

# The Capabilities Approach as a Future Alternative to Neoliberal Higher Education in the MENA Region

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**Abstract**—This paper aims at offering a futures study for higher education in the Middle East. Paying special attention to the negative impacts of neoliberalism, the paper will demonstrate how higher education is now commodified, corporatized and how arts and humanities are eschewed in favor of science and technology. This conceptual paper argues against the neoliberal agenda and aims at providing an alternative exemplified in the Capabilities Approach with special reference to Martha Nussbaum's theory. The paper is divided into four main parts: the current state of higher education under neoliberal values, a prediction of the conditions of higher education in the near future, the future of higher education using the theoretical framework of the Capabilities Approach, and finally, some areas of concern regarding the approach. The implications of the study demonstrate that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach will ensure that the values of education are preserved while avoiding the pitfalls of neoliberalism.

**Keywords**—Capabilities approach, education future, higher education, MENA.

## I. INTRODUCTION

HIGHER education (HE) is beset with a number of urgent issues in need of attention. One of the most compelling concerns is the state of HE in the neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism, under the banner of globalization and the special regard to the knowledge society or the knowledge economy has created a HE that is no longer functioning for the common good. This paper argues against the neoliberal impact on HE in the MENA region in terms of commodification, corporatization, and focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects as opposed to the humanities and liberal arts. There are already tangible ramifications for this process and its continuation in the near future will only serve to magnify them. Thus, the researcher of this paper is calling for the capabilities approach (CA), pioneered by the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, with special attention to Nussbaum's theory and its potential for implementation in HE in the MENA region as an alternative. Proper application will serve to maintain the true values of HE and eschew the detrimental outcomes of the neoliberal one.

The outline of the paper goes as follows: first, it starts with a layout of the major concepts underlying the context of education addressed by the researcher. Second, it tackles the present issue of a neoliberal HE and its consequences: the commodification of HE in its transformed purpose, the

corporatization and performativity of the university, and the focus on STEM subjects at the expense of the humanities and liberal arts. Third, it moves on to the possible ramifications of this system in the near future. The current study pays special attention to the increasing competition among universities, and the future impact on the autonomy of both the teacher and learner. The final part of the essay introduces the CA in HE, starting with a brief introduction to the theory, then discussing the benefits of this approach in HE. The section ends with possible criticisms against the approach.

## II. GLOBALIZATION, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Three concepts shape the current educational context: globalization, neoliberalism and the knowledge economy. Although there is always criticism directed towards globalization, it is better to pay attention to the various benefits it brings in terms of the unfettered cultural exchange facilitated by the flux of information technology. The adverse impact of this process, however, is that local policies are no longer defined by local needs, but rather, by global ones. National policies are made as a direct reaction to the demands of globalization and these policies are mostly implemented with the help of multi-national companies [1]. These policies in turn are designed by economic strategies resulting from American capitalism [2]. Hence, it is essential to consider these implications when dealing with a futures study.

Though globalization and neoliberalism are sometimes used interchangeably, they should not be confused together. Neoliberalism is considered to be the economic form of globalization, causing it to be usually charged with being too market-oriented [2]-[9]. The advent of neoliberalism brought with it the image of the "self-interested individual", free-market economics, and a commitment to laissez-faire and free trade [6]. In this sense, an institution is evaluated by how far it can contribute financially to the society. This in turn led to the creation of a knowledge society or knowledge economy, which is a powerful representation of globalization in educational issues [10]. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development defines the term as the ultimate outcome of the contribution of knowledge and technology in economic development [11]. The manifestation of this knowledge lies in investment in the people as under what is called "the human capital". Knowledge, for the OECD, can "increase the productive capacity of the other factors of production as well as transform them into new products and processes". The value of knowledge, and hence education, is reduced to its function in the enhancement of the economic

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growth of a nation.

The field that is mostly conducive to developing the knowledge society is education, especially HE as the final stage in the preparation for skilled work in the job market. Schools and universities now are considered as a “knowledge industry” [12]. They are in charge of producing high-skilled employees. Those who do not have sufficient skills are encouraged to resort to lifelong learning or training. Knowledge is thus transformed into a group of competencies one either has or does not have and such competencies are currently of the utmost value. Knowledge, and the competencies it facilitates, are now of monetary value. Whether this new value has brought, the good it is expected to is debatable.

To conclude, there is a distinct shift in the purpose of education in recent times due to the transition in many countries from a welfare society to a neoliberal or a knowledge society. Knowledge gained is still valuable but is no longer valuable for its own sake. Now it has an instrumental value. People strive to get an education that places them ahead as far as possible in the job market. They move on to graduate and post-graduate degrees because this will help them get promoted and, consequently, get a better salary. University students now often ask me how any part of the syllabus will help them later on in their work. When the author taught them essay writing, for instance, many of them complain that they will not be writing essays at work. They would rather spend time in class doing something they will surely use in the future. There is no longer such thing as learning for the sake of learning.

### III. THE PROBLEM: THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERAL HE IN MENA

In light of the concepts highlighted in the previous section, a neoliberal HE has a set of distinctive features that shape the area of concern. Neoliberal HE entails the limitation of government budgeting as well as a greater emphasis on quality and accountability. What is a source of disquietude is that these features have become priorities at the expense of the real values of HE as a setting for “personal engagement, transformation and change through individual development” [13]. This is due to the conviction that the university is the source of skilled labor [14], [15]. Since the Middle East is influenced by Western standards in matters of development, a number of issues arise as a consequence of the neoliberal form of HE existing in the MENA region as they do elsewhere. This section focuses mainly on the commodification of HE, the corporatization and performativity of the university, and the accentuated inclination to STEM subjects at the expense of liberal arts and the humanities.

A comparison between public and private universities in the MENA region proves that there is a reconstruction of the purpose of HE. Neoliberalism is a “wide project to change the institutional structure of societies at a global level” [14], driving universities to compete for knowledge production in the Middle East in the same manner as the West. The researcher reviewed the vision and mission statements of

various public and private universities in Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to give a fair account of the region as a whole. It is found that public universities tend to maintain the original objectives of universities: research and learning, in addition to the values of civil societies [16]. Nevertheless, private universities almost unfailingly address the requirements of universities in a neoliberal era. There is a stress on the functionality of universities and their contribution to the economy [15], as shown in the examples below.

Starting with public universities, Ain Shams University, one of the most prominent institutions in Egypt, focuses on the mission of the university as an educational and research institution with an aim of “spreading the culture and ethics of scientific research”, and the “development of educational programs in light of the standards of local, regional and global levels” [17]. Secondly, Zayed University [18] in UAE sets out to “prepare qualified graduates” able to take part in “building the nation” through “international standards of education”. Finally, Hassan 1<sup>st</sup> University [19] in Morocco offers only one goal: to “prepare student success in the challenges of tomorrow” through the advanced laboratories of the institution. The missions and objectives all adhere to the values of a civil society that are not yet tinged with the language of the knowledge society.

Newer private universities in the same countries offer a deep insight into the rhetoric of “producing” skilled workers. One of the objectives mentioned in The German University in Cairo’s website [20] is to “produce the most comprehensively prepared” citizens, ready to face the “challenges and competitions created by global economy”. Misr International University in Cairo is committed to “qualify its graduates to meet the needs of the job market” [21]. The University of Dubai more or less is the same in aiming to “produce high caliber graduates”. Finally, SIST British University in Morocco [22] boldly answers the question “what do you get from SIST?” with “a British education” followed by “employability”. This dramatic shift in the wording of the missions and visions from the public to the private universities indicates that educational reforms and the expansion in HE institutions serve the neoliberal principle that the function of universities is the investment in human capital for the sake of expanding the knowledge economy.

Another issue that resulted from the focus on the university as a function is that of performativity [23]. Like any other commercial enterprise, a university is evaluated by its performance: the number of students, the number of publications and so on. The notion of performativity touches upon two main ideas incremental to this paper: autonomy and the commodification of education. In terms of autonomy, the concepts of teaching and learning are limited to an outcome-based learning and a course evaluation at the end of the semester. This view is reiterated by Brancalone and O’Brien [24] when they contend that outcome-based learning is part of the process of commodifying knowledge. This leads to the second aspect, as [23] confirms that now it is not a matter of experience, but a matter of productivity. Innovative ideas may be rejected because there is insufficient justification to be

given to the quality assurance committee or may not guarantee positive student feedback. These corporate-like measures limit creativity and consume a lot of time that could be better given to matters more relevant to the education process, such as curriculum development or even staff development.

A third aspect of the commodification of education is the focus of attention in HE on STEM at the expense of the humanities and liberal arts. This is due to the fact that the humanities do not contribute financially to the university, as science and technology do [25]. There is now a distinct rise in the institutions offering science and technology majors as opposed to the humanities.

In conclusion of this stage of the discussion, the aim of this section has been to draw the framework of a current problem in HE under the market values of neoliberalism in the MENA region. The issues this paper is concerned with are narrowed down to the changing values in universities, moving from education and research to preparing graduates for the competitive job markets; the focus on the performativity and corporatization of the university; and the increasing attention to STEM subjects at the expense of the humanities and liberal education.

#### IV. THE POSSIBLE: THE FUTURE OF HE IN THE MENA REGION IN ITS PRESENT STATE

The previous section outlined an urgent problem in HE in the MENA region. In addition to the existing problem, this paper addresses how far this will subsist in shaping the future of HE in the region. This part of the essay is primarily focusing on speculative impressions of how matters will be with the continuance of a neoliberal HE in the near future. These speculations are limited to the direct impact of the aspects discussed previously. This section mainly targets the following: the increasing competition among universities, the changing image of the college instructor into a service provider, and the gradual transformation of student autonomy into a radical form of self-interest.

There is already an ongoing competition between universities both at the regional and international levels and this is only expected to rise in the future. Since the student is the paying customer and the number of students pursuing a good quality of HE is increasing, public education in the region is unable to accommodate such numbers and hence the door was opened for private providers, followed by international ones, mostly on a for-profit basis. This competition would only increase further with more branch campuses operating in the Middle East than ever before [26]. The business of HE would soon focus on “brands” going up the ranking scales [8], aiming to enhance student satisfaction so the students would go online and vote for their institution. Furthermore, the college student would not be paying more attention to the quality of education offered or the major she is interested in, but rather would choose the university that will offer the highest rate of employability.

In addition to the hazards of further commodification of education, there is another negative consequence in the form of a lack of job prospects for the masses of graduates in the

MENA region. Reference [27] considers this issue as one of the most difficult “dilemmas” to solve in the Middle East. In struggling markets like Egypt and Morocco, there is no guarantee that even the most qualified graduates will find jobs. Reference [28] argues that one of the main reasons that ignited the Arab Spring was that the recent expansion in education did not correlate with employment, especially among the better educated. That is why it is a “dilemma”, since these kinds of graduates with no job prospects are a “potent political force” [27]. This creates an uncertain future for the coming generation of unemployed graduates in a more stagnating economy than at the time of the Arab Spring. In addition, the corporatization of HE will turn the college instructor-student relationships into employee-customer ones and will serve to diminish their autonomy as a teacher and learner. Since decision making and power is gradually moved from the academic to the administrative spheres [3], the instructor will no longer be in control of their own curriculum or their own lecture rooms. As a service provider, they will be rated based on student/ customer satisfaction and not based on knowledge or the ability to teach. On the other hand, the student’s autonomy will turn into a matter of self-interest. Reference [29] proclaims that neoliberal autonomy creates isolated individuals and this will be further proved in the future. A student who knows that they are the customer and that their evaluation of the instructor plays a huge role in the former’s stay at the university may lead to a student undermining the authority of the instructor with the unintentional blessing of the administration. The logic, in the same way as one would behave in a hotel or a restaurant, will be: “I am paying a lot so why am I not satisfied with this service?”

Finally, this section attempted to present a speculative overview of the future of HE in the MENA region if this current state persists in the near future. Since the focus is on the commodified framework of HE in its present state, the future predictions are confined to the effects of this process in the near future in the region. The researcher attempted to draw attention to the competition among universities and how this may tamper with the future of a generation of unemployed graduates. Furthermore, the section gave an overview of the diminished autonomy of the instructor and the restructuring of the student-teacher relationship as one similar to a customer and service provider.

#### V. THE PREFERABLE: INTRODUCING THE CA AS AN ALTERNATIVE IN HE

The current neoliberal form of HE created a series of reform policies in the MENA region in an effort to come to par with the area of quality education. These reforms encompass the rise of private universities, more partnerships and other forms of internationalization of education [9], and the shift to the American credit-hour system. Reference [30] criticizes the view that education in the Middle East should be reformed as an independent entity away from the ultimate goal of raising conscious, critically-aware citizens. In their plans for reform in this region, experts neglected to deal with education as “an agent of socialization”. In her article, Benard does not directly

call for the CA as a valid alternative but a good remedy for the ills she mentions would be incorporated in the principles of the CA either in addition to the economic reforms or completely separate from them [30]. This section of the paper offers a future alternative to neoliberal HE in the form of Martha Nussbaum's principles of the CA. It starts by giving an overview of the theoretical framework. Then the author mentions the benefits of CA to HE. Finally, it aims to demonstrate that CA can reform HE through critical thinking, liberal education, and attention to diversity.

Martha Nussbaum defines the CA in simple terms. For her, it is the answer to the question "what are people actually able to do and to be?" [31]. She further clarifies in an interview at Helsinki [32] that her CA replaces the still dominant futile measures of justice across countries, namely the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the utilitarian measurements of citizen satisfaction. To her, these comparisons are not a true measure of social justice. Her theory of capabilities focuses on "need and sociability as well as rationality" [33]. It is defined as a "broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change" [34]. From these definitions, it is ostensible that CA marks a shift from the market orientation of neoliberalism to the human as a social being with basic capabilities that should be pursued and achieved.

The CA revolves around two main elements: functioning and agency. A functioning, in the view of [35], is an action or a state that if performed will lead to the logical conclusion that these people are moving closer to their prosperousness. In other words, a functioning can be considered as the achievement of what people can do and be. The second element in the approach is agency, a definitive concept in education and learning in addition to the achievement of social justice and human development. Agency is the empowerment of people, getting them in charge of their own destiny. In that sense, the road to human advancement will not be through economic progress but through human development and empowerment [36]. This makes it far removed from neoliberal theories of human capital which measures the progress of humans by how much they can earn or contribute financially to their countries.

There are multiple reasons for the potential success of the CA in the MENA region as well as worldwide. Significantly, the values promoted by the CA are universal and each culture can apply it in the manner it sees fit [37]. Moreover, it does not coerce people to accept certain values. The people are the ends, not the means, putting it in direct contrast to human capital theory that views people as a means to accumulation of capital. Reference [38] remarks that among its possible uses, the CA is employed as another recourse to market-oriented ideology. Finally, there is a need for such a pedagogical approach that does not deny the economic hegemony but at the same time will help eliminate its dominance in a gradual manner.

The promotion of the CA in HE is not an original idea and Melanie Walker writes extensively about how it can be an

alternative to neoliberal HE [13], [39], [40]. In addition to the points mentioned above, this approach paves the way for the development of an individual able to pursue her goals using her own mind, an individual aware of the social drives and needs around her. For the MENA region, this is even more consequential, since globalization has brought about different implications in addition to those in the West. Reference [41] states that for the Middle East, the changeover to globalization brought with it different religious and cultural conflicts resulting from the absence of dialogue. Just as the best stage in life for preparing the individual for the job market is the post-secondary stage, so it is for the introduction of a well-rounded individual that can counter the demerits of the neoliberal commodified lifestyle. Hence, it can be claimed that the CA would be a panacea for HE in the MENA region if implemented effectively.

HE under the CA has numerous distinctive features. Reference [13] identifies five of them: 1) that HE has both "intrinsic" and "instrumental" values, 2) that it is a ground for multiculturalism, 3) that it recognizes the agency of the individual, 4) that it puts the individual and social agency in one place, and 5) it pays attention to the capabilities needed to achieve this. Later on, in her book, she emphasizes more benefits for the proper application of pedagogy in HE which corresponds to Nussbaum's three capacities for cultivating humanity the author refers to later on in this essay [43]. The CA for Walker should empower people through dialogue, diversity and the preparedness to listen to others and respect their views.

For using capabilities in HE, [40] suggests a list of eight of them to correspond to Nussbaum's list of capabilities for the minimum achievement of justice: 1) practical reason, 2) educational resilience, 3) knowledge and imagination, 4) learning disposition, 5) social relations and social networks, 6) respect, dignity, and recognition, 7) emotional integrity, and 8) bodily integrity [43]. It is important to stress the fact that this approach suggests a view of HE as more than education for economic development, and incorporates an implicit view of education both as and for democratic citizenship, and understanding and solidarity under conditions of cultural difference and diversity [39]. The question now is, how is it possible to achieve these capabilities in HE in the MENA region? How to transform the ideology of the market and emerging/ struggling democracies to the one of human development, social justice and democratic citizenship?

The first step in the implementation of CA in HE is to encourage and employ critical thinking or practical reason in the curriculum. In order to achieve agency, the student has to know how to employ the proper mode of thinking. Nussbaum stresses on the importance of the ability of citizens to know why they are siding with one party against the other rather than just agreeing because that is the side they are on [44]. In the MENA region, at a time after the Arab Spring and the political and ethnic strife that swept the region, this is a skill that is sorely needed. In education, according to Nussbaum, this can be carried out with the aid of good textbooks that promote and arouse students' curiosity in understanding the

opposite points of view. Through this self-examination, one of the main capacities needed for democratic development, people can achieve agency, and hence, the possibility of developing their capabilities [42].

The second step is to give due attention to liberal education. For Nussbaum, art has a role in advancing people's capabilities [44]. Art increases and feeds creativity. It brings people together in a team if they want to master self-examination. The third capability [15] proposed is knowledge and imagination. Imagination is more likely to be fostered by liberal education in the form of the subjects of arts and the humanities. In the MENA region, there has been a recent attention to the STEM subjects more than the humanities or the liberal arts, more so after STEM subjects promised better prospects for employment. A better approach is to follow the American system of HE [44] which requires two undergraduate years of liberal education before specialization. Nussbaum argues that the manner in which a student is taught the humanities will prompt students' abilities to think for themselves [45]. This way, the student is exposed to the capabilities of knowledge and imagination simultaneously in her HE even if she chooses to specialize in STEM.

The third step is to use the capabilities of knowledge, imagination, and practical reasoning to recognize and respect diversity. Going back to what [41] warns about in the challenges of globalization for the Arab world, it is essential for us to be able to engage in a culture of dialogue. This does not only entail the differences across cultures (Eastern/Western or Arab/ non-Arab) but also inside one's own culture [42]. Attention to diversity corresponds to the sixth capability for HE suggested by [13] above: respect, dignity and recognition. This will counter the spirit of intolerance that has spread recently with the advent of religious fundamentalism and the advent of hostile groups such as the so-called Islamic State.

To conclude, the CA is a theoretical framework introduced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as a theory of social justice. It is a possible alternative to existing neoliberal values of HE in the MENA region mainly because it encourages empowerment and social awareness. The potential success of this approach was demonstrated by following three steps: stressing on the value of critical thinking, paying attention to the humanities and liberal arts, and respecting diversity. If these steps are followed, the CA could gradually do away with counter the values of the market and introduce instead the values of social justice.

## VI. THE POSSIBLE AREAS OF CONCERN FOR THE PREFERABLE FUTURE

There are certain points of criticism directed to the CA, mainly addressed by various opponents. This final section of the paper addresses three main points of weakness that may be taken against the approach: that it is not practical, is too hard to measure, and that it favors Western thought. The author attempted to address these concerns as the author sees fitting to the Middle Eastern context.

Nussbaum is criticized for assuming that her list of

capabilities should work with all people [38], [39]. Even if people have access to the full list of capabilities, there are three scenarios that go with this assumption. Firstly, people achieve their capabilities and live by them. Secondly, people have access to some or all capabilities but choose not to use them voluntarily. For example, a college student that has a disposition for learning but decides to drop out to help out her family in the expenses. The third scenario is having access to the capability but is hindering others from achieving theirs, like a college student who harasses or bullies another student. In theory, although everyone will strive to achieve all capabilities to have a basic decent life but in actual life, there might be other factors to hinder this process. In addition, the CA is hard to measure in a manner that is related to the point mentioned above. Reference [35] argues that the capabilities are "not necessarily put into practice" and hence not necessarily observable. If the capabilities are not detected in a society it may not ultimately mean that the people are unable to exercise them but that they are probably choosing not to exercise them. In HE, how can the success of the CA be measured as well? There should not be a certain measure for knowing whether a HE institution managed to carry out the CA. It is enough that the ideology of the institution, its mission and curricula should attempt to transform the general outlook of an education for employability into one of human development. It is also possible that future researchers come up with a certain method of weighing the degrees students are employing and exercising their capabilities in the form of questionnaires and other forms of qualitative research.

The last point of criticism which the author addresses in this paper is that the CA draws from Western philosophy. Nussbaum repeatedly declares that she borrows her thought from Aristotle and she links her list of capabilities to human rights [42], [37], [44], [46]. From one perspective, these are universal views, and from another they are "deeply rooted in Western philosophy" [39]. Ultimately, this is not a conclusive point against the approach and according to [47], the globalization of academic thought renders the idea that any thought arising from itself or by itself impossible. Nussbaum herself replies to this point in a recent lecture, stating that this is a false claim [32]. Firstly, Amartya Sen, the pioneer of the CA, is Indian, and it is being developed by Asians from many parts of the world. Ideas travel faster than people now and regardless of their origin, the author finds it only plausible that any society is free to adopt concepts from another culture as long as it can seamlessly mingle with its own.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to write a futures study in the field of HE in the MENA region. The CA, as shown in the paper, displays appropriate measures for the needs of HE in the region for the sake of initiating new pedagogies arising from a theoretical framework to replace the neoliberal one. The CA is not a magical solution to the ills of neoliberal HE and measuring it may be proved to be hard to accomplish. However, neoliberal values may not be here to stay. For developing countries, it will be a struggle to eschew the

current dominant discourse of the promise of investments in human capital and the quick economic returns of international economic agreements that employ soft power to enforce neoliberal values. Nevertheless, with the help of the CA, the values of the market can be upheld in addition to the values of human development. With the failure of the Arab Spring in the MENA region, education is the key for any nation that wants to rebuild itself using the human capital for human development first then for economic development.

If the future upholds the same values of the present, with market values in the vanguard, it is inevitable that fanaticism and intolerance will increase as a reaction to the extreme forms of individualism and the search for self-interest. There are points of consideration for future research as to the methods of applying the steps mentioned in the pedagogical framework of HE, which textbooks to use that would aid in raising the students' awareness as to the list of capabilities and which teaching methods would allow for debate and dialogue among students, instructors, and administrations. Other points include methods of incorporating arts and humanities into STEM HE, strategies for resisting the corporatization of HE, and pointers for adapting to neoliberal HE without losing focus on the real purpose of education itself.

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