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# Jordanian Views of Education Outside the Formal System

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Amman, Jordan; credit David Bjorgen



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## Overview

Jordanians are generally pleased with the formal educational system and the government's efforts to improve it. Moreover, those from different backgrounds including men and women, wealthier and poorer, and those living in urban and rural areas, all hold positive views of the education system. Nevertheless, despite recent progress, many are still concerned about a lack of opportunity to provide children in the Kingdom with a high quality education. This gap highlights a new opportunity in Jordan: as the formal system continues to develop to meet the changing needs of Jordan's youth, non-traditional programs could be used to address specific needs in the short-term. The opportunity is especially significant for programs that seek to improve skills in critical thinking and emotional intelligence, which most Jordanians believe are key skills for their country's children to develop.

Given the significant barriers to participation facing Jordanians, there are several important factors that any education program outside the formal system should seek to alleviate. The primary issue is cost. This is especially true for poorer Jordanians who are more likely to cite affordability is a major obstacle to participation. Other key barriers include transportation and lack of physical access. Additionally, Jordanians have a clear preference for receiving formal recognition for their participation in such a program, so an educational program outside the formal system should provide a form of recognition or certificate of completion. Given that many Jordanians rate the government's performance on creating employment opportunities poorly, building capacity for new educational opportunities could yield benefits for the country's youth. Notably, the added marketability of degrees or certificates from such programs would likely hold strong appeal to those Jordanians who are worried about finding employment.

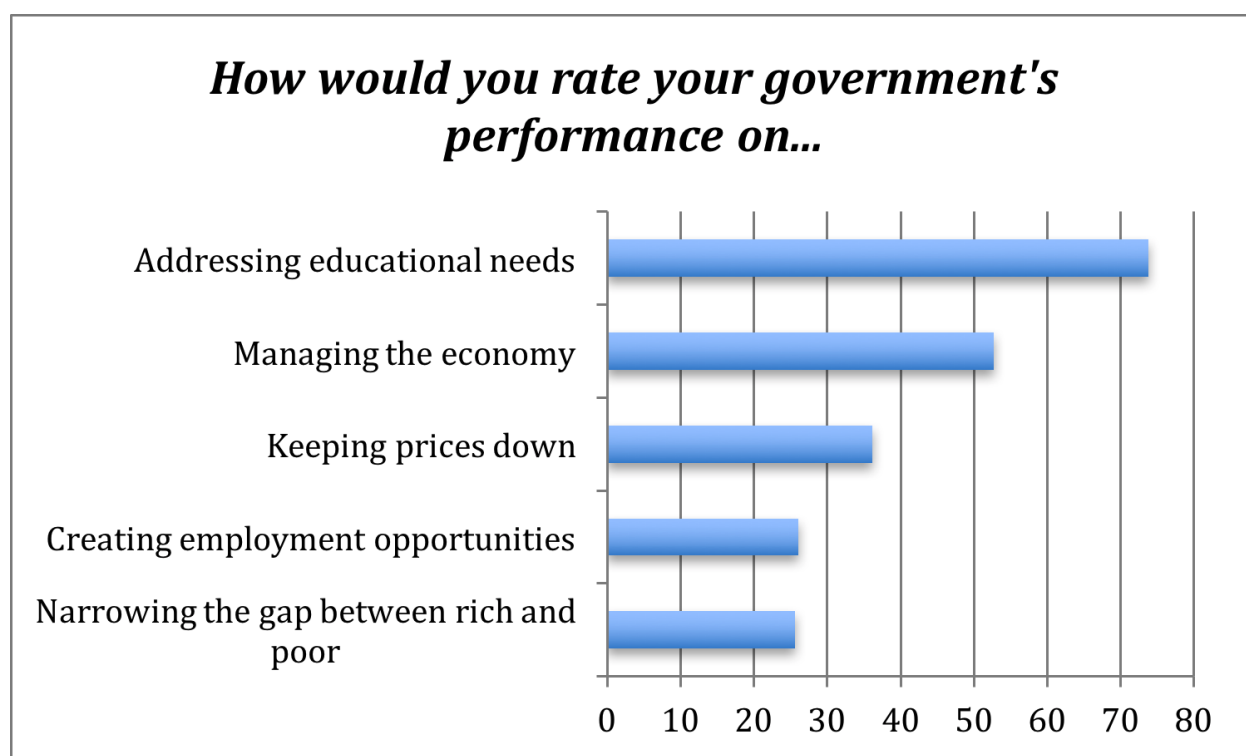
With regards to the type of education, the Arab Barometer survey finds that Jordanians are interested in programs that could increase their skills in critical thinking and emotional intelligence.<sup>1</sup> For example, there is a preference for programs that stresses critical thinking over rote memorization and most Jordanians believe it is more important for students to learn how to think through a problem than to necessarily reach the correct answer. However, the results reveal that not all Jordanians are equally likely to hold these views. Generally, women show a stronger preference for courses teaching emotional intelligence, social skills and understanding the perspectives of others, while men are somewhat more likely to favor more traditional approaches to education.

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<sup>1</sup> Arab Barometer data. 2016. "Jordan. Wave 4." Available at <http://www.arabbarometer.org>.

## Views on the Government and Education System

By and large, Jordanians hold favorable attitudes towards the government and the educational system. For example, roughly three-quarters say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the formal education system (71 percent). Jordanians also rate the government's efforts to address educational needs positively. Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) say the government is doing a good or very good job improving the quality of education. By comparison, roughly half of Jordanians (53 percent) say the same about its efforts to improve the economy. At the same time, just 36 percent are satisfied with the government's performance on reducing inflation. Thus, overall and in relative terms, Jordanians are strongly supportive of the government's overall work on addressing the educational needs of the country.



Nevertheless, more work remains to be done. Despite a general satisfaction with the educational system and the government's efforts in this area, a clear majority of Jordanians (61 percent) say they are either very much or somewhat worried about the inability to provide children a good education in the country. Notably, Jordanians of all backgrounds share this concern. For example, those whose family income is in the upper half of all Jordanians are as worried about the inability to give children a good education as those in

the lower half (62 percent vs. 61 percent). While there is also no difference between Jordanians who live in urban or rural areas (61 percent, each), there are slight differences between men and women (58 percent vs. 64 percent) and based on level of education. Specifically, Jordanians with a secondary education are somewhat more likely to be concerned about the ability to give children a good education (64 percent), than those who are illiterate (55 percent) or have only an elementary education (56 percent).

## Views Towards Education Outside the Formal System

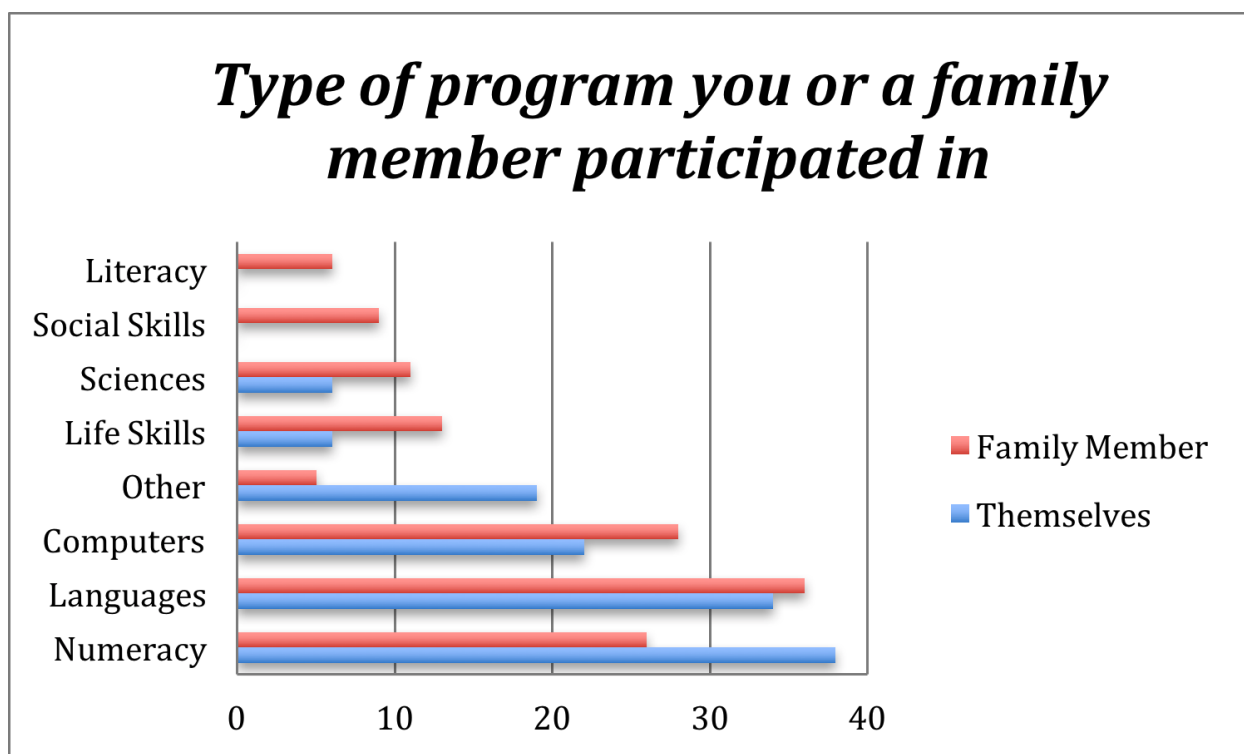
More than one in 10 Jordanians said either they themselves or a youth in their family has participated in an educational program that took place outside of the government education system (14 percent). Private institutions organized roughly 80 percent of these programs. It is important to note that participation is not equal across all groups. Jordanians in the lower half of the income bracket are less likely to have participated in educational programs outside the formal system. Among the Jordanians who make less than JD450 per month, 12 percent have participated in educational programs outside the formal system. In contrast, among the Jordanians who make more than JD450 per month, 20 percent have participated in youth educational programs.

However, beyond income and education level, there are no other clear demographic differences. For example, there are no differences based on levels of personal religiosity in terms of who participates in education programs outside the formal system. Differentiated by education level we see that respondents who have higher levels of education are more likely to have participated in an educational program outside the formal system or to have a family member who did so. Jordanians with at least a secondary education are more likely to report that either they themselves or a member of their family had participated in such a program. While 17 percent of those with a secondary education or higher say that either they or a family member has participated in a program, only 7 percent of illiterate and elementary educated Jordanians said the same.

Overall, Jordanians participate in a variety of educational programs outside the formal system. The most common programs for respondents who participated themselves include those focused on math (38 percent), followed by languages (34 percent) and computers (22 percent). Among those who had family members participate the most common types of programs were the same, though popularity differed with 36 percent citing programs focused on languages, followed by computers at 28 percent and math at 26 percent. Whether differing rates of participation in these programs is due simply to availability or personal preferences is unclear. Meanwhile, a smaller percentage of Jordanians participate themselves in programs that target other subjects, including, for example, life skills and sciences (6 percent each). We see higher levels of participation for these types of programs among family members who have participated with 13 percent citing attendance in

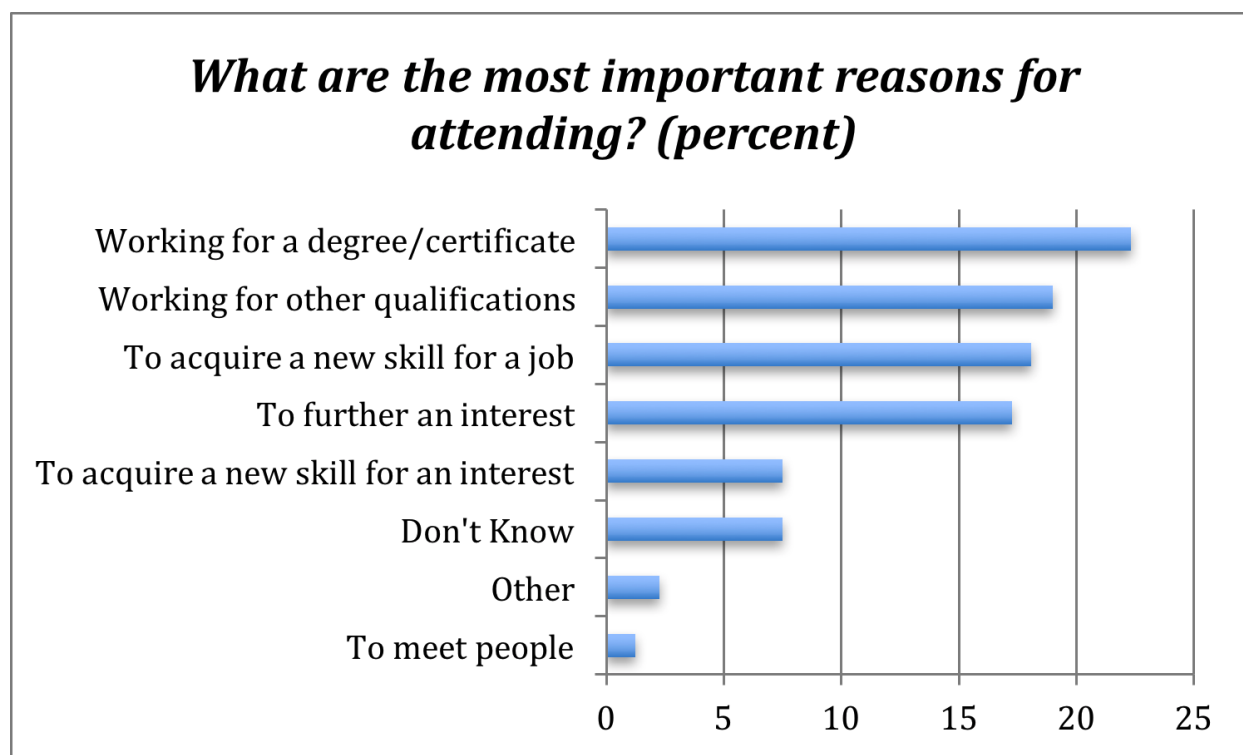


programs focusing on life skills and 11 percent for sciences. The lowest level of participation was seen in programs that teach literacy and social skills.

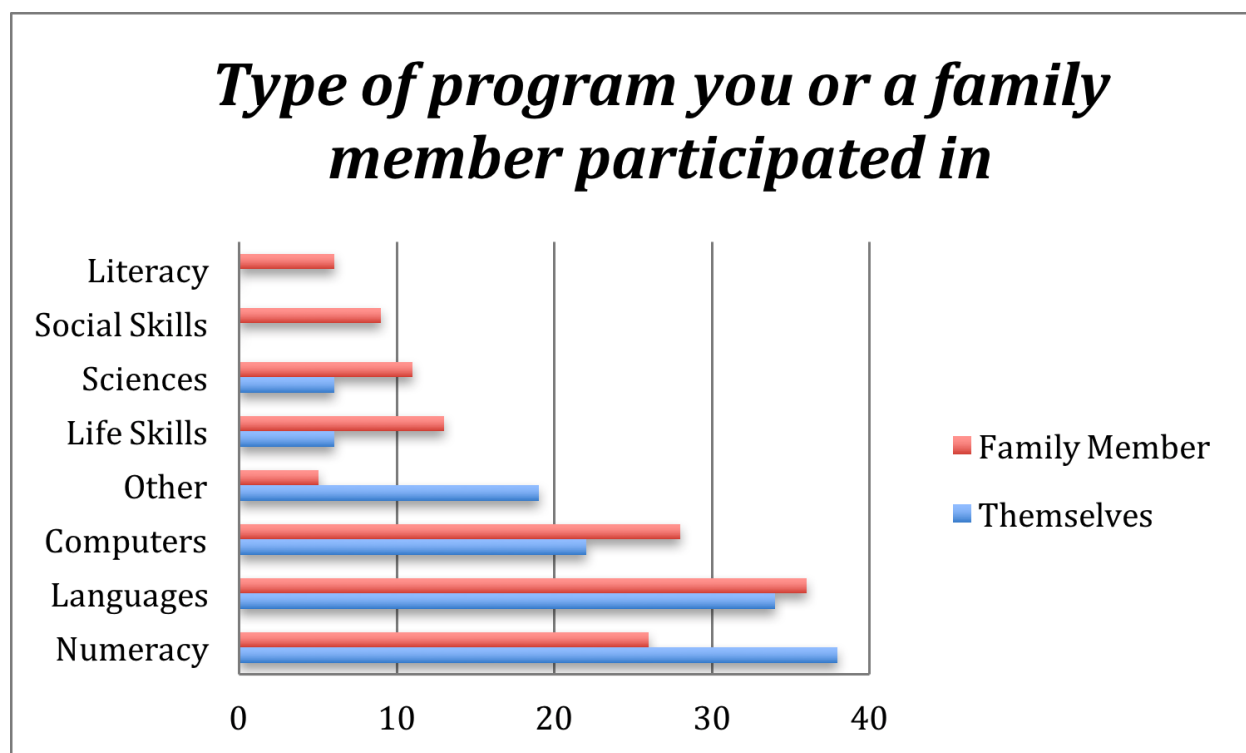


When asked what are the most important skills that they hope to gain out of participation in a program outside the formal educational system, the most common responses relate to career advancement. For example, 18 percent cite gaining new skills for a job as the most important reason, while 22 percent say achieving formal recognition such as a degree or certificate is the most important factor. Meanwhile, 19 percent say it is working for other qualifications. A smaller percentage of Jordanians say it would be for furthering a personal interest (17 percent) or to acquire a new skill for a personal interest (8 percent), becoming a better person (4 percent) or to meet new people (1 percent).

The results for the second most important reason are somewhat different with achieving formal recognition such as a degree (14 percent) falling behind acquisition of a new skill (21 percent), working for other qualifications (17 percent) or furthering an interest (17 percent). Nearly twice as many Jordanians cite personal growth as the second most important reason, as opposed to most important reason, for attending programs outside the formal system (9 percent).



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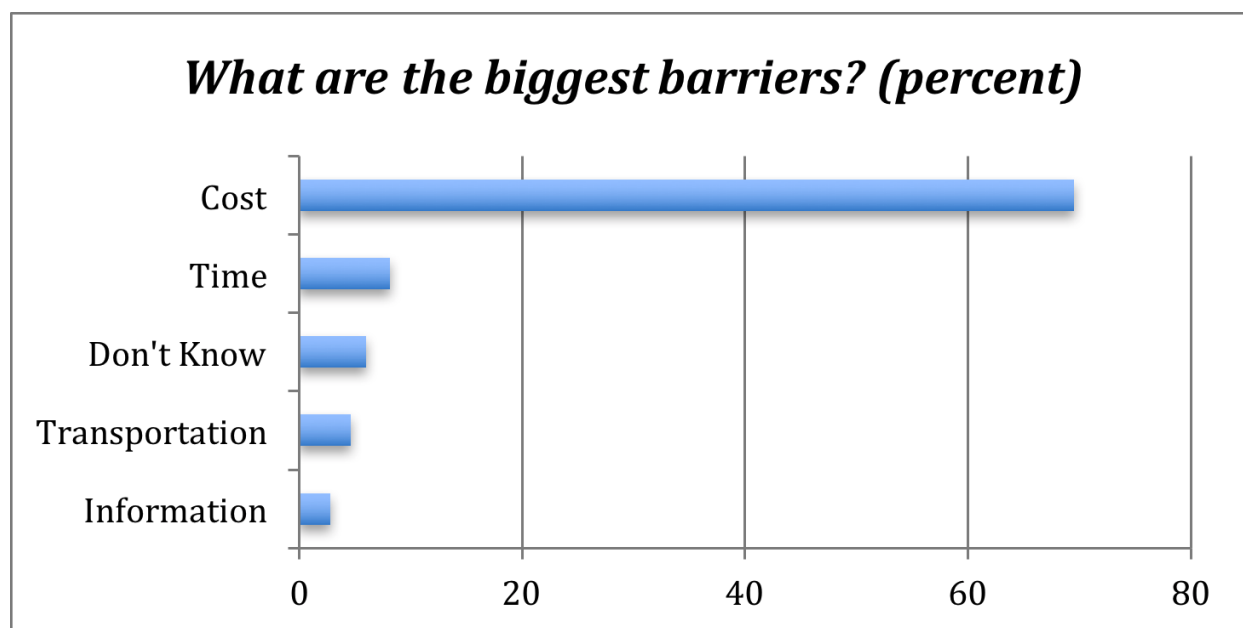


## Barriers to Attending Education Programs Outside the Formal System

With roughly eighty percent of educational programs outside the formal system organized by private institutions, it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters of Jordanians said that cost was the biggest barrier to attending a program outside the formal education system (70 percent). Beyond cost, the most common barriers Jordanians cite are lack of time and transportation (8 percent and 5 percent, respectively). When asked about the second biggest barriers to participation, Jordanians cite lack of time (19 percent), transportation (18 percent), lack of information and cost (10 percent, each) and family disapproval (9 percent).

More detailed analysis reveals that while cost may be a somewhat greater concern for poorer Jordanians, those from wealthier backgrounds also worry about this issue a great deal. Two-thirds of Jordanians in households earning more than JD450 cite cost as a major barrier to participation (66 percent), compared with a little over seven-in-ten of those in households that earn less each month (72 percent). Educational programs outside the formal system prove to be expensive both for lower-income and higher-income Jordanians.





In addition to more concrete barriers to participation, certain Jordanians may face social barriers. Although 82 percent of citizens disagree or strongly disagree that university education is more important for men than it is for women, almost half of Jordanians do not think it is acceptable for male and female university students to attend classes together (45 percent). It is difficult to determine the relevance of the latter belief to educational programs outside the formal system that target younger students; specifically those who are of elementary school age. A cultural preference to separate the sexes at a university level does not necessarily reflect the same belief for younger students who have not yet reached adulthood. However, given that boys and girls do not normally attend classes together, it is likely that some Jordanians would not want to send their children to programs that include both boys and girls in the same classroom.

## **Type and Limitations of Education Outside the Formal System**

When asked questions pertaining to the kind of education system they would like to see in the country, Jordanians are divided on whether they prefer an education system emphasizing scientific skills or one stressing emotional skills. Overall, 49 percent of Jordanians prefer the former, and 48 percent prefer the latter. However, when asked about emotional intelligence in a different form, the results strongly suggest this skill is valued. Respondents were given a choice between an educational system that places primary importance on academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion to one that places primary importance on learning social skills such as understanding the perspectives of others. Overall, 61 percent of Jordanians said they agree with the latter as opposed to 35

		<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Total</b>
Ü	GhUHYa Ybh% The education system should focus primarily on developing the scientific skills of pupils and students	27.8%	21.2%	49%
	GhUHYa Ybh&. Just as there are courses to teach scientific skills there must be courses to teach students how to recognize and express their own emotions and respond to others' emotions	28.3%	19.2%	47.5%
Ý	GhUHYa Ybh% 'Giving the correct answer to a question remains the most important goal for pupils and students	10.5%	11.7%	22.2%
	GhUHYa Ybh&. 'It is not important for pupils and students to always reach the correct answer. What is most important is that they learn to think about how to answer the question	44.8%	30%	74.8%
Þ	GhUHYa Ybh% 'A good education system is one that encourages the student to accept the answer offered by the teacher because it is the best answer, there is no need for alternatives.	10.8%	15.5%	26.3%
	GhUHYa Ybh&. 'A good education system is one that encourages students to think for themselves even when it	44.4%	26%	70.4%

	goes against what the teacher is saying.			
β	GhUHYa Ybh% Examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what has been taught in class are the best test of learning.	7.7%	12.1%	19.8%
	GhUHYa Ybh&. Examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have made their own sense of what has been taught in class are the best test of learning.	40.8%	36%	76.8%
à	GhUHYa Ybh% The education system should place primary importance on academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion.	15.9%	18.6%	34.5%
	GhUHYa Ybh&. The education system should place primary importance on learning social skills such as the ability to understand the perspectives and feelings of others.	35.4%	25.8%	61.2%

percent agreeing with the former. Overall, Jordanians are divided about the importance of emotional skills as opposed to scientific skills. Yet, when compared to academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion, Jordanians overwhelmingly emphasize learning social skills.

Turning to the issue of critical thinking, the results show that Jordanians believe these skills should be strongly emphasized in an educational system. For example, respondents were asked if it is more important for an educational system to stress giving the correct answer as the most important goal or if teachers should focus on teaching students how to think about answer the question. Jordanians place a clear emphasis on learning how to solve the problem (75 percent) over getting the correct answer (22 percent). Additionally, only 26

percent of Jordanians want an education system that encourages students to simply accept the answer the teacher provides, whereas 70 percent think a good education system is one that encourages students to think for themselves, even when it goes against what the teacher is saying. Finally, most Jordanians agree (77 percent) that examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have made their own sense of what has been taught in class are better tests of learning than those that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what has been taught in class (20 percent).

Though Jordanians largely prefer an education system that emphasizes critical and analytical thinking to rote memorization, some subtle demographic differences exist. When asked what kind of education system they envision for the country, Jordanians are somewhat divided along gender lines. In terms of emotional literacy, women are somewhat more likely to prefer an educational system that has courses to teach students how to recognize and express their own emotions (53 percent) while men slightly prefer one that focuses primarily on developing the scientific skills of pupils (52 percent). Further, slightly more women (63 percent) than men (59 percent) say they believe the education system should place primary importance on learning social skills, such as understanding the perspectives of others, over academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion.

When examining views on critical thinking in education, we again see that women value this skill somewhat more than men. While 72 percent of men say that it is more important that students learn to think about how to answer a question, women are slightly more likely to say the same (77 percent). Similarly, women are slightly more likely to prefer an educational system that encourage students to think for themselves even when it goes against what the teacher is saying as opposed to simply accepting the answer offered by the teacher (72 percent of women vs. 69 percent of men). Finally, with regards to examinations, 71 percent of men compared with 82 percent of women prefer tests that allow students to demonstrate how well they have made their own sense of what has been taught in class as opposed to ones that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what they have been taught. However, the contrast is not stark: more women than men hold the view that an education system emphasizing critical and analytical thinking as well as emotional intelligence is best, given that the alternative is one which stresses rote memorization.

Traditionally, education in the Arab world has focused more on rote learning techniques than promoting critical thinking or developing emotional intelligence.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that most Jordanians, of all ages and backgrounds, are supportive of a shift toward strategies designed to teach children to think critically and to develop their emotional skills.

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<sup>2</sup> Eid Mohamed, Hannah R. Gerber, and Slimane Aboulkacem, *Education and the Arab Spring: Resistance, Reform, and Democracy* (Sense Publishers, 2016).

## Conclusion

Although Jordanians are generally satisfied not only with the existing educational system but also with the steps the government is taking to improve it further, a significant percentage still participate in educational programs outside the formal system. It appears that Jordanians turn to such programs to further enhance what they perceive to be an already solid educational framework in the country. Both those who directly participate in these programs and those who have never participated review youth programs outside the formal system positively. The most common reason Jordanians cite for participating in these programs is to gain a new skill or to achieve some sort of formal recognition or a certificate. Clearly, marketability in the job market is important, and we also see that Jordanians emphasize analytical skills. While there are nuanced demographic differences in terms of views on education, generally speaking, Jordanians are open to programs outside the formal education system that emphasize critical thinking and emotional literacy. Given that cost is by far the biggest barrier to participation; a key to expanding access to such programs relies on addressing the affordability of such programs. If programs are affordable and are marketed as helping learners develop practical skills that would assist in finding employment, then they are likely to meet the needs of ordinary citizens.