

Ever Challenged Union: Exploring Ways Out of the Crises

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Exporting European quality structures in higher education –
normative attempts to secure the Southern neighbourhood?

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Abstract

European procedures of harmonisation in higher education and shared standards of quality are promoted worldwide as trademarks of excellence. The output-oriented approach represented by both the Bologna process and the EU's Higher Education Modernisation Agenda operates with economically sensible indicators which enhance competitiveness, hence its appeal.

The paper analyses the external dimension of European higher education processes relying on the spatial extension of the Europe of Knowledge and the sharing of good practice. The EU's involvement in the higher education reforms of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia has led to the introduction of some fundamental concepts and associated policy instruments of the European model (e.g., lifelong learning, competitiveness or networking) into their higher education infrastructure. By resorting to instruments of rationalisation, authoritative regimes of the past have been able to respond to labour market needs and to simultaneously keep their political influence over higher education institutions. However, incentives to continue modernisation in the "European way" are likely to change in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The democratization or the radicalization of the public spheres in these countries will necessarily involve the redefinition of the role of higher education institutions. The EU thus must reconsider its strictly market-based approach to norm projection in higher education cooperation projects in order to maintain its role of normative power in the region by advocating quality knowledge as a post-crisis stabilising factor.

Introduction

Education plays a role of growing importance in the modernisation agendas of countries in the MENA region. In the past decades, most of the Arab world has seen profound transformations in the area of education, partly as a consequence of global developments, and partly due to the countries' efforts to improve the performance of their education systems. Education is considered as a key factor for political, social and economic development (Cairo Declaration, 2007), and such a conceptualization urges countries to live up to today's international standards and join the global competition, especially in the field of higher education. The Arab states have recognized the need to reform higher education in order to fulfil social and labor market needs and the transformation marks the beginning of the new era: more than just tools of political legitimization and nation-building (Buckner, 2011:21), higher education institutions have emerged as drivers of the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society, indicating a shift towards a global paradigm of growth. Although the reforms opened the way for the internationalization of higher education institutions in the region, this trend has also brought about a number of new challenges. In the face of new adversities, governments consider the import or the adoption of local variations of different higher education models as potential remedies to the situation.

This paper focuses on the influential paradigm of a certain European model of higher education, inspired by both the EU's competitiveness strategy (the project of a knowledge society) and the Bologna process (and the creation of the European Higher Education Area). After highlighting some of the essential discursive and instrumental elements of the model, the essay explores the main trends in EU-sponsored higher education reform processes in three countries: *Egypt*, *Tunisia* and *Libya*. Finally, the essay will touch upon questions about the incentives which lead these countries to embrace the paradigm of a "knowledge society" promoted by the European Union; and propose a few points for further consideration in this respect.

The role of the “European model” of higher education in the MENA region

Higher education reforms in the MENA region follow quite divergent patterns. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a distinct pattern of genuinely European-inspired agendas (Buckner, 2011). This is partly due to their colonial past, but more recently, the growing emphasis on the external dimension of the European Higher Education Area (Holford, 2014) has prompted development organizations (namely World Bank and the OECD) to mainstream Bologna-inspired structures as international standards. Many countries in the MENA region have attempted to install a European-style system centred on quality assurance mechanisms. The aim of these reforms is not only to imitate a policy successfully implemented elsewhere, but rather to engage in fruitful dialogue with Europe by improving the compatibility of qualifications and encouraging mobility, not just between national systems in the region, but also in an interregional context. It is therefore apparent that countries of the MENA regions are receptive to the influence of Europe in the field of education and have clearly definable incentives to involve the European Union in the modernisation of their educational sector.

Although it is not easy to provide a comprehensive definition of what constitutes a “European model of higher education”, it is possible to discern some of its defining elements which are not only mainstreamed by the European-level discourse on higher education among EU member states, but are also frequently exported in the neighbourhood and strategic partner regions. The two pillars of this discourse are the European Union’s higher education policies which are associated with the competitiveness framework strategies (the Lisbon and the Europe 2020 Strategies) and the so-called Bologna process (extending beyond the EU), which aims at the creation of a European Higher Education Area, implying enhanced academic mobility and the mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications (EUA, n.d.)¹. The ideational core of these policies is that education is essentially a productive activity which benefits the economy and the society both on the individual and systemic level (Keeling, 2006:209). Knowledge and innovation are portrayed as essential factors to national and regional competitiveness. In this sense, higher education functions as an “industry” because it produces knowledge, a transferrable and tradable good. In order to reach an optimal level of production, mechanisms of quality assurance and accountability have to be put in place. The output of higher education should therefore be assessed based on shared standards of quality.

¹ Some key documents are: communications of the European Commission entitled *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge* (2003) and *Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems* (2011); and the Bologna declaration of 1999.

The output-oriented approach to higher education relies largely on what is “measurable” (Pasiás and Roussakis, 2012:128), and therefore it supports the elaboration of “rationalized”, economically “sensible” indicators. While the “instrumental logic of the marketization and commodification of education” (Stech, 2011:263) has helped to adjust higher education outputs to the needs of the global economy, it has yet failed to aggregate the complex social and political roles associated with universities into universally viable measures (Stech, 2011). In other words, the popularity and applicability of the “European model” across different social and political contexts is inherently constrained upon a narrow conceptualization of higher education as a factor of economic growth.

This paradigm has infiltrated external actions of the European Union, and led to the promotion of European higher education policies as trademarks of performativity and excellence (Keeling, 2006:211). In the framework of the EU-MENA partnership, institutionalized by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the goal is to explicitly link the modernisation of the higher education sector to economic development by enhancing the mobility and employability of students and researchers and facilitating their participation in exchange programs. The Cairo declaration on the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Area (2007) set the framework for cooperation by offering grounds for development of national systems based on internationally recognized standards of quality. The launch of a Common Knowledge and Innovation Space (CKIS) between the two regions in 2011² has further tied the partnership to the innovation agenda of the EU through the new European Neighbourhood Strategy.

The projects associated with the above cooperation frameworks and their predecessors, have transposed some fundamental concepts and associated policy instruments of the European model in the higher education infrastructure of the countries in question, such as lifelong learning, competitiveness or networking. However it must be noted, that many of these notions are not genuinely European inventions, but they are rather part of a global vocabulary. This is evidenced by the paradigm shift which has taken place in most of the Arab region, implying the redefinition of education as a form of both social and economic investment instead of being a purely social endeavor serving individual needs (Masri, 2009: 129). More recently, the Arab Spring has opened up new opportunities for higher education institutions to re-conceptualize their mission as key drivers of socio-economic change and to compete in the

² Declared in the communication entitled “A new response to a changing neighbourhood”.

global higher education market. The paper provides a few points for consideration when assessing these fundamental changes vis-à-vis the normative impact of the “European model”.

The following review of higher education developments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will concentrate on three reform elements framed under three flagship activities of the EU: *quality assurance, university modernisation and academic mobility*.

The culture of *quality assurance* is promoted in the MENA as a joint project of the EU and the World Bank, aiming at institutional capacity building to enable the mutual recognition of programs and the establishment of a regional qualification framework (ENQA, 2009). Quality assurance mechanisms build on the systematic comparison of institutional performance and require the establishment of public bodies which perform regular audits, as well as the collection of comparable data on academic activities. In Egypt and Libya, national quality assurance agencies exist since 2006, and in Tunisia a National Evaluation Committee was set up as early as 1993 (Jaramillo et al. 2011:76). In 2007, the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQHE) was established to provide a platform for cooperation for national accreditation and quality assurance agencies in the region. In these countries the adoption of a “quality assurance model” (Buckner, 2011) largely coincided with the introduction of Bologna-inspired three-cycle higher education structures which enables institutions to measure their educational outputs against European universities (such as the equivalencies of degrees) and to gain international recognition. MENA countries have increasingly participated in international cooperation in recent years; encompassing institution-specific external evaluations conducted by independent quality assurance agencies (e.g., in Tunisia) and comprehensive benchmarking exercises (such as the University Governance Screening Card³ supported by the World Bank Regional Program on Higher Education). There is a distinct tendency to recognize quality as the key to competitiveness and adopt European-style assurance strategies. However, it is not clear whether a certain “quality culture” has been successfully internalized in higher education institutions and public administration.

In the European Union, the problem of quality is intrinsically linked to the competitiveness of individuals, institutions, and the economy. The reigning discourse on the Europe of Knowledge (linked to the concept of “smart growth” encapsulated in the Europe 2020 programme) prompts nation states to reaffirm their control over the quality of their higher

³ The methods and reports of the Screening Card project are available at: <http://cmimarseille.org/highereducation/screeningCard.php> (Accessed on May 16, 2015)

education systems. The instruments devised for the support of national reforms promote the idea of “smart” regulation, which implies that instead of direct intervention the state facilitates the improvement of existing institutional capacities, thereby “enabling universities to modernise themselves” (EC 2006). In the MENA region however, the adoption of quality assurance tools and procedures seems to be detached from wider socio-political or regulatory reform agendas: public bodies entrusted with quality assurance and accreditation still operate under state control and they only have limited regulatory capacity (Wilkens, 2011) which could help to tackle systemic issues underlying the “quality problem” of education in the region, considered to be one of the trigger factors of the youth movements (Goujon, 2014).

The second element is *modernisation* and structural reform carried out by partnerships at the institutional level. This type of assistance has been widely supported by the *Tempus* programme in the last two decades (starting in 1990) in ENP countries. Under the latest Tempus programme (2007-2013) several comprehensive projects have been implemented in MENA countries in the areas of curriculum design, teacher training, institutional development and university management. These projects were implemented via consortia of higher education institutions from both Europe and the beneficiary country and advocated a bottom-up approach based on mutual learning and intercultural exchange (European Commission, 2012). Projects conducted under Tempus IV (launched in 2008) in the countries in question prominently focus on improving institutional capacities (via curriculum, management and infrastructural reforms) to create better synergies between higher education institutions and the labour market, especially in the innovation-intensive fields such as medicine or engineering. Currently similar projects are run as part of the Erasmus+ cooperation scheme and operate in forms of strategic partnerships, capacity-building partnerships, and so-called “knowledge alliances” which formalise interaction between the higher education and business sectors.

Reports on these EU-financed modernisation projects emphasise the need for reforms that align the output of institutions with the needs of the economy: producing workforce that are capable of “knowledge work” to supply the entrepreneurial society. The message is clear: the EU helps institutions to adjust to a globalised economy and to better integrate in the “EU family of higher education institutions” (EACEA, 2008). However, there is much less reference to the social capital that universities create in their own national contexts. Among the focus areas of the Tempus programme we find the title “Higher Education and Society”. A number of priorities listed under this title relate to the European ideal of a knowledge society:

partnership with enterprises, defining national qualification frameworks based on skills which are valued in the labour market; and the transposition of the concept of lifelong learning. This suggests not only that modernisation promoted by involves the redefinition of the value of tertiary education in terms of quantifiable objectives, but also that the European model of higher education is transferrable into different contexts as long as it follows an “instrumental logic of marketization” (Stech, 2011:263), i.e. resulting in a production of human capital. This objective underlying EU higher education programmes in the Southern Neighbourhood is not, in itself, illegitimate when it comes to mutually beneficial commercial, scientific and industrial cooperation between the two regions. However, framing the problem of higher education modernisation uniquely in this way may have an indirect impact on socio-political tensions which remain sustained by educational structures and attitudes that are heavily entrenched in the legacy of oppressive political systems. Another criticism that can be voiced against Tempus projects is that they only tackle the surface, since the transformative effects of mutual learning exercises are isolated (Goujon, 2010) and often absorbed by massive state-centric administrative inertia on the national level.

The last element is *mobility*, which is an important part of the EU’s efforts at increasing the attractiveness of its higher education institutions. Exchange programmes, such as *Erasmus Mundus* have been growing as a result of the internationalisation of the academic spheres of MENA countries. In 2015 two scholarship schemes are running which involve the short- to medium-term academic exchange of scholars between the two regions: the Al-Fihri⁴ and the Al Idrisi II⁵ partnership programmes, both of which target institutions in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. It has been shown that exchange programmes are highly beneficial to participants, the majority of which are young people, as it enriches their cultural perceptions and enhances their employability⁶. A number of issues are associated with mobility that may raise concerns related to the aftermath of the Arab Spring. First of all, global mobility rates in proportion to total student numbers are relatively low in North Africa compared to other countries in the region (e.g., Saudi Arabia or Lebanon), especially in Egypt and Libya (cf. Jaramillo et al. 2011). In contrast, participation in the European Erasmus Mundus programmes in these post-revolutionary societies has hit unprecedented highs: in Tunisia and Egypt the number of Master students studying in Europe in 2012 and 2013

⁴ <http://www.alfihri.eu> (Accessed on 3 May 2015)

⁵ <http://www.al-idrisi.eu> (Accessed on 3 May 2015)

⁶ The unemployment rate of students who took part in Erasmus Mundus programs is only 3% (Králiková and Rezk, 2010:60).

surpassed the numbers in the previous years (between 2004-2011) combined (EACEA, 2014). There is no accessible up-to-date data on the number of European students studying in MENA universities, but it can be easily fathomed that major obstacles, such as incompatibility of programmes, problems of recognition and security risks associated with an unstable political climate diminish the appeal of MENA institutions as exchange destinations. A potential alternative to strictly exchange-based programmes are joint programmes on common campuses, such as the EMUNI based in Slovenia, which offers Euro-Mediterranean Masters and PhDs.

The EU has a vested interest in educating talented students from these countries since it benefits both from booming economies in its neighbourhood and from the inflow of highly skilled migrants. Due to the disproportionate nature of the academic exchange (i.e. more people coming to the EU than *vica versa*) and the opportunities that may give students incentives to stay in host countries; there is a considerable risk of talent loss (Jaramillo et al., 2011:15-17) which is yet to be addressed by MENA governments. A positive side-effect of the popularity of exchange programmes as well as the harmonization of educational systems is the rapidly increasing intra-regional mobility (Jaramillo et al., 2011:5). Yet, critiques warn that growth in mobility following the model of Erasmus may very well be limited to horizontal movements and do not necessarily lead to vertical, i.e. social mobility (Holford, 2014:21).

From the above review of European initiatives related to higher education modernisation in the Southern neighbourhood, it can be thus observed that many of the concepts exported to MENA countries which aim at transforming higher education systems, although they may provide signposts for adopting an internationally renowned reference model (i.e. that of the European university), they seem to miss target in the sense that they fail to address systemic problems which lie at the heart of the profound socio-political transformations experienced by post-revolutionary societies. In the following sections, the reforms will be presented and evaluated in the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan context to test this claim.

Egypt

Egypt is currently struggling with an overcrowded public university system that is detrimental to quality, as a result of steady state control, which for the past decades had been in operation without regard to student attainment, market needs and employment opportunities (Králiková and Rezk, 2012:30-33). The most urging problem of Egyptian youth after the revolution is the

climbing unemployment rate (Sabha, 2014), which appears to be unaffected by changes in the education sector.

In the past decades Egypt has adopted a number of reforms with the help of external actors, most importantly the EU and the World Bank. 2002 was a hallmark year in Egyptian higher education policy, as it simultaneously marked the launch of a comprehensive reform program, the *Higher Education Enhancement Project* (HEEP)⁷, sponsored by the World Bank; and the EU's Tempus Programme. The joint impact of these initiatives has opened the way for a dramatic transformation of the Egyptian higher education scene, as "imported" good practice and organizational schemes inspired governmental efforts to put forward a strategy of quality improvement. The reforms are still running after the revolution without interruption, although they are rather sustained by ad hoc external projects instead of being integrated by a stable educational government strategy (DAAD, 2012:13).

Formal mechanisms and institutions of quality assurance were established. Each university adopted an internal quality assurance procedure in which the academic staff has a decision-making role (EACEA, 2012a:6 & 12). On the national level, the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education is charged with external quality assessment and accreditation processes, accompanied by an independent expert-led peer review system (EACEA, 2012a:6). Yet, public universities are still strongly bound by a centrally defined mission defined by law (Jaramillo & Zaafrane, 2014:17) which limits their capacity to deliver results tailored to the needs of the society and promises little incentive for university professionals to engage in self-reflective activities concerning their teaching standards. One of the main issues with state-controlled quality regimes in the MENA is that governments fail to embrace and implant a culture of quality (as in quality of teaching and learning) in institutions. Their main focus lies in the quantitative expansion of higher education in order to cater for the ever increasing pressure of demand; and often equate quality with accreditation (Hassan, 2013:81).

The Tempus Programme is reported to have been rather successful in Egypt and is widely supported in academic circles, as it allows university staff members to introduce their own ideas into the reform process (EACEA, 2012a:13-14). Tempus has also succeeded to bring the "flavour of the Bologna process" in the system (EACEA, 2012b:2), even though Egypt is not

⁷ Website of the programme: <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P056236/higher-education-enhancement-project?lang=en> (Accessed on May 2, 2015)

a signatory country and efforts at the adoption of the Bologna style three-cycle structure are fragmented.

Several attempts have been made in the framework of Tempus cooperation projects to bridge the gap between universities and the labour market (Králiková and Rezk, 2012:57): perhaps the most important achievement is the establishment of standards of *competitiveness*, through curricula modernisation. The introduction of a culture of projects and the adoption of a National Qualifications Framework (EACEA, 2012a:11-14) have further enabled Egyptian universities to set out on a path of international recognition and to participate in various forms of cross-border cooperation with European institutions, including the establishment of joint programmes and degrees. Moreover, Egypt has begun defining equivalencies between its own credit system and ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) in order to facilitate the design of “European oriented” study programmes (European Commission, 2012:26). Universities have also been active participants of Erasmus Mundus Partnership Programmes, although student mobility rates (in proportion to total student population) had been relatively low before the revolution, especially in comparison with Tunisia (Jaramillo et al., 2011:4). This seems to be changing after 2011, as the proportion of Egyptian students participating in such programmes have considerably risen (EACEA, 2014).

Learning outcomes, another internationalised European concept creating link between individual skills and the knowledge economy, are equally being introduced in certain disciplines as part of a World Bank/OECD project called AHELO⁸ (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes), which is an attempt at measuring and evaluating the skills that students acquire during their period of formation. This type of assessment is much needed in Egypt, where thousands of graduates find themselves unemployed each year, crashing the hopes and illusions sparked by the revolution. The project is currently in a definitional phase during which the feasibility of a globally comparable study on meaningful indicators of learning outcomes are tested. This approach is to be applauded since it deals with the much debated question of commensurability regarding indicators of “useful knowledge” across diverse geopolitical contexts.

Small steps towards the democratization of university governance have also been made: for instance university presidents are now elected; however, students remain left out from the broader reform processes. While the Egyptian higher education sector has been put on the

⁸ Website of AHELO: <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/testingstudentanduniversityperformancegloballyoecdahelo.htm> (Accessed on June 15, 2015)

trajectory of steady modernisation, efforts are overly concentrated on the quantifiable and measurable qualities associated with economic competitiveness: the absence of political and social dimensions from the development process is striking (OECD, 2012:21). Despite the continuous expansion of the sector and attempts at quality improvement, the persistence of inequalities (related to gender and social status) regarding access to higher education (Cupito & Langsten, 2011) remains one of the biggest concerns. Researchers find that the “social bias” of the public higher education sector in Egypt has not been considerably affected or targeted by the reforms (Jaramillo & Melonio, 2011). Regional disparities are continuously reproduced by the system in spite of growing government investment in higher education and seemingly equitable conditions of access (no tuition fees) (Melonio, 2011:44-45). This situation is financially unsustainable and as well as socially undesirable. With the steady population growth, the “youth bulge” in Egypt is becoming a critical mass which carries considerable risks of security (LaGraffe, 2012). Higher education plays a pivotal role in social stability; yet, external efforts have so far failed to instil an operational notion of employability on the grounds of which meaningful principles of quality education could be developed.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, despite considerable efforts, reforms have not yet yielded the expected results. While public spending on HE is large (2% of GDP in 2012) and directed towards the promotion of social efficiency and equity, the country equally keeps struggling with a rising rate of youth unemployment (Králiková and Rezk, 2012:36). Tunisia had been widely criticized for the absence of consistent standards of quality assessment. In response to the growing social needs and external pressures to establish a basis for credibility of its diplomas (UNESCO, 2012), Tunisia enacted a Higher Education Act in 2008 which for the first time included provisions on quality assurance and accreditation (EACEA, 2012c:7). As a first step, the law provides for the creation of a national evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation authority, which was established in 2012 (EACEA, 2012c:7). Furthermore, in the framework of the so-called Higher Education Quality Support Programme, the government enabled institutions to move towards a more autonomous, decentralized management so that they can enhance their capacities to adapt to local contexts (EACEA, 2012c:5), and thus better serve the needs of the economy. With regard to student mobility, Tunisia has had the number of mobile students among the three countries between 2000 and 2008 (5.2%, Jaramillo et al., 2011:28). Tunisian universities participate in the full range of activities offered by the Erasmus Mundus program (Joint Programmes, Partnerships and EU Attractiveness Projects).

Tunisia is also the closest to the full implementation of Bologna's three-cycle structure of qualifications and diplomas by its official adoption; however, not all institutions use the ECTS yet (EACEA, 2010:9-10). Nevertheless, the biggest forces of change in the Tunisian higher education system do not emanate from the transposition formal and structural elements of the European model, but rather occur at a slower pace from within. Tempus has transformed the repertoire of degrees and research programs by primarily focusing on the development of nanoscience, biotechnology, ICT and mathematics (Králiková and Rezk, 2012:56-57), thus promoting the concept of a society based on knowledge and innovation. Tunisia shows considerable institutional progress in the field of science and research, for instance, the number of scientific publications has tripled over the past fifteen years (Nour, 2011:397).

One of the reasons why Tunisia performs relatively well compared to other MENA countries is that despite contemporary tendencies of "Arabization", institutions still require the obligatory use of French and occasionally English in the field of research (Nour, 2011:411), which clearly facilitates scientific exchange and dialogue with Europe and other parts of the world. At the same time, the attachment to the French university system and its "bolognization" carries post-colonial echoes, since for countries already operating higher education institutions based on European models (such as the centralized French system) transitioning into the Bologna process is not a choice, but rather a result of path dependency and a necessary condition for scientific survival, the elements of which are not negotiable (cf. Croché & Charlier, 2012).

As a positive aspect of its bottom-up approach, the Tempus programme appears to have profoundly affected the mentality of academics and their perceptions regarding their work, as they have reportedly begun to think in teams and networks in the context of common projects (EACEA 2012d:2). However, academic freedom and stakeholder participation in university management is still severely limited (Jaramillo & Zaafrane, 2014), partly by political factors, partly by systemic (administrative) inertia. After the Arab Spring, corruption has increased in both the public and private sectors in Tunisia (Auoadi, 2014), and due to the strictly centralized and hierarchical nature of the higher education system, the lack of transparency and accountability deeply undermines institutional autonomy and hinders the development of a culture of self-evaluation among faculty (Wilkins, 2011). Just as in the other two countries discussed here, higher education policies in Tunisia are not attached to broader societal goals and the market-oriented approach to management is generally undervalued (Hassan, 2013).

Quality assurance processes are formally quite forward-looking on the one hand, for instance, institutions are allowed to choose external quality assurance bodies (in contrast to Egypt) (European Commission, 2012:48). On the other hand, rigid hierarchical structures which exclude students from the reform processes place serious barriers to creating a sense of participation and belonging and therefore continue to reproduce outdated forms of teaching and learning.

In comparison to Egypt and Libya, higher education in Tunisia is definitely the most “Europeanised”. European concepts and procedures are integrated part of the system and institutions present a strong inclination towards an increased participation with European universities. Yet, systemic problems persist, most of which relate to social, political and cultural dimensions of education that receive little attention from reformers.

Libya

Libya’s situation is somewhat peculiar as under the rule of former dictator Gaddafi, the country’s intellectuals were living in almost complete isolation from the rest of Academia. After the overthrow of the regime, Libya is still lacking clear cut strategies to tackle systemic problems generated by a weak administrative set-up, constant de- and recentralization dynamics and fragmented sector investment (Králiková and Rezk, 2012:33-35). A new legislative framework for higher education is now under implementation and as the country is recovering from the upheaval, more reforms are expected to be underway in the near future. The US-based Hollings Center for international dialogue identified key areas of improvement based on a conference entitled *Expanding Opportunities for Libyan Higher Education*, held in 2014. The problem areas are the following: a) sustained insecurity in certain parts of the country which directly threatens institutions; b) severe lack of institutional capacity facing an increasing demand; c) poor campus environment and IT infrastructure; d) poor incentive structures for students and faculty alike (Hollings Center, 2014). These fundamental challenges signal a situation of crisis which cannot be easily remedied in the framework of international cooperation. Reforms which aim at internationalization already presuppose an operational higher education system, which, in contrast with Egypt and Tunisia, Libya does not appear to maintain.

The history of EU-Libya cooperation is relatively recent. Libya only joined the Union for the Mediterranean (formerly Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) in 2012. In the framework of the

Erasmus Mundus Programme, Libya only sent two students abroad until 2013, but a gradual progress in the number of applications can be observed in the past two years (EACEA, 2014.)

Even though Libya has not yet adopted any formal elements of the European model of higher education system (three cycles, credit system, qualifications framework, etc.), it has developed its own procedures of quality assurance and accreditation. In 2006, a national agency for quality assurance was established for both public and private institutions (EACEA, 2012e:5). Overall, however, the higher educational infrastructure of Libya remains underdeveloped. European assistance is provided sporadically: since 2010, Tempus Programme experts have been spreading European concepts and practices through Tuning exercises (an expert-led inculcation of the Bologna process).

The fall of the regime in Libya opened up a window of opportunity for the European Union to support the modernisation efforts of the new authorities, and it is likely that the exchange of knowledge and good practice will intensify in the future. The instrumental language of higher education that the EU has successfully introduced in the surrounding countries will provide a common ground for Libya to develop network relations with the academic communities in the MENA region. However, the overall political situation has seriously deteriorated since the elections in 2014, and the country is on the verge of a civil war. The absence of fundamental conditions of a stable educational environment and the lack of a long-term vision regarding higher education policies risk jeopardising the opportunity created by the liberation of the Libyan academic sector.

Incentives for a reinforced EU-MENA cooperation after the Arab Spring: rethinking the societal role of universities

The above overview of the developments in the three countries has provided a brief insight into the types of processes that are generated by the partnership between MENA region and the European Union. On the one hand, it has emphasized their formal, structural effect: to what extent have countries succeeded to transpose the procedures and standards which are regarded as prerequisites of a competitive higher education system. On the other hand however, the briefs have also shed light on more subtle processes of “ideological” influence which are channelled via forms of inter-institutional cooperation, especially in the framework of the Tempus programme, and which have impact on the norms, concepts and practices that are associated with the modernisation of higher education (such as the adoption of a common

logic of rationalization by thinking in terms of quality assurance, competitiveness and employability).

What is striking in this analysis is that all documents which report the progress of reforms in each country only focus on the operational aspects of the partnership programs, without much reference to the fundamental changes that have transformed the social and political landscape of the region in the past two years. In addition, while reports published by the World Bank on the progress of reforms in these countries have a broader outlook on institutional autonomy and academic self-determination, they do not include student-related benchmarks (student experience, accountability, self-organization, learning methods).

One of the core questions that the Arab Spring raises in relation to the modernisation of higher education is about the change in incentives of government to pursue cooperation with the EU in this field. What were the incentives of governments in Egypt and Tunisia *before* the revolution to develop extensive relations with the EU and how is *continuity* in higher education policies assured after the change? To what extent will cooperation be built on a different basis in Libya? Based on the evidence provided by the literature, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis that the receptivity of authoritarian regimes vis-à-vis the influence of the European model was largely based on its economic rationale which makes it appear universally applicable through different political contexts. By focusing on measurable indicators of the performativity of their higher education sector, governments were able to reconcile their efforts to respond to labour market needs and at the same time keep their political and ideological influence over higher education institutions (Mazawi, 2011:4). By resorting to the language and the instruments that the European model offers, namely the commodification of higher education, it became possible to solve human resource management issues (Masri, 2009:130) without having to deal with the social reality. The Arab Spring has shed light on the unsustainability of this model as underlying social tensions broke the authoritarian system.

The democratization processes following the Arab Spring will therefore bring a set of issues in the picture which has been left unaddressed during a little more than a decade of cooperation. The marginalization of social and political issues in higher education management and reforms is not likely to continue. Questions will be raised about the participation of students and faculty in university governance, and the “marginality of the academic” (Mazawi, 2011:4) in decision-making processes about reforms. The social bias of the academic admissions process and the absence of fundamental changes in the mindset of

professors and students regarding notions of academic freedom, accountability, self-management and performance are strong indicators of systemic failures.

Two important consequences follow from the observations above. The first is that the appropriation of the European model by third countries cannot be detached from certain social and democratic prerequisites. Academic culture and quality education will not be engendered on procedural grounds, i.e. by simply transitioning to formalized quality and accreditation procedures. The outcome of this type of transposition is that it facilitates the access of MENA students to European higher education, but this can have an inversely detrimental effect (one-way mobility) on the national education system, since human resources will continue to escape.

The second issue concerns the societal and economic benefits of the European model both in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond. The Bologna system has been often criticized of the missing social dimension and the unrealised objective of student-centred learning (cf. Holford, 2014 and Stech, 2011). In the conceptual framework of the EHEA, the role of universities is defined in relation to the economy (via skill formation, the production of human capital and innovation). The role of higher education as a social institution is only apparent in the programme of “lifelong learning” (Holford, 2014:15), which attributes an intrinsic value to knowledge beyond its application. A further problem with the knowledge economy paradigm promoted by European reform programmes is that it implies a universal definition of employability which does not automatically lead to economic prosperity when detached from certain socio-political prerogatives. It seems that despite continuous investment in both public and private higher education in the MENA region (Jaramillo & Melonio, 2011), employment prospects of graduates are not improving. This may lead to a double disillusionment with higher education among the youth in the aftermath of the Arab Spring: the loss of hopes of a better life and that of having a voice in decisions concerning their own future. Consequently, there is a great risk of the radicalization of poor young masses, especially if secularist groups fill the gap and misappropriate the societal role of universities for their own religious and nationalist ends.

These reflections reveal not only the hidden challenges of higher education in these countries, but also inform broader assumptions about the “knowledge economy and society” paradigm, promoted by the European Union, but also by international actors (cf. UNDP, 2010). One of the fundamental contradictions of the knowledge economy ideal is that it principally frames welfare in an economic sense and often ignores questions of social equality and political

stability (UNDP, 2010:21). While in the European context the tension between economic and social rationales might seem manageable for the moment, this is not the case in other contexts where the political embeddedness of social justice and human rights is not yet solidified. The development of ground-level dialogue with the academic communities of these countries may be a way forward: since 2013, the Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education is organized each year by university organizations and convene stakeholders from both regions. It is expected that these programmes will pave the way for a more in-depth and sincere exchange of experiences and ideas.

The European Union should also re-evaluate its approach to higher education development in the MENA region. The following policy recommendations could be formulated based on the findings of this paper:

1. The EU must take the opportunity to reach out to newly independent academic communities (i.e. Libya);
2. Instead of establishing new framework programmes, the EU should aim to tailor current programmes to the needs of individual partner countries, as well as to assess the quality of its programmes regarding the effects of reforms on social exclusion, democratization and student learning experience;
3. The EU should further encourage (the not exclusively business-oriented) cooperation of individual institutions and university associations, to develop long lasting relations between academic communities.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed at exploring some of the key trends of higher education reform in countries of the MENA region (specifically Egypt, Tunisia and Libya), by highlighting the role of the European Union in shaping the content of these policies. It can be observed that most attempts at modernising these countries' higher education infrastructures are aligned with concepts of competitiveness, quality assurance and employability, which are central elements to the European discourse on higher education. It seems that governments have been supportive of these changes and that the European model has proven to be functionally successful in framing institutions, standards and procedures. However, in many countries, structural problems are still left unanswered. Issues of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student-centred education are urging to be addressed.

It seems that after 2011, the year of the revolutions followed by the overthrow of authoritarian regimes, the implementation of reforms cannot continue without a critical assessment of the adaptation of the European system to post-revolutionary contexts. The unfolding situation offers even more possibilities to deepen and widen the policy dialogue between the European Union and the Mediterranean. However, incentives of the new authorities to participate in reform programs will be most certainly different from those of their predecessors. The democratization of the public sphere will necessarily induce a process of redefinition of the relationship between institutions and the state and their role in political, social and economic development, which eventually might lead to the review of reigning conceptualizations of higher education, including the imported concepts of the European model.

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