

**A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL AND FOREIGN  
AREA NEEDS:**

**Changes in the Middle East Studies Association Membership from 1990 to 2002**

Anne H. Betteridge

In 1990 the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) joined with other National Council of Area Studies Associations (NCASA) to produce *Prospects for Faculty in Area Studies*, a study of the associations, their memberships, and prospects for the future of faculty in their fields. The study predicted that senior faculty members were likely to retire in large numbers during the 1990s and that their positions would not necessarily be replaced. MESA is the first NCASA organization to compare recent information to the earlier data; we hope to publish a cross-regional comparison of data from all NCASA member groups in the near future.

In the 1991 study the prospect of looming retirements was a particular concern for Middle East studies, where relatively large percentage of senior faculty members were concentrated in the higher academic ranks. Also worrisome for Middle East studies were the fields of economics, sociology, and language-related subjects—all on a list of potentially endangered Middle East studies fields. These fields were singled out as in need of special attention and support to assure the continued existence of qualified faculty members and other professionals well versed in those subjects.

MESA analyzed membership figures again in 2001 and has begun to do so for 2002 data. To the extent that the membership represents scholars in the field<sup>1</sup>, the update of MESA's earlier study permits tracking a decade's changes in the population of Middle East studies scholars and the field of Middle East studies. Although analysis of data about the MESA membership does not constitute an exhaustive study of Middle East

studies scholars, it does raise important concerns and questions for further study.<sup>2</sup> The data suggest that concerns expressed in the 1991 study were justified and have not been addressed. If anything, troubling trends have become more pronounced. What has changed?

### **Changes in the Membership since 1990**

MESA's membership has grown slowly since 1990, with a relatively constant number of members in recent years. In spring 1991 MESA reported a membership of 2375; the membership in fall 2002 was 2572. As in 1990, the overwhelming majority (92%) of MESA's 2002 members were involved in academic pursuits as faculty members, researchers, and students. Students continued to constitute some 20% of the membership. The number of MESA's members resident abroad has increased steadily. In 1994 16 % of the membership resided outside North America; 20% of MESA members did so in 2002.

### **Gender**

The 1991 study showed the proportion of female students relative to male students to be higher than the ratio of female to male full members of MESA; the proportion of female members in MESA has continued to increase since that time. In 1990, 28.8% of MESA full (largely faculty) members were female; in 2001 33.9% of full members were women. The proportions of female student members also increased, from 48% of all student members in 1990 to 54.9% in 2001. Women made up 37.7% of assistant professors in 1990; in 2002 46.1% of MESA member assistant professors were

---

<sup>1</sup> The NCASA study estimated that some 60% of scholars involved in the study of the contemporary Middle East belonged to MESA (NCASA, *Prospects for Faculty in Area Studies*, 1991: 60).

<sup>2</sup> The Social Science Research Council is supporting studies of Middle East studies infrastructure in several countries, including the U.S. Results of the study will provide rich data for understanding the current situation of Middle East studies and its institutional organization internationally.

women. If the proportion of female students continues to increase, graduate, and move up the professorial ladder, the percentage of women in each rank will continue to grow.

### **Subject/Discipline Specializations**

Comparison of 1990 and 2001 data indicates some shifts in MESA member subject and disciplinary specializations. The most popular disciplines for MESA members have always been history and political science. This remains the case, although by smaller percentages. Two fields in particular have experienced an increase in the number of MESA members who study on them: the arts and especially religious studies. Both faculty and student interest in these fields have experienced an upsurge; in 1990 4.1 % of faculty members declared interest in religious studies fields; in 2002 10.7% did so. Given that Islamic studies research topics often transcend conventional regional boundaries, this is a notable change for Middle East studies. The greater proportion of MESA full, and especially student, members who list specialized fields that appear under Other<sup>3</sup> in Table 5 reflects the ever wider range of interests within Middle East scholarship.

Economics, sociology, and language-related fields were highlighted as particular areas of concern in the 1991 NCASA study. These fields continue to suffer decreases in the proportion of MESA members who study them. This is particularly the case regarding student members, who represent the future of these fields in Middle East studies. Like the situation in political science, it may be that priorities in the disciplines of economics and sociology do not encourage students to pursue area studies research topics.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Other' includes a large number of subject areas, education, geography, law, Middle East/Near East studies, and women's studies prominent among them.

The proportion of MESA members specializing in the field of language and literature has declined noticeably, with a change in student specialization in literature from 9.3% in 1990, 6.8% in 2001. In the combined areas of language/linguistics, student interest fell from 4.7% in 1990 to 1.6% in 2002. This fact does not indicate that fewer students are studying Middle Eastern languages, an essential component for preparation in all Middle East studies fields. It does, however, sound an alarm concerning the number of people being trained to teach the languages so essential to area studies fields, and to develop new pedagogical methods.

### **Retirements and Age Profile**

For comparison with 1990 figures, MESA produced an occupational profile of the membership. Most noteworthy are increases in the percentage of members in the categories Professor Emeritus/a, up 2.4%, and the 3.3% increase in the percentage of retired members. The 1991 study noted a concern that large numbers of Middle East studies faculty members would retire in the near future, and that either sufficient numbers of students would not be trained to replace them and/or that the positions would not be replaced when the faculty members retired. MESA membership data appear to substantiate the 1991 NCASA study's concern about impending faculty member retirements, many of which have occurred.

Data on the age of MESA full members show that a larger proportion of the MESA membership is concentrated in the higher age brackets in 2002 than was the case in 1990. MESA prepared a table listing percentages of MESA faculty members in age groups under 40, from 40-49 years, and over 49; the table paints a similar picture to that drawn by the occupational profile data, and shows MESA members moving into the higher age brackets. In 1990, 41.9% of MESA full members were over 49 years of age.

In 2002 the percentage of MESA full members over 49 was a far higher 58.1%. The percentage under 49 decreased accordingly (by 16.2%). The percentages are compared to figures in Bowen and Sosa's 1989 publication, in which they reviewed the age profile of national humanities and social sciences faculty. In 1990 and to an even greater extent in 2002, MESA's members are older than the 1989 national figures, which Bowen and Sosa then regarded as troubling.<sup>5</sup>

Full professors in 2002 (34.5%) make up a smaller proportion of MESA members than in 1990; it appears that some in that rank in 1990 (39.4%) have not been replaced by new hires or by promotions of faculty in junior ranks. MESA data, with a lower percentage of assistant professors in 2002 (24.9%) than in 1990 (26.7%), suggest that new hires are not occurring in sufficient numbers to assure replacement. The proportion of associate professors remained constant.

Recent events may be addressing some concerns about the growing number of MESA full member retirements. The last year has seen creation of a number of new initiatives to fund research in Middle East studies fields. Some additional financial support is also available to Middle East studies students, and some new positions are being created. We don't know how many are being lost. Given the need to make up for losses in the field, to respond to the need for experts, and to address shortages in endangered fields, the amount of new funding is far from lavish. This is particularly the case under the current budgetary constraints that prevail in institutions of higher education, especially in most state-funded universities.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bowen, William G. and Julie Ann Sosa. *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts & Sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1989).