

Recent Trends & Developments in Jordanian Higher Education

The higher education sector in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has, especially since the mid 1990s, been going through significant shifts, changes and reforms – in many ways parallel to the shifts, changes and reforms which have been happening elsewhere in the globe, including Europe. Historically, the higher education sector in Jordan began to emerge in the 1950s with the creation of two-year teacher training colleges, and then in the early 1960s with the birth of the first four-year, comprehensive, public university – the University of Jordan. As of the 1970s, the number of public universities and public and private community colleges started to increase; and in 1990, the first private university was born. At present, Jordan (a small country of 6 million inhabitants) prides itself on having 10 full-fledged public universities (many comprehensive and some technical), 17 private universities, and more than 60 community colleges. The Ministry of Higher Education, the home for the Higher Education Council, was created in 1986, with the aim of regulating and coordinating the work of the growing sector. This numerical increase, made to accommodate a strong demand for higher education in the country and the region, has been complemented with a marked escalation in interest in quality. And this (the drive for quality) is the main reason behind the shifts and the reforms just referred to. Ten years ago an Accreditation Council was created, and an overall strategy for higher education was drawn five years ago. Two and a half years ago, the Accreditation Council, which was part of the Ministry of Higher Education, was transformed into an Accreditation Commission, whose mandate is to accredit both private and public universities, and to enhance the quality of their performance.

More recently, however, (in particular since the summer of 2009), the momentum of change has accelerated remarkably, with fundamental amendments in higher education laws resulting in a substantial restructuring of the sector. The restructuring – ratified by the Jordanian Parliament and then announced officially last September – manifested itself (among other things) in the following:

- a) The Higher Education Council – presided over by the Minister of Higher Education & Scientific Research and, for years, was comprised (essentially) of all public university presidents (for an open tenure) and a couple of private university presidents – was reshuffled, to include three presidents only, three representatives of academic institutions, four representatives of the private sector, and the head of the Accreditation Commission – for a three-year term, renewable one time. The idea is to have a council that is more objective and neutral, and more concerned with general policies, regulations and directions. In addition, having a significant number of private-sector representatives enhances the role and say of the private sector and bridges the gap which has existed for decades between public higher education institutions and the private sector.
- b) University autonomy has been significantly augmented, with each university having an independent board of trustees which, for the first time in the history of the sector, chooses the university president (who has always been appointed) through a selection committee, and ratifies the appointment of vice presidents and deans. The board – which includes both academics and representatives of civil society – also draws university strategies and plans, and is responsible for much of the thinking pertaining to the boosting of the university's finances and quality drives.
- c) The new changes have enabled the Accreditation Commission to be fully independent, with the aim of empowering it to fulfill its tasks objectively and forcefully. For the first time, public universities have become subject to accreditation, an activity which was previously exercised only on private universities. The Accreditation Commission

is also expected to focus on implementing the various quality assurance mechanisms and drives, for the benefit of the higher education sector.

- d) A new Research-Support Fund has been established, with the aim of making available the funds necessary for conducting original scientific research, and for making available reports and studies on the status quo and prospects of scientific research in Jordan.

Higher education in Jordan has always been strong, providing quality education not only to a growing number of Jordanians who are competing for places in undergraduate and graduate programs at universities, but also for many in the region. From the start, Jordanian higher education institutions attracted substantial numbers of students from many countries in the region, and smaller numbers from the rest of the globe. The intention at this point in time is to focus on all efforts which boost quality. Due to a strong demand on higher education (over-demand, one might say) quantity has affected quality somewhat negatively over the years. The main challenge now is to balance demand requirements with quality standards. Quality, however, cannot be addressed without benchmarking higher-education standards and criteria in Jordan in accordance with international standards, criteria, and best practices. For that reason Jordan is always eager to interact and connect with the Bologna Process.

In the days ahead, more attention will be paid to the matters of curricula, pedagogies, and methods of teaching and learning. Also, as e-learning and distance learning have become a reality, these two topics will also be receiving increased attention, with the aim of enhancing learning and advancing closer in the direction of life-long learning. The higher education sector is also focusing on creating centers of excellence and expertise in a number of vital spheres, especially those related to matters which concern the society and the region more immediately. Enhancement of scientific research will be a priority, as it has been given a marginal attention so far.

As the synopsis of the changes above illustrates, governance at higher education institutions in Jordan has received a lot of attention; but attention in the days ahead will be given to making the necessary funding for reform available. It is obvious that the sector suffers from shortage of the funds necessary to implement further reforms and development. The community colleges, whose function and performance have somewhat weakened over the years, will be receive increased attention and support.