

# THE CIVIC ROLE OF ARAB UNIVERSITIES

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## **Summary**

*The emergence of the “Arab Spring” and the dramatic events that followed were one the reason to initiate the project on the Civic Role of Arab Universities, which looks at issues of democracy, citizenship, culture of law, teaching social studies, public service, civic commitment, and the pedagogy of inquiry and deliberation. As a part of this project, the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES) organized a conference in collaboration with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, on April 21-22, 2016. This policy brief aims to provide key findings and recommendations regarding the civic functions of universities in the Arab world obtained from the research presented at the conference.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- ▶ Governments and universities alike should recognize that universities can play an important and independent role in policy formulation and civic dialogue. Universities should pursue more active civic engagement and governments should support this idea by allowing for academic freedom and an increased autonomy of universities from political actors.
- ▶ Universities should develop and promote curricula and programs that center on democracy, citizenship and human rights so that practice reflects discourse.
- ▶ Universities should engage students and faculty in community service activities and prepare them for participation in public life.
- ▶ Universities should promote faculty and student participation in decision-making and give faculty the rights to create their own organizations and unions.

## **Introduction**

Two competing historical trends shape the civic role of universities in the Arab world. Neoliberalism, which was absorbed by universities all over the world in the second half of the twentieth century, gives top priority to competition and market requirements. This model neglects political, social, and ethical aspects of higher education, marginalizes the teaching of humanities, and confines faculty members to short-term contracts. An opposite trend emerged in the 1990s criticizing the technical and economic biases in higher education stemming from neoliberalism. This new trend has been expressed in international declarations and institutions including the “Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education” (1999), and the “Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibility of Higher Education” (2005). For their part, several Arab universities established the “Arab University Alliance for Civic Engagement- Ma’an” (2008) as a regional network of Talloires, which aims “to bring together Arab universities with the collective goal of encouraging and enhancing civic engagement implementation in higher education.”

Three years later, in 2011, peaceful youth demonstrations accompanied the Arab Spring and showed the civic aspect of concerned Arab societies and the important role played by university students and graduates in these demonstrations. Yet, just months after, events escalated and revealed the weakness of the sense of civic responsibility in society, including among youth, as conditions were transformed into tribal fanaticism and religious extremism, as well as armed conflict. It is within this new context that the civic functions of Arab universities must be considered.

### ***Democracy in Arab Universities***

Democratic discourse is still in its infancy in most Arab universities, as well as activities that address topics related to democracy. Educating graduate students in Arab universities on democracy and its values is essential in developing their positive civic participation. Such discourse on democracy can also have a positive effect on the overall university environment. In addition, it is necessary to include basic knowledge of democracy in the content of curricula and academic programs for the benefit of the students and graduates. However, a study of 36 Arab universities showed that only 0.3% of academic programs and 0.2% of the content of courses are related to democracy. The topic is completely absent in 24 of the 36 surveyed universities.

The practice of democracy in Maghreb universities is more advanced in comparison with other Arab universities, however, it is almost totally absent in the academic discourse. It is important to note that their student unions have played a significant role in improving political awareness, enhancing the values of political participation, and involving students in public affairs.

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Universities, and particularly public universities in the Arab world are highly influenced by political actors. These actors that control students and teachers’ unions are exhibiting, in some cases, partisanship and intolerance in their discourse and practice. This has led, to some extent, to the curbing of academic freedom. Still, the practice of democracy at a university by both students and faculty should include the right to freedom of assembly, freedom of thought and expression, the participation in decision-making and the access to opportunities afforded by universities. Most Arab universities are clearly in need of improving in the aforementioned areas in order to graduate democratic elites.



### ***Citizenship, Human Rights and the Culture of Law***

There are a few courses in citizenship and citizenship education concerning legal identity and values related to equality, justice, and individual rights in Arab universities, although human rights courses are more prevalent in their curricula. The growing focus on human rights in the curricula of Arab universities can be seen as an important indicator of the growth of the civic role of these universities.

However, this valuable effort of teaching human rights needs to be accompanied by the consolidation of the “culture of law”. The “culture of law” refers to the general awareness of the need to respect and apply principles and rules, and the existence of such regulations, the concept of accountability and ethics, and beyond in university discourse. Thus, the “culture of law” is closely related to the “rule of law”. According to a recent study by Dr. Adnan El Amine, a scholar in higher education, the climate in Arab universities is mostly based on arbitrary law, rather than on the rule of law. The culture of law represents 2.3% of the total words of Arab universities’ discourse and 4.2% of the curricula. One of the paradoxical results is that schools of applied sciences seem more interested in the culture of law (36%) than schools of humanities (10.2%), and schools of social sciences and business administration (7%). The existence of professional ethics in the universities’ discourse clearly makes a difference between these colleges.

Citizenship education and a culture of law should both be essential parts of the universities’ core functions. This objective can be achieved by disseminating an elaborated discourse on citizenship and culture of law within the university departments, by including related values and knowledge in curricula, and by engaging students in activities and initiatives beyond their self-interest. In other words, citizenship and culture of law cannot only be learned in the classroom or by books, but most importantly through repetitive cycles of training.

### ***Community Service and Civic Engagement***

Community service and civic engagement are means through which universities demonstrate engagement beyond their walls. In general, the concept of community service is present in the discourse of most Arab universities, and there are specialized units serving the community in some Arab countries, for example in public universities in Egypt. Universities in the Arab Gulf region are inspired by the American model, and their mission statements give great importance to community service, more than Maghreb universities. Yet, there is more discourse on community service compared to actual activities and tangible actions.

Civic engagement can translate into the university’s contribution to public policy development and its social responsibility. Both conceptions of civic engagement are weak in university discourse and activities. Beyond few success stories, if there is some involvement by a university in national policy matters it takes merely the form of individual consultation. Arab universities seem to play a passive role in this regard.

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The financial and political dependence of Arab universities largely affect their community service and civic engagement initiatives. For example, in Libya, because of funding and absolute dependency on the government, universities have lost the sense of social responsibility towards society and their local environment. Libyan authorities have dealt with universities as “minors” that cannot mature outside the arms of the state, which still fears the “maturing” of such higher education institutions.

Arab universities, through their educated student and faculty capacity, are capable of playing a significant role both at the local level, and at the state level, through community service and civic engagement. Students and faculty could provide free services, organize support programs and undertake advocacy campaigns to support their local communities. In addition, many issues may emerge from the public spheres which need policy advocacy, formulation and lobbying, such as amending regulations and plans on pollution, tobacco control, violence against women, or minority rights. Arab universities should be aware of their potential capacity in this regard, and be willing to move from being passive to active players in their society.

## Conclusion

According to Dr. Adnan El Amine, civic elements constitute between 10% and 15% of the total discourse, programs, and courses of the 36 Arab universities that have been surveyed. There are only 13 universities that exceeded the average rate in terms of percentages and numbers in the measures of discourse, programs and courses. The American University of Beirut (AUB) is the only Arab institution of higher education that exceeded the average of these three measures. AUB remains the best model of the balance between the various components of a university's civic role, both in terms of discourse as well as practice.

Considering the above-mentioned research findings, Arab universities have a long way ahead to develop their civic role and become institutions that provide their societies with a civic culture. This culture is not only a basic feature of any university from a humanistic perspective, but it is also necessary for the university to play a role towards social cohesion, political stability, and social justice, on a national level. As the Arab world moves forward after the tumultuous Arab Spring period, universities and governments alike should consider ways in which institutions of higher education can increase their civic role locally and nationally.

## EDUCATION AND YOUTH POLICY

The Education and Youth Policy Research Program aims at informing educational policy and promoting improved educational practices and achievement through an increased understanding of the issues of education in the Arab world and their impact on children and youth in the region. The program further aims at engaging in applied, policy-relevant research to help policy-makers make decisions based on best available information. The program will serve as a resource for government agencies and other institutions in order to shape the education and youth policy debate through evidence.

## AUB POLICY INSTITUTE

The AUB Policy Institute (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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