

A study that reads the impact of Covid-19 on the Arab higher education

Based on a survey held by

International Association of Universities (IAU)

**The survey was sent to various higher education institutions in the Arab
region with 47 respondents**

Association of Arab Universities

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The Impact of Covid-19 on the Arab Higher Education

The outbreak of the corona virus that is called COVID-19 pandemic has affected human life worldwide. Many people have lost their jobs or suffer of income cut. Unemployment rates have increased across major economies. Indeed, COVID-19 disturbed all aspects of life including public health, education, companies and factories, traveling and tourism, hospitality, shops, trading, etc. Many countries reacted to the pandemic concerns by imposing closure of borders, airports, seaports, entertainment facilities, and educational institutions. It was reported that the global economy struck by 4.4% in 2020 which is considered as the worst since the Great Depression of 1930s.

In March 25, 2020, higher education was bumped by unprecedented effect of COVID-19 worldwide. Universities and colleges were forced to close which was all of sudden with no time and proper planning. Countries seemed to continue the education process according to their capabilities and their readiness to shift from face-to-face towards online education. Moreover, the pandemic raised the demand on computers, laptops, tablets, smart phones, and internet. Many countries, especially developing and underprivileged were unable to implement online education due to impairment of infrastructure and knowledge to deliver online education. Therefore, the whole process of education in these countries took a period of time to catch up and get used to the situation.

In the Arab region, the impact of the pandemic on the educational process was severe according to officials of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Universities and colleges, with some exceptions in the rich Arab countries, were not prepared for online education due to poor IT infrastructure and knowledge for all stakeholders such as students, staff, and administration.

Therefore, COVID-19 resulted in lockdown and closure of almost all Arab universities and colleges. Resumption of the education process, adopting the online education instead of face to face, varied in time and quality according to the country and their educational institutions capabilities and readiness. Moreover, various activities have been completely halted from the start of the pandemic such as practical classes/ labs, field research, graduation ceremonies, seminars, conferences, sportive activities, and entertainments. Certain activities of administrative type were resumed in campuses with complete abidance to COVID-19 national directions. Important to realize, the pandemic has uncovered the inadequacies and inequities in the Arab education systems including readiness to online education and availability of supportive environments required for such learning activities. Undoubtedly, the educational processes resumed with a lot of confusion and chaos that affected all players and stakeholders involved in the education cycle. The impacts of the pandemic on the Arab higher education were sensed and a lot of measures were taken by local authorities and institutions that were, indeed, insufficient to alleviate the effect of pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 on Arab higher education survey was carried out by sending the survey prepared by the International Association of Universities (IAU) to various higher education institutions in the Arab region. As a result, only 47 entities responded mainly from Iraq, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Republic, Yemen, and Libya. 40.4% of the responses were prepared by the deputy head of institution (Vice President), 25.5% by the heads of institutions (presidents), (29.8%) by their representatives while registrars' answers made (4.3%) of the total. Public institutions were more responsive with a percentage of 53.2% compared to non-profit private entities 31.9%. Private for profit institutes percentage was 14.9%. Moreover, 44.7% of institutions with 1000 to 5000 student population reacted to the survey more than institutions with less than 1000 population body (4.3%). The degree of

satisfaction related to how the institute managed the crisis was not unanimous 63.8% (very good), 31.9% (good)' and 4.3% (adequate).

The respondents of survey indicated and pointed out the real impacts and challenges of Covid-19 on the Arab higher education at the level of the institute governance, management, teaching & learning, research, stakeholders, and community.

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the higher education Governance and Management:

- ❖ The pandemic resulted in complete closure of all higher education institutions in the Arab region in 2020 and adopted online education that replaced face to face system. Moreover, certain activities have been cancelled and postponed to unknown dates.
- ❖ Technical assistance, webinars, and trainings for the online approach were offered by higher education institutions for all players such as staff, faculty, and students but the quality of service varied from entity to entity and from country to another.
- ❖ Meetings of the boards, faculties, departments, and all other committees were carried out remotely.
- ❖ Transversal collaboration and communication between faculties and departments enhanced to a great extent (55.3%) during the crisis.
- ❖ There was strong communication among and between all staff (academic or administrative) to a great extent (63.8%).
- ❖ Communication between staff and students varied between the different institutions depending on the infrastructure and capabilities. 63.8% of the survey respondents were satisfied to a great extent but 4.2% were not. The rest (31.9%) were doubtful.
- ❖ Strategic plans implementation at the higher education institutions were disrupted to some extent (55.3%). In the other hand, 6.4% claimed no impact.
- ❖ As a result of the pandemic, 87.3% of the Arab Higher education institutions are convinced with the urgencies of modifying their strategies to face the existing and future challenges and to mitigate negative resulted consequences.
- ❖ The academic freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions were disrupted due to national governments strict new measures including compulsory closure and reinforcement of digital communications and teaching. 44.7% of Arab institutions respondents confirmed the threat despite of 55.3% claimed no impact.

The impact of Covid-19 on Finance of the higher education institutions:

- ❖ Covid-19 resulted in financial challenges for Arab education institutions such as loss of international students and auxiliary revenues while at the same time had to accommodate expenses including cost of scaling the virtual engagements in the institution environment.
- ❖ Public funding to Arab education institutions have dropped down as 42.6% of the respondents indicated. Other respondents claimed no change (27.7%). Surprisingly, 4.3% respondents announced increase in the public funding. Moreover, private sector funding was also affected and 29.8% of respondents agreed with this fact.

- ❖ Despite the support of the national higher education to the Arab institutions in terms of issuing the guidelines for completing the academic year, the institutions believe the support did not tackle the financial challenges resulted from the pandemic. Therefore, 48.9% of the respondents indicated lack of support in this regard.
- ❖ 36.2% of Arab education institutions claimed reduction of income generated from student's fees, while, 51.1% claimed no impact.
- ❖ 42.6% of respondents suffered from the reduction of income generated from auxiliary revenues.
- ❖ 32.4% of respondents claimed increase in spending to enrich the institution environment including upscale of technology to facilitate proper teaching as an urgent consequence to Covid-19 pandemic. On the contrary, expenditures on research dropped down as 27.7% respondents declared.
- ❖ The expenditure of Arab education institutions on social responsibility and societal engagement declined as 38.3% respondents reported.
- ❖ Covid-19 impacted the expenditure of international collaboration and activities including students' mobility and staff exchange as 42.6% of respondents confirmed.
- ❖ Even though, Covid-19 resulted in the termination of staff including educators and administrative contracts especially in the private sector, 70.2% of Arab education institutions claimed no effect. Only, 19.1% respondents admitted reduction.
- ❖ 46.8% of Arab institutions respondents claimed no financial impact of the pandemic on the infrastructure of their institutions, while, 23.4% reported decrease and 27.7% claimed increase.
- ❖ 38.3% of Arab institutions respondents reported extra costs of health challenges for staff, faculties, and students including health insurance and university hospital expenditures.
- ❖ The pandemic impacted other operating costs including internet accessibility, platforms, social media, and marketing as 23.4% claimed. Other institutions respondents reported decrease in costs.
- ❖ Governments in the Arab region did not declare any major funding for higher education. Respondents' answers were confusing and contradicting where 53.2% answered positively and 46.8% answered negatively. Nevertheless, Arab institutions in rich countries might have received some funding but others did not enjoy any privileges. Moreover, Arab institutions did not benefit from any substantial external non-governmental funding to confront the pandemic and 80.9% of respondents agreed with this fact.
- ❖ Regrettably, Arab institutions feel threatened of the future and sustainability of existence. 66.0% of respondents shared the threats.
- ❖ So far, the salaries of existing academic administrative staff benefits were not altered according to Arab institutions respondents (70.2%). However, news of contract terminations to academic and administrated staff is very prevalent.

The impact of Covid-19 on Partnerships of the higher education institutions:

- ❖ The Arab institution's relationship and collaboration with the national authorities progressed from the start of pandemic in order to keep up with national directives. Therefore, 53.2% of respondents admitted enhancement in the collaboration, while, 31.9% claimed no change.
- ❖ 42.6% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed that their senior management were consulted by the national higher education authorities in the context of public policies related to measures and instructions belonging to Covid-1, while, 48.9% claimed that they were not involved.

- ❖ Despite the support of the national higher education to the Arab institutions in terms of issuing the guidelines for completing the academic year, the institutions believe the support did not tackle the financial challenges resulted from the pandemic. Therefore, 48.9% of the respondents indicated lack of support in this regard.
- ❖ Students of the Arab institutions have not the same opportunity to access remote learning due to financial capabilities and/or lack of technical skills. Only, 34.0% of the Arab institutions respondents showed that 100% of their students managed to follow remote learning activities but the rest showed lesser percentages. To overcome the obstacles, 40.0% of the Arab institutions' respondents claimed providing their students with funded devices, 27.7% developed partnerships with telecommunication companies regarding internet connection and data packages, 19.1% failed to provide solutions to their students, and 12.8% allowed those students access to their facilities as priority group.
- ❖ 42.6% of the Arab institutions respondents reported that Covid-19 weakened their academic partnership; against 31.0% who reported that it strengthened them and created new opportunities with partner institutions. The rest of respondents claimed no impact.
- ❖ 38.3% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed that a Covid-19 strengthened academic partnerships for international collaborative learning; against 29.8% who opted for decline, and 31.9% stated no impact.
- ❖ Covid-19 stimulated all aspects of related health research issues that drove many institutions to collaborate for the aim to produce vaccines and medicines. As a result, many Arab institutions showed interest to compact the disease by carrying out related research either independently or on collaboration with other institutions and research centers whether locally or internationally. 44.7% of Arab institutions respondents claimed involvement in partnership in relation to Covid-19 and health issues research. On the other hand, only, 31.9% of the respondents announced academic partnership in research not related to Covid-19.
- ❖ 34.0% of respondents reported strengthened partnerships with private sector in research related to Covid-19 and other health domains, while, 21.3% respondents stated that partnerships were weakened. The rest indicated no impact.
- ❖ 27.7% of Arab institutions respondents proclaimed grow in partnerships with private sector in issues not related to Covid-19, while 21.3% respondents announced a reduction.

The impact of Covid-19 on the Learning and Teaching of the Higher Education Institutions:

- ❖ Arab institutions closures due to Covid-19 drove them to adopt technology. Various tools such as zoom, Skype, and other videoconferencing platforms became the ultimate new classrooms. Academic staff utilized blackboards, Microsoft Teams and other applications to collaborate and deliver their courses. The institutions had to invest in technical infrastructure to be able to shift from face-to-face to online. The Arab institutions respondents (55.3%) indicated growth in their capacity to acquire technology from the private sector.
- ❖ Arab institutions were encouraged to find ways and means of supporting online learning, including learning analytics, assistive technologies for academic staff and students with disabilities and more advanced means such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence applications.
- ❖ 74.5% of Arab institutions respondents announced the adoption and usage of various Learning Management Systems (LMS).
- ❖ 76.6% of respondents admitted usage of Open Education Resources (OERs)

- ❖ 83.0% of respondents reported that communicating with students was performed through digital communication infrastructure arrangements available in their institutions.
- ❖ In support of online learning 76.6% of the respondents embraced the usage of the learning analytics.
- ❖ Arab institutions initiated many online activities to train academic staff how to perform “teaching” online. 78.7% of Arab institutions respondents claimed offering online teaching pedagogy to adapt with the epidemic challenges and the closure of their campuses. Moreover, 78.7% of the respondents reported advancement in capacity building and provision of training to use technology. As a result, 83.0% of the respondents claimed an increase in virtual exchanges and collaborative online learning.
- ❖ Students of the Arab institutions have not the same opportunity to access remote learning due to financial capabilities and/or lack of technical skills. Only, 34.0% of the Arab institutions respondents showed that 100% of their students managed to follow remote learning activities but the rest showed lesser percentages. To overcome the obstacles, 40.0% of the Arab institutions’ respondents claimed providing their students with funded devices, 27.7% developed partnerships with telecommunication companies regarding internet connection and data packages, 19.1% failed to provide solutions to their students, and 12.8% allowed those students access to their facilities as priority group.
- ❖ Prior to Covid-19, Arab Institutions started to promote online education and many had initiatives to adopt blended models of eLearning but it was at preliminary stages. Few institutions were known as digital or open education institutions. Therefore, 38.3% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed all of their academic staff had experience with online learning & teaching, 29.8%, announced 75% or more had experience, 19.1% stated 50.0% or more had experience, 4.3% stated 25.0% or more had experience, and 8.5% claimed less than of 25.0% of their academic staff were acquainted with experience.
- ❖ Covid-19 disrupted the Arab institutions and forced them to emergent remote teaching. Academic staff members had to adapt with the urging situation and started to convert the curricula content into digital content to cope with the needs of remote delivery. Numerous challenges emerged due to their level technology skills, lack of experience, and the type of theme subjects. However, 57.4% of the Arab institutions respondents declared that their curricula have more theoretical parts than practical which made it easier for them to deliver. 27.7% converted their curricula to problem based learning in an effort to engage students from distance.
- ❖ In fact, the field of study determines the magnitude of Covid-19 impact on the delivery of curricula. Medicine, pharmacology, engineering and other several specializations that require laboratories cannot be taught remotely. Moreover, topics require practicing and supervision cannot be delivered totally online such as music and arts. 48.9% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed that education, humanities, social and behavioral science, journalism, information, business, administration, and law can be taught digitally. On the other hand, life sciences, physical sciences, mathematics & statistics, computing, engineering, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and health specialties face true difficulties where the learning and teaching will be obstructed seriously with digital learning option only. Moreover, hospitality, environmental protection, and security services contents are also difficult to deliver remotely where delivery will be too limited quality wise.
- ❖ Arab institutions declared no significant impact in offering micro credentials because they can deliver digitally. 48.9% of the Arab institutions respondents disclosed no impact.
- ❖ Covid-19 has affected all internships and placement tests in many Arab institutions. 17.0% of the Arab institutions respondents announced cancellation of all internships and placements. 21.3%

declared cancellation of international internships and placements. On the contrary, 21.3% claimed increase in offering online internships and placements.

The impact of Covid-19 on Staff of the higher education institutions:

- ❖ The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent closure resulted in sudden shock to the academic staff and forced them to adopt remote education. The level of readiness to perform varied between staff due to numerous reasons including availability of infrastructure, tools, previous experience, field of specialization, technical skills, etc. Unsurprisingly, all staff started to deliver different types of remote learning including blended and mixing synchronous with asynchronous learning. As a result, staff had to spend time in preparing and interacting with their students which added extra work load. 42.6% of the Arab institutions respondents confirmed that academic staff workload had increased.
- ❖ Administered staff was obliged to communicate remotely with their institutions and this situation led them to work harder to cope with the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Nevertheless, 23.4% of respondents agreed and 27.7% claimed decrease. Surprisingly, 48.9% of respondents claimed no extra work was done by administrative staff and their work was as usual.
- ❖ 44.7% of the respondents reported that their institutions showed institutional support for physical health of academic staff, while, 38.3% claimed no support. On the contrary, 14.9% declared reduction of support.
- ❖ Even though, Covid-19 resulted in the termination of staff including educators and administrative contracts especially in the private sector, 70.2% of Arab education institutions claimed no effect. Only, 19.1% respondents admitted reduction.
- ❖ Academic staff has been more absent due to health issues related to them or to their families as a result of the pandemic spread out.
- ❖ The Arab institutions showed less concern for their staff in regards to supporting their mental health although many suffered effects of social distancing and uncertainty. Therefore, only 29.8% claimed offering of such support.
- ❖ The Covid-19 pandemic stimulated some Arab institutions to recruit skilled academic and administrative staff to confront with the sudden change of learning and teaching methods. 46.8% of respondents were positive and the rest were negative.

The impact of Covid-19 on Students of the higher education institutions:

- ❖ Students of Arab institutions were forced to migrate from face to face to online learning and this prompt change exposed incapacity among many students especially those who lack skills in technology or ability to access technology due to financial issues.
- ❖ Academic performance of the Arab institutions students worsened and retreated because the general preference is the conventional class learning in addition to the fact that they are not adapted to online learning.
- ❖ Covid-19 resulted in social distancing and absence of student to student interaction in all Arab institutions which may cause serious complications.
- ❖ The enrollment of domestic students in the Arab education institutions was not altered significantly as 57.4 respondents stated in the survey. On the contrary, 21.3% claimed increase and 17.0% indicated decrease in students' enrollment.

- ❖ The enrollment of international students whether from the same region or worldwide dropped off compared to prior academic years. 48% of respondents declared decrease. The rest claimed no change or slight increase.
- ❖ The total population of the Arab institutions suffered of a reduction due dropout of students as a result of the epidemic. 20% of the respondents announced increase in the dropout compared to the prior academic year; before the spread of the virus.
- ❖ The dropout of research students was noticed at the time of pandemic spread in certain institutions as reported by 11.0% of respondents. Also, another student dropout was observed in their engagements in community service and social responsibility.

The impact of Covid-19 on Research Activities of the higher education institutions:

- ❖ Research at the Arab higher education was impacted negatively from the spread of epidemic and closure and lockdown. 63.8% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed delayed in research activities because staff had to spend more time in teaching activities (51.1%). Moreover, staff could not travel to conferences and meetings and they could not undertake field planned events or other events require physical presence..
- ❖ Academic staff has been more absent due to health issues related to them or to their families as a result of the pandemic spread out.
- ❖ The research priorities at Arab institutions were shifted towards issues related to epidemic. 60.3% of respondents reported increase in research in the fields of education, social and behavioral sciences, life sciences, and health welfare.
- ❖ The overall number of publications increased in certain universities (34.0%) and decreased in others (27.7%). The rest announced no change (38.3).
- ❖ The publication in international journals increased as stated for 34.0% of the respondents, whereas, 29.8% admitted decrease.
- ❖ The open access publications increased as reported by 40.4% of the respondents with a decrease in 17.0%.
- ❖ Covid-19 impacted the claiming of patents negatively. 19.1% of respondents reported reduction and 10.6% reported increase.
- ❖ Covid-19 did not change the number of PhD students (51.1%) but, however, delayed the time to complete their degrees (25.5%).
- ❖ The Interdisciplinary collaboration of research activities reduced in Arab institutions as 19.1% of the respondents claimed.
- ❖ Community based research and other research on global issues related to the epidemic had been prioritized at the same time (34.0%).
- ❖ Funding of the Arab institutions on research activities was impacted negatively at level of the each local government (25.5%), at foreign level (25.5), and among international organizations (19.1%). Moreover, funding from different sources also reduced such as, private sector (27.7%) and other private/ independent donors (27.7%).
- ❖ Covid-19 has impacted the research collaboration at Arab institutions positively where it scored (38.3%) at the level of national collaboration (36.2%), (27.7%) at the regional collaboration level and (34.0%) for the international collaboration.
- ❖ The Arab institutions claimed that the quality of research collaboration in general rose up to (34.0%). Moreover, the score of quality of research on the national level was (29.8%), the quality

of research on the regional level score was (29.8%), while quality of research on the international level increased to 36.2%).

- ❖ Covid-19 stimulated all aspects of related health research issues that drove many institutions to collaborate for the aim to produce vaccines and medicines. As a result, many Arab institutions showed interest to compact the disease by carrying out related research either independently or on collaboration with other institutions and research centers whether locally or internationally. 44.7% of Arab institutions respondents claimed involvement in partnership in relation to Covid-19 and health issues research. On the other hand, only, 31.9% of the respondents announced academic partnership in research not related to Covid-19.

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the International Strategies of the Higher Education Institutions:

- ❖ Covid-19 resulted in driving the Arab institutions to reviewing and revising their international strategies. 91% of the Arab institutions respondents declared their international strategies were already revised or under revisions. 31.9% of the Arab institutions respondents strengthened the attraction of international students with 23.4% of student exchange plans. Moreover, 38.3% of the respondents showed interest on internationalization of their curricula and 34.0% emphasized the importance of academic staff mobility. Interestingly, 34.0% of the respondents expressed it was essential to get academic and administrative staff trained internationally.
- ❖ Arab institutions expressed positive attitudes towards foreign qualifying applicants taking into consideration the Covid--19 challenges.

The impact of Covid-19 epidemic on the Communities of the Higher Educations:

- ❖ Covid-19 epidemic had a severe impact on the Arab communities as the same as it affected the rest of the globe. As a result, the pandemic caused devastating socio-economic impacts such as reduction of salaries and income in addition to jeopardizing businesses and caused serious health concerns. Community engagement and social responsibility are main pillars of the higher education institutions. 46.8% of the Arab institutions respondents claimed increased societal engagement. Moreover, 51.1% of the respondents showed involvement in the dissemination of scientific knowledge and awareness to the general public.
- ❖ Arab institutions were active in a way or another in promoting scientific knowledge and increasing awareness of the public by mainly organizing virtual conferences and seminars to disseminate scientific knowledge (40.4%). Moreover, the scientists and researchers were active in writing divulgation articles (25.5%) and participating in public media debates (21.3%). As a matter of fact, Arab institutions were involved in fighting disinformation by writing official institutional statements and divulging factual information based on scientific results (44.7%).
- ❖ Arab institutions claimed support for local communities during the Covid-19 spread peak (98.4%) in various manners based on their capabilities by providing available medical care and Covid-19 checks. Moreover, staff and students volunteered to provide mobile care for affected people while social experts provided expertise to local authorities.

The impact of Covid-19 on the Academic Values of the Higher Education Institutions:

- ❖ The Covid-19 drove the Arab institutions to restudy their academic values. Results showed strengthened impact on the equity in access (38.3%) rights of students and scholars (36.2), scientific integrity and research ethics (34.0%), and non-discrimination and support of the disadvantaged groups (34.0%). Nevertheless, a minority claimed weakened impact and the rest claimed no impact.

Important changes in Higher Education triggered by the pandemic that may stay beyond the pandemic:

- ❖ The Arab institutions believe that Covid-19 triggered changes in higher education that may stay beyond the pandemic including, online and blended learning (46.8%), increasing digital skills of academic staff and learners (8.5%), and usage of technology (8.5%).
- ❖ The Arab institutions believe that some changes triggered by the epidemic will unfortunately have negative effects on higher education beyond the epidemic such as:
 - a. decreasing in students commitment to attending physical classes and engaging with academic staffs and peers,
 - b. decreased international students and collaboration,
 - c. decreased practical experience of students, decreased learning outcomes as a result of conducting teaching on video platforms instead of using proper online platforms,
 - d. decreased students' trust in the national educational system
 - e. decreased community contribution,
 - f. there will remain numbers of unprepared academic staffs and students in dealing with online mandatory skills,
 - g. increased financial challenges.