

declared in April 2007 that the country has suffered a “profound fracture in its political organization.” Of the two rectors' associations, AVERU (Asociación Venezolana de Rectores Universitarios) covers the autonomous and private-sector universities and ARBOL (Asociación de Rectores Bolivarianos) represents the rectors of the government—controlled institutions.

The conflicts arise from the government's tense relationship with autonomous universities and the strong private sector. These institutions face ongoing threats by a government whose public policies focus on absolute control of institutions in this rich petro state and poor society—ranging from the Parliament to the Supreme Court, the Army, and the employees of the public administration. The government is also trying to control the mass media and private services in most areas including the area of health care. If the logic of the revolutionary government prevails sooner or later the whole higher educational system will fall under government control.

Surprisingly enough, this policy is being carried out with special care to work under legal procedures. No universities have been closed down, no students persecuted, and no

*The third stage of this higher education policymaking consists of the **motores**—the engines of the rapid changes that are transforming this society in ideological terms. Ideologization is now the key element of the system.*

professors jailed because of their political views. Little by little, however, under the slogan of the revolution (“fatherland, socialism or death”) the political opposition and is being eliminated. This society is being confronted with the predicament of a single line of thought dominating public discourse and a sole leader who is omnipresent in Venezuelan daily life all over the country.

However, these contradictions and conflicts remain profound since many people in society object to absolute power held by a small group led by the military. While the final outcome is largely unforeseeable at this stage, it will be interesting to see what finally happens to higher education in Venezuela—that is, coming under the total control of the government or managing to sustain some institutional autonomy and academic freedom. At the end of the day, transforming higher education without a vision for learning in the 21st century does not help academic quality and with it modernization and development. Thus how to erase inequality and to improve academic quality is still the challenge for countries like Venezuela. ■

Syrian Higher Education: Responding to a Changing Economy

DAVID HARDY AND ROGER MUNNS

David Hardy is director of Distance Education International and past president of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities. Address: The Farmhouse, Lycrome Road, Lye Green, Chesham, Bucks HP5 3LD, UK. E-mail: d.hardy@mailbox.ulcc.ac.uk. Roger Munns is senior education adviser at the British Council. Address: 10 Spring Gardens, London SW1A 2BN, UK. E-mail: roger.munns@britishcouncil.org.

The economy of the Syrian Arab Republic is heavily reliant on oil and agriculture. Under the leadership of President Bashar Al-Assad, the government is seeking to diversify the economic base, putting in place a social market economy with a vibrant business sector. To achieve these aims a reformed higher education sector is seen as a priority by the president. He wishes to see high-quality, relevant education geared to the needs of business and the economy.

THE BACKGROUND

For the past 20 years there have been 4 state-funded universities in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Tishrin. A 5th has just been set up in Deirezzor. There are also 192 intermediate institutes under the Vocational Education and Training Directorate of the Ministry of Higher Education. Of these, 34 are under the direct control of the Ministry of Higher Education, the rest are controlled by 17 different ministries.

The current education policy gives all school leavers who pass the baccalaureate exam the opportunity to go into higher education. Out of 114,298 school leavers who passed in 2006, 98,718 continued into higher education—universities or Higher Education Institutes—which is about 22 percent of all school leavers. In 2005/06 there were 244,292 undergraduate and 12,384 postgraduate students at state universities.

Popular information technology courses at the University of Damascus have a student/staff ratio of 100/1. Humanities courses have so many students that self-study is the norm, with maybe 10 percent of students attending lectures. Assessment is hugely difficult given the numbers. The use of multiple-choice essay questions emphasizes the difficulty—that is, there is not enough time to mark student essays. Students are allocated to subjects according to their baccalaureate marks rather than demand. Teaching is often of poor quality. A whole generation of teachers were instructed in the former Soviet Union and have hardly been updated since. The education process is driven by political and not market needs. Its origins lie in the 1970s and the late President Assad's

“open-door” policy. Appropriate then, it is now placing massive strain on the system.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In addressing these issues the government has already taken a number of significant steps. The president has instigated the setting up of six new private universities since 2003. The private universities charge high fees and enroll few students so far. There are no publicly available statistics on the number of students at private universities. As an indication, however, the University of Kalamoon has 2,500 students. The private institutions have much greater autonomy and local management control than the state universities. Nevertheless, private university management must still comply with national regulations to be accredited and licensed by the state as a degree-awarding institution. Thus the criteria for the appointment of a dean at a private university are set by the minister of higher education, although unlike their state counterparts the appointment is for the institution to make. While instigated by the president, in the case of Kalamoon the university was set up by local business people in discussion with key members of the government. Some of the funding came from individuals who had been successful in business overseas and wished to put something back into the local economy.

In addition and again promoted by the president, the Ministry of Higher Education has established four Centres of Excellence outside the state university framework. The Higher Institute for Applied Science and Research, the Higher Institute for Business Administration, the Institute of National Administration, and the Syrian Virtual University all have more selective admissions procedures.

The business sector, as represented by the Chamber of Industry, expresses concerns of the ability of state institutions to change fast. They are currently pinning their hopes on the private universities. Businesses represented by the Chamber of Industry state that their method of funding (student fees) forces the private universities to focus on the quality of instruction and the employability of graduates. The same concerns about higher education in general are expressed by the State National Directorate (responsible *inter alia* for higher education and reporting to the president), and the State Planning Commission (responsible for the country's Five-Year, or National Indicative, Plan). Their concerns include: a lack of clear strategic thinking; the need to strengthen quality assurance; the required retraining and updating of academic staff; and the slow-speed response and lack of flexibility.

THE FUTURE

Syria's 10th Five-Year Plan, in itself perhaps something of an

anachronism, is regarded as covering a transition phase from a centrally planned economy to that of a social market focusing on education and health. The plan introduces a number of priorities for higher education. It sets out the need for institutions to improve academic programs through changes in admissions policy; identify priority subject areas (business, science, technology, medicine, and education); meet labor market needs; and develop teaching and learning strategies. The government wishes to elaborate a five-year plan for institutional research to develop an international strategy and improve capacity. The latter part of the plan will involve the introduction of information and communication technologies into teaching and learning, a review of institutional management, and a new financial strategy that will include income generating activities. The Ministry of Higher Education and university management see the Bologna process to create a European higher education area by 2010 as important in influencing, but not dominating, their thinking. The education ministries of 45 countries, including neighboring Turkey, are signatories to the Bologna process.

The strength of European views should not be overestimated, however; rapidly growing economies such as India have influence at a time when Europe has been almost invisible.

There is a debate within government on the degree of decentralization required. If there are to be stakeholders other than government, then higher education must be made more accountable to parents, communities, business, and so on for the quality and relevance of its processes and the learning outcomes of courses of study. This contrasts with the current focus of a more authoritarian centralized system that primarily holds the state institutions accountable to public authorities.

As is intended (but not yet demonstrated) with the private universities, well-managed decentralization has the potential to improve the quality and relevance of higher education by creating a management style focusing on enablement and motivation rather than direction and control. It potentially enables teachers, parents, and business to find solutions to education and training problems. These are the people who are closer to the specific issues than government ministers and officials.

The policy proposals are sound. Their implementation will be a challenge. It is not so much a matter of financial resource as the need for the knowledge and skills to take the reform agenda forward and the fundamental necessity to change long-entrenched attitudes. It is also important that the government does not raise expectations so high that citizens become disappointed when the results take time to arrive. ■