

Reflections on Higher Education in Jordan

By:

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Jordan attaches a considerable role to education at all levels and most importantly to tertiary education. The country has traditionally placed great emphasis on education and relied heavily on the human resources for its economic and social development. This explains the expansion of the Jordanian education system. Jordan also provides some Arab countries and particularly the Arab Gulf states of part of their needs of highly qualified and well trained cadres.

Higher education in Jordan is facing several challenges including the expanding number of students, lack of financial resources, bureaucracy, centralization, lack of proper salary for faculty, and poor libraries and equipment. The quality of higher education also is problematic and there is a need for a radical and qualitative transformation not only in this sector but in scientific research as well.

1. Jordanian Higher Education Institutions (H.E.I)

Tertiary education in Jordan dates back to the 1960s with the establishment of teachers' colleges to provide teaching staff needed for schools. These colleges became community colleges in 1981. There are 43 such colleges and are affiliated to the public university Al-Balqa University.

The first Jordanian university, the University of Jordan was established in 1976. Today there are eleven public universities.

In the past, higher education was the exclusive duty of government, but the role of the state in this sector decreased with the establishment of the first private university, Amman Al-Ahliyya University, in 1990. The emergence of private universities was a necessary development to face the problem of the lack of university seats and to solve the problem of increasing demand. Privatization of higher education has increased gradually and today there are sixteen private universities.

Foreign universities became also common in higher education. (i.e., German Jordanian University, established in 2005, Arab Open University established in 2002 to provide continuous education for all ages, and New York Institute of Technology).

Private universities play an increasingly important role in tertiary education; they run on a purely for-profit basis. Their main concern is granting revenues to shareholders, and they provide academic programs which are similar to those offered by public universities in order to compete with public universities for students and to enlarge their margin of profit.

The latter universities absorb most of the students and they are heavily controlled by the state. Private universities are also subjected to rigorous control by the state, and accreditation requirements are applied to these universities although they will soon be applied to public institutions as well.

2. The Education Personnel: Students and Academic Staff

A. Students:

The total number of students enrolled in universities is 219,277 including 111,545 women. Public universities comprise 160,190 students including 922,33 women and the remaining students are enrolled in private universities with a general total of 59,087 students including 19,652 women.

A larger number of students are enrolled in SS&H disciplines as opposed to S&T. Among the 219,277 students enrolled in Jordanian universities, the number of SS&H students is 123,104 students including 66,768 women.

The number of graduate studies students enrolled at Jordanian universities reached 17,543 including 8,025 females.

Data shows that Jordanian universities attract a good number of foreign students. Arabs and students of other nationalities enrolled in Jordanian universities in 2009 reached 27,871 including 8,536 women.

It is expected that the demand for university seats will increase by 5% by the years 2013/2014 and will reach a peak of 292,000 students universities.

The increasing number of graduate and undergraduate students admitted at the higher education institutions (H.E.I.) and at the community colleges exceeds the capacity of H.E.I., in terms of space and/or faculty. This considerable increase in the number of students enrolled in Jordanian universities will have a negative impact on the delivery of the quality of higher education and it puts a great pressure to keep up with this quality on the level of international standards. The present human and physical infrastructure of social and human sciences is unable to cope effectively with these growing numbers.

The admission of students in higher education is based on their results on the high school certificate. Objective as it may be, the said criteria does not necessarily preclude unqualified students from entering SS&H disciplines. Candidates do not sit for any special admission test or entry qualification, fine arts and physical education may be the only exceptions.

The lowest acceptable limit of grades on Al-Tawjihi certificate is determined for admission to the university. Furthermore, a minimum achievement on the certificate is required for the admission in various faculties.

Students with low grades in high school are normally oriented towards faculties of education. These students are the product of the prevailing education system based on rote memorization, and after graduation they become teachers in high schools perpetuating the same pedagogical problems. The present admission policy contributes to the weakness of input of the H.E.I., therefore, the admission requirements for these faculties and their quality ought to be changed.

Furthermore, in the name of positive discrimination several categories of students are exempted from the admission requirements for enrollment in public universities. This results in the admission of a good percentage of students enrolled in public universities without fulfilling the admissions requirements to this purpose. Access to higher education must remain open to those successfully completing secondary school or its equivalent without any discrimination whatsoever. The present state of affairs which is characterized by discrimination feeds mistrust, resentment, and reduces productivity. It has no beneficial aspects for society whatsoever, and yet the public universities continue to practice it without even realizing what they are doing.

The rising enrollment rate into tertiary education and the abundance of graduates in SHS disciplines makes it difficult for the labor market to absorb fresh graduates. Graduates of SHS disciplines suffer more from this problem of unemployment and this surely impedes the high education institutions' role as a mechanism for social mobility. To this question of mismatch between supply and demand we must add the fact that students are not empowered with the skills needed to meet the challenges of market economy competitiveness. The pre-university educational system does not prepare entering university students for critical and analytical thinking.

Although students are major stakeholders in higher education, they are not represented in the policy decision bodies' board, i.e. the Board of Trustees, the Deans' Council, and the faculties' and departments' councils.

B. Academic Staff

The number of the faculty staff in Jordanian universities for the year 2008/2009 reached 7,613 among them 1,574 women. Those who are working in public universities reached the number of 4,651 including 927 women; the remaining staff works at private universities. It is clear that although significant progress has been achieved to enhance the access of women to higher education, women are underrepresented in the academic staff.

It is unfortunate that favoritism and personal connections play a considerable role in faculty recruitment and in the occupancy of academic administrative positions. The quality of higher education depends on the selection of academic staff from the best applicants with open opportunity to all without discrimination whatsoever and through a transparent process. The same is applicable to the promotion of the teaching staff which should be based only on merit, intellectual achievements and on the active participation of the staff in the university activities on and off campus.

The staff needs appropriate development programs including training, planning, and research funding, assessment, and self evaluation. It is also necessary to develop the capacity of faculty members in designing curricula and content and to develop their capacity in research methodologies and computer use. Academic staff "need to focus on teaching students how to learn and how to take initiatives rather than being exclusively taunts of knowledge" (UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21 Century, 1998). They have also to develop "testing that will promote not only powers of memory but also powers of comprehensive skills and practical work and creativity" (UNESCO Declaration).

Furthermore, the choice of students on scholarship for graduate study who are supposedly going to join the academic staff after graduation is not also always based on intellectual merit; this also does not help in improving the quality of education.

Jordanian universities rely on PhD holders, however, experienced people from the world of business, international organizations and civil society should be involved in teaching to produce new ideas into study programs. Reliance on part-time faculty should also be reconsidered.

Jordanian universities have criteria for the promotion of academic staff including research output, effective teaching-learning, and the service of the community. The fact is that the most important criteria for the promotion is research output and the third criteria for promotion is not taken into consideration. Faculty members are judged essentially on the basis of articles published mostly in local journals. Books published, citations of journal articles, grants, awards and honors and service to the community are not given the importance they deserve.

The process of tenure is not always tough enough and it is quasi automatic after the promotion of the faculty to the rank of the associate professor. The objective of the tenure is to ensure that those of the faculty staff who deserve a permanent job would get it. But because of the shortage of academic staff and the universities need for more faculty, this noble profession still attracts imperfect recruits, and tenure is largely routine. In fact the employment of faculty in Jordan is characterized by stability or permanence. Some professors slack off after getting tenure or full professorship and dismissal of faculty is very rare, although it happens occasionally and usually for political reasons. While job security is important to academic freedom, it is necessary to monitor tenure more carefully than in the past and those faculty members slacking off should be a matter of concern.

The absence of rewarding salaries is not attractive enough to recruit and retain Jordanian academics. By contrast, the high salaries characterizing the Gulf States helped high education institutions in those countries attract scholars who were teaching elsewhere in the Arab world, and particularly from Egypt and Jordan.

3. Finance and Higher Education Institutions

Given its role in promoting sustainable development, state support for higher education and research remain essential. Funding H.E.I. by the government is no doubt a long-term investment in human resources and the Jordanian government served first as the primary or sole source of funding for high education. But Jordan is no more in a position to cover the cost of public higher education institutions and the government subsidy to the budget of these universities is not sufficient and it is decreasing gradually. In the last three years the budget did not exceed the amount JD35 million a year, an amount which corresponds to 8% of the total expenditure of universities.

Expenditure on H.E.I. is costly, and it keeps rising year after year. Public universities do not have satisfactory resources of their own, and the trend is to reduce public spending on higher education. Therefore, these universities live on modest public financing from the treasury and on limited students' tuition. They can therefore no longer count on these resources to meet their growing expenditures.

Public universities are no more able to provide the necessary equipments or laboratories nor can they recruit and retain qualified staff. The ever-increasing number of graduates from high schools who are joining the H.E.I. will worsen the situation and may lead to the rapid collapse of this sector.

Furthermore, the deterioration of living standards of the academic staff creates negative repercussions on their performance and limits their incentive to develop and promote innovative methodologies.

It is worth mentioning that private universities rely totally on students' fees to cover their expenses and have a margin of profit for their shareholders. These universities are financed from the private sector which owns them and they are not facing any financial constraints.

4. Research and Development

Scientific research can play an effective role in efforts to find solutions to Jordan's socio-economic problems, but the sector, suffers from a fragmented administration, unclear goals, limited cooperation and coordination, and insufficient financial management.

Most of the scientific research in Jordan is conducted by academic staff at public and private universities and at research centers affiliated to those universities. Nevertheless, a small percentage of academic staff is intensely active in research. Their research aims principally at getting promotion and most professors who get close to or the highest promotion level withdraw from research.

The main task of the academic staff in Jordan is to teach. Each faculty member should teach a number of credit hours depending on his rank (12 hours for the assistant and associate professors and 9 hours for full professors); this teaching load leaves little time for research and it should be reconsidered.

Academic staffs in S&HS disciplines publish primarily in local journals and in Arabic language. Those who publish in internationally-recognized academic journals that are refereed and registered with the ISI are very few. The studies that are carried out are sometimes without purpose and they are irrelevant to issues and concerns of the society.

Researchers have little incentive to carry out research and those who conduct research are not always rewarded. In fact, research is not seen by the society as a priority.

More importantly is the limited freedom of expression and academic freedom which prevents academic staff from voicing their opinion and from publishing freely and restricts university ability to generate knowledge. All these factors have a negative impact on the environment for scientific research.

5. Governance and Management

Governance and management is an issue of paramount importance and a top priority. Jordan has two separate ministries that take responsibility of education, one for general education and the second for higher education and scientific research, and this is despite the inherent relationship between the two systems.

The council of Higher Education was established in 1982 and it formed the core of the Ministry of Higher Education which was established in 1985. In 1995 the Ministry of Higher Education was annulled but was re-established in August 2001 and renamed the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. It is not the intention of this paper to deal with the different bodies and agencies that contribute to the policy and decision making process for the tertiary education in Jordan.

6. Quality Assurance

The recent establishment of a program of quality assurance to insure that Jordanian universities are producing high quality education is a positive development in higher education in Jordan. The commission for Quality Assurance was first governed by the law no.20 of 2007 and it is governed now by the law no.13 for the year 2009.

According to the new law the Commission is affiliated with the Prime Minister, and it is no longer affiliated with the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research because this will unavoidably result in a certain degree of the Minister's influence on the commission's decision. On the other hand the Minister is a member of the cabinet of Ministers and as such he can always present, clarify and support commission's decisions considered by the cabinet.

The Jordanian program of monitoring education is a good step towards the improvements of the quality of higher education in the country, but the way quality assurance is conducted does not sometimes that lead to quality education, and there are certainly other methods that work to enhance the quality of education in the country.

One of the issues faculty face is that rather than a culture of reading and knowledge, students have become accustomed to a culture of cramming for exams and memorizing material they think the professor wants to hear parroted back to them. Thus, students expect a classroom environment where they are spoon-fed material.

There is a need to move from teaching that is "dominated by a traditional, rote-learning pedagogy" where there is "little incentive for teacher creativity" to a pedagogy that gives teachers "incentive for teacher creativity in curriculum development, delivery and assessment." For students the goals are commendable: "students will be active creators of knowledge, skills, and lifelong learning

When looking at this model it appears that a new pedagogy is required in order to implement this sort of a teaching system. In Jordan, as in much of the region, the central role of the *tawjihi* examination makes it impossible to imagine such changes without abolishing this examination, its role in the educational system and its accompanying emphasis on rote-memorization leading up to this exam. This pedagogy which to date remains the main stay of Jordanian education, prohibits any kind of critical thinking or creativity and by definition demands that for students to achieve their educational goals they must merely memorize ideas presented by teachers and textbooks..

The weakest aspect of higher education in general and in S&HS in particular is the pedagogy. Teaching is essentially rendered through lectures, i.e. the faculty lectures and students listen. They may take notes and most probably do not. Discussion is rare and interaction between faculty and students is minimal. Lecturers often do not assign texts, nor do they assign research and/or writing assignments. Teaching is based on the delivery, and absorbing process of conveying information and the students are rarely called upon in class to discuss and analyze. Students are not given the opportunity to read material for the love of learning and knowing; they are not granted the experience of researching a subject of interest to them and writing a report; they are not encouraged to produce their own creative projects. They may, therefore, acquire a theoretical knowledge and understanding of the subject matter but they are not able to acquire practical, analytical and critical skills and self learning and research and communication skills. There is no doubt that knowledge of the subject is important but it is not sufficient. Reasoning and critical skills are more important.

Conclusion

Education has always formed a vital component in the official discourse in Jordan and the higher education institutions (H.E.I.) of the country witnessed several developments aiming at improving the quality of higher education and scientific research.

Jordanian universities are in the process of developing in terms of number of students and number of academic programs; new attempts have been implemented but it seems that they were not up to the level of expectation.