

Middle Eastern universities begin to make their mark

Description

by Martin Ince

They may be at an early stage in their development, but investment schemes of Middle Eastern nations are beginning to pay dividends.

Across the Middle East, nations large and small are developing plans for higher education. Some have immeasurable sums of oil wealth to spend on this ambition, but even those that lack billions of petrodollars see no reason to be left behind.

Some Middle Eastern nations want universities for the new knowledge they generate, with an eye on replacing oil money with high technology employment. But others are aware of the soft power potential of universities in the struggle for world prominence. They would like universities that are good enough for their elites not to assume that their children have to go to Harvard or Oxford to complete their education.

The World University Rankings for 2011 are an early test of Middle Eastern plans for academic excellence. They show that the region, from Turkey to Morocco and the Gulf, has 34 universities in the 742 that we rank. At about one in 20 of the total, this group far exceeds the Middle East's share of world population. There are also five ranked Israeli universities, which for political reasons are highly disconnected from the rest of the region's educational culture.

The most heavily-publicized university ambitions in the Middle East belong to Saudi Arabia, and their success is seen in the seven Saudi universities in our rankings. These include King Saud University at number 200 in the WUR, and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals at 221. These two are the region's top-ranking universities by some distance.

More striking is the progress which these seven are making in the QS World University Rankings®. Umm Al-Qura University is still in the 501-550 band. But King Faisal and King Khalid universities are new entrants, the second of them entering immediately into the 451-500 zone. The other four have all risen, for example from 221 to 200 for King Saud.

A look across the rest of the region suggests a repeated pattern of modest but growing performance. In the far west, Al Akhawayn University in Morocco is one of the most striking entries, admittedly in our lowest 601+ category. It is the nation's only ranked university and was founded in 1993, accepting its first students in 1995. This makes it one of the youngest ranked universities in the world.

The only nation in the region with more ranked universities than Saudi Arabia is Turkey with eight. Bilkent is highest-placed in our 401-450 grouping. Both it and the Middle East Technical University appear in our citations rankings and attract international faculty, but no Turkish university impresses global employers or academics. Beyond these two nations, Egypt has five universities here but no other nation manages more than two.

Middle Eastern nations have chosen a variety of ways of developing their higher education. Qatar, which has one university here, is also home to Education City, a development zone that houses local branches of Cornell, Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown, HEC, Texas A+M and other US and European universities. It is difficult to capture this development in rankings such as ours. Qatar is also committed to spending 2.8 per cent of GDP on research, probably the highest figure in the world.

We cannot yet tell what effect the events of the Arab Spring will have on education in the region, although students and professors have been enthusiastic participants. But it is axiomatic that universities reflect the society they belong to, which suggests that change is inevitable.