Comparability and equivalence of EU and Arab Higher Education Systems: A Lebanese University perspective

Presented within the panel
“Comparability and Equivalence of Higher Education Systems: Bologna as an Example.”

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Rationale

This paper shares some thoughts about the comparability, equivalence, and challenges in higher education systems, which can be perceived on the European and Arab levels from a Lebanese university point of view.
USEK background and experience

USEK diversified experience embraces comparability and equivalence of EU and Arab Higher Education Systems.

USEK had been adopting some sixty years ago till the year 2000 the French system and language. At a later stage, it embraced the American credit system with an increasing shift towards English language while maintaining its French language tradition. At the matter of fact, USEK is still tightly linked to European universities.
USEK background and experience

- USEK is a Lebanese private Catholic University
- Member of the AARU
- 1st associate member of the EUA from outside Europe (2010)
- Accredited by a European agency evalag (member of ENQA and EQAR)
- Working today on an institutional and program accreditation from different US accreditation bodies.
Questions and comparability issues between EU and Arab countries Higher Education systems

Q1. How to talk about comparability and equivalence between EU and Arab world, while diversity is governing both worlds?

Q2. How common challenges in the EU and Arab world, such as quality, accreditation, faculty qualifications, online teaching and learning, internationalization, etc. are addressed? And what may be the best collaborative setup for universities in EU and Arab countries?

Q3. What is then the solution for a better HE quality?
Q1. Comparability and equivalence between highly diversified frameworks

The European and the Arab Higher Education systems share in common "diversity" in HE institutions profiles, missions and governance.

The Bologna process was a great attempt to organize diversity and promote mobility and cooperation.
Q1 | European Higher Education System

The EU system has established a platform, the EUA, for sharing good practices and policies between universities. Yet we still can’t talk of uniformity or complete harmonization.

The flexibility, which is a praised virtue, of the ECTS leads to different implementations among European universities even in the same country.
On the Arab level, we also find diversity. It is right that a Bologna-like process doesn’t exist in the Arab framework for higher education, but the diversity is also due to various tendencies of Arab universities. They are mainly open to Europe or to North America to reflect their international affiliation.

Furthermore, there is no Arab planning or budgeting for a common higher education policy in the Arab world as we see in EU such as the HORIZON 2020 for example.

There are available setups or platforms of cooperation like the AARU.
Q1. ...How to talk about comparability and equivalence between EU and Arab world, while diversity is governing both worlds?

- HE systems are highly diversified even inside the same country. In Lebanon for example different institutional profiles with different roots, missions, credit system, language policy, etc., can be identified (Public, private, non for profit, etc.).

- Many of the well-established universities in the Arab world consider themselves as foreign universities or local universities with American or European affiliation, and seek accreditation from their chartering countries.
Q1. ...How to talk about comparability and equivalence between EU and Arab world, while diversity is governing both worlds?

Diversity is the key to read the current status of both Arab and EU university worlds, and this diversity constitutes a promoting element for universities mutual cooperation.
Q2. Challenges’ comparability in EU and Arab countries: what and how?

#1. Quality and accreditation agendas

#2. The need for a greater focus on outcome based systems

#3. Development of Faculty qualifications framework

#4. E-learning: A common confusing challenge
Challenge #1. Quality and accreditation agendas

“Within this diversity framework, quality assurance and accreditation is a key challenging matter for both the European and the Arab Higher Education systems”.

Ministerial meeting in Bucharest 2012 - Providing quality higher education for all

“...The demonstration of quality has become a key element in universities’ internationalization strategies”.

Lesley Wilson, EUA Secretary General - CHEA Conference 2013

“...The quality revolution has been marked by a lack of impact research, particularly the impact of quality assurance processes on academic practice, the student experience and student learning...”.

Jethro Newton in the EUA quality Assurance Forum in 2012
Challenge #1. Quality and accreditation agendas

Accreditation from outside the countries national border is considered a competing strategy for many of EU universities.

First example of a university requesting accreditation / institutional audit from an agency outside its national boundaries is: The University of Graz in Austria from the Finnish QA agency.
Challenge #1. Quality and accreditation agendas

The European model which is based on different national initiatives and **global EU initiatives can, a priori, provide some benchmarks to Arab HE policy makers** where Quality assurance agencies are becoming spread in different Arab countries and where many issues remain unsolved:

*It is not sure, for example, how ensured is the quality of the services provided by these agencies and who is providing the external audit on them and how?*
Challenge #2. The need for a greater focus on outcome based systems

The Bologna reforms and the European Standards and Guidelines provided a great opportunity for European universities to rethink their programs frameworks into a greater focus toward an output based system.

Bologna reforms was also an opportunity to enhance employability and to fill the gap between the learning outcomes and the labor market.

Potential enhancement at both levels, European and Arab, by a strong focus on professional programmatic accreditations can ensure the quality of teaching and learning and its direct link to the profession in question as well as students’ mobility.
Challenge #2. The need for a greater focus on outcome based systems

The Bologna process has also recommended the use of diploma supplement that can provide more details than the transcript about the student learning experience.

Delivering student learning portfolio, showing the accumulated learning outcomes, in addition to the student’ transcript record will be a challenging issue for universities in Europe and in the Arab countries.
Challenge #2. The need for a greater focus on outcome based systems

It is a matter of transparency that would facilitate equivalence within the framework of respect of each national and institutional context.
Challenge #3. Development of Faculty qualifications

-The focus on quality of teaching and learning shed the light on the formal development of faculty qualifications.

-Many European countries have adopted a national framework for the continuous improvement of qualifications that emphasizes universities’ substantial investment in faculty qualifications.

-In the majority of Arab countries, this issue is left to the university initiative.
Challenge #3. Development of Faculty qualifications

USEK has adopted a collaborative strategy with key partners in UK and USA for the continuous development of faculty qualifications:

More than 20 of our faculty members, for example, have become members of the Higher Education Academy HEA in UK and have obtained postgraduate certificates in teaching and learning. These people can have a strong impact on the development of teaching and learning strategies inside the university.
Challenge #4. E-learning: A common confusing challenge

It is not clear how policy makers, at the European and Arab levels, will deal with many challenging issues and mainly e-learning and MOOCs that are growing at high speed. Many questions still need to be answered:

- How ready our universities’ infrastructures are?
- How ready our faculty qualifications are?
- How ready our legal frameworks are?
- How suitable our academic credit system is?
Challenge #4. E-learning: A common confusing challenge

Indifference is not a wise and suitable strategy for this evolving revolutionary matter. It was clearly mentioned in the January 2013 CHEA conference recommendations in Washington that “online education is critical to the long run development of HEI”.

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Q3. What may be the best collaborative setup for universities in EU and Arab countries?

Both HE systems in EU and Arab world are highly oriented toward continuous quality enhancement processes and can develop a collaborative strategy for benchmarking good practices.

The more a university opens its doors to quality assessment from accredited agencies, the more quality is enhanced and relations are tightened. Quality goes on a par with internationalization, transparency and strong relationships with a big range of worldwide universities.
Q3. What may be the best collaborative setup for universities in EU and Arab countries?

- EUA platform is a successful story. The AARU is also doing a good job for promoting collaboration, benchmarks and quality inside the Arab word.

- On the other hand, many universities operating in the European and Arab countries are internationally top class institutions and their strengths come from diversity, freedom and autonomy. These universities can provide good benchmarks for universities in EU and Arab countries (University World Bank Report on University Governance for the MENA region in 2012).
Concluding remark

This brief comparability shows that cooperation between universities in EU and in the Arab countries in dealing with different challenges while considering national and institutional contexts would create a **win-win situation**.

The only valid benchmark strategies that serve universities are the best practices that are proven to enhance competitiveness wherever geographically these benchmarks are: **North America, Europe, East Asia, Arab countries, etc.**
Concluding remark

This event today is a strong witness of the visionary leadership of both the EUA, and the AARU. It helps us realize the importance of the challenges I raised in my presentation and mainly recognize the particular context of each HEI and Association. It helps us also believe in the well founded principle GLOCALISATION “think globally or universally in your local context and think locally in your global context."
Thank you,
وشكرًا
Muchas gracias
Tante grazie
Merci!