

Overview of current COVID-19 situation and economic impact.¹ Most MENA countries have been experiencing a fourth wave of infections, with new COVID-19 cases spiking in June and August 2021, but declining overall as vaccination campaigns have started or picked up pace. Within the MENA region, Bahrain (154,677), Kuwait (94,583), Lebanon (91,081) and Qatar (83,869) have the total highest rates per million population, although they all experienced reductions in weekly cases (-29%, -10%, -22% and -21%, respectively) and testing is uneven across countries.² Yemen (-17%), Libya (-18%) and Iraq (-27%) reported a slight decline in positive cases. Several other countries indicated a drop in Covid incidences compared to the previous week, ranging from -9% in West Bank and Gaza to -32% in the United Arab Emirates. Jordan (2%), Tunisia (36%) and Egypt (38%) had a low to moderate rise in weekly cases, in contrast to Djibouti with an 117% increase in cases. Vaccine rollout across the region varies considerably from a high share of the population of the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain being fully vaccinated (at 76.5%, 74% and 62.5%, respectively), and about 44% in Morocco and 30% in Jordan to only 3.5% in Egypt, 2.6% in Djibouti and 6.7% in Algeria.³ Estimated macroeconomic losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic have risen markedly since March 2020, to about 6.6 percent of MENA's 2019 GDP as of August 1, 2021, relative to the counterfactual scenario of no crisis.⁴

Status of University Openings/Classes. The majority of MENA countries are currently preparing for the start of the academic year 2021/2022 in the fall. In contrast to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 when most countries closed their universities and switched to online instruction for the remainder of the 2019/2020 academic year, MENA countries and universities have been pursuing a range of different approaches for the past academic year of 2020/2021 and are further modifying their approaches for the upcoming academic year 2021/2022. This approach differs across MENA countries, but even within countries by universities, disciplines or between the public system and private universities (see table for country approaches).

Country Examples of Modalities and Covid-19 Measures for the Academic Year 2021-2022

Country	Reopening & Modality of Teaching/Learning	Vaccination and Hygiene Measures
Jordan	The Ministry of Higher Education issued a circular which announced three modalities for the 2021/22 academic year: (i) in-person, (ii) blended and (iii) fully online. Universities were asked to identify disciplines/subjects to be taught in person (face-to-face), blended or fully online, based on the number of students per class, taking into consideration the health precautions and feasibility of safe distancing.	All faculty, administrative staff and students are required to be vaccinated before returning to campus or submit a negative PCR twice weekly. This effectively mandates vaccination for a return to campus. Vaccines are readily available in country, even at universities. Additionally, there is high rate of youth requesting vaccination or getting vaccination.
Tunisia	In-person classes for the 2021-22 academic year were cleared by the Tunisian Universities Council. The approval is based on the vaccination progress among the university community.	About 70% of the university community (students, teaching and administrative staff) is vaccinated. In addition, a new vaccination campaign for members of the university community was launched in early September.
Egypt	In-person attendance in 2021/2022.	The Ministry of Higher made vaccination compulsory for university students and staff for in-person teaching/learning activities on

¹ All figures from WB MENA Crisis Tracker, August 23, 2021.

² WB MENA Crisis Tracker, September 20, 2021.

³ WB MENA Crisis tracker, September 13, 2021.

⁴ WB MENA Crisis Tracker, August 23, 2021.

		campus. There is also a prioritization of teaching staff and students above 18 for vaccination. Several private universities also announced that they will not allow non-vaccinated persons on campus.
Morocco	<p>Reopening of schools and universities was postponed from September 13 to October 1, 2021. Although the ministry plans with in-person attendance, it announced three modalities for this academic year: (i) distance learning, (ii) in-person and (iii) blended. The choice of modality will depend on (a) the subject/course and (b) the epidemiological evolution.</p> <p>In its effort to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, the ministry has the following two priorities for this academic year: (ii) scale up of broadband connections in universities, (iii) financing of research on COVID-19.</p>	Higher Education Institutions, staff and students are required to follow sanitary protocols (mandatory mask wearing, hand disinfection, no gatherings, physical distancing, natural ventilation of closed spaces, control of access to campus and traffic flow, floor markings and specific signage,) and temperature checks.
Lebanon	The impact of the economic and political crisis dominates. The socio-economic situation has drastically deteriorated since last year. There are significant fuel and gas shortages and frequent, long lasting electricity cuts (about 22h/day). As a consequence, both faculty and students will have significant difficulty to make it to campus and online/hybrid learning is not an option due to electricity cuts.	No information
Iraq	Universities have started the new semester, with all lectures being in-person (though remote learning can play a supplementary role as needed). Many in the university community (students, faculty, administrative staff) have been vaccinated.	<p>MOHESR issued instructions that prohibit any person (whether student, employee or lecturer) from starting the new academic year without being vaccinated.</p> <p>The unvaccinated are given a few weeks to get vaccinated. The government has opened many centers and mobile facilities to provide vaccinations.</p>
West Bank & Gaza	Universities resumed in September with in-person learning.	Most teaching staff is vaccinated Mask wearing masks and other hygiene measures are in place. If there is an infection case, the program/faculty will be closed for some time and teaching/learning will be online.

Good practice examples from MENA region countries on Online Learning and Covid-19 Research

Jordan: The connectivity challenges experienced during the first year of the pandemic have been resolved this year. During the early months of COVID-19 when the lockdown was enforced, universities cooperated with local telecom companies that offered special internet packages for the students and faculty members. However, this past academic year, telecom companies made available internet packages at affordable prices.

Virtual labs: COVID-19 has been the catalyst behind the development of online labs: universities in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria are implementing remote laboratories in cooperation with universities in Jordan, France, Spain and Belgium as well as with LabsLand under the e-LIVES project.⁵

Cross-country research collaborations: The COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the importance of research, including university research, and of international research cooperation and innovations for conducting research under challenging circumstances. It may also have led to greater cross-country collaboration and sharing of resources in research. For example, Morocco and Tunisia launched a US\$2.16 million plan⁶ for 30 research projects in health, renewable energy and electricity, energy efficiency, water, environment and climate change, human and social sciences, artificial intelligence and big data, with the objective to promote student and academic mobility and joint doctoral degree awarding by partner universities. The plan would include the establishment of joint laboratories, strengthening of university networks and mutually recognition of degrees.⁷

⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200715130543961> and <https://e-lives.eu/> The e-LIVES project is an ERASMUS+ project that runs from October 15th, 2017 to October 14th, 2020. The goals of the project are the identification of best practices in e-Engineering, the development of reliable remote laboratory solutions, the development of practical open staff training, the assessment of the pedagogical innovation solutions used, and the promotion of the concept of e-Engineering within the South and Eastern Mediterranean countries. The project is coordinated by the University of Limoges.

⁶ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201005185420616>

⁷ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201005185420616>