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Interest in Online Courses Surges in the Middle East

Jeffrey R. Young / 12 Oct 2020

Online course providers like Coursera and edX have seen a spike in demand for their courses since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Image: Pixabay).

Providers of online higher education have seen a spike in interest in their courses and degree programs from the Middle East and North Africa region since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. And some say the sudden exposure to online learning may lead to a shift in attitudes about the value of digital delivery methods.

Edraak, a Jordan-based provider of free online courses delivered in Arabic, served one

million new learners in the past six months, a big jump from the 650,000 new learners it served in all of 2019. The platform now serves four million learners total.

And Coursera, a U.S.-based provider of online courses and programs from well-known universities, said that since mid-March, it saw a 500 percent increase in learners from the Middle East compared to the same period last year.

FutureLearn, a British company offering similar online courses, also reports a 500-percent increase in participation from the region. Officials from edX, a nonprofit founded by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to offer free and low-cost online courses, says its enrollments from the region have gone up more than 200 percent since the start of the pandemic.

"There has definitely been a shift in the sense of recognizing they cannot ignore online learning anymore" in the region, said Maha Bali, an associate professor of practice at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo.

Shireen Yacoub, the chief executive of Edraak, called the growth in adult learning via online courses "one of the most inspiring observations we've had during the curfews and lockdowns."

Even so, she worries about what she calls the "equity gap" when it comes to who is able to use the organization's free courses. Most of Edraak's users get to its platform through their smartphones, she added, and low-income families may have three or four kids all needing to share a phone. Computers and home Internet access are too costly for many, she adds. "We need to advocate for more equity in Internet connectivity," she said. "Their lives will often depend on it. It's not a luxury." *(See a related article, "The Shift to Online Education in the Arab World Is Intensifying Inequality.")*

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Coursera has 3.4 million users in the Middle East out of approximately 70 million learners worldwide, according to Betty Vandenbosch, the company's chief content officer. About 400 colleges and organizations in the region have signed up for a free program that lets them offer Coursera online courses to their enrolled students. That means that the colleges—including Al Hussein Technical University in Jordan—are offering at least some online courses based largely on content provided free from Coursera.

And she says that in recent months, Coursera has seen more interest from governments and organizations in the region to form partnerships. Such deals typically mean that governments and organizations pay Coursera a fee to get free access to Coursera's online degree programs for their employees. That was starting to happen even before the pandemic: Last year the company announced a deal with the Abu Dhabi School of Government to train 60,000 government employees in data science, digital transformation and other high-tech skills.

"The governments in the Middle East are recognizing the challenges they have with their economies," Vandenbosch said. "Some of those governments are saying, 'Gosh, we really need to upskill our workforce because oil is not going to be there forever."

New Attitudes Toward Online Learning

Experts in education technology say that the pandemic may end up being a turning point for online education in the region.

John Schwartz, head of Enterprise Global Business Development at edX, said that colleges in the MENA region have recently adopted the platform's online courses as well. "Virtually no university had the time and resources to turn all their classroom content into online courses, so edX was able and continues to fill a large void," he said. "In addition there has been a significantly higher degree of interest from the region's schools to not only use edX content, but to put their own quality content online, as a partner on the edX.org platform."

The most popular edX courses by students in the region are an introductory computer-science course by Harvard University and a course from the University of Queensland that prepares students to take the IELTS test of English-language skills.

"The pandemic really changed the dynamics towards online learning in the Middle East," said Gehan Osman, an assistant professor of instructional design and technology at the American University in Cairo's Graduate School of Education, in an email interview. "Professors who had never considered even blended or web-based instruction before embraced online learning because it was the

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only alternative. Many of these professors said that they would never go back to completely face-to-face because they discovered many instructional value of going online."

Curtis J. Bonk is a professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University at Bloomington and author of [The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education](#), and other books about online learning. He said he is suddenly getting invitations to speak in the region at places that had not done much with online education in the past. One example: He recently spoke at an online forum for teachers at the grade school and university level in the United Arab Emirates run by the Ministry of Education, and more than 600 people attended.

The Biggest Concern: Cheating

However, some reservations about online education remain. The biggest concern: that the format will lead to rampant cheating. "Many insist that exams and major assessment need to be done in person in a proctored environment," said Osman.

Bali agreed that academic integrity remains a key concern. "We know in Egypt many online standardized tests done in exam centers get leaked/cheated, et cetera," she said, noting that people worry the same kind of thing could happen in online courses.

And even those providing online courses stress that they are not meant as a wholesale replacement for classroom instruction.

"Even at Edraak we don't think that online ed and learning is a silver bullet to education in the region," said Yacoub, that group's chief executive. "We really believe in the value of in-person teaching."

For Bali, the question for colleges should be what is the purpose of education, and "how to use the online effectively while preserving the best of what we can do face-to-face."

New efforts are underway to help train professors in the region to teach online. Among them, the Center for Learning in Practice based at the Carey Institute for Global Good is running [a series of free online workshops](#) on how to teach with online technologies, with a focus on inclusive teaching.

Jeffrey R. Young is an editor and reporter focused on technology issues and the future of education. He is a senior editor at EdSurge, covering the intersection of technology and education.