Quality Assurance in Tunisian Higher Education:
A case-driven analysis of prevalent policymaking practice[1]

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The study focuses on the policymaking process in the higher education sector in Tunisia and critically assesses it through a case study of the important reforms in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It included the move to a new certification structure, adapted from the Bologna European model of higher education accompanied by a parallel quality assurance reform with the creation of a competent body. The study is organized into three parts: the first briefly describes the modern higher education system in Tunisia, the policies pursued in this field, and the major reforms that the country has experienced since independence. The second deals with the challenges of forming higher education policies, reforms, and quality assurance systems in Tunisia. The third presents the research methodology and the main results. The conclusion discusses the weaknesses, causes and potential impacts of the policy process.

Quality Assurance	Policy Making	Tunisia	Higher Education

This study is part of a comparative empirical investigation of policymaking practices in the Arab region, conducted in the context of an umbrella project involving a number of researchers from eight countries in the region. The objective of the umbrella project is to critically assess policy aking processes and practices in the Arab region with the goal of elaborating an agenda for public administration research in the region grounded in the region's realities and defined by its key stakeholders. A group of researchers from across the region participated in this project, each examining a particular policy theme in their country of origin as a case study. Despite encompassing disparate policy themes, the collective research effort has a shared focus on the policymaking "process", seeking to draw conclusions and recommendations that are transferrable between various spheres of public policymaking and between countries in the region.

This paper examines policy making practices in the Tunisian sector of higher education, specifically with respect to quality assurance (QA) related reforms. Important reforms have been conducted in the past decade, namely the migration to a new degree structure aligning the country with the Bologna model of European higher education reforms. These reforms were supposed to be accompanied by parallel reforms in the area of quality assurance. However, progress on the latter front has encountered several obstacles. This paper looks at the policymaking process behind the quality assurance aspects of the Bologna inspired reforms. The investigation relies on evidence collected from a thorough literature review and a series of semi-structured interviews with the various stakeholders involved in the policy process. This evidence is then used to critically assess the various stages and practices of the policymaking process and to benchmark them with international best practices in the field.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews some important background information, including a brief description of the policy theme, an overview of the modern Tunisian higher education system and a brief account of the major reforms it has undergone since its inception shortly after the country's independence. Section 3 reviews previous literature on the subject, specifically on higher education reform and quality assurance systems. Section 4 describes the research methodology and summarizes the key findings. Section 5 includes a discussion of the various shortcomings identified in the policy process, their likely root causes and implications. Section 6 summarizes the paper.

Background On Tunisia's Higher Education System

In 2005, the government of Tunisia launched its largest reform of higher education since the 1958 law that established the basic system of education in the country. This reform, dubbed LMD, follows the 'Bologna' model of European higher education reforms, which prescribes a degree structure of 3, 5, and 8 years of study respectively for the bachelor, master, and doctoral training of students. Implementation of the LMD started in 2005 and continued until all programs were fully converted to the new degree structure.[7]

Within a few years of it being made obligatory for higher education institutions to move to the new degree structure, many institutions had successfully converted to the LMD format. This was probably one of the quickest conversions in the history of Bologna process implementation.

Quality Assurance was supposed to be an integral element of the reformulation of the higher education system in the country in line with the Bologna principles. Quality assurance is meant here as external quality assurance, meaning external review by an independent teaching and learning body, the employability of graduates, the quality of input into the educational process – be it students (i.e. admission process) or faculty (i.e. faculty qualifications, teaching evaluations and scholarships) – and the internal processes put in place to ensure the quality of higher education provision. To this effect, the 2008 Higher Education Law introduced concepts of quality assurance into higher education and provided for the creation of a national evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation authority. International cooperation programs with the World Bank and the European Union in the field of higher education also included support for strengthening quality assurance mechanisms and training for universities and the new national QA entity.

However, the National Authority for Evaluation and Quality Assurance (known by its French acronym IEAQA) was only set up in November 2013 and conducted its first reviews in 2016, mostly to validate the legal status change of various higher education institutions. By the end of 2018, it had accumulated around 60 reviews, 22 of which were legal status change validations, 9 institutional reviews, and 29 program reviews. The number of reviews had gone down significantly in 2018, with only 8 being conducted compared to 23 in 2017. It goes without saying that the review reports are not published. Nor are the evaluation indicators themselves available on the IEAQA website.[8]

This national problem coincided with a near total absence of internal quality assurance processes within higher education institutions. Moreover, student participation in quality assurance or in any other aspect of the reforms was virtually non-existent, contrary to the Bologna process prescriptions. In sum, Bologna process implementation in Tunisia was restricted to the new degree structure and totally disregarded other substantial changes dictated by the process, including quality assurance. Although, thanks to the establishment of IEAQA, quality assurance is not completely absent from the system, there is no significant implementation either.

This paper focuses on the policy process behind the establishment of a quality assurance system for HE in Tunisia. Our study asks what evidence was

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7   See Sahraoui S. (2007), *Implementation of a New Degree Structure in the Context of Higher Education Reform in Tunisia*, Dissertation submitted in part-fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education, University of Oxford, p. 8.

**8**   http://www.ieaqa.com/index.php/fr/

collected and, in the formulation of the policy, who the stakeholders involved were, whether there was enough ex-ante impact analysis performed, and how the process of policy formulation and implementation proceeded. It analyzes the factors behind the failure to formulate and implement a clear policy on quality assurance, a central component of the Bologna reform process.

Tunisia's modern higher education system was officially established with the education act of 1958. There are five main categories of higher education institution: universities (*jāmiʿāt*), faculties (*kulliyyāt*), institutes (*maʿāhid*), *écoles* (*madāris*) and Higher

women) distributed between 13 public universities comprising 204 higher education institutions and 72 private institutions, accounting for a little more than 30000 students. Financing for public higher education institutions is largely provided by the state. Almost 100,000 students receive government grants and scholarships. There is a growing private university sector

As the table below shows, higher education access rates in Tunisian higher education hover around 35%, similar to those of Algeria and Egypt and significantly lower than Jordan and Lebanon. [9] [10]

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Access rate	31.7%	33.5%	34.6%	34.6%	36.2%	37.3%	37.6%	36.9%	33.69%
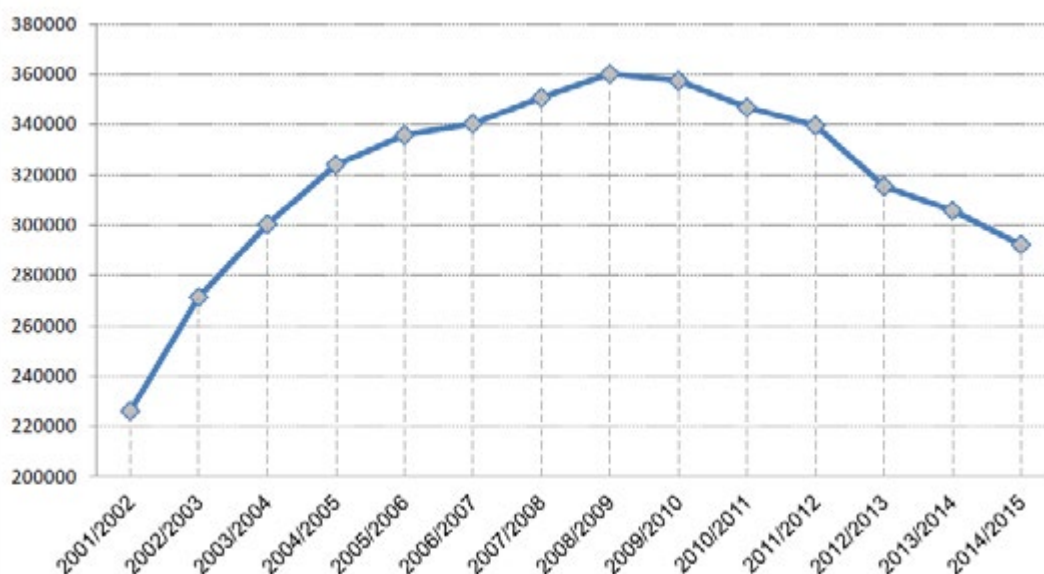
Source: Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (2016)

Institutes of Technological Studies (ISETs). The latter lie within the purview of the Directorate-General for Technological Studies.

As of the 2018 academic year, Tunisia has 22,000 teaching staff, including 12,500 full-time doctorate holders, and 270,000 students (62% of whom are

The 1990s witnessed a substantial increase in the number of students in higher education, with enrolment rates tripling in little over a decade from 15,600 in 1997 to 54,000 in 2005-2006. [11] This was not matched by a proportionate increase in resources and funding, leading to overcrowding and contributing to a decline in quality of teaching and

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9   *L'Enseignement Supérieur et la Recherche Scientifique en Chiffre, Année 2005-2006*, Bureau des études, de la planification et de la programmation, Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur de la Recherche Scientifique et de la Technologie.

10   *L'enseignement supérieur en Tunisie: dynamique et analyse de la performance,* Etude No 1, Février, 2016, Institute tunisien de la compétitivité et des etudes quantitatives.

11   *Evaluation des Résultats des Activités de Développement: Tunisie*, Programme des Nations Unis Pour le Développement, May 2012.

an increase in dropout rates. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in unemployment rates among university graduates - from 3.8% in 1994 to 10.4% in 2004.[12] Access rates dipped further from 2016-2018 as a result of changes to the grading criteria for the Baccalaureate (end of secondary education national exam): while in the past a student's GPA during their final school year provided 25% of the final grade, this grade is now entirely exam-based.

Recognizing the urgent need for reform, the government set out a new higher education program in 2006, the *Programme de Developpement de l'Enseignement Supérieur et d'Appui à la Qualité*, (PDESAQ) with the aim of improving the internal efficiency of the higher education system and strengthening the knowledge, competency and skills of graduates, contributing to a more knowledge-based economy. This is at the core of the quality assurance system sought by the Bologna style of reforms.

In 2005, the Ministry of Higher Education launched a major reform of higher education, the LMD reform. This reform implemented political commitments by Tunisia, together with the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries, to create a "Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area" by harmonizing higher education systems – in particular by introducing the three-cycle Bologna degree system and reforming university governance and quality assurance.[13] The Tunisian government argued that adoption of the Bologna process would facilitate mobility for students between higher education institutions in Tunisia and between different higher education systems, enable greater compatibility and exchange between Tunisian and EU universities and boost employability.[14]

The Ministry of Higher Education gave higher education institutions the option to enroll within the new system within three years. By 2006, the LMD system had been adopted by all higher education institutions.[15] All courses at Tunisian universities, with the exception of medical, architecture courses and engineering courses, are now based on the structure of Bachelor degrees, awarded on achievement of 180 credits; Master's degrees, awarded after a further 120 credits have been achieved; and Doctorates, at the end of 3 years beyond the Master's.

The 1989 Higher Education Law was the first to introduce the aim of increasing the employability of graduates through an emphasis on external effectiveness of higher education. A quality assurance system was first introduced in 1995 with the establishment of the *Comité National d'Evaluation* (CNE) and the *Comité National d'Evaluation des Activités de Recherche* (CNEAR). The CNE's functions included carrying out internal and external evaluations of Tunisian higher education institutions according to certain criteria: namely, production and performance.

Under the former system, higher education institutions produced their own internal evaluation reports and submitted them to the CNE. However, the system was widely recognized to be ineffective and failed to provide a systematic analysis of performance. Furthermore, there was little incentive for universities to improve the quality of their teaching, and universities had very little autonomy or involvement in the development of the objectives and goals assigned to them in a highly centralized system.[16]

The Law of 25 February 2008 introduced concepts of quality assurance into higher education. It provided for the creation of a national evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation authority. The new Agency's composition, procedures and remuneration of members were to be set by decree and its president and members appointed by the same mechanism.

In addition, the 2008 law sought to reform university administration by offering institutions the opportunity to move from centralized management to a more flexible and autonomous form of management by establishing themselves as public academic and technological institutions (EPSTs), provided that they

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12 Country Diagnostic Report: Tunisia, World Bank, 2015.

13 Catania Declaration, 2006.

14 See *Implementation of a New Degree Structure in the Context of Higher Education Reform in Tunisia*, Sofiane Sahraoui, Dissertation submitted in part-fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education, University of Oxford, 2007, p. 8.

15 *Implementation Completion and Results Report on a Loan (IBRD-73920) in the Amount of EUR 61.3 Million (US$ 76.0 Million Equivalent) to the Republic of Tunisia for a Second Higher Education Reform Support Project,* World Bank, 17 March 2015, Report No: ICR00003297.

16 *Haut Comité du Controle Administratif et Financier*, M. H. Zaiem, December 2008.

met certain conditions relating to the quality of their management.

The Ministry of Higher Education launched a quality assurance program in 2011, the PAQ (*Programme d'Appui à la Qualité*), with the aim of improving teaching standards and introducing a new decentralized system of financial management for higher education institutions. However, progress towards establishing the new quality assurance system has been very slow. The new Quality Assurance Agency envisaged by the 2008 law was only established in November 2013 when a new law brought it into existence. Although the Agency has a budget line, staff and location, it is yet to become functional and many questions remain around its precise functions, focus and priorities.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research oversees the development and implementation of higher education policy. The higher education system has been characterized as "resolutely centrally managed".[17] The Ministry sets the mission and goals of universities. It consults the

Universities Council (*Majlis al-Jāmiʿāt*), a national body composed of the heads of all the country's universities and responsible for ensuring that higher education strategic guidelines are implemented. This body is also responsible for accrediting higher education institutions, enabling them to award master's degrees and doctorates.

The government's higher education reforms of 2005-14 received direct support from the World Bank (a loan of $76 million) and from the European Union's Tempus program. The EU's EVAFOR program trained a pool of Tunisian university professors in the quality-based approach and contributed to the evaluation of university courses.

The implementation of the LMD reform was managed by a national steering committee (*Commission nationale de pilotage*) whose function was to recommend new bachelor's degrees (*License*) for approval by the Ministry of Higher Education.[18]

Literature Review

The mass expansion of higher education in Tunisia in the 1990s made it a policy area of high national priority. The major challenge facing the higher education sector was how to manage this rapid transformation from an elite to a mass education system and maintain the quality of higher education and its relevance vis-à-vis the workplace.[19] This challenge is shared by many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where graduate unemployment rates have risen in recent decades, becoming particularly acute in the last few years – nearing 30% in Tunisia and Egypt in 2013.[20]

Higher education has come to the fore in recent decades with a new emphasis on the "knowledge economy" as the key to economic development and

growth. The new global paradigm of the "knowledge society" emerged in the 1990s, putting forward knowledge as the key to economic development and prosperity.[21] This shift to a new economic model necessitates changes to various areas of economic, social and cultural policy, above all higher education policy.

The World Bank, one of the proponents of the "knowledge society", emphasizes higher education as the key to the "creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge as well as for building capacity".[22] Higher education thus becomes key not only to a nation's economic development but to its survival and integration within the global economy. Without better higher education, the

17   World Bank, 2015, p. 15.

18   Sahraoui, 2007.

19   *Quality Assurance in Universities of Developing Countries: The Case of Tunisian Higher Education, 6th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies*, IATED, 2014.

20   *Les jeunes et l'emploi en afrique du nord: rapport de synthese, Organisation Internationale du Travail (OIT)*, Genève, September, 2017; *Benchmarking governance as a tool for promoting change*, Working Paper, Adriana Jaramillo, World Bank, 2013.

21   Sahraoui, 2007, p 38.

22   *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, The World Bank, 2002, p. 4.

World Bank and UNESCO task force on higher education and society concludes, "developing countries will find it increasingly difficult to benefit from the global knowledge-based economy".[23] The global dimension of higher education and its role in economic development thus raises the question of how to improve quality of teaching to make graduates both well-equipped for the new knowledge society and globally competitive to ensure integration within the global knowledge-based economy.

This emphasis has dovetailed with the Tunisian government's growing concerns about the employability of university graduates. The 1989 Higher Education Law singled out employability as a major objective of higher education. The sharp increase in university enrolment figures in the 1990s and the accompanying rise in unemployment rates among university graduates led to increased concerns about the gap between university teaching and labor market needs. Employability was a major objective of the 2005 and 2006 higher education reforms and was cited as a key rationale for the changes.

Alongside this renewed focus on higher education as a vector of economic development, new dynamics emerging within Europe in the 1990s emphasized standardization of higher education across different countries. The Bologna process launched in 1999 by the Ministers of Education and university leaders of 29 countries sought to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) linking together different higher education systems, implementing measures to facilitate mutual recognition of academic qualifications and promoting mobility and exchanges between institutions. The extension of the process to non-European countries was, according to Lepoivre, prompted by concerns over the growing gap between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, constituting "nuclei of potential political tensions".[24] Tunisia came together with other southern Mediterranean countries to call for the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education

Area, announcing a commitment to this in the 2006 Catania Declaration.[25]

The LMD reforms launched in 2005 and the associated quality assurance measures were thus seen by decision-makers and other stakeholders as mandated by Tunisia's international agreements, part of commitments made to international partners.[26] The Tunisian government received support to implement the reform process from the World Bank and the European Union's Tempus Program. The World Bank's $76 million Second Higher Education Reform Support Project (PARES II) provided support to the government's PDESAQ 2006-14 reforms. The program sought to expand university capacity, revise the legal framework to give greater autonomy to universities, develop a quality assurance and accreditation system and develop financing mechanisms that would provide higher education institutions with incentives to improve their quality and performance.

The program evaluation found a 100% success rate in adoption of the new LMD degree structure by universities by the official deadline. However, in the area of quality assurance, the evaluation report notes that as late as 2014, "although the Agency has been created, it is not yet functional and there are questions about whether the Agency is likely to achieve its mission under its current Director-General". The evaluation found "considerable resistance among some higher-level officials to the fundamental reforms of higher education management" and "reluctance to be seen to be supporting reforms that were inconsistent with centrist principles".[27] Major shortcomings were identified in policy monitoring and evaluation (M&E) – while data on project outcomes was supposed to be collected by new "observatories" that were to be established at each higher education institution, the 2012 report noted that "most of the observatories only exist on paper".[28] However, the project team found "a distinct improvement" following the revolution, as the new government renewed its commitment to the

23 *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise,* The World Bank, 2000, p. 9.

24 *La réforme de l'Espace Européen de l'Enseignement Supérieur Quelques clés d'analyse pour les universitaires des pays tiers participant aux programmes européens de l'enseignement supérieur,* Bureau Europe de l'Ouest et Maghreb, 2007, p. 67.

25 Sahraoui, 2007, p. 40

26 Sahraoui, 2007, p. 44.

27 World Bank, 2015, pp. 11, 30.

28 *Ibid.,* p. 17.

reforms and pushed ahead with establishing the new quality assurance agency. Beyond this report, the lack of progress on the establishment of the QA agency and any significant inroads in QA within higher education institutions has to be read in the context of a gentleman's agreement between all members of the higher education establishment, including the political leadership in the government and ministry of higher education, the ministry's bureaucratic hierarchy, higher education institutions leadership, and the all-powerful workers' union (National Union of Tunisian Workers). The lack of accountability within the system provided for by the absence of any QA provision seems to suit all parties.

More generally, monitoring of educational outcomes has also been identified as a weak point in the MENA region. Indicators to assess the performance of higher education institutions are scarce and there is a near absence of data on student learning outcomes in higher education.[29] In a comparative study of university governance, the World Bank found that few universities in the region have surveys in place to monitor the time it takes graduates to find employment, the areas in which they find employment, or their average salaries.[30] This poses a significant challenge in assessing the external effectiveness of higher education. While the external effectiveness of a higher education system is primarily tied to economic growth, studies in many countries in the region (Algeria and Egypt for example) have shown that there is a gap between demand for skills in the labor market and skill provision within the education and training system.[31] This skill gap is generally a symptom of quality deficiency in educational provision.

Comparative studies of higher education institutions in the MENA region reveal common challenges but also significant differences. Tunisia's universities appear to have markedly less autonomy in comparison with other countries in the region. Universities have little room to make their own decisions on many academic,

human resources, and financial matters – much less than universities in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine or Morocco.[32] In contrast, private universities in Tunisia enjoy significantly more autonomy.

In quality assurance, the World Bank's benchmarking report found that in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, approximately a quarter of the sample universities do not have a quality assurance system in place. This is in sharp contrast with Egypt, Iraq and Palestine, where all participating universities had a quality assurance system in place. External quality assurance systems were found to be less common than internal systems and when they do exist, are often under government oversight.

However, progress is being made. Several MENA countries have created quality assurance agencies in recent years and the number of countries mandating quality assurance in higher education has increased. A scoping study of the region's agencies found a positive trend towards greater independence – most agencies no longer report directly to the head of the executive branch (President/Monarch) but to a higher education authority. Agency members are largely no longer appointed directly by the highest level of leadership in the country and a variety of stakeholder groups are represented, particularly higher education institutions, government and industry and labor market representatives.[33] Many agencies are now playing a more active role in producing external quality assurance reports in comparison with a similar study in 2008, indicating that quality assurance capacity is being built.

Nevertheless, existing quality assurance agencies continue to face financial and operational challenges. In a study of quality assurance agencies, they cite their top three obstacles as being: lack of "quality assurance culture" and experience, limited resources/funding, and lack of autonomy.[34]

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29 World Bank, 2013.

30 World Bank, 2013, pp. 30-31.

31 *International Labor Organization (ILO)*, 2017, p. 11

32 World Bank, 2013.

33 Sahraoui, S. *Second Scoping Study: Survey of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education in the Arab Region*, Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, October 2012.

34 Sahraoui, 2012, pp. 93-94.

Research findings

The policy making process is typically represented as a multi-step cycle comprising the stages shown in Figure 1. The cyclical nature of the conceptual model highlights the iterative nature of policy making. Successive and continuous refinements of a policy are often required in response to the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the policy's implementation. Refinements are necessary because realities on the ground change, and also because of the nature of the policy making process, for no matter how much evidence is integrated into the early stages of the cycle, the process remains imperfect and relies to some degree on trial and error.
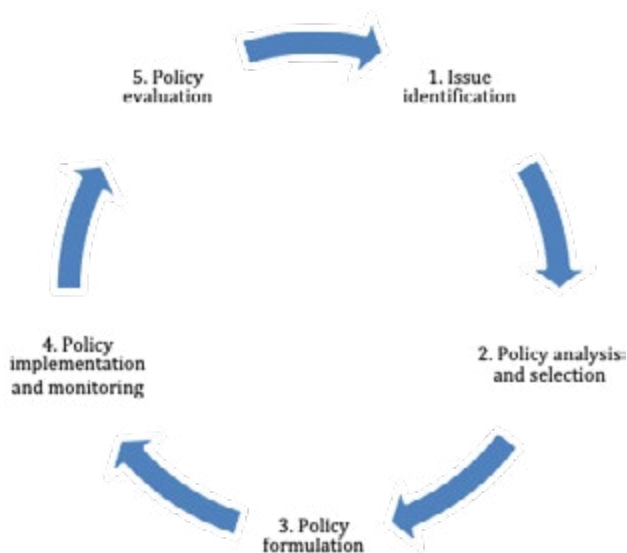

Figure 1. A diagram of the various steps in the policy cycle.

The policy cycle is often depicted by the five steps of Figure 1, namely:

1. Issue identification and agenda setting.

2. Policy analysis: Identification and ex-ante evaluation of policy alternatives.

3. Policy formulation.

4. Policy implementation and monitoring.

5. Policy evaluation.

The objective of this study was to analyze each stage of the policy relating to the introduction of a quality assurance system and identify its key characteristics, in particular how each stage in the policy cycle was carried out, who was involved, how the various

stakeholders interacted, and how much objective evidence was integrated in the decision making process at that stage.

The research methodology consisted of analyzing secondary sources, including academic publications and institutional reports, together with a set of semi-structured interviews with the various stakeholders in the policy process. The following stakeholders were identified at the outset: Political authorities (ministers and their cabinets, members of parliaments), public administration (public administration officials, bureaucrats/technocrats, state think thanks), academia (active and retired professors and university administrators), students and civil society organizations (student associations, civil society organizations, labor unions, trade and business organizations, media, independent think tanks), and international agencies and institutions (financial institutions, technical support and aid agencies).

We collected the opinions of the following stakeholders from accounts reported in secondary sources, namely published articles, public statements, and media interviews:

• Political authority: Minister of higher education.

• Academia: Deans of private and public higher education institutions.

• Labor and Trade union representatives.

We complemented this evidence with a series of semi-structured interviews with the following key actors:

• Public administration: head of the Quality Assurance Agency.

• Academia: retired university and active university presidents.

• Private higher education institutions: deans of private higher education institutions (HEIs).

• International financial institutions (IFIs): Local and regional representatives of the World Bank, the institution that financed a major multi-year program of higher education reform.

• Students: Representatives of the two principal national student unions.

We also set up a social network special interest group on quality assurance in higher education in Tunisia. The group is growing in membership, and is attracting teachers, students, and parents. While the discussions so far have not lead to important additional evidence for the paper, it will certainly serve as an important resource for future research on the issue, especially as the group grows in membership and scope. The group is particularly useful in facilitating quick polls and opinion surveys.

We now summarize the analysis of the feedback from the various stakeholders according to the policy cycle framework set out in Figure 1 and its various stages.

Firstly, the issue identification and agenda setting stage. It appears that the key thrust behind the law establishing a quality assurance and accreditation agency was not homegrown. All the local stakeholders interviewed, such as representatives of the public administration, university administration and professors, confirm that the initiative was originally driven by recommendations of external actors, mainly international financial institutions and international partners, in particular the World Bank and the European Union. The objective of the Ministry was to implement these recommendations and to align Tunisia with its European neighbor, specifically its Bologna reform process.

Nevertheless, the situation has developed since then. A local homegrown discourse in favor of a quality assurance system in Tunisian higher education has developed albeit in limited circles. This discourse has developed from a growing realization that the quality of the training provided by Tunisian HEIs, both public and private, is behind international standards, as demonstrated by the position of Tunisian universities in international rankings. The continued high rates of unemployment of university graduates combined with the shortage of labor in some sectors has also underlined the inadequacy between the skills sought by the local economy and the training delivered by most HEIs.

The fact that the quality assurance framework was originally driven by external actors is problematic, however. It appears that there was no real debate on the causes of quality degradation in the higher education sector: Is it the lack of accountability and the weakness of external or internal M&E systems? Or is it rather the lack of university autonomy and the excessive centralization? Or is it inadequate infrastructure and inadequately trained faculty? In the absence of in-depth objective studies and an open and broad dialogue, the analysis of the real causes of the quality challenge is often superficial, and issues surrounding quality are often reduced merely to shortages in adequate infrastructure and resources.

The representatives of the student unions were particularly of the view that the agenda is defined by external IFIs, namely the World Bank. They insist that there was no real consultation, and any communication from the Ministry on the subject was a mere formality after the policy proposals and decision had already been finalized. Their view is that the reforms do not answer the real needs in the Tunisian higher education system, and that solutions are projected from the European, especially French, context, which is quite different from local realities.

Representatives of student associations (national student unions) point out that the migration to the new degree structure, LMD, was "supposedly" motivated by the need to address the mismatch between higher education training and the needs of the job market, thereby alleviating the problem of high unemployment among university graduates. The unemployment situation has not improved, however, following the implementation of the LMD system. Quite the opposite – according to them, it has worsened. They conclude therefore that the policy did not emerge from an understanding of local needs and did not integrate objective evidence concerning local realities. They add that few studies were undertaken to identify the major challenges faced by the Tunisian higher education system. Student associations concur that the Ministry simply implemented recommendations of international donors with a privatization agenda, relying on little evidence beyond simple aggregate statistics on higher education enrolment and rates of unemployment.

This opinion that policy-making related to quality assurance in higher education lacked appropriate studies and evidence is echoed by the local representative of the World Bank, who is a former director of a university mission and a former public servant within the Ministry of Higher Education. He points out that the unit responsible for studies and planning within the Ministry does not carry out enough monitoring and evaluation studies regarding higher education institutions and the quality of their

teaching and programs. Rather, it simply stores basic data and statistics about HEIs such as numbers of local and foreign students, faculty, budgets, and other basic information. Moreover, on the internal front, internal quality units are weak and have not really developed since they were not created as real meaningful entities. Without functional internal quality units, it is hard to identify the quality gaps at the institutional and program levels.

There appears to be a consensus from student unions, former public officials, professors and university administrators that reform policies are often initiatives tied to the programs of external funding agencies motivated by a desire to align the country to European standards and processes. There is little genuine participation by domestic stakeholders in identification of the issue and its root causes and designing policy solutions. This creates significant challenges for policy implementation further down the road, as various stakeholders feel totally disengaged, adopt a distrustful position, and sometimes actively oppose the reform initiative from the moment it is introduced. This points to a significant structural problem in the way consultation is carried out, and the strategies adopted by political authorities to engage stakeholders in the initial stages of policy design, to facilitate smoother participation in later stages of implementation.

Next, on policy analysis and selection. The consensus among domestic non-governmental stakeholders was that not enough consultations had been conducted. One university president reported that he was given 24 hours to respond to a policy proposal on quality assurance by the Ministry, suggesting that the consultation was a mere formality. Several actors have expressed the view that there was no real interest in collecting a variety of opinions and arriving at a consensual policy proposal that reflected an understanding of real needs based on a broad debate. It is difficult therefore to identify any other policy alternatives that were considered at the time the policy was formulated, since it seems to have been conceived, drafted and imposed top-down by the Ministry, according to numerous stakeholders.

The country's history of strong social welfare policies and in particular universal access to free education appears to contribute to distrust towards M&E and quality assurance initiatives. Professors' unions consider M&E systems and quality assurance policies to be the first step towards introducing free market concepts into education, a path that will end with privatization. The concept of public-private partnerships in education is still largely unknown or misunderstood. The fear of privatization and the threat it is seen to pose to free universal access to education is behind antagonistic positions towards many quality related reforms. This is exacerbated by the lack of clarity on the part of the government with regards to its vision of how education should be financed in the future.

Moreover, quality is a slightly foreign concept to North African and generally francophone countries.[35] The legalistic francophone tradition of policy making and the strong role of the centralized state might be behind the lack of focus on accountability and evaluation in higher education institutions. This might also explain the lack of policy alternatives proposed by the non-government actors at this stage of the policy process, given their lack of familiarity with the proposed concepts.

Moving on to policy formulation, the policy proposal appears to have been developed in a relatively closed circle. The desired policy outcomes were not clearly stated and are not documented, beyond the contents of the law itself. Non-governmental domestic stakeholders state that they were not presented with much evidence to support their informed engagement. Some continue to question the motives of IFIs and the need for a quality assurance agency in the first place. Some professors argue that such a quality and M&E-focused approach might restrict academic freedom by involving external authorities in deciding the content of courses. This fear of external control is confirmed by the head of the quality assurance agency as a main cause behind resistance from stakeholders in academia.

Stakeholders identified significant problems within the law establishing the quality assurance agency, in particular the fact that the entity does not enjoy independence but was established under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, which does not reflect international best practice. The head of the agency claims that he is still trying to get

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35   Quality assurance in higher education is more advanced in other parts of the Arab region than in the Maghreb region – see *Benchmarking governance as a tool for promoting change*, Working Paper, Adriana Jaramillo, World Bank, 2013.

the law changed so that the agency is independent, as per international best practice.

A segment of university faculty appears to have an interest in the continuation of the current state of affairs. The lack of transparency and evaluation gives them a great deal of freedom in terms of attendance, pay, and performance in the classroom. As in any well-thought-out reform, policymakers must ensure that the winners outnumber the losers, and that key stakeholders are brought on board. Many stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction at inadequate communication and consultation by political authorities, and a deficit in political leadership. The resistance of unions to quality improvement initiatives, for example, is not unsurmountable, especially if they are involved early on in the elaboration of policies. The case of education reforms introduced by the education department of the counties of Washington and Montgomery provides an example of different strategies for engaging stakeholders and aligning interests.[36] Early participation in the reform process by the union in Montgomery made a significant difference to their willingness to accept policies that linked teacher salaries with evaluation of teacher performance based on the value added and the progress registered by their students. Meanwhile, similar reform attempts in Washington failed, partly due to a non-inclusive policy making process.

Despite recommendations by various stakeholders that the agency be independent from the Ministry, this was not adopted. Conferences were organized where international best practices were presented. Unfortunately, these best practices were not taken into account in this regard. This has been compounded by the problem of overwhelming centralization in the Tunisian higher education system; the Ministry is just as accountable as the universities. It is difficult for the current institutional arrangements not to

compromise the freedom of the agency and the credibility of the evaluations it conducts, especially on public universities.

As far as implementation and monitoring is concerned, the agency has now been set up – albeit many years after the law was initially passed – and now employs over thirty staff members as well as a number of external evaluators. As noted above, by the end of 2018 it had already conducted 60 reviews, but it is not clear how the outcome of the reviews was communicated back to the institutions concerned in order to improve on the quality of their provision. Moreover, the sharp decrease in the number of reviews in 2018 (8) compared to 2016 and 2017 (28 and 23 respectively) could be an indication that the Agency is losing steam. A new invitation to tender posted on the Ministry of Higher Education website has announced the creation of a National Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation in Higher Education and Scientific Research.[37] It is not clear however if this new Agency will replace IEAQA or will boost its capacities and endow it with an autonomous status. Irrespective of this, the posting of an invitation to tender at this stage is a clear indication that policy implementation is being redirected to better pursue objectives that have not yet been achieved

Finally, to perform evaluation of the policy, its objectives should be clear. These have not been properly articulated. It is difficult to imagine that evaluation could be conducted properly in the absence of clear objectives. It appears that the mere creation of an agency seems to convince some parties that the policy has been successfully implemented and objectives met. However, the invitation to tender referenced above seems to indicate that the policy to create the IEAQA as a tool of improving the provision of higher education seems to have failed and there is an attempt to go back to the drawing board and rework the policy.

Analysis and discussion

The accounts of the various stakeholders confirm that the policymaking process was seriously deficient in many important aspects, and throughout the various

stages of the policy cycle. We identify here the key deficiencies that impact the policy making process in the field of introducing a quality assurance system

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36 https://bit.ly/2XUqMhI

37 Avis the preinformation relative a un marche de services: Appui a la creation d'une agence nationale d'evaluation et d'accreditation dans le domaine de l'enseignement superieur et de la recherche scientifique, EMORI – Lot ANEA.

within higher education in Tunisia. While the policy case study is specific, most of the identified challenges and shortcomings are general to many policy making exercises. The lessons, in terms of diagnosis as well as proposals and recommendations, are likely to be transferrable to other spheres of public policy making.

Improper issue identification and lack of adequate research on weaknesses and strengths of existing systems. Almost all stakeholders have confirmed that insufficient evidence was collected on the existing higher education system, its internal efficiency, or external effectiveness, before the policy was proposed. The policy objectives were not therefore clearly stated and tied to existing shortcomings, strengths, and weaknesses. This led to a disconnect between the policy and the various actors who are key to ensuring the success of its implementation.

Interviews with leading university presidents show that they still question the motives and the objectives of the quality assurance policy proposals.

Lack of adequate participation and buy-in. Real participation is lacking. A university President confirmed that the Ministry does not have a genuine interest in participative governance. For example, the Council of University Presidents was enlarged to include DGs of the Ministry a decade ago, thereby drowning the voices of University Presidents in any vote and skewing it in favor of the Ministry. Despite presidents being nominated effectively by the ministry, however, their input is still distrusted. Evidence suggests that political authority was not ready to accept parallel or counterbalancing authority. Of course, with lack of genuine belief in the value of wide participation, any consultations would not be conducted in any meaningful way. Another University President reports that consultations were not genuine and that input was ultimately ignored in favor of a solution completely drafted within a few offices in the Ministry.

Lack of consensus around reforms due to lack of a political champion and a manifest deficit in leadership. It is clear that the key stakeholders are not supportive of the reforms, do not understand them in detail or are wary of their implications. This is symptomatic of a deficient policy making process, especially in the early stages. Before formulating a policy, it is important to ensure wide participation, communicate the objectives of the policy clearly to all stakeholders, outline its benefits and reassure groups that resist it because of its implications on their interests.

Lack of transparency. There is a genuine reluctance towards introducing mechanisms for transparency. This is a major deficiency in the policy making process. Budgets, internal data about governance processes, information about the performance of institutions, faculty, and students are not shared with the various stakeholders and with society at large. Our interviewers report that even universities are not aware of the details of the Ministry's budget.

Weak culture and tradition of policy evaluation. There is a pervasive lack of policy evaluation.

Prevalent culture of unaccountability. Universities currently have few mechanisms by which they can be held accountable, especially by students. There are no compulsory course or teaching evaluations. The Ministry, for its part, is not keen to decentralize, and HEIs are not keen to take on more autonomy as it will imply a bigger degree of accountability.

Excessive centralization/lack of sufficient autonomy. Many universities do not mind the lack of autonomy as it means lower levels of accountability. Central administrations are wary to cede autonomy to universities. This creates a stable equilibrium favoring mediocrity.

Distrust of independent institutions. There are few examples and very little history of well-functioning independent institutions in Tunisia. Independence immediately raises the fear of institutions and processes that are out of control, unfair, lack quality standards, or are totally unaccountable. This reaction goes beyond public officials to university professors and other stakeholders.

Summary

This paper studies and critically assesses the policy making process in the sector of higher education institutions in Tunisia, through the case studies of the reform policies related to introduction of a quality

assurance agency. Important reforms have been conducted in the past decade, namely the migration to a new degree structure aligning the country with the Bologna model of European higher education, which was supposed to be accompanied by parallel reforms in the area of quality assurance. Progress on this front has been much slower, however, and has encountered several difficulties.

While things did not seem to have changed much with the 2011 "Jasmine revolution," with the Ministry of Higher Education blocking any change towards a pervasive QA system that would hold institutions of higher learning accountable for the quality of educational provision, there has been movement of late towards a reinvigorated and more active IEAQA. This is the result of funding provided by the European Union and the World Bank to enact an effective QA system in Tunisian Higher Education. However, it is still not clear whether the new QA system will supersede the current one that has been in place since 2013 or improve on it. Moreover, the new system includes research alongside teaching and learning. QA of research is easier both from a technical point of view as well as a political point of view. The Tunisian higher education system is organized such that teaching and research are managed separately. They also take place in different spheres of the higher education space. Research is primarily a function of research units and laboratories which are managed by the State Secretariat for Scientific Research (dependent on the Ministry of Higher Education). Teaching and learning, on the other hand, are the core functions of universities and are mired in a laissez-faire system that only strong leadership and a clear vision can unravel. Moreover, and although the subject of the 'reform' is still QA in higher education, the new process is not the continuation of the previous policy process presented in this paper. It is rather a new process, albeit using holdovers from the the old one, to put in place QA in Tunisian Higher Education. Compared to its predecessor, this process seems to be more participative, although it is still too early to make a definitive judgment. What both policy processes share is external stimuli, namely the European Union and the World Bank. Without the "legitimation" effects of such bodies, policymaking seems to have very little chance of succeeding.

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