

Universities and Sustainable Development in the Arab Region

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an important opportunity for the Arab region to reposition its universities to be among the global leaders. The Emirates Diplomatic Academy (EDA) has joined the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and has graciously agreed to host an SDG Center of Excellence for the Arab Region (SDGCAR). In this regard, the EDA and SDSN propose to engage with the leading universities of the Arab region in order to boost the research, education, policy analysis, and business incubation for sustainable development throughout the Arab region.

Universities have a unique role in sustainable development. They are the main institutions globally for: the generation of new scientific, technological, and social scientific knowledge; the propagation of that knowledge to the next generation; and the analysis of public policy issues outside of the political sphere. Universities train the teachers who educate children in primary and secondary schools; prepare the engineers and scientists to run high-technology companies; and diagnose the challenges facing their societies regarding the three pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social justice, and environmental sustainability. The Arab region stands to benefit from an intensive transnational effort to raise the performance of the regions' universities in research, education, and policy analysis.

Universities increasingly form the core of the world's high-tech regions, emulating the role that the US universities of Stanford and University of California have long played in Silicon Valley. Therefore, the quality of universities and their ability to attract top students and faculty are important. According to one widely used global ranking of universities, QS World University Rankings, the 22 Arab states have 15 universities

among the top 500 universities worldwide. These are listed on the next page.

These 15 universities constitute 3% of the top 500 schools, while the Arab region, with its 430 million people, constitutes around 5.5% of the world population. We may say, tentatively, that while the Arab region has many fine schools, its overall representation among top universities is currently insufficient. As of now, there is not one university in the Arab region ranked within the top 100.

The under-positioning of Arab universities is certainly a factor in the under-representation of the Arab region in global research and development (R&D). The latest data by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) shows that countries in the Arab region contribute a mere 0.8% towards global R&D. The global R&D powerhouses are North America, with an estimated 35.65%, Europe, with 25.16%, and East and Southeast Asia, with 32.1% of global R&D investments. Of course, the region's underperformance in this area also reflects many other considerations, including the insufficient level of public financing of R&D.

SDG Challenges in the Arab Region

The Arab region faces many distinct and important SDG challenges that also vary markedly across the region. Some countries are still struggling to meet basic needs and to break free of extreme poverty. These include Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, among others. Many countries are hydrocarbon powerhouses in an era in which the world needs to move from fossil fuels to renewable energy. These hydrocarbon powerhouses include Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Another group of Arab countries, alas, are caught in war, often caused or stirred by outside powers that have divided the Arab region. Countries caught in the cycle of violence and conflict include Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

There are also two cross-cutting issues of enormous importance for the whole region. First, the Arab region is, with very few exceptions, a dryland region highly vulnerable

to water insecurity and global warming. Therefore, the issues of freshwater and climate resilience must engage the entire region. Second, the Arab region, like almost all regions in the world, is grappling with the need for gender equality, which entails girls and women participating fully in economic, social, political, and cultural life.

These challenges – ending poverty, transitioning to zero-carbon energy, ending violence and conflict, managing freshwater resources, and pursuing gender equality – are all core to the SDGs. The SDGs number 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 8 (decent work and economic growth), and 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) focus on basic needs. SDGs 7 and 13 (climate action) focus on the energy transition. SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) focuses on peaceful and inclusive societies. SDGs 6 and 15 (life on land) focus on freshwater resources and ecosystem health. SDG 5 calls for gender equality. For these reasons, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda offer a meaningful, high-priority framework for the Arab region.

Role for Universities in the Region

Universities around the Arab region are expressing high interest in engaging with this complex agenda, and in forging partnerships with universities in other regions of the world as

well. Monash University, in Melbourne, Australia has produced a very useful guide emphasising a four-pronged approach for universities to get started with the SDGs, entitled 'Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities'.

The first is to introduce new teaching programmes to educate the next generation of leaders in the inter-disciplinary challenges of sustainable development. The second is to strengthen the university's research programme in sustainable development, on topics ranging from poverty to renewable energy to conflict resolution. The third is to create new organisations at the university level to coordinate SDG activities across the university's departments. The fourth is for the university to engage in public outreach and leadership, by convening all key stakeholders – government, business, civil society, and the academic community – to work together to achieve the SDGs.

Most importantly, the SDGs are the positive, constructive, problem-solving opportunity of our time. The world squanders its resources and limited attention span on useless conflicts and self-destructive competition. We are in an era when science and cooperation must loom large, so that the world can end its wars and direct attention to the common challenges of climate change, extreme poverty, and social justice. The universities of the Arab region, building on great historic traditions of learning and ethics, are poised to help their societies to achieve the SDGs in the coming years.

Table: Top-ranked Universities in the Arab Region in the 2018 QS World University Rankings

University	Rank (QS World Universities Ranking, 2018)	Country
King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	173	Saudi Arabia
King Saud University	221	Saudi Arabia
American University of Beirut	235	Lebanon
King Abdul Aziz University	267	Saudi Arabia
Qatar University	349	Qatar
United Arab Emirates University	390	United Arab Emirates
American University of Cairo	395	Egypt
American University of Sharjah	411–420	United Arab Emirates
Arabian Gulf University	411–420	Bahrain
Khalifa University	451–460	United Arab Emirates
Sultan Qaboos University	451–460	Oman
King Khalid University	471–480	Saudi Arabia
Cairo University	481–490	Egypt
Saint Joseph University of Beirut	491–500	Lebanon

Source: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>