

# Assessment of Cross-Border Partnerships in Business Education: A Student Perspective from a MENA Country

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**Abstract.** The proliferation of cross-border partnerships in higher education, particularly in business education, has led AACSB to call for a more careful assessment of their impact and effectiveness. For the MENA region, these partnerships have constituted an integral component of education privatization and reforms that for the most part centered on improving the quality of higher education, and on bridging the gap between business education and the changing needs of the labor market. We extend on the conceptual work of Dakhli and El Zohairy (2013) that offered a critical assessment of the changing landscape of business education in the region. We adopt a student-centered approach and compare business students' perceptions and satisfaction with their educational experiences at a private university engaged in an exclusive cross-border partnership, with those at a leading local, public institution. The results of our exploratory study point to higher levels of satisfaction with the private education offering. We conclude by advancing a set of recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** business education, cross-border partnerships, privatization, MENA, Kuwait

## 1. Introduction

Human capital, with education as its main component, is considered to be one of the most important drivers of innovation, economic development, and overall prosperity (Becker 1964, Black & Lynch 1996, Cannon 2000, Dakhli & De Clercq 2004, McGuirk, Lenihan, & Hart 2015, Mehrara & Musai 2013, Spring 2015). As such, investment in sound education is seen as one of the most effective ways to secure long-term sustainable socio-economic development (Fägerlind & Saha 2014, Hanushek 2013, Stuart 2003).

Generally, in the MENA region and specifically, in the GCC countries (a subset of oil-rich economies that include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Oman), education has fallen far short of expectations,

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failing to address the fundamental aspirations of millennials. A number of seminal works have been published, underscoring a number of shortcomings. Many of these are summarized in the Dakhli and El Zohairy (2013) examination of business education in the MENA region and the commensurately emerging trends. Below we highlight some of the key findings, and organize our review around the pivotal dimensions that are paramount to higher education in the region.

In the next sections, we outline the key drivers behind such privatization efforts in higher education and the proliferation of world-wide partnerships with international institutions. While this transformation has been pervasive across multiple disciplines in higher education, apparently the business field is the area where these “alliances” are the most prevalent, and where their impact has been the most pronounced (Alon & McIntyre 2013).

### 1.1. Challenges at Leading Public Sector Institutions

The pedagogical methods used in the MENA region are educational relics, resulting in significant barriers to impactful results. (Akay 2015, Al-Tarrah 2008, World Bank 2008). MENA region educators employ traditional, outdated scholastic models (World Bank 2008), while higher-scoring countries on the Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) implement more student-centric, inquiry-based learning approaches. In large measure, this has resulted in MENA countries trailing below the middle distribution range on important socioeconomic measures (Kazem 2008). Moreover, a fundamental distinction in learning mode is exhibited in the curricula emphasis on memorization and rote learning in the region rather than the cultivation of comprehension, creativity and critical thinking skills characterized by the scholastically higher-performing countries (Al-Tarrah 2008). As such, structured, linear, routine tasks, rather than the more critical-thinking problem-solving approach, still dominates pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in the GCC region. (Donovan *et al.* 2010, Rupp 2009).

The apparent disconnect between the skills of graduates and the needs of employers in the labor market has been frequently cited as a major shortcoming of education in the region (Alissa 2007, Akay 2015, Al-Shamsy 2008, Coffman 2003, Gonzalez, *et al.* 2008, Kazem 2008, Othman 2008, Pepper 2007). This mismatch is especially acute in the business and engineering fields where regionally low performance results on internationally benchmarked assessments are characteristic (Rupp 2009).

While many MENA countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt are labor exporting countries due to low standards of living and job scarcity, in the GCC non-nationals dominate the workforce. Expatriates respectively account for 87 percent and 84 percent of working business professionals in Qatar and the UAE