic context.

Despite the continuing importance of English as an academic lingua franca, there is a promising shift in perception regarding the role of the Arabic language in education. Increasingly, Arabic is being recognized for its intrinsic value in the teaching and learning process. This change reflects a broader understanding that language is not merely a medium of instruction but also a critical component of cultural identity and cognitive development. The growing appreciation of Arabic within educational reforms signifies a move toward more inclusive and culturally sensitive pedagogical practices.

4.5. Specialization

Another significant challenge within the region's educational landscape is the issue of specialization, particularly in relation to teaching status and age groups. Teaching status is often structured informally in a hierarchy, with greater prestige assigned to teachers of older students and subject specialists (Al-Mahdi & Salama, 2019; El Nagar & Krull, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). For instance, a high-school English teacher is viewed as more prestigious than a kindergarten generalist. However, this hierarchy neglects the vital role of quality teaching in early childhood, which is crucial for student development. Despite the critical importance of the early years in education, they often receive the least prestige and recognition (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Moss, 2013; OECD, 2017; UNICEF, 2019). This misalignment exacerbates misunderstandings about the nature of early education. Contrary to the approach in higher education where an academic subject is dissected and taught from its foundational principles, early education requires a different methodology. These pedagogical approaches, crucial for early cognitive development, are not easily interpreted or valued within the traditional disciplinary framework. This discrepancy highlights a fundamental issue in the regional education system, where the importance of foundational early education is often overshadowed by the perceived prestige of teaching older students and specialized subjects.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that the reform of the academic field of education within the MENA region represents a decisive shift toward enhancing the quality and relevance of teacher education, professional development, and

educational research. Motivated by a desire to elevate the teaching profession and improve educational outcomes, these reforms align with broader societal and economic goals. By adopting innovative international practices, emphasizing evidence-based policy, and fostering professional development, the region is poised to overcome historical challenges and make significant strides toward achieving educational quality. This progression not only reflects the evolving global educational landscape but also underscores the unique context and aspirations of the MENA region.

As a crucial highlight, the establishment of autonomous educational institutions and the strategic focus on accreditation and internationalization serve as critical mechanisms to elevate the stature of teacher education. These efforts, coupled with targeted selection schemes, aim to attract high-caliber candidates to the teaching profession, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. As the MENA region continues to navigate the complexities of educational reform, it is imperative to sustain this momentum and further integrate local insights and experiences. This will ensure that reforms are not only globally informed but also deeply rooted in the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the region, ultimately leading to sustainable and impactful improvements in the academic field of education.

However, it is imperative to approach these reforms with a degree of caution. The path to educational transformation is fraught with challenges, ranging from the potential for policy misalignment with local needs to the risk of exacerbating educational inequalities. There is a fine balance to be struck between embracing international best practices and ensuring these reforms are adaptable to the nuanced realities of the MENA region. To navigate these complexities successfully, continuous dialogue among educators, policymakers, and communities is essential. This will help in refining these reforms to ensure they are both ambitious in scope and grounded in the sociocultural context of the region, thereby maximizing their effectiveness and sustainability.

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Author Biography

Ted Purinton is Founding Dean of the Sharjah Education Academy. Previously as Senior Education Advisor for the Economic Development Board of Bahrain (seconded as C.E./Dean of the Bahrain Teachers College), Purinton doubled the size of the college and expanded its programs and consultative capacity for educational reform within Bahrain. Previous to that, he served as Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the American University in Cairo (AUC), as well as Associate Provost for the University (AUC's senior internationalization officer, also responsible for academic administration and strategic initiatives); Chair of the Department of Educational Administration at National Louis University in Chicago; Associate at the Center for Literacy, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory; programs administrator at the Paramount Unified School District in Los Angeles; and a high school/intermediate school English teacher in Los Angeles. He holds a doctorate in educational policy, planning, and administration from the University of Southern California. Purinton has served on multiple boards for various schools and other educational institutions and has consulted for a wide range of educational organizations and governments on issues ranging from organizational restructuring to teacher professional development, university budget allocation to tertiary system redesign, and more.

Endnotes

1- For example, see the following reports:

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- (b) University of Michigan School of Education. (2023). Research. <https://soe.umich.edu/research>
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