

## Skills development for Mediterranean youth through the internationalization of higher education and the mobility of knowledge

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### Background

The Mediterranean region is currently facing many challenges. Its youthful population, while holding enormous potential, is held back by extremely high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and informality. Uneven levels of education quality across the region lead to many young people graduating without the right mix of knowledge and skills required by today's labor markets. Combined with a serious lack of opportunities to take part in public and political life, these conditions create strong feelings of frustration for Mediterranean youth, who find themselves excluded on social, economic, and political levels.

The Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) maintains that, if the region is to undergo the socio-economic transformation required for increased youth inclusion, with a fulfilled, skilled, employable and empowered young population, investing in human capital appears as a most crucial strategy. Through its human capital program, the CMI emphasizes the importance of skills development and of quality education. In this framework, one key area of CMI's work is on the internationalization of higher education.

Internationalization can be defined as "The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (De Wit et al, 2015). It is a strategy that works towards the twin goals of boosting students' 21st century skills and employability, and improving both the quality and relevance of higher education, amongst

other advantages for students and for institutions. Internationalized education has been shown to lead to significant skills gains and employment prospects for students (European Commission, 2016; Parsons, 2009; Sample, 2013) and, in its capacity to boost education quality, ought to be seen as a means to making higher education much more relevant.

The term "internationalization" covers a wide variety of elements including student and staff mobility, double and joint degrees, branch campuses, academic partnerships, internationalization of research, and the ensemble of activities coined internationalization "at home" which take place domestically, including internationalization of the curriculum, virtual exchange, and more. However, internationalization can often be equated with the physical mobility of students only. The CMI's position is that, on the contrary, it must be understood in its broadest sense, and notably, with a key focus on the mobility of knowledge. Concretely, this would mean giving more weight to a whole range of non-physical-mobility activities, including, for example, increasing internationalization "at home" activities, which hold the same advantages in terms of gains in key 21st century skills and employability (Soria & Troisi, 2014), but which can benefit all students, not only the small percentage who are able to undertake studies abroad. The CMI's current work on internationalization focuses on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean - the MENA region - and it maintains that this region, currently lagging on the internationalization front (International Association of Universities, 2019), could benefit from increased internationalization, in particular from promoting the mobility of knowledge (CMI & World Bank, 2020).



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### **Internationalization in the region: the CMI-World Bank report**

In the MENA region, the internationalization of higher education has not always been the most well-known topic; indeed, there is a real lack of research and analysis on the topic. In this context, the CMI responded to a direct demand for information and analysis on internationalization in the region, a demand voiced by stakeholders - including higher education institutions from the region - at a conference held in the framework of the CMI-led University Governance Screening Card (UGSC) network. Its subsequent report *Internationalization of Tertiary Education in the Middle East and North Africa*, published in 2020 jointly with the World Bank, was thereby conceived in response to this demand and in order to provide a critical baseline in research on the topic for the MENA region. As the first report of its kind for the region, it also aims to stimulate further research on internationalization in the region.

The CMI-World Bank report came out at a particularly important moment, because today, while internationalization has been taking hold in the MENA region, this has been happening very unevenly, and the region as a whole is not the world's most advanced in that regard. Yet given the region's socioeconomic context, including its high rates of youth unemployment, it could really benefit from the advantages of increased internationalization. The report gave an overview

of internationalization processes in the region, including an in-depth analysis on student mobility. It found that only a few countries attract high numbers of international students and, regarding the establishment of internationalization partnerships, higher education institutions around the world do not generally prioritize those from the MENA region (International Association of Universities, 2019). The region is also often excluded from global academic conversations around internationalization, which can be dominated by North American or European voices.

Yet as the report shows, today, a window of opportunity is open for the MENA region to “catch up” on the internationalization agenda. In 2021, the beginning of the decade framed by the UN Agenda 2030, there is an emerging increased global focus on higher education, including on skills development, on cross-border collaboration, and on equity and inclusion in education. Notably, UNESCO's decennial World Higher Education Conference will be held in 2022 and will address these themes, and its new decade on higher education will be launched. Within this framework, MENA stakeholders could take advantage of the momentum to implicate themselves more centrally in global conversations, exchanges, and policymaking on higher education. If MENA makes internationalization a higher priority, further mainstreaming it in its higher education systems, its youth will greatly benefit from the gains in key skills required for today's world.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit whilst the report was under production. Reflections on the pandemic's effects on higher education and its internationalization were thus integrated into the report, and the report concludes that certain impacts of COVID-19 also contribute to highlighting the window of opportunity for the MENA region. While the pandemic has caused huge disruption to education systems, it has also acted as a catalyst for much rethinking around education, in particular with regards to online

learning and activities such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), as institutions have been forced to adapt to the “new normal”. In this context, the importance of the mobility of knowledge - as opposed to solely the physical mobility of students - has been underlined. The report therefore maintains that COVID-19 has added to the impetus for institutions and governments in the region to, as a first step, considering the context, increase their implementation of internationalization “at home” activities, and, more widely, to deepen their focus on the mobility of knowledge, in order to both improve students’ skill sets and boost the relevance of their higher education. It suggests that MENA institutions and governments will need to take this into consideration and actively focus on the mobility of knowledge if they are to take advantage of this moment and make real strides in their internationalization processes.

### Follow up and next steps

The report was launched in January 2021 at an event co-organized by the CMI and the Qatar Foundation. In line with the recommendations of the report, this event aimed to increase awareness in the region on internationalization, enable stakeholders to exchange and to share best practices, push for internationalization to become a higher priority for governments and institutions in the region, and ultimately, launch a regional policy dialogue amongst representatives from higher education institutions, governments, international organizations and other wider stakeholders. At the event, testimonials were given by four universities from across the region, and presentations were made by partners UNESCO (on the related Qualifications Passport) and by the Aix-Marseille University-coordinated Tethys Consortium of Euro-Mediterranean Universities. The implications of the pandemic and of the subsequent rethinking of education for internationalization processes were discussed, and the conclusions reached by CMI in its report were reinforced by evidence heard from the region: in many cases, post-COVID, institutions

were looking towards increased internationalization “at home” and seeing this as a key opportunity.



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The CMI is currently also engaged in further deepening its research on internationalization, building on the report and in particular in relation to internationalization in MENA in the post-pandemic world. As part of this increased focus on research, the CMI undertook a small-scale piece of research gathering testimonials from institutions in the region on internationalization in the COVID-19 era. These testimonials were generally in line with CMI’s contention that the increased focus on internationalization “at home” may be the “silver lining” of the pandemic, once again adding to the body of evidence showing the importance of mobility of knowledge for internationalization processes in the region today.

Looking forward, the CMI remains committed to its work on human capital in general and on internationalization more specifically, through the deepening of partnerships, the strengthening of the UGSC network, further research and analysis on internationalization, and taking part in regional and global initiatives. In June 2021, the CMI ran an event together with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) on internationalization and other pressing topics in higher education for the region, and plans to continue strengthening this cooperation in the future. The CMI continues to engage with its many partners including the Qatar Foundation, the Tethys Consortium of Euro-

Mediterranean Universities, and UNESCO; notably, the Center is due to be an important partner at the UNESCO 2022 decennial World Higher Education Conference. Through such partnerships, knowledge production and exchange, and regional policy dialogue, the CMI continues to promote mobility of knowledge, increased internationalization, for skills gains and boosted employability, and mobility opportunities for young people. These activities remain rooted in some of the CMI's key goals: fostering the conditions for youth inclusion and the development of an empowered, mobile, and employable youth who are able to enact transformative change in the Mediterranean region.

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