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Development of Education and Its Impact on Middle Eastern Societies

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Introduction

Education is considered a basic foundation of economic and social development in all countries. The existence of educated people in society is essential to drive business development contributing to economic prosperity and a better social environment. Nowadays, with growing competition in the educational sector worldwide and in the Middle East in particular, educational institutions are recognizing their role in shaping society and the leaders of future generations. Thus, more emphasis is being put on education and its development so that institutions can stay up to date with recent developments in the areas of technological advances, pedagogical tools, and research methods in order to reach this goal.

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Quality education does not, however, guarantee sustainable economic development. In a poor economic system we observe high unemployment rates instead of better living standards and higher salaries (World Bank 1999), even if the country has a strong educational system. Hence, education should go hand in hand with broader economic initiatives to best address society's needs and to drive economic prosperity. Therefore, we consider educational institutions as entities integral to society since they have a significant influence on the development and progress of people's lives and thus society more broadly. Educated people, such as architects, physicians, and lawmakers will be the backbone of society. If citizens are educated and well prepared, they will be instrumental in developing a modern society; otherwise, they will be influential in writing a story of limited development and demise.

Overview of Education in the Middle East

Middle Eastern countries have many characteristics in common including, but not limited to, language and religion. They speak Arabic and they follow, in the vast majority of cases, Islam. These countries are facing increasing challenges because of the expansion of basic education in the region. Their institutions have significant differences in linguistic and cultural terms, and these have a large impact on education and diversity. Despite these differences, institutions manage to coexist even inside national borders. They are often driven by a centralized command and control management culture that limits classroom initiatives which foster creativity and learning. Most importantly, the value of education is not uniform; in some countries learning is perceived as very important, while in others it is considered an unwarranted opportunity cost because of the pressing economic conditions that oblige children to drop out of school to start working early (World Bank 1999).

Education systems in the Middle East are heavily bureaucratic, and recruitment of faculty and students is often based on connections rather than qualifications. Nepotism is common practice in recruitment for administrative positions as well. Most institutions in the region are public, except for those in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. Planning is

disorganized and incoherent, and funds are seldom allocated for poor rural areas because urban areas and other locations where wealthy groups reside receive priority.

In the Middle East, education has traditionally been considered a privilege for wealthy families. But many donor agencies and promoters have emphasized the importance of early education and considered investment in it as more important than funding higher education, in order to break the intergenerational poverty cycle (Young and Mundial 1996). This investment will have a social impact and is a starting point for the development of societies through the enhancement of social status among a wider range of people, and creating opportunities for the educated to work in better positions with higher salaries. This presents an opportunity for learners who are eager to shift their social class through education, which enhances social mobility. Accordingly, Arab governments have adopted social and educational policies to support and increase early childhood programs and initiatives. As a result, net enrollment in primary education rose from 86% to 94% between 2000 and 2010 (World Bank 2014a). Some countries such as Jordan and Egypt have tried to integrate early childhood programs in their educational planning system; and Iran provided financial support for early education programs through the Ministry of Education's public institutions (Sabbaghian 1992). It should be noted that the education sector in the Middle East would not have continued without the financial and moral support of international actors in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education, including UNICEF (United Nations International Children Emergency Fund), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Save the Children, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the High/Scope Foundation, and the World Bank. In this context, Figure 4.1 shows youth literacy rates for those aged between 15 and 24 in the region. We observe in general an increasing trend in literacy in Middle Eastern countries, especially during 2013–2015. Nevertheless we can clearly see that literacy in Iraq follows a strictly declining curve, but conversely literacy in Syria shows an upward trend after 2004. This is because of the huge migration of Syrian refugees to neighboring countries, where they are continuing their primary and secondary education (Fig. 4.1).
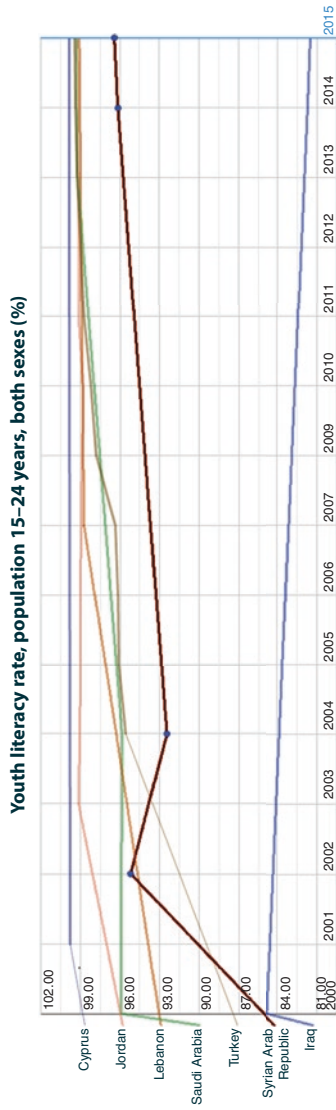
Fig. 4.1 Trends for literacy for youth rates. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, National literacy rates for youths (15–24) and adults (15+), available from UIS website, http://www.uis.unesco.org

Despite all those efforts, women, rural populations, and the poor in general have not been served well in different countries in the region. Existing models and systems do not meet human resources needs for the region, and they have failed to have a significant impact on social development despite expenditure on education, which is among the highest in the developing regions (Christina et al. 2007). In other words, education is not meeting the needs of society. For instance, as Fig. 4.2 shows, we can observe an increasing trend in unemployment rates in the Middle Eastern countries. Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic have significantly higher unemployment levels than other countries owing to the unstable political situation and war. Yet we think that a primary reason for high unemployment in the region is the lack of student orientation, advice, and guidance that helps students to choose their areas of specialization. These high unemployment rates are mainly noticeable in several saturated fields. For instance, there are 3.54 physicians per 1000 people according to the CIA World Fact Book (2009), but there is a significant deficit in qualified employees in many specializations and majors. There is little interest in vocational education but strong demand for fields leading to white collar jobs, which help people achieve higher social status and prestige.

Challenges

Education in the Middle East has many challenges, in part because the region is constantly struggling to keep up with international educational standards. One challenge is based on the region's success in improving elementary through high school education over the last decades. The significant increase in the number of high school graduates created a serious demand for higher education which institutions at that level are unable to absorb and accommodate.

Other challenges in the region include high student–faculty ratios, low salaries, lack of academic freedom, poor infrastructure, and poor research facilities. This is considered a strong incentive for governments to establish high professional standards (Massialas 1991). In addition, overcrowding in several Middle Eastern countries led to inadequate classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and technological facilities. Moreover, teaching is
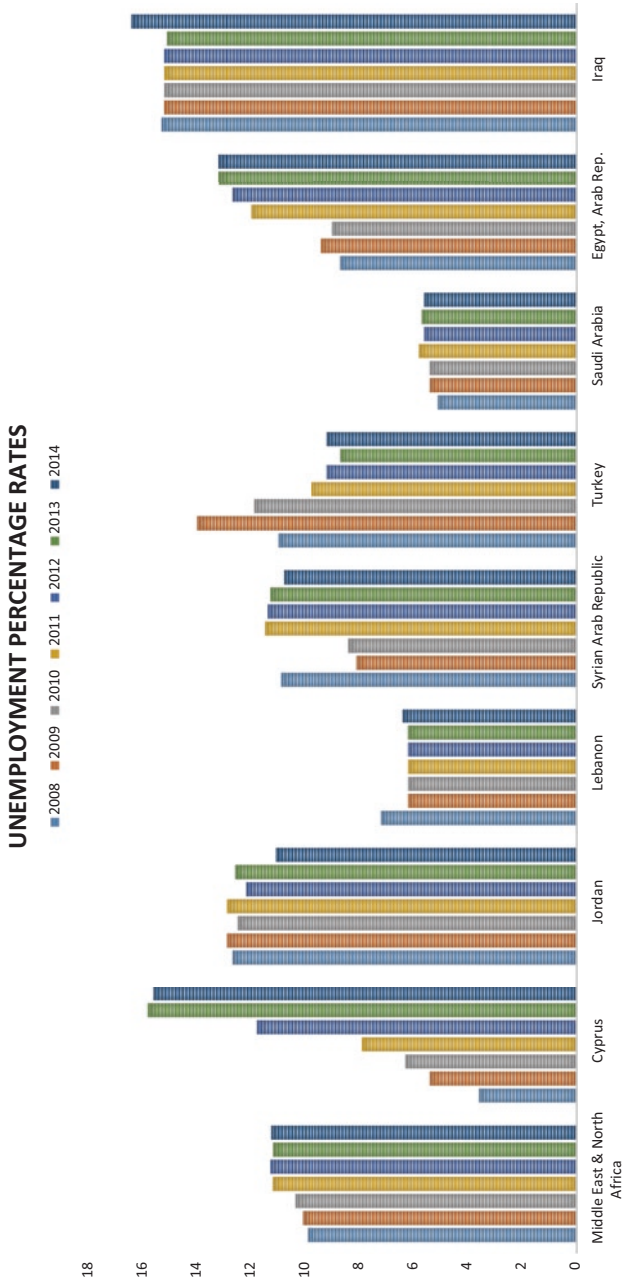
Fig. 4.2 Unemployment rates by country. Source: International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market database (2016)

lecture-centered with minimal use of experiential and practical learning pedagogies. Governance is usually centralized, with inadequate participation of faculty and senior staff from different units. Opportunities to access secondary and higher education require that students pass national or regional examinations at the end of primary and/or secondary cycles, except for Jordan where admission to advanced cycles is not based on performance in the primary stage. This prevents a large number of interested people from attending higher education institutions in the region. For instance, in Iran only 10% of the applicants are admitted to colleges (World Bank 1999). In other nations, such as Lebanon and Jordan, higher education is considered a highly valued privilege; students tend to work hard to earn the best grades they can so they can successfully compete to secure their spots at institutions of higher education (Ellington 2005). With the rise of globalization and the digital world, primary education has received greater attention because parents want their children to receive it; and governments are investing in public schools to provide quality primary education. In Figure 4.3, we notice that educational attainment of the population aged 25 years and older has been, in general, an increasing trend in various countries of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region (Fig. 4.3).

International and civil conflicts have been a constant and major cause of recession in education in terms of human and physical capital. People are temporarily or permanently displaced; physical and social infrastructure has been destroyed. During the war in Lebanon, teachers had great difficulty in crossing zones of control to reach their schools. In Yemen, schools were destroyed in 1994 during the civil war. The situation is no better now, with renewed conflicts and fighting across the region. Educational facilities were destroyed or severely damaged during the Iran–Iraq war and Gulf wars, and rebuilding educational infrastructure was not a priority for rehabilitation projects in post-conflict situations (World Bank 1999). Finally, with the recent crisis in Syria, many students have been displaced and educational authorities have had to deal with the ever-growing wave of school-age refugees especially in Jordan and Lebanon. According to UN projections, even if the crisis were to end immediately, it could take almost ten years for the displaced refugees to return to Syria. Of course, immediate action is needed to respond to
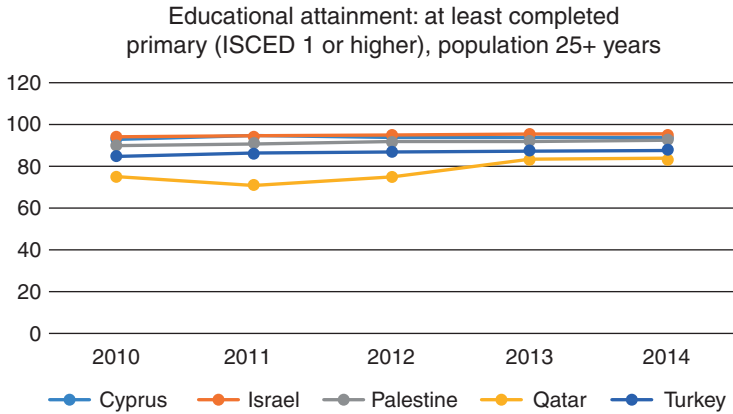
Educational attainment: at least completed
primary (ISCED 1 or higher), population 25+ years

Fig. 4.3 Educational attainment of the population aged 25 years and older.
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016)

the humanitarian crisis, but the next step is to deal with the growth and
development of school-age refugees currently in neighboring countries
(World Bank 2014a), to ensure their education is not stifled while they
are displaced.

Current Trends in Higher Education (Opportunities)

Higher education in the Middle East has great potential to develop and
grow owing to the boost in population and the need for educated people
to run emerging and growing businesses in the region. The main paradox,
however, remains in the dramatic growth in demand for education and
the reduced quality of teaching and scholarship. Higher education has
expanded from eight universities in the region in 1940 to several hun-
dred institutions offering post-secondary education today. Although this
growth rate is considerable, the Middle East is still far behind developed
countries. In addition, this impressive expansion in higher education
facilities has not been able to meet the demand in some countries owing
to the exceptional demographic change. An estimate of the MENA pop-
ulation in 1980 was 168 million, while it had increased to around 396

million in 2015 (World Bank, World Development Indicators 2016). This has significantly affected the number of educational institutions in the region, and many of them are striving to provide quality education through both national and international accreditations.

One of the rising trends in higher education in the region is the increase in institutionalization and privatization. Lebanon is the only Arab country where the majority of higher education is private; but Palestine and Jordan are moving toward that model as well. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have also begun to experiment with privatization in higher education (Heyneman 2002). As privatized Western brand institutions increase in number, one strategy is to import foreign curricula, aiming at the replication of quality programs in a timely and effective way. Despite the strong interest in education, public financial support is still on average a small percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in Middle Eastern countries, as noted in Fig. 4.4. But the numbers in some countries are comparable to those in UK, Canada, and the USA (World Bank 2013).

Another trend in the Arab world is strong governmental intervention in the appointment of heads of universities, based on nepotism, personal interest, and influence, rather than academic and professional qualifications. Such trends may not be in the best interest of educational institutions' autonomy and development. Modern Arab universities tend to be bureaucratic and centralized, strictly adhering to civil service rules and policies instead of striving towards academic freedom and autonomy. Consequently there is minimal statutory basis for faculty participation in the decision-making process (Massialas and Jarrar 1991).

Currently, students are determined to choose the university that provides them with the most solid and rigorous education, which will in turn help them to have attractive work opportunities. This issue has led university administrators in Sultanate Oman to design master's specializations according to vacancies available in large companies and the governmental sector. This strategy perfectly serves students' ultimate objective of enrolling in a university which can land them a job. On another level, the university is reaching its goal by serving the needs of society and shaping qualified persons to occupy highly ranked positions. Yet education in the Middle East is more often influenced by cultural trends and prestige, especially for those who obtain their degrees from
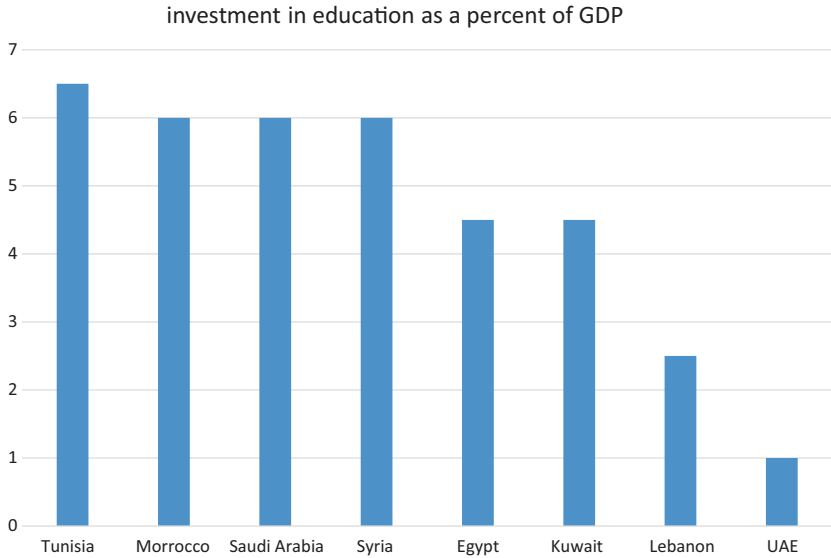
investment in education as a percent of GDP

Fig. 4.4 Public investment in education in MENA countries (percentage of GDP). Source: World Bank 2013

European or American universities. The local perception is that Western education represents added value and prestige, and provides its recipients with a head start over other candidates.

Role of Women in the Education Cycle

Middle Eastern countries have different levels of political development, economic affluence, and educational achievement, and these differences contribute to a distinctive role and status of women in each country. Lebanese and Egyptian women enjoy a long history of educational provision, while it is still a recent phenomenon for Kuwaiti, Saudi Arabian, and Omani women. In these countries, women's access to schools was limited, but now, they are allowed to attend some educational institutions, and some affluent families can even afford to have private tutors at home.

Recently, a larger number of women have been completing their compulsory education, thus leading to improvements in health and nutrition

status for them and their children, and raising their stature in society. The increasing literacy rate allows the educated workforce to quickly learn and adapt to new technologies and processes, and will increase the number of people interested in pursuing secondary and tertiary education. A report published by the World Bank Group shows that women with little or no education at all have a high chance of being married at a very early age, suffering domestic violence, living in poverty, and having limited access to and control over household and health spending, all of which has a negative impact on their children and communities. (World Bank 2014b). We can see from Table 4.1 that the percentage of illiterate women is relatively low except for Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia owing to a range of different reasons, mainly cultural, social, political, and economic. We may also note that the percentage of illiteracy among the younger generation of females is decreasing. In other words, fewer females aged between 15 and 24 are illiterate than those over the age of 15 (Table 4.1).

A significant number of girls who are making the transition to higher education choose traditionally female fields of study. It is not because they are uninterested in male-oriented specialization, nor because of their qualifications, but simply because the social norms and culture of the region limit their choices. In secondary education, gender disparity is evident in the fields of study chosen by the students. For instance, the fields of humanities, medicine, and education are traditionally deemed appropriate for women since they lead to respectable, sex-segregated employment. Historically, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) academic fields were not available for women, who had access only to education development and humanities. This resulted in a surplus of humanities graduates and a serious shortage of graduates coming from technical and vocational education. Therefore, there existed a mismatch between university graduates and the needs of the labor market. Nevertheless, when girls were allowed access to "male-dominated" fields such as agriculture and engineering, they had an equal success rate to boys, and sometimes higher. Girls in Kuwait achieved higher scores than boys in secondary examinations and in science subjects (Al-Methun and Wilkenson 1988).

Today, more Middle Eastern women have moved to the formal labor market and into positions of importance in political and social circles,

Table 4.1 Trends for illiteracy for females

	Percentage of population over age 15 who are illiterate, 2000	Number of people over age 15 who are illiterate (thousands), 2000	Percentage of population ages 15–24 who are illiterate, 2000	Number of people ages 15–24 who are illiterate (thousands), 2000
	Female	Female	Female	Female
Middle East and North Africa	42	50,057	23	8585
Egypt	56	12,253	37	2500
Iraq	77	5070	71	1593
Jordan	16	220	1	3
Kuwait	20	103	7	15
Lebanon	20	246	7	23
Qatar	17	21	3	1
Saudi Arabia	33	1723	10	187
Syria	40	1879	21	376
Turkey	24	5453	6	392
United Arab Emirates	21	117	6	10
Average	32.4	2708.5	16.9	510

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Literacy Statistics" (www.uis.unesco.org, accessed March 11, 2003); United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2002; UN Statistics Division, The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics

and the role of women as "housewife/lactating mother" has been deeply changed. The family structure has been altered from extended family model to smaller family units. Nuclear families are increasing, particularly in urban areas. Ultimately, alterations in family structures and socio-economic levels in the region have had a direct impact on values, attitudes, and child-rearing habits, leading families to look for childcare alternatives (UNESCO 1995). Nowadays, women's education is an effective investment in developing countries, regardless of whether they work or stay at home. Women will have a positive influence in their families, in areas that include better health and nutrition, improved child spacing, lower infant mortality, and enhanced educational attainment for their children (Dervis 1998). Figure 4.5 shows the trend of higher life expectancy rates
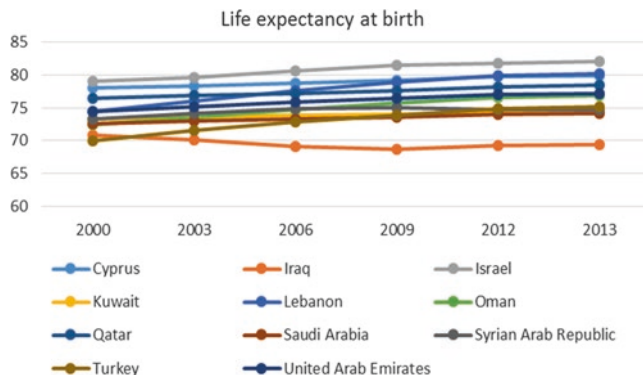
Fig. 4.5 Life expectancy at birth. Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2016)

in various countries of the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, which is mainly owing to qualified physicians and high-quality medical support and hospitals. On the other hand, the continued unrest in Iraq has led to a weak infrastructure and a deficit in qualified and skilled medical staff. As for other Middle Eastern countries, we can observe an increasing trend in higher life expectancy owing to advances in the medical sector and in pharmaceuticals, with more people attending medical schools.

As compared to the rest of the world, women's involvement in education in the Middle East is very encouraging. The average increase in female enrollment between 1990 and 2001 was 7%, as compared to 3% in the majority of developing countries (UNESCO 2003). Despite the significant quantitative expansion and development in recent years and closing of the gender gap in primary education, there is still significant room for improvement in female education in the region.

Educational Development Strategies

In order to secure a sustainable future for the region, a careful and well-structured strategic plan must be prepared to cope with and overcome the hurdles and ongoing changes. Hence, MENA countries have started to implement several strategies to improve the quality of their educational system. The strategies available are divided into five main areas:

- Simplifying the management system: Many of MENA's education systems are heavily influenced by the government and specifically managed by several ministries. This creates problems regarding the allocation of resources and conflict concerning new approaches to enhance performance. Consolidating ministries responsible for education and focusing on standards and quality will result in better performance and management.
- Decentralization: Increasing school autonomy over allocation of resources, pedagogical methods of instruction used, language of instruction, and course scheduling can improve the system over time. This creates better assessment of the needs and resources that will work best in each institution, resulting in improved efficiency and effectiveness of classroom activities and student learning.
- Aligning curriculum, teacher training, instruction, and assessment: These four key educational elements should be brought into line for the effective functioning of the system as a whole rather than as a series of unrelated stages. When those key elements are standardized and aligned, they will contribute to better results and more effective goal accomplishment. In addition, teachers need to develop strategies that include different learning styles among students.
- Professionalizing the teaching framework: This strategy can be accomplished through training before recruiting staff and in-service training on pedagogical aspects and on new innovations in the world of learning and education. Other important steps might include increasing incentives and salaries for teachers, recruiting from reliable and trusted sources, upgrading the qualification criteria, and increasing the number of PhD holders and experienced teaching staff.
- "Leapfrogging" through the use of technology: It is impossible to continue and progress in the higher education sector without integrating technology through various teaching methods. Research has demonstrated that students using traditional computer-based systems outperformed their colleagues who were taught without the use of such systems.

Throughout the past three decades, governments' primary concern in the Middle East has been to support educational institutions. This has

contributed to an uncontrolled and unsustainable growth rate of enrollments and, unfortunately, declining quality. This has resulted in increased public debt, and therefore it has not been able to support public education to as great an extent as in the past. Consequently, the World Bank has intervened to recommend and encourage the establishment of private education institutions to help solve the problem (Schwartzman 1992). Therefore, a new role for the state has emerged, to monitor higher education institutions across public and private sectors to ensure that equity and quality are attained.

Conclusion

In a global world dominated by information and knowledge, education has become more significant in the development of society and the growth of global prosperity. Policymakers should continue to support education from different perspectives, providing sustainable funding, developing a standardized framework for education on different levels, and applying continuous assessment and reform to cope with evolving technological and pedagogical advancements. Furthermore, ongoing concerns need to be addressed. For example, how will education affect future generations? How can we best assess the costs and benefits of such policies? And what fields are needed to create more opportunities for fresh graduates (World Bank 1999).

Throughout this chapter, we have emphasized that educated individuals play a very important role in society; they occupy high-level and intellectual jobs, drive business development, and earn more, which leads to greater dignity of life and enhanced community development, as well as higher contributions to the tax base, which supports infrastructural and other public needs. Furthermore, education should lead to longer life expectancy and improved social status and access to networks. Education will also increase awareness, tolerance, and understanding of other people's culture, traditions, and behaviors, which should eventually lead to reduced violence and lower crime rates. As a result, democracy and social systems may develop to increase the quality of relationships between people and to improve living standards.

Education and society are two entities that are closely interwoven, with the output of a society's economic system closely affected by educational institutions' input and influence on the development of human capital. The role of education is to help build a better future for the coming generations and to equip society with world-class leaders who have vision, values, and intellect. The ultimate result is to move humankind further and further along a path toward innovation, advancement, and global prosperity.

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