

The Bologna Process and Higher Education Reform in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean: the Case of Israel, Egypt and Lebanon

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Research generally highlights three factors that led 29 European countries to embark on the Bologna Process in 1999 with the aim of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. These were perceived global pressures on higher education systems in Europe (Charlier & Croché 2008; Hartmann 2008); perceived deficits of national higher education systems (Pechar & Pellert 2004; Charlier & Croché 2008); and tensions between national governments and European interests regarding the competence for policy development in higher education (Tomusk 2004; Corbett 2006; Pechar 2007; Charlier & Croché 2008).

The 'External Dimension' – Cooperation or Competition?

Particularly the first factor has received increasing importance in recent years through the development of the so-called 'external dimension' of the Bologna Process (Zgaga 2006; Vögtle 2010). This was linked to perceived global pressures brought about by declining numbers of foreign students choosing to study in Europe compared to Europeans studying in the US. Particularly the decrease in enrolments of foreign students from regions such as Asia, Latin America as well as Eastern Europe, which were considered by various European countries to be of geopolitically strategic importance, raised concerns (Charlier & Croché 2008). In view

of that, European cooperation in higher education through the Bologna Process was considered an effective strategy to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of higher education systems in Europe. In particular, the size of the European Higher Education Area and European labour market as well as the connection between the two were considered as determining factors for its attractiveness for skilled individuals and its competitiveness with other world regions (Hartmann 2008). Multilateral cooperation appeared to be, therefore, more effective than individual strategies undertaken by each country.

Despite the joint declarations for multilateral cooperation, various countries of the EHEA stepped up their individual promotion activities in the hope of maximising their own national benefits from this cooperation vis-à-vis their cooperating partners (Charlier & Croché 2008). Others appear to have seen it as an opportunity for a rapprochement with the European Union, particularly in view of its enlargement in 2004, for which negotiations had commenced in 1995 (Tomusk 2004).

These diverging motives for engaging in the Bologna Process stress the need to analyse more closely the relationship of the EHEA with countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean. Is the engagement of countries from the eastern and southern Mediterranean in seminars and conferences linked to the Bologna Process (Zgaga 2006: 39-45) evidence of their intention to seek rapprochement with Europe, much in the same way as Tomusk (2004) suggested for the 'new' EU Member States in the early stages of the Bologna Process? Or is it evidence of centre-periphery dependencies as suggested by the World Systems Analysis advanced by Wallerstein (1998; 1990); Amin (1976-77) and Amin & Luckin (1996), namely

as “a disguised transfer of value from the periphery to the centre” (Amin 1976-77: 47) by attracting skilled individuals from South to North, “since the periphery has borne the cost of training this labour force.” (Amin 1976-77: 47) Or is it evidence of a combination of both?

Quality Assurance, Comparability and Compatibility and their Link to Mobility

In the Bologna Process the discourse on quality assurance has gained importance in bringing about a systemic change in higher education, alongside structural reforms to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions to external expectations at national level and increase comparability, compatibility and mutual trust between national quality assurance systems.

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Facilitating the comparability of and mutual trust in national quality assurance systems is of particular importance from an international perspective, since it eases the recognition of qualifications and study periods between one country and another. This in turn supports the mobility of students and graduates within and towards the EHEA – a central element of the ‘external dimension’ of the Bologna Process as suggested above. Apart from that, it projects the quality of higher education in the EHEA internationally – thus, aiming to create a pull-factor towards the EHEA. However, facilitating student and graduate mobility is not uncontroversial in view of the difference in socio-economic development among the countries, resulting in some countries being more ‘attractive’ for the best talent than others. The effects of such push and pull factors are noticeable both within the EHEA (Kwiek 2004) and between countries from outside it towards the

EHEA (Shawa 2008). Therefore, embarking on higher education reforms that improve the recognition of qualifications of foreign graduates may further facilitate the mobility of the best talent towards the EHEA.

Besides that, quality assurance also seeks to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions to external expectations at national level. This is important in view of increasing cross-border provision of higher education and the need for regulation at national level that arises from such developments. Kwiek (2004) argues that such developments within and outside the EHEA may affect the spirit of ‘cooperation’ and ‘competition’ since: some countries are already global players in higher education; and some are already exporters of higher education to Central and Eastern Europe in various, but mostly highly lucrative, disciplines. It may be hard to combine the ‘competitive’ spirit presented to the non-European global competitors with the ‘solidarity’ spirit presented at the same time to the (central) European partners. Can we imagine sheer cooperation and solidarity as driving motives in contacts with the countries of the region on the part of institutions from the countries with strong market traditions and a good share in the global education market (like for example, the UK or the Netherlands)? (Kwiek 2004: 770).

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If countries forming part of the EHEA voice such concerns regarding the consequences of implementing the higher education reforms arising from the Bologna Process, who may influence its discourse? And, why should other countries and regions of the world be interested in implementing such reforms and seeking comparability and compatibility with higher education systems in the EHEA?

Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Mediterranean

Indeed similarities in reforms on quality assurance between countries of the EHEA and the eastern and southern Mediterranean are noticeable. However, it is questionable to what extent these reforms are the result of cooperation with the EHEA or a response to it. Instead, reforms may have been influenced by the aim of strengthening ties with the US or with former colonial economic powers rather than the EHEA per se.

The Example of Israel

Research on the process of quality assurance in Israel suggests a focus on quality assurance by subject area across higher education institutions, in contrast to the focus on external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the EHEA. Bearing in mind the strong influence of research intensive universities in the governance structures of the Council for Higher Education, which is responsible for quality assurance of higher education in Israel (Bernstein 2002; Lieven & Graeme 2006; Geva-May 2001) this comparative approach to quality assurance across a diverse set of higher education institutions appears to serve particularly their interests in sustaining the stratification of Israel's higher education system (Bernstein 2002; Davidovitch & Iram 2009; Davidovitch & Soen 2010).

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Another notable difference in the discourse on quality in higher education in Israel is the progressive de-nationalisation of higher education. Quality assurance regulations in Israel stress that the members of the quality evaluation committees must be in the majority foreigners (CHE 2013), while the recommendations and guidelines issued by the Council for Higher Education in 2006 had no such requirement (CHE 2006). Indeed, only two out of

seven evaluations of academic disciplines, carried out during the academic year 2005/2006, were carried out by a majority of foreign evaluators. In comparison, out of 32 evaluations of academic disciplines carried out between the academic year 2005/2006 and 2011/2012 foreign evaluators made up the majority of the evaluation committees in 27 cases. This clearly indicates a major effort by the Council for Higher Education to seek foreign influences on Israel's higher education system. In view of that, it is interesting to note that in 28 out of 32 cases the majority of foreign experts were from the US. Indeed, in 17 out of 32 instances all foreign experts were from the US. Thus, Israel's higher education system appears to be more in line with higher education and research institutions in the United States, rather than with the EHEA.

The Example of Egypt

Developments on quality assurance in Egypt seem to mirror more closely the tiered structure of programme accreditation and external quality assurance of higher education institutions (Arab Republic of Egypt 2004; 2006; 2009). However, these developments appear influenced by external consultancy from the Quality Assurance Agency of the UK and conditions of funding from World Bank loans rather than by the policy discourse from the Bologna Process. Thus, they appear to be more aimed at strengthening economic ties with the former colonial power or between centre and periphery rather than being inspired by a policy dialogue with the EHEA.

Besides that, the final project report of the Arab Republic of Egypt (2009) on the higher education enhancement project, of which the development of the national quality assurance framework on higher education formed part, also noted the resistance of universities to the reforms pursued through this World Bank project. Nevertheless, it expressly stated its resolve to overcome this resistance by pursuing the reforms in a top-down fashion (Arab Republic of Egypt 2009: 41, 47). It appears, therefore, that such reference to funding conditionalities or the discourse on quality assurance, which seeks to increase the accountability of higher education institutions to external expectations, may have been used to strengthen control over higher education institutions.

The Example of Lebanon

In Lebanon, the Directorate General of Higher Education has been responsible for the licensing of new higher education institutions through exercising a simple process of auditing. Beyond this initial licensing by the Ministry, quality assurance was being ensured through institutional competitiveness and, for some selected universities, through foreign quality assurance agencies. However, the recent rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions locally calls for the establishment of a national QA agency. This need comes as a response to the growing regional competition where the weak quality of some higher education institutions affects the reputation of the whole national system (Towards the Lebanese Quality Assurance Agency - TLQAA Project, 2013). In addition to the national need (DGHE, 2007/2008), there is a growing international pressure to establish a national quality assurance agency as mentioned in the EU country strategy paper (ENP, 2007-2013) and the recommendations of the conference of Arab ministers of HE in Dubai 2007.

With the absence of a national regulative framework to regulate and monitor institutional quality, the individual institutions' endeavours to maintain their quality have been the sole quality assurance measures available. As the institutions have a high degree of autonomy and freedom, the higher education arena in Lebanon has traditionally been a very diverse one and much influenced by foreign forces where each institution follows the education system of the country it is affiliated to and gets evaluated by QA agencies from the corresponding country as well. In other words, French, American, Arab, and Canadian universities follow the European, American, Arab and Canadian system respectively.

In Lebanon, there is no specific mechanism for supporting the implementation of the Bologna Process apart from the Tempus Higher Education Reform Experts, who disseminate information on Bologna to both institutions and Ministries. (Tempus, 2012) In fact, it is through European funded Tempus projects and one AMIDEAST project that a Lebanese QA agency was initiated in the form of a draft law prepared and completed on 14/12/2010 and submitted to the government (MEHE, 2011). Political and sectarian interference, limited monetary resources and human expertise, in addition to the current re-

gional unrest, dramatically impede the ratification of such a law. In the meantime, another recent Tempus project, TLQAA, has been developing a Lebanese QA model by emulating the functioning of external QA through a pilot evaluation of several higher education institutions.

Just because similarities may be drawn between strategies for higher education reform in the EHEA and countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean this does not imply the existence of sound and reciprocal cooperation

In addition to the old French universities who initially adopted the Bologna reforms, an NQA inspired by European standards, can influence the only public university, the Lebanese University, which has around 40% of the total students' enrolments, as well as a number of the new universities, who have not opted for a foreign quality assurance agency. Furthermore, even though the Bologna process has no direct influence on the few old well-established universities that initially followed a non European system of education; those same universities have been involved in the TLQAA Tempus project and have agreed to perform the pilot evaluation. This means that the Bologna process has influenced the Lebanese higher education through its work on paving the way to establishing a national quality assurance agency based on EU funds and consultancy which ensures that the main Lebanese education ambience is in phase with the EHEA.

Conclusions

Overall these findings suggest that countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean pursue their own national interests for higher education reform and to this end may draw to different extents on the Bologna Process discourse as well as on funding and consultancy from individual countries within the EHEA. However, just because similarities may be

drawn between strategies for higher education reform in the EHEA and countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean this does not imply the existence of sound and reciprocal cooperation. A more comprehensive and sustained dialogue would be needed to ensure such cooperation. However, bearing in mind the present regional unrest, such dialogue may be difficult.

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