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Arab council documents rapid rise of social science

The Arab world has experienced an exponential increase in social science research over the past three decades, a draft report has said, including a sevenfold increase in the number of dedicated research centres.

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The preliminary assessment by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences reports that the region now hosts more than 280 research institutes dedicated to the subject, compared with around 40 prior to 1981. There has also been a rapid rise in the number of universities teaching social science, with 55 per cent of institutions across the Arab world offering social science degrees—a significant figure given the young age of most Arab institutions.

Meanwhile, the number of scientific periodicals on the subject has risen to 180, and the appearance of social science in mainstream newspaper articles has risen to above 60 per cent of all editions. The findings, due to be published in a final report in June, link the rise in social science study to the economic and political development of the region.

However, the report highlights a lack of a grounded research community for the social sciences in the region, because researchers lack a common scientific identity. This is in stark contrast to the “quasi-science” communities that have built up in the form of civil societies that use social science to serve their objectives.

The Arab Council, launched in 2008, funds social science in the region. “We hope that the report can serve as a practical and theoretical tool for anyone who might be interested in supporting and developing the social sciences in the region, including social scientists themselves,” says Seteney Shami, director-general of the council.

The report highlights the contrast in the development of the field at

universities and at independent research centres. While the majority of research centres are focused on the political sciences, university courses are orientated towards economics, sociology and psychology.

There is also little interest in historical study, the report says, leading to the conclusion that development is focused on subjects perceived as being integral to economic development.

The highest presence of social science research at universities was found in in Algeria, followed by Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Across the region, PhD courses are available at 14 institutions, while 19 offer masters training. One institution that houses several social science and humanities centres is Egypt's Bibliotheca Alexandrina (pictured).

However, in some countries university-based research is still totally lacking—with five countries having zero research activities at institutions.

Social science degrees are most pronounced in countries with a longer history of higher education, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Tunisia, the report says. This history is an important factor in the development of social science, given that 97 per cent of Arab universities were created after 1950, and 70 per cent since 1991.

Oil-rich nations of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have greater levels of social science higher education, as do Jordan and Yemen, the report says. This might be a result of better recognition of the role of social science in modern society, or an attempt to imitate Western institutions, it says.

Image credit: David Stanley, Flickr

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