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Using Quantitative Methods: The Case of the Arab world

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MOHAMED CHARFI, JUN 2 2016

The debate over qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches is one of the most important issues in the social sciences. Some scholars have maintained that a strict division between the two types of approaches should be upheld, whereas others have identified ways to combine them. Regardless of the **outcomes of this debate** and the various positions maintained within it, the existence of qualitative, quantitative, and so-called mixed methods has led to significant progress in the social sciences. However, the voices of scholars from some parts of the world, such as Arab countries, have been absent from the debate. This is partly due to a lack of training in social science research methodologies among political scientists and international relations scholars.

I had the opportunity to study at two universities in Morocco (Rabat and Casablanca) before leaving for Europe to study at the University of Geneva in Switzerland and shortly at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. Between universities in Europe and those in Morocco, the most striking difference I noted concerned the importance given to research methods, especially quantitative and so-called mixed methods.

Moroccan political science and international relations programmes offer few courses on methods. Moreover, the methodology courses that do exist are integrated with other main courses and relate mainly to qualitative methods and general research design. This is also the case in most of the universities in Arab countries.

In Europe, most universities offer a set of methodology courses at either the bachelor's, master's or PhD level. For example, the **University of Geneva** master's programme includes five courses on subjects such as sample surveys, comparative methods, and advanced quantitative methods. The PhD programme offers several methodological training modules, such as regression analysis, network analysis, and textual analysis.

In addition, University of Geneva students have the opportunity to take advanced courses on methods in summer programmes such as the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection (Essex, United Kingdom) and the ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques (Ljubljana, Slovenia). They are also presented with funding opportunities to support their participation in such programmes.

The ECPR's Methods and Techniques programme instructs students in up-to-date methods and offers training across the entire range of methodologies (and across different paradigms and approaches). Such methodologies are particularly relevant for research questions in political science and neighbouring disciplines, as well as for dealing with all stages of a project and catering to the needs of research sets at both the macro and micro levels. These summer institutes cover quantitative and qualitative designs as well as both positivist and more interpretative perspectives.

In 2007, I attended two sessions at the **Essex Summer School**. It was a very interesting experience—one that students in the Arab world miss. Beyond the courses, the summer programmes enable interactive discussions between professors and students who want to improve their approach to research. In the Arab world, as noted above, courses on methods are lacking. It is essential to redesign political science and international relations programmes in the Arab world. This will give students both up-to-date tools and an expanded set of alternatives for

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research design, and it will have a positive impact on the quality of social science research.

To remedy this gap between European universities and those in the Arab world, three measures seem essential:

1. Implement training for doctoral students: universities may initially attract qualified professors from abroad to teach advanced methods for doctoral students.
2. Allow students to attend specialised summer schools to acquire advanced methods and use them in their research. This can be facilitated through easier visa arrangements and the creation of specific grants programmes.
3. Consider the creation of an exchange programme for students and teachers that will allow universities in the Arab world to benefit from the European experience in the field.

About the author:

Mohamed Charfi holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Geneva (Switzerland) (2010) and a Master in European studies from the European institute of the University of Geneva. He is an Associate Expert at the think tank Africa21 (Geneva) and European Affairs Researcher at the Saudi Mission to the European Union (Brussels). Previously, he worked as a research assistant at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, and Translator at the International Committee of the Red Cross. His research expertise include comparative politics and European Union foreign policy, with special focus on the Middle East and North Africa.