

WHY DOESN'T LEBANON HAVE A NATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION YET?

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Understanding the dynamics of developing policies is critical for improving the lives of citizens. Improving the higher education sector in Lebanon reflects positively on the economy as graduates of higher education institutions contribute to the development of the nation. Mapping the development of the draft quality assurance law aims at generating in-depth insights on the public policy-making process in Lebanon, by identifying factors that influence decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Strong stakeholders buy-in is critical for supporting a policy: Strong buy-in of all the stakeholders and higher education institutions as well as the support of regional and international entities successfully promoted the draft law to the parliament, raising the issue to the top for a decision.
- ▶ Political support and expert engagement are detrimental for the success of a policy decision: Experts are important informants, which provide added value when they are able to gain political support for the evidence informed arguments provided, promoting the draft.
- ▶ Moving forward with a policy decision in spite of the political stagnation is important for the wellbeing of the nation: As the country engages in other more pressing issues, it remains equally significant to address social issues that pertain to the well-living of citizens, among which is regulating the quality of higher education institutions, as this reflects directly on the country's economy.

Problem statement and key message

Regulating quality within higher education institutions in Lebanon has significant implications for the sector. The number of institutions of higher education has tripled in the past decade, coupled with a sharp increase in the number of students. It became necessary to regulate the quality of education rendered at these institutions in order to maintain competitiveness within the regional and global market. Mapping the development of the policy on quality assurance in higher education provides a deeper understanding of the efforts put forth for improving higher education in Lebanon. It also presents an example of a stagnated policy development process, highlighting the factors that have delayed the progress of the draft law and the factors that have promoted the policy. It further sheds light on the importance of having wide stakeholder support in order to overcome some of the obstacles that hinder the process. Recommendations inform future public policy-making, and provide insights for structuring the decision-making process in the country.

Quality assurance developments in the global, regional and local contexts

Issues of quality assurance have become a high priority on the agendas of policy-makers in many different countries across the world. Many countries have developed accreditation systems, while others have established external review committees that carry out cycles of external review. In addition, some countries established independent bodies commissioned to monitor the quality of services in higher education institutions. Circumstances may vary among Arab states, but several broad trends have contributed to growing governmental interest in establishing policy mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability in higher education. Of particular significance is the trend towards mass higher education. In response to the diverse and growing systems of higher education, issues of quality and quality assurance became a central concern to the Arab states. In Lebanon, the government as well as the

institutions of higher education recently came to realize that it was critical to regulate quality within the sector in order for their graduates to remain competitive. Efforts were mobilized to draft a law that would establish a national agency for quality assurance in higher education. The mandate of this agency would hold (private and public) institutions accountable for the services they provide to the public. The process of developing this draft law was a lengthy one that was delayed due to both political influences (intertwined with personal interests) and the local political context. However, it was also strongly supported by a number of policy-makers, and many experts and practitioners in the sector.

Use of evidence in public policy

Studies and examples from other countries were used in the process of drafting the law. However, it is critical to highlight the fact that almost all of the actors engaged in the drafting and discussions of this law were experts in higher education. The ministers who were in office throughout the process were also practitioners and educators. This expert engagement at all levels of decision-making provided the process with added value given that those directly involved in the process were quite knowledgeable themselves. Two key actors involved in the process were the Lebanese Association for Education Studies, a local think-tank, and the Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE), a group of local experts appointed by the European Union at the Ministry of Education. Therefore, although local scientific evidence was not generated to support the draft law, local experts were closely engaged in the process who were able to provide both the international experience and the knowledge of the local context.

Insights and barriers

Despite the strong awareness of the importance of adopting the quality assurance law and the strong support it has received, the realization of this law has so far been hindered by a number of political factors and personal interests. One of the main reasons for the delay in both the formulation and the passing of the draft quality assurance law have been the political pressures exerted to modify the draft. The Lebanese University and some of the private institutions of higher education used their political connections to attempt to modify the draft both during the formulation of the law as well as during the review of the draft at the meetings of the various parliamentary committees. The power of the Lebanese University and the other groups stemmed from political resources. In many cases, the stakes were too high, particularly for some of the private institutions that were owned by some politicians or controlled by some political parties. These personal interests in not passing the law or altering it were particularly stemming from the expected

evaluation of quality at their institutions. The Lebanese University also viewed this law as allowing an external entity to trespass its boundaries, for it has always been viewed as an independent institution with its own rules and regulations. Therefore, some actors had their own sources of power and reasons for delaying the process of the draft law reaching the general assembly. The main supporters were private institutions founded before 1996. The strong engagement of experts and stakeholders shows that the draft law was formulated in a bottom-up participatory approach. Local think-tank members, who are scholars and faculty members from local universities, played a significant role in the drafting and promotion of the draft law. Given that this think-tank led the process of formulating the draft law allowed for wide participation of stakeholders, particularly representatives of local higher education institutions. Furthermore, the workshops and meetings that took place throughout the process of formulating the draft law also aimed at engaging all institutions of higher education in the country. This raised awareness of the urgency for such an agency as well as of the work being done, and developed a sense of ownership for the law being developed.

Conclusion

Quality in higher education is key to a competitive workforce, which in turn leads to a competitive economy. Lebanon has always been one of the leading Arab nations in higher education. Regulating quality in its universities comes as a natural response to maintaining that competitive niche. Most of the practitioners and experts in higher education supported this plan of action and the law that would establish an independent agency to regulate quality in local universities. Therefore, a strong buy-in from stakeholders helped in raising the issue to the top of the policy agenda for a decision. In addition to the bottom-up and participatory nature of the decision-making approach used for formulating the draft quality assurance law, it is important to note the strong top-down support throughout the policy-making process. All of the ministers of education and higher education who assumed office during the process of the draft law formulation were strongly supporting the discussions and efforts made to draft and promote the law. This informed leadership provided “policy-heroes” who stood in the face of some obstacles that delayed the process. Finally, a country like Lebanon faces numerous pressing policy issues that usually delays the decision to pass a policy such as the draft law for establishing a quality assurance agency for higher education in Lebanon. However, it is critical to continue with legislative decisions of issues that have a socio-economic impact on the nation despite the political hindrances that may occur. The recommendations of this brief provide policy-makers and scholars with the opportunity to learn from a policy-making experience in Lebanon.

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