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General Insights into Higher Education Dynamics: Understanding Challenges and Exploring Implications for Moroccan Universities

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Abstract:

Higher education has always been the backbone of the academic enlightenment of civilizations. It is the impulse behind scientific discovery and the building block of sound economies. It is also the thrust of progress that drove developed countries to discover new inventions and invade outer space. It is the path that provided humanity with answers to thrilling enigmas that were far-fetched realities in the past. However, how to improve higher education has always been the subject of a heated debate and often resulted in baffling matters. This article delves into the pressing concerns within higher education, focusing on the challenges faced by Moroccan universities. The discourse navigates through multifaceted issues impacting academia and elucidates their broader implications. A comprehensive literature review encapsulates these challenges, shedding light on their intricate interplay and potential ramifications. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives, this brief yet incisive review aims to offer insights into the complex landscape of higher education, guiding discussions and prompting strategic considerations for the enhancement of Moroccan universities in the evolving global educational milieu.

Keywords: Higher education, Moroccan universities, academic issues, academic development, educational strategies

1. Introduction: Definition, Missions and Functions of Higher Education

The conceptualization and significance of higher education took on a different role throughout the last two centuries. Hence, it is plausible to begin with a tentative definition of the subject matter before delving into other fundamental items of this report.

In the literature, higher education can be viewed as an education that purportedly takes place after one's graduation from high school. Thus, it is also occasionally referred to as post-secondary education (see Clark, 1986). Usually, this sort of education is undertaken on a voluntary basis, and it often results in a college degree or at least an associate's degree. According to Oakshott (2004), higher education is a stage where the pursuit of knowledge becomes voluntary. That is, students in higher education become more autonomous, totally responsible for their own learning and can actually decide whether they want to take part in it or not. Generally, higher education often encompasses any sort of post-secondary education, training and research guidance that takes place at any educational institution. In this respect, the university is the most common establishment associated with higher education.

Traditionally, the idea of a university revolved mostly around knowledge imparting and accumulation embodied in straight lecturing and notetaking. With the turn of the nineteenth century, however, different countries around the world adopted a practical model of higher education, one that combines both teaching and research (Newman, 1959). This model, being the most common one in modern society, had many advantages (Rothblatt, 1997). For many practitioners, it was the way to emphasize intellectual freedom, university autonomy and internationalization (op.cit: 9). As illustrated by Rothblatt (op.cit), this concept of the university has only flourished when conservative views towards education began to vanish implying a serious need for a change.

Attempts to revolutionize higher education together constituted the final straw that led to a change in the missions and functions of higher education. Anderson (2009) identifies three models of higher education, namely Wilhelm von Humboldt's, John Henry Newman's and the Robbin Committee's (also known as the Oxbridge model). While the Humboldtian model was the first to emphasize combining research and teaching, Newman's model sought to define university by its capacity to provide general knowledge, assuming that the latter should be pursued for its own sake (Newman, 1959). Robbin's model, on the other hand, initiated the idea that universities should concentrate more on developing the 'general powers of the mind' instigated in the savoir-faire rather than bare knowledge. The incarnation of the three models together, as they served as constructive criticism to each other, resulted in a positive shift in the function of the university; it was no longer that passive space where only content can be taught but an interactive intellectual arena where the moral influence of society and lifelong learning were as important as knowledge accumulation.

Higher education should not only be perceived as a site for transcendent knowledge; it should also incorporate the skills that graduate students need to develop through their enrollment (Ouakrime, 1996). The latter, according to Carter (1985), is basically embodied in information skills, mental skills, action skills and social skills. These skills, together with the knowledge students accumulate, constitute a perfect combination that would result in well-cultivated individuals who are capable of facing the challenges of life after graduation.

2. Higher Education in Morocco

For most countries, higher education is considered a 'factory' of human capital that would be in charge of the future of civilization. In Morocco, for instance, higher education operates as a public domain under the responsibility of the state. Meziani (1999) alleges that, for decades, the country has been seeking reform of its higher education under different policies. The motive for such reform usually lies in providing better access to its institutions by fighting social and gender disparities, putting a huge emphasis on the quality of the education system and encouraging good and effective governance (Hoel, 2013).

As part of this reform, the state sought to make some changes in several aspects of the system. In the first place, following the French model, it started with the establishment of an accreditation plan covering both public and private institutions (Ouakrime, 1986, 2003). Subsequently, an assessment method was devised, and different apparatuses were established to account for the regulation of the system (op.cit).

Although the economic state of the country is a modest one, it devotes 26% of its annual budget to education. Possibly, that could be a reason behind the fact that the university is now under pressure not only to increase access to higher education but also to accommodate graduates into the labour market. This being the case, the Moroccan government has shown enough political will to improve the education system (Ouakrime, n.d). As such, almost no fees are required to enroll in Moroccan universities. Moroccan high education is practically free of charge. The state pays the institutions' expenditures as well as their operating budgets. The financial scheme is based on the number of students in each institution (Meziani, op.cit). That is, institutions with limited access receive less funding than those with unrestricted access. Other major financial resources for Moroccan universities include grants, donations, and legacies from both internal and external funders (Ouakrime, op.cit).

3. Reform of Higher Education

Much of the debate on the issue of higher education often settles on the need for a reform that works towards the betterment of the latter. As part of human nature, we seek perfection; thus, no matter how good higher education might seem, there has always been a desire to make it better. Perhaps one of the major concerns when it comes to reforming higher education is enhancing quality. According to Daniel et al. (2006), much of today's higher education remains unable to respond to the constant changes in the era of globalization and cater for the requirements of the job market. The notion of quality is inextricably intertwined with these changes. Hence, reform that envisages quality should keep pace with these fluctuations, which are generally precipitated by rapid technological advancement, socio-economic growth and geopolitical changes worldwide.

Of equal importance is the issue of access to higher education, which is at the forefront of the debate on quality. An issue that constitutes an essential part of seeking quality and improvement in higher education is guaranteeing equal access to all (Tucker, 2012; Kinser, 2013). In the same line, Chiheb (2012) argues that quality is branded by exclusivity and expense, which are, in turn, key characteristics of Sir John Daniel's iron triangle: access, cost, and quality. However, a reform on the basis of the iron triangle may not lead to a healthy change as it turns higher education into a business enterprise, away from the humanistic principle of education as a God-given right.

From an economic perspective, higher education is supposed to account for incorporating employability skills as part of formal instruction. According to Mhamed (2004), a successful university is one that takes the needs and the job market into consideration to grant its graduates a decent status in society. In this respect, a reform of the university is a major political issue as much as it is a socio-economic one (Tucker, op.cit).

4. English Language Teaching in Morocco

As part of the reform of higher education, many developing countries, including Morocco, sought to encourage English language teaching. As an international language, English language learning has rapidly grown in Moroccan higher education institutions. According to Ouakrime (1986), the study of English in Moroccan universities dates back to the late 1960s, when the first department of English was established in Rabat. This initiative instigated one of the earliest steps towards gaining the interest of Moroccan university students. In fact, the establishment of English studies departments had a huge impact on the development of ELT programs in Morocco later on and was soon extended to other universities. According to Ouakrime (op.cit), other universities also shared the inspiration and adopted the idea, beginning with Fez in 1973, followed by Oujda, Casablanca and Marrakesh by 1980.

For Moroccans, English is often conceived as a key to better educational and employment opportunities (Bounahai, 2014). As Morocco opened the gate to a larger world of economic growth, English found itself a place in the country's complex linguistic landscape. According to Buckner (2011), this can be rendered to the fact that English as a foreign language does not entail any colonial legacies to Moroccan students. Rather, it seems to represent a new means of socio-economic competition, besides being a language of future opportunity and personal and educational growth.

Therefore, the status of English departments throughout Moroccan universities has flourished as they receive more students every year (Sadiqi, 1991). Compared to other languages, students of English enjoy a vast range of accessibilities. Departments of English are famous for their international staff, access to the latest sources of information,

cultural diversity and updated libraries, which enable students to access job opportunities not only locally but also abroad (Professor Fatima Mouaid, personal communication, December 23rd, 2016).

5. Public Vs Private Higher Education

The economic growth that the world is witnessing serves to plant materialistic interests in many sectors, and higher education is no exception. The debate over whether the university ought to be public or private has always been a matter of controversy (Woodfield, 2014; Cemmell, 2009). As one thinks of a public university, a hypothetical prototype is immediately presented, with an image of an institution that is mainly funded by the state (Douglas & Lombardi, 2006). One could say more or less the same about a private university, except that besides being partially supported by the state, the institution's major supplies come from private investments. Powar (2015) alleges that private universities are basically enterprises, and students' tuition fees are only part of their many funding resources. Private institutions benefit from a variety of financial aids, which is often associated with quality (Kinser, op.cit). Access to public universities often results in a scarcity of resources, which may not be enough to cater to the number of students. On the other hand, public tax exemptions for private institutions justify their tremendous success (see Douglas and Lombardi, op.cit).

Although the privatization of higher education went viral over the past few decades, most people still perceive higher education as a public good rather than a commodity for trade, where, in fact, it can be both (Kinser, op.cit:6). The university has to provide sufficient resources to account for the increasing number of students. Thus, the idea of being a public good may not be the only focus of higher education, given that there should be a sort of commodity for trade (Woodfield, op.cit:7). Several aspects of higher education have been incorporated into business. However, prevailing as it might seem, according to Cammell (op.cit), this trend has to be monitored carefully to protect the elements of higher education that would not be adequately compensated at any rate.

As a key provider of social benefits and an agent of change and development, higher education ensures the cultivation of individuals who would, in turn, contribute to the academic and economic growth of a given society. This reciprocal relationship between higher education and society is a major endowment resource for both. This conception, according to Cemmell (op.cit), is meant to allow global higher education to develop in a sustainable and free environment to provide new research, benefiting not only the individuals but also the whole society.

6. Higher Education and the Phenomenon of Brain Drain

Brain drain, often referred to as human capital flight, generally stands for the emigration of highly qualified or well-cultivated individuals (Mitchell, 2014). This movement usually takes place from their country of origin to another one where better living standards are available. This phenomenon is more popular in underdeveloped countries (see Sajjad, 2012). Presumably, some of the major causes of brain drain are the lack of opportunities in the job market, financial insufficiency due to low salaries and the absence of support for university graduates. Highly skilled graduates opt for migration to Western countries, hoping for better living conditions. Thus, their countries of origin fall short of human capital, which slows the rate of investments and, thus, national economic growth (Jaschik, 2011).

Efforts to combat brain drain or possibly turn it into brain gain continue to be a major impulse behind a range of higher education policies in the countries plagued with this phenomenon (Altbach, 2013). Some attempts prevailed following supportive economic blueprints for college graduates. Western countries continue to attract highly motivated and educated individuals to their shores. However, though this might be for the benefit of both "the brain drainer" and the host country, it is likely to result in serious ramifications at the expense of their countries of origin (Jaschik, op.cit). This being the case, hoping to stop human capital flight, which deprives a country of its best higher education graduates, implementing ambitious recruiting programs and improving work conditions and salaries might be a good step towards solving the problem.

7. Conclusion

The present paper is an attempt to account for some issues in higher education. First, it provides a tentative definition of what higher education generally stands for in the literature. In this regard, several accounts were presented with reference to the common models of higher education. Besides, the missions and functions of higher education were also revisited based on salient literature in the area. As a case in point, the Moroccan higher education system was referred to as an example of a developing country. Thus, some dimensions of the issue of reform and its function in improving higher education were also covered. Furthermore, the report also sheds light on the status of English language teaching in Morocco within the framework of higher education. The financial resources of higher education institutions were also called into question in a brief comparison between the public and private sectors. Finally, the report tackles the issue of brain drain, which is the nightmare that is supposedly hindering the progress of higher education in developing countries.

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