

Tertiary Education

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Over several decades, countries all over the world have considerably expanded their public universities or have seen the expansion of their private universities. The overall aims of these policies and developments are

- to strengthen the national science and research base (basic and applied), within and outside the university sector (in the beginning with a strong emphasis on technologies, but always including broader motives such as progress of mankind in understanding our existence and promoting sustainable ways of living),
- to provide higher education and training to meet the aspirations of students (and their families and other stakeholders) for highly relevant and stimulating university degrees that prepare people for fulfilling lives and productive careers.
- to promote university-industry relations in two directions: make university research more relevant and enable the transfer of research results into practice, new products, services and jobs.
- To encourage universities to be responsive to the needs of external stakeholders in a timely way- within a framework of appropriate regulation and accountability

Universities thus have become a central sector for all education systems, delivering programmes through different partners in the education sector. They contribute considerably to the public understanding of science and – of central importance – innovate to the advantage of society and the economy. They are important factors in international cooperation and competition.

The ongoing process of globalisation is partly driven by universities and partly from calls on universities to respond. They promote international exchange of knowledge, staff and students, and have developed effective instruments to cooperate on an institutional (university or faculty) basis as well as of promoting individual mobility.

Education systems have at the same time (responding to the interest of students in higher qualifications) expanded the participation of pupils in secondary education, including students from culturally, socially or economically disadvantaged groups. Access of girls and young women to schools and universities has become an important policy concern – how to meet the needs of diversified student populations and of constantly rising numbers of students?

Another concern is the dominance of students participating in humanity studies as against the growing demand for qualifications in natural and technological studies. Unemployment of university degree holders is on average considerably lower than unemployment of groups with lower qualifications. However, in many countries, persons with humanities degrees do not find jobs or are employed below their potential.

The growing diversity of student populations has been met by universities and other post-secondary education and training institutions by offering courses on different levels and in new fields of studies, often stimulating new areas of economic activity. It

is therefore more appropriate to broaden the discussion to embrace tertiary education as the third sector of national education and training systems.

Progress of science and knowledge has led to new fields of studies and of combinations of research areas. Universities have entered into national and increasingly international competition, aiming to enhance quality, attract a growing share of public resources, support from companies and foundations, and to become more attractive to the best students. Whilst countries are supporting this international orientation with marketing campaigns abroad, universities appreciate that international partnerships offer important growth opportunities for staff and innovative joint degrees are developing. A recognised and accepted quality assurance system would offer further support to encourage co-operation between BMENA and G8 countries. However, such systems must be applied equitably to all providers of higher education, including both public and private providers.

The contradictions between international cooperation and competition offer serious challenges, however. Policies to promote excellence are implemented in many countries. These processes are also encouraging international orientations of universities, e.g. hiring excellent staff abroad. Competition in this field may lead to rising salaries and increasing mobility and in the end may result in countries and single universities as winners or losers of international competition. The recognition of credentials and the need to acknowledge university degrees from different countries has led to the Bologna process as a good example for multinational cooperation to develop a common framework for comparable study structures. The European Research Area is another example that will change the framework in the European Union in favour of international cooperation within the region.

Some fears regarding the consequences are: the time span for Bachelor students is too short to be able to pass some courses abroad; the Bologna process may create new hurdles for universities outside the process. However, the Bologna process is in principle open to any country, and the European Union has implemented neighbourhood policies, e.g. with the Arabian countries in the Euromed region.

Support for talented students and/or students with low family income continues, but sometimes lagging behind inflation rates and individual needs. A growing tendency of policies to charge fees, both from nationals and foreign students, can also be observed. Universities are spending some of these new resources to cover expenditure in favour of individual support, e.g. for foreign students. Reliable information about the structure and quality of courses at foreign universities can help students make rational choices. Governments – both of home and host countries - are supporting students willing to pursue their studies, or part of them, in foreign countries with government grants. Visa procedures and the social status of foreign students are still a matter of debate in and between countries and regions.

Policies to change brain drain into brain circulation and to encourage expatriate graduates to return to their home country are being demanded.

To sum up, three related areas can be identified that may need further analysis and discussion in the BEMENA and G 8 discussions:

- Relevance with regard to the overall coherence of education systems,
- relevance with regard to the labour market, and
- overall quality and performance.

At the Senior Officials and Experts meeting, the question of whether a new working group on Tertiary Education should be established was put. The meeting decided that, rather than immediately deciding to establish such a Group, it would be better to deliver focussed workshops over the next year to inform the decision of whether there would be real advantage in establishing a Tertiary Education Working Group.

At the meeting many issues were discussed including the questions below which were offered to the meeting as a starting point for debate, and several key areas were discussed and considered, for onward consideration by ministers

Questions initially offered for discussion were:

- (1) As the international connectedness of tertiary systems evolves further, what is the scope of national policies, and how can the framework for international cooperation be developed further?
- (2) What are status and roles of tertiary education in BMENA and G 8 countries, as compared to the relatively low esteem that is attached to TVET and middle level skills in many countries?
- (3) How can the growing demand for science and technology qualifications be met, and how can the prospects of academics with degrees in humanities be improved?
- (4) How are access to universities and the overall coherence and quality of education systems be promoted in BMENA and G 8 countries??
- (5) How can multinational, bi- and multilateral cooperation of universities be enhanced in a beneficial way for both sides?
- (6) What are the prospects and how can the Bologna process be extended and made relevant?
- (7) How can international mobility of staff and students be promoted further?
- (8) What is best practice with regard to innovative measures to promote cooperation among tertiary institutions, e.g. creating foreign dependencies of universities, and what does constitute for example a bi-national university in the BMENA region?