



There is a real danger that an academic black hole will emerge in the Middle East. Tighter border controls and a rise in racially motivated attacks on Muslims threaten to drive Middle Eastern students away from universities in the UK and other Western countries.

This is not just a problem for the Middle East: it's our problem too. Unless the region's most talented individuals are educated to the highest level, in 20 years and with an energy crisis imminent, a large proportion of the world's mineral and petroleum resources is likely to be run by an under-skilled and undereducated workforce that has had little access to the West and the Western values we cherish. The region will increasingly depend on external investment and expertise, destroying capacity building and creating resentment.

For students unable or reluctant to study abroad, local provision is hopelessly inadequate. There are minimal PhD programmes: in Saudi Arabia, women are not encouraged to progress to further education unless they want to teach or become doctors. The US and UK boast some of the best universities in the world and both are natural choices for international students. Yet despite overseas research scholarships and Fulbright scholarships, it is increasingly difficult for many to secure admission to the programmes of their choice, notwithstanding their uncertainty as to how they will settle in the West.

There are two serious risks inherent in this situation. The first is that the Middle East will become increasingly intellectually dependent on the West. Although this might seem attractive to Western companies in the short term, there are long-term risks. With more highly qualified Westerners taking the best jobs, the local workforce is offered little career progression. This leaves the local population dependent on the West, and dependency can

Don't turn your back...

...on the Middle East. The West has a duty to support development in the region, insists **Zahir Irani**

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turn to resentment. Second, an economy built on dependency is a fragile one and all the more so in a region known for its instability.

This issue cannot be solved politically in the short term. The current immigration laws in many Western countries are unlikely to be relaxed. If anything, they are likely to be tightened. Industry and academia must work together to find a solution.

There are three paths to explore. First, partnerships between universities and commercial organisations are already starting to develop, with both working to create courses tailored to practical "local" needs, with the emphasis on teaching rather than research.

However, these partnerships could be extended further, supporting capacity planning

through, for example, building new or private universities that satisfy home demand for knowledge. An example is Bahrain, which has liberalised private education to satisfy local demand.

Alternatively, the West can help to build regional educational hubs or to develop competencies through providing "intellectual aid", such as the long-term secondment of Western academics to the region.

A third solution would be for Western universities to establish operations in the Middle East. The proviso here is that Middle Eastern students receive the same level of teaching as UK students, rather than supporting a two-tier system that generates revenue but not highly skilled undergraduates or postgraduates. Where teaching in a particular country is difficult, intermediary locations can be used as an alternative. While this may sound unlikely, a precedent has been set with the large number of Chinese students who currently study in Egypt.

If we want to gain access to markets in countries such as Iran, Syria and, in years to come, Iraq, we need to provide the local populations with access to expertise that can support capacity building in their home region. This is food for thought for organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

For our part, universities and commercial organisations must work to cultivate the talent that exists in the Middle East and Gulf, providing them with the level of education that they need to successfully run their economy now. We will all become increasingly dependent on their future decisions. In a decade's time, inactivity could result either in an increased, unhealthy dependency on the West, or propagate a region that is an intellectual black hole — open to possible exploitation from other governments.

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