BRIEFING NOTE (extended version)

Benchmarking University Governance in MENA

PROJECT CONTEXT

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are going through important political transformation at a time when similar economic and social change is taking place worldwide. These recent political changes in MENA give hope that governance across the board in the region will be more democratic, transparent, and efficient in the long term.

The Arab Spring made clear that young people in MENA are asking for more and better opportunities to study and work. Economic growth in MENA countries over the past decade has not been enough to absorb the increasing labor force for a variety of reasons, including excessive GDP volatility, labor demand heavily dominated by the public sector, economies over-dependent on oil revenues and highly dependent on low value-added products, and weak integration into the global economy. This macro scenario - coupled with mismatches between labor supply and demand, very slow school-to-work transition, and low quality and relevance of post-basic education and training systems – provides a bleak outlook for sustainable economic development in the region.

Universities play a key role in society because they generate new knowledge and mold young people into leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, and professionals in all fields of study. Higher education systems in MENA are under particular pressure in the wake of the 2009 global financial crisis, as there is a significant gap between the skills demanded by labor markets and those that higher education
graduates are acquiring. The unemployment rates of tertiary education graduates from MENA have been persistently higher than from any other region for the past decade, and the recent financial crisis is making this even more critical.

For instance, in recent years, higher education enrollment in MENA has increased significantly. Average enrollment across the region increased 20 to 30 percent between 2000 and 2008. Despite an increasingly educated population of young people, youth unemployment rates in MENA are higher than any other region in the world – 21 percent in the Middle East and 25 percent in North Africa – and university graduates with at least an associate’s degree make up nearly 30 percent of the unemployed.

University governance – how universities and higher education systems define and implement their goals, manage their institutions, and monitor their achievements – is an area of focus in tertiary education reform worldwide. The role that university governance plays in the improvement of education quality is now a broad consensus, especially in MENA, where higher education representatives have expressed a specific need for a benchmarking tool.

In response to this call, the World Bank’s regional program on higher education developed a University Governance Screening Card to assess to what extent universities in MENA are following good governance practices aligned with their institutional goals. Although the Screening Card does not, fundamentally, exemplify a model of “good governance”, it does allow universities to compare themselves with other institutions and international trends and to monitor their progress over time. University governance is a decisive factor in achieving university goals, and there are many governance models that vary according to each institution’s context. It is clear that there is no single model or “one size fits all” approach to university governance and that choosing a governance model for adoption by a given institution must be a well-thought decision.

Such university governance mirrors benchmarking and reform taking off worldwide. In Europe, the Bologna process, European Qualifications Framework, and declaration of the Lisbon goals are defining drivers of change in tertiary education. Nations have seen increased government intervention in terms of funding and governance of higher education systems and even individual universities. This university-
governance benchmarking tool has the potential to respond to the demands of young people in Arab countries and promote governance reforms widely.

CREATING THE UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE SCREENING CARD PROGRAM

The University Governance Screening Card was developed in 2010, taking into account other benchmarking tools, such as the Australian Universities Benchmarking tools, the European Autonomy Score Card, the UK Good Practice Code, and the Governance Guidelines reviewed by the OECD. It incorporates lessons learned from their review and provides a mechanism for monitoring changes introduced in governance practices and structures.

The University Governance Screening Card has been tested in 41 universities from four countries: Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia. As governance is one important dimension of performance, this tool is an entry point for assessing other dimensions such as quality assurance, student-learning outcomes, teaching and research quality, and graduate employability. The use of this tool in the first 41 universities yielded a few lessons on the advantages of benchmarking and how it can be a powerful mechanism to generate reforms. The exemplary and courageous journey undertaken by these 41 institutions is an important milestone in improving accountability for social services delivery.

The same 41 universities participated in a workshop in Cairo, organized with the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education, in November 2011. The objectives of the workshop were to discuss the results of the Screening Card and allow the universities to explore explanations for the findings, to validate the Screening Card as a benchmarking tool to be used with universities from other countries and regions, and to agree on next steps for both implementation of governance reforms at the participant-level and expansion of the project to new participants. The program also launched an online community of practitioners in order to enable the participants to continue this important dialogue and share their reform implementation experiences.

WHY UNIVERSITIES SHOULD PARTICIPATE

During the Cairo workshop in November 2011, the participants agreed on the value added merely by completing the Screening Card. The participants’ enthusiasm and a resulting awareness of governance concepts within the participating institutions are powerful indicators of the Screening Card’s potential to effect meaningful change. Another notable takeaway was the difference between the self-perception component of the Screening Card and the analytical score: Overall, universities perceive that they are more autonomous, have more clearly defined mission statements, and have better levels of participation among stakeholders was shown to be the case through the questionnaire. The participants were eager to explore the significance and explanation for these results and to use the data to inform possible reforms.
The interest shown by the institutions that participated in this screening exercise is an important step in the right direction. Benchmarking is critical to understand weaknesses and to identify areas for improvement. Service delivery must first be monitored in order to improve the service quality; having information available is the first step. The openness that universities and government officials showed by participating in this governance benchmarking exercise is an important first step in introducing monitoring university performance. This benchmarking tool has also provided some important lessons on the tool itself and its capacity to:

1) Identify strengths and weaknesses at individual institutions;
2) Identify trends at the national level;
3) Identify trends and practices by type of institutions; and
4) Generate interest to initiate reform at the institutional, national, and regional levels.

The Screening Card also provides an opportunity to establish correlations between governance and other aspects important for policy development related to performance, such as admission and retention rates, labor market insertion, skills development, innovation and contributions to economic growth. Although data related to university performance is not yet available in most MENA countries, this first benchmarking exercise raised awareness among the participating countries on the need to produce, collect, and disseminate performance related information.

By joining the program, individual university participants and participating countries will:

- Learn lessons about university governance from a global perspective and from OECD countries;
- Identify their strengths and weaknesses and have baseline indicators for monitoring their progress over time;
- Benchmark and compare themselves with other MENA countries and OECD countries;
- Share governance assessment results with university departments and develop plans to introduce reforms; and
- Prepare for international accreditation.

**TECHNICAL NOTES (METHODOLOGY)**

The methodology utilized to build the Screening Card can be summarized by its three major elements: the questionnaire, the set of indicators examined in the questionnaire, and the weighting system applied to the indicators.
The questionnaire has 45 questions and is divided in 5 major parts. Once the questionnaire was developed, the program team held a workshop in Marseille in 2010 to validate the proposed methodology with the participating countries. The Screening Card was first tested with a pilot phase of 10 universities from four countries (Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia) and subsequently expanded and tested in 31 additional universities from the same countries. At each step of the process, the program incorporated the interviewers’ experiences and participants’ feedback into empirical fine-tuning of the instrument. These steps also validated the tool’s capacity for identifying patterns followed by institutions and for allowing international comparisons.

Because university governance is a multidimensional issue, the Screening Card assesses several dimensions, or indicators:

**1) Overall Context, Mission and Goals:**

A key element of university governance is the overall framework of the system and the interaction between the institution and the state. This indicator takes into consideration the legal framework that establishes a country’s higher education system, whether a university is public or private, what players determine a system’s or institution’s mission and goals, and the value placed on the mission and goals in the administration of the institution.
(2) Management Orientation:

Management refers to the day-to-day but no less critical decisions of operating the institution: the admission, registration, and certification for degrees of students; the appointment, remuneration, and promotion of the academic and other staff; and the construction and maintenance of the facilities. It includes the head and governing bodies of the university, their composition, the process for selection or appointment of its members, their roles and responsibilities, their reporting lines, any accountability measures, and the time of their assignment.

(3) Autonomy:

The Screening Card recognizes both the financial and academic components of university autonomy. Financial autonomy is defined such as the ability of universities to set tuition fees, to accumulate reserves and keep surplus on state funding, to borrow money, and to invest money in financial or physical assets, to own and sell the land and buildings they occupy, and to deliver contractual services. Academic autonomy takes into account the responsibility for the design of the curricula, the extent to which the universities are autonomous to introduce or cancel degree programs, the ability to determine the academic structures, the ability to decide on overall number of students, and the determination of admission criteria as well as admission per disciplines, evaluation of programs, evaluation of learning outcomes, and using teaching methodologies.
(4) Accountability:

Accountability applies to several different levels: academic staff, managerial staff, administrative staff, and governing bodies. It is the process for evaluating completion of institutional goals; dissemination of information, such as institutional goals, student achievements, graduates’ insertion in the labor market, institutional evaluations (internal and external), and accreditation; methods used to evaluate student, teaching staff, administrative staff, and managerial staff performance; the processes for financial auditing; and the processes in place for risk management and dealing with misconduct.
(5) Participation:

This dimension analyzes to what extent different stakeholders are taken into account in the decision-making process. There is a wide range of stakeholders that have an interest in university matters, depending on the type of institution as well as on the overall framework of the system. Common stakeholders include students, academic staff, government, industry representatives, donors, community associations, unions, and alumni.

In order to analyze each university's performance on each dimension, each axis measures the universities’ position vis-à-vis one of the global trends in university governance practices. A weighting system was developed to aggregate those indicators and transform the questionnaire into a Spider Chart, which gives a visual representation of the university's position in each axis.
As an illustration, the indicators used for the fourth axis (Accountability) are (1) Education Quality, (2) Social Responsibility and (3) Financial Integrity. Sub-indicators are used to lead a sharper analysis, respectively (1) the existence, contents, and consequences of a quality assurance system; (2) dissemination of information, and insertion surveys; and (3) the frequency and contents of audits.

Axes are on a [0; 5] scale. Because of the lack of scientific basis to help prioritize the indicators, each major indicator has the same contribution to the numeric value representing the axis. Thus, it becomes possible to assign a weight to each answer of the questionnaire (coded in 0/1) simply by dividing the contribution of each indicator by the number of constituting answers.

As explained earlier, the Screening Card does not exemplify a good governance model, and there is no “one size fits all” university governance strategy. Governance patterns are complex and context-sensitive: The aim is not to get the maximum score on each axis but to determine if the governance arrangement is coherent.

VALIDATION OF RESULTS: SOME GUIDELINES

The purpose of this online tool is to provide a resource for higher education institutions that are interested in critically examining their governance strategies. It is only a practice tool: The questionnaire is abbreviated to allow interested parties to get a sense of the complete Screening Card program and to start to understand the elements and concepts at play. The purpose is to give individuals a very broad idea of their strengths and weaknesses, but the real benefits come from full participation in the complete questionnaire and program. The tool has been validated and tested at every step in order to maintain the integrity of the tool and results, and users should bear the following in mind and contact the program staff for more information about participation:

a) Each user should use the online Screening Card as practice, using best available information.

b) Because the online tool is an abbreviated version of the questionnaire, the results displayed are incomplete and do not necessarily represent a participant’s score for the complete questionnaire. Completion of the full Screening Card with the moderation of a World Bank program interviewer is necessary to ensure accurate and thorough responses.

c) All user information will be kept confidential, and private information will be used only to contact the participants for the purpose of gauging interest in participating in the full Screening Card. No practice tool results will be published, even anonymously.
CONTACT US

Adriana Jaramillo, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank: ajaramillo@worldbank.org
Jennifer Barry, Consultant, World Bank: jbarry@worldbank.org
Silvia Marchionne, Consultant, World Bank: smarchionne@worldbank.org