

Regional Policy Review 2024 from Third Countries not Associated to the Programme

The Middle East

REGIONAL REPORT



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Introduction

The Erasmus+ regional policy review acts as a bridge between the Erasmus+ programme and third countries not associated with it, shedding light on the policy landscape that shapes educational exchange and collaboration. By examining the interplay between local policies and Erasmus+ objectives, the document aims to foster a more cohesive and effective approach to international education, enhancing the programme's reach and impact across diverse educational systems.

Regional Report

The main approach of the report is the aggregation of the policy frameworks of the third countries within a specific region, offering a macroscopic view of how regional policies support, complement, or diverge from the goals and practices of the Erasmus+ programme. It aims to identify common themes, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration across the region, providing insights into the broader regional stance towards international educational cooperation and mobility.

These reports offer an analysis of the region's specific educational policies as they relate to the Erasmus+ programme. They examine the extent to which national policies facilitate or hinder participation in Erasmus+ activities through a regional lens, highlight successful alignments, and pinpoint areas where policy adjustments could enhance cooperation.

Individual Country Reports

National reports from individual countries within the region are embedded into the regional report. However, data and statistics relating to the state of play of education in individual countries will also be available in the annex. These country reports have been submitted by the Erasmus+ National Focal Points, and are important in understanding the nuances of each country's engagement with Erasmus+ and identifying tailored strategies to improve integration and outcomes.

Erasmus+ Priorities and Features

The Regional Policy Review of the Erasmus+ programme in third countries will be underpinned by the priorities that align with the overarching goals of the European Union, particularly focusing on digitalisation, the European Green Deal, inclusion and diversity, and active participation in democratic life. These priorities reflect the EU's commitment to addressing current global challenges through education and training,

ensuring that the Erasmus+ programme contributes to building a more sustainable, inclusive, and digitally advanced future. It will also look at the important features, most notably internationalisation, and how this is implemented in the regions.

Digitalisation: This priority focuses on integrating digital technologies into education and training. The goal is to enhance digital literacy and skills among learners and educators, promote access to digital learning resources, and improve the quality of education through innovative teaching methods. Digitalisation in the Erasmus+ context aims to prepare participants for a rapidly evolving digital world, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary competencies to thrive in the digital economy.

The European Green Deal: Underpinning the Erasmus+ programme with the European Green Deal emphasises the transition towards a climate-neutral, green, and sustainable Europe. This priority includes projects and initiatives that raise awareness about environmental challenges, promote sustainable development, and encourage the adoption of green practices within education and community engagement. The focus is on fostering an understanding of ecological issues and inspiring action towards environmental stewardship among participants.

Inclusion and Diversity: This priority aims to ensure equitable access to Erasmus+ opportunities for all, regardless of individuals' backgrounds, abilities, or socio-economic status. The programme seeks to remove barriers to participation and promote diversity within its projects and activities. By fostering an inclusive environment, Erasmus+ strives to enrich the educational experience for participants, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and cultures.

Active Participation in Democratic Life: Encouraging active citizenship and participation in democratic life is a key priority of the Erasmus+ programme. This includes initiatives that engage young people in civic activities, promote democratic values, and foster a sense of European identity and solidarity. Through these efforts, Erasmus+ aims to equip participants with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to contribute to society and to address the challenges facing democracies today.

The Regional Policy Review will critically examine how these priorities and important features are being addressed and integrated into Erasmus+ projects and initiatives in third countries. By juxtaposing the review on these thematic areas, the Erasmus+ programme reaffirms its commitment to contributing to the EU's broader objectives and making a meaningful

difference in the lives of individuals and communities around the world.

Internationalisation: As a fundamental feature of Erasmus+, internationalisation involves promoting cross-border collaboration and cultural exchange. This facet of the programme is designed to broaden participants' horizons by fostering mutual understanding and respect among diverse cultures. Through international partnerships and mobility opportunities, Erasmus+ aims to create a global learning community that values diversity and global interconnectedness. This document examines how this important feature is implemented in the countries not associated to the programme.

There will be six regional reports: Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, Caribbean, the Middle East, and the Pacific, along with annexed country reports.

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Alfaisal University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

1. Overview of Education and Training Policy in the Middle East

Education and training policies in the Middle East have undergone significant reforms to align with global standards, enhance workforce preparedness, and promote sustainable development. The region's approach to education emphasises accessibility, quality, and the integration of modern technologies to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. Governments across the Middle East are focusing on skill development, vocational training, and higher education reforms to drive economic diversification and knowledge-based growth.

Education strategies in the Middle East have diverse objectives but similar goals, like boosting literacy levels and increasing opportunities for higher education and vocational training to prepare young people for the evolving global economy landscape. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), along with the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), have put forth plans and programmes to standardise practices and promote cooperation among nations in the region. Similar to other countries, the region is increasingly focusing on fields like STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) digital skills, and entrepreneurship as part of their strategies to drive growth and diversity.

1.1. Educational National and Regional Frameworks

Education policies in the Middle East vary by country, but many governments share common objectives such

as improving literacy rates, expanding access to higher education, and enhancing vocational training. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, for example, have established regional frameworks to standardise qualifications and ensure the recognition of academic credentials across member states. The Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) plays a pivotal role in harmonising educational policies and promoting research collaboration among Gulf nations.

Many countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, have launched national strategies such as Vision 2030, which aims to transform their education systems to better support economic diversification. These initiatives emphasise STEM education, digital skills, and entrepreneurship training to equip students with competencies relevant to the modern workforce.

Vocational and workforce development, along with education, are now key components of the long-term strategies of the GCC countries as they strive to diversify and sustain their economies. Realising that oil revenues are finite, policymakers across the region are increasing their attempts to enhance academic institutions, match vocational training with labour market requirements, and increase spending on research and development. In this broader context, Qatar is particularly noteworthy for its attempts to enhance its qualifications framework, both for academic and vocational qualifications, to international standards. Thus, the position of human capital at the core of transformation agendas of GCC nations, including Qatar, aims to develop a ready and future-oriented workforce to

support industries like technology, finance, renewable energy, and knowledge services. These efforts signify the shared regional vision of creating a competitive, knowledge-based economy, where economic stability depends no longer on finite resources but on the skills and resilience of the people.

The UAE has made similar efforts via its National Higher Education Strategy 2030 aiming to transform the country's higher education sector into a globally competitive player that both attracts international talent and prepares Emirati graduates for dynamic and rapidly evolving industries. This strategy emphasises curricula aligned with labour market demands. To ensure quality and raise academic standards, the UAE government is introducing rigorous accreditation systems and qualification frameworks that establish clear, consistent benchmarks for student outcomes. Equivalency efforts are a cornerstone of this modernisation process, with authorities working to recognise and validate diplomas, certificates, and degrees from reputable institutions at home and abroad.

On the other hand, Kuwait has consistently invested in expanding and modernising its education infrastructure. Public education is free for Kuwaiti nationals at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, with the government allocating a significant portion of its budget to maintain schools, develop curricula, and support teacher training. Kuwait's Ministry of Higher Education supervises post-secondary institutions and scholarship programmes. In addition, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) manages vocational and technical education, offering programmes to address labour market needs in various sectors such as technology, healthcare, business, and engineering. As the country diversifies its economy away from oil, policymakers have emphasised science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), alongside business and entrepreneurship skills, to prepare students for emerging economic opportunities.

Over the past few decades, GCC countries have made remarkable strides in developing and refining their education frameworks to better align with international standards and support a rapidly diversifying economic landscape. Through ongoing reforms, strategic partnerships with global institutions, and an increasing emphasis on technology and innovation, the GCC's education systems continue to evolve, empowering learners with the skills needed to excel in a knowledge-driven global economy while reinforcing the region's collective goal of sustainable, long-term growth.

1.2. Higher Education and International Cooperation

Higher education in the Middle East has developed very quickly and some countries have established relationships with international universities in order to improve academic quality and research. There is an increase in the branch campuses of European and North American universities, especially in the UAE and Qatar. To this rapid expansion, European partnerships, (especially those developed within the Erasmus+ programme) have become an important enabler of higher education cooperation in the Middle East. Within the framework of Erasmus+, mobility grants, capacity-building initiatives, and joint projects in research and innovation have enabled universities in the region to enhance their curriculum design, faculty development, and institutional governance. In the Gulf countries of UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, these partnerships have enabled students to gain valuable international experience through the mutual recognition of credits gained while pursuing their degrees. The opportunities for collaborative research, peer learning, and professional training increase for academics in the process of the ongoing modernisation of higher education systems. These efforts, in addition to contributing to the dissemination of cross-cultural exchange, ensure that Middle Eastern institutions remain current with global academic trends and contribute to the education of a new generation of graduates to meet new labour market challenges. It is for this reason, and in line with the Erasmus+ programme's commitment to inclusive education, that persons with disabilities and women (who are underrepresented in the workforce and higher education in many parts of the world) are a specific focus of these collaborations.

1.3. Illustrative Erasmus+ Initiatives

In practice, these international collaborations are embodied in a number of projects and consortia to demonstrate the programme's real impact on institutional reform and capacity building. Another good example is INsPIRE (Innovative Governance Practices in the Higher Education Institutions in Iraq), a capacity-building project that involves partnerships with European universities in Italy, Portugal, Greece, and Iraq. Addressing contemporary challenges, INsPIRE improves governance and enacts policy changes to enhance transparency, accountability, and academic quality in line with broader reforms across the region. Meanwhile, the International Credit Mobility (ICM) partnerships in the GCC are a model for collaboration between universities in Qatar, the UAE, and Oman with

European institutions to exchange staff and students and enhance curriculum design, intercultural competencies, and research collaboration. These reciprocal partnerships guarantee that knowledge transfer is both robust and sustainable, benefitting students' and academics' professional growth. In conclusion, the various projects outlined above represent the Erasmus+ programme's capacity to accelerate the synchronisation of regional reforms with global best practices in order to support the GCC's overall strategy of enhancing educational excellence as part of economic diversification.

1.4. Vocational Education and Workforce Development

In order to tackle skills shortages and unemployment, many countries in the Middle East are enhancing their systems of technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The GCC has adopted several measures to ensure that the vocational qualifications are standardised and the training programmes are relevant to the labour market demands.

Vocational education in the GCC states has been reshaped by a combination of government-led strategies and public-private partnerships. Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are increasingly involving private sector actors to ensure that TVET programmes are in sync with market requirements. These collaborative efforts may include industry advisory councils, which are made up of representatives from energy, construction, financial services, and technology sectors, to advise on curriculum updates, practical skill requirements, and emerging occupational standards. Through the closure of the school-employer gap, TVET providers can better equip students to enter the workforce and be more employable—and, therefore, more valuable to the region.

At the same time, Iraq is both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of vocational education and workforce development. The country has suffered from decades of conflict and underinvestment, such that a good deal of the country's educational infrastructure requires modernisation. Nevertheless, there are recent initiatives—often with the support of international organisations and through bilateral partnerships—that seek to revitalise and expand TVET provision across multiple governorates. Some of the efforts include renovating technical institutes, upgrading teacher training programmes, and developing new curricula to fill some of the most important labour market needs in the agriculture, oil and gas, and construction sectors. The focus has been on the participation of the

private sector in the planning and delivery of vocational courses so as to enhance the credibility and applicability of teaching. For example, oil companies operating in the south of Iraq have started to provide training modules for the local youth and thus help to build a more sustainable talent pipeline for the main economic activity of the country.

In the GCC, apprenticeship models and skill certification schemes are also emerging, as learners are able to gain real-world experience while being supervised by experienced mentors. These programmes not only enhance job readiness but also assist in the standardisation of skill sets in important industries. In addition, several GCC states, aware of the need to diversify the economy, are investing in vocational programmes that are in line with the national economic diversification strategies. This includes the promotion of entrepreneurship training within the TVET frameworks, especially for young people who can be the drivers of growth in areas like renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and digital services. Thus, the GCC countries are ensuring that their students are not only technically skilled but also have other attributes like project management, communication, and critical thinking so that they can be a future workforce that can contribute to innovation and growth and sustain it through the legacy industries.

In total, these measures in the GCC and Iraq reflect a larger regional shift towards new and innovative vocational education systems that are suitable for current and future economic developments at the local and global levels. Still, there are some problems: inadequate infrastructure, the continued skill shortage, and variations in programme quality. The improvements in reforms and the cooperation between various sectors will result in a more dynamic and flexible labour force in the Middle East. This collective effort to improve TVET's performance confirms the idea that the development of human capital is an essential factor for the stability and progress of the region and the individual progress of millions of young people who want to build their careers in the context of a changing economy.

1.5. Feature: The Education Growth of Iraq

Iraq's education system stands at a crossroads, shaped by its historically robust foundations yet challenged by decades of conflict and underinvestment. Notably, it is the only developing country at the time of this report to have an Erasmus National Focal Point (ENFP), a status shared otherwise only by the more economically advanced and politically stable GCC nations. This distinction underscores both Iraq's commit-

ment to fostering international cooperation in higher education and the unique hurdles it faces in modernising its educational infrastructure. Given the country's complex history and ongoing rebuilding efforts, Iraq is given special attention here to highlight its potential for significant growth in regional and global academic collaborations.

Iraq's education and training system has undergone significant transformations over the past decade, shaped by a combination of historical legacies, conflict-related disruptions, and reform initiatives. The overarching policy guiding education in Iraq is the National Education Strategy, which seeks to rebuild and modernise the country's educational infrastructure while ensuring alignment with international standards. This strategy emphasises access to quality education, skills development, and labour market integration.

Historically, Iraq had one of the strongest education systems in the Arab world, with high literacy rates and well-regarded universities. However, decades of conflict, economic instability, and political challenges have severely impacted the education sector, leading to declining enrollment rates, outdated curricula, and insufficient funding. Recognising these challenges, the Iraqi government, in collaboration with international organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank, has launched various initiatives to revitalise the education sector.

Higher education in Iraq is governed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR), which oversees universities, accreditation, and research institutions. The government has placed significant emphasis on improving academic quality, developing research capacities, and enhancing university-industry linkages to foster innovation and economic growth. Several Iraqi universities are undergoing reforms to meet global accreditation standards, and partnerships with foreign universities are being encouraged to facilitate knowledge exchange and faculty development.

In the vocational and technical education sector, Iraq is working on aligning training programmes with labour market needs. The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) strategy aims to equip students with practical skills and competencies relevant to key economic sectors such as oil and gas, construction, and information technology. TVET institutions are receiving support from international development agencies to upgrade curricula, enhance teacher training, and establish apprenticeship programmes.

One of the major challenges in Iraq's education sector remains access to education, particularly for margin-

alised communities and internally displaced persons. Efforts are being made to expand educational opportunities through distance learning, scholarships, and infrastructure development. Additionally, Iraq is taking steps to integrate digital education and e-learning platforms to modernise teaching methodologies and expand access to quality learning resources.

While significant progress has been made, Iraq's education system continues to face hurdles such as limited funding, political instability, and the need for further policy reforms. However, with ongoing national and international support, Iraq is on a path toward rebuilding its education sector and enhancing its role in regional and global academic cooperation.

2. Challenges and Future Outlook

Despite progress in education and training policies, challenges remain, including disparities in access to quality education, the need for stronger teacher training programmes, and the integration of technology in classrooms. Countries across the region are working to address these challenges through increased investment in digital education, curriculum reforms, and regional cooperation efforts.

Moving forward, education policies in the Middle East will continue to focus on enhancing quality, expanding vocational training, and fostering international partnerships. By prioritising skills development and innovation, the region aims to build a more resilient and knowledge-driven economy that supports long-term sustainable growth.

