

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

SARAH GURI-ROSENBLIT
RONALD G. SULTANA

This special issue has a long history behind it: friendships formed at the memorable 1995 Salzburg Seminar (Session 323) dedicated to the theme *Higher Education: Institutional Structures for the Twenty-First Century*, consolidated one year later at a University of Malta workshop on the management of change and quality assurance in higher education in the Mediterranean (jointly sponsored by the European Union and the Coimbra Group), and several discussions – mostly by e-mail – in order to plan themes, develop papers, solicit reports, edit drafts, and co-ordinate efforts and ideas.

The project of producing a special issue of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* dedicated to higher education – and particularly to universities – has been an exciting one for several reasons. In the first place, we constantly had the feeling that we were attempting something that had not yet been done before. Comparative education projects in this region, where differences catch one's attention more readily than do similarities, are rare, and to our knowledge, non-existent when it comes to the tertiary level sector. In the second place, we also felt that, despite this lack of tradition in carrying out collaborative work in regional educational scholarship, we were tapping an ancient and dramatic history of humanity's search for knowledge and 'truth'. Plato's academy was, after all, born in the Mediterranean, as were the first medieval universities.

Nowadays, as both Sultana's overview article and the different country contributions show, the Mediterranean basin reflects a colorful plethora of higher education systems that vary dramatically: from very large to very small, from very old to newly born establishments, operating in nations that range from highly developed to less developed, and based on a rich texture of academic traditions and cultures. Despite their noticeable divergences, all of the Mediterranean higher education systems have been confronted in the last two decades by growing pressures to expand their boundaries, to respond to an array of societal demands and to become more accountable both to the state and the public. Some of the challenges that confront Mediterranean countries reflect international trends, whereas others portray unique national contexts and even regional dimensions.

This special journal issue sets out to provide a balanced representation and a reflective and critical account of the ongoing changes that characterise higher education systems in the Mediterranean. Several themes emerge from the different contributions that feature here. It is impossible to consider the region without highlighting the three 'Abrahamic' religions that were born and still co-exist in the Mediterranean, and the impact of these faiths on academic institutions and traditions of higher learning, with the former sometimes stimulating, at other times frustrating the latter. The question of religion is tied up intimately with that of identity, and with the unavoidable conflict between trends in globalisation and internationalisation on the one hand, and national identity formation and consolidation on the other. Many of the articles and reports in this issue highlight this tension, which plays itself out in a most fascinating manner in the Mediterranean, and which is either non-existent or marginal as a dilemma in the 'western' world. Sabour's short, but critically important piece on higher education in Arab countries, together with that of Persianis on the interplay between the search for identity in post-colonial Cyprus and the attempt to connect with the international academic community, powerfully highlight aspects of the dilemma faced by several states in the region.

This tension in the interaction between national and international, local and global is heightened by the rapid change that higher education systems in the Mediterranean – and elsewhere – are undergoing. As practically all the papers and reports show, all systems of higher learning in the region are in flux, with the pace of change being particularly accelerated during the last two decades, and with the tempo likely to be kept up, if not increased, in the foreseeable future. The ongoing changes alter both the external and internal boundaries of the various higher education systems, a theme developed in Guri-Rosenblit's article. The external boundaries define the kind of institutions that consist part of each system, and thus influence greatly its size. The internal boundaries reflect the institutional texture of each system and relate to the shifting balance between: university and non-university sectors; undergraduate and graduate studies; teaching, professional training and research; and different academic fields of study. Definitions of external and internal boundaries vary greatly from one country to another, and the essence of what is entitled as a 'university', a 'college' or any other type of a higher education institution is immensely diverse. It follows that the relative magnitude and depth of changes depends heavily on the prevalent academic culture and on the socio/political conditions in each national setting.

Changes have many dimensions. First of all, there is the enormous demand for, and consequently expansion of, higher education systems. Many institutions of higher learning in the region are new, and the rate of growth is occasionally staggering, as Simsek's paper about Turkey shows. There is an expansion not only

in the number of institutions, but also in the numbers of students that institutions have to handle. The international phenomenon of massification of tertiary level studies is prevalent in the Mediterranean region, with the familiar problems and challenges that it brings along with it, including dearth of resources, overcrowded lecture halls, diluting and dropping of standards of teaching, research and scholarship, and so on. Whether one refers to Italy, as does Todeschini in his revealing and acerbic insider's view of a static country that seems to be permanently talking of reform, or whether one refers to Algeria, as does Boubekeur in his carefully researched piece on graduates' criticisms of their *alma mater*, it is evident that the problems are there, and that they are serious.

Change, expansion, diversification, the management of tensions between tradition and modernity – all bring into play what is often, in the Mediterranean, a Leviathan State. The relationship between the university and the state in the region is of critical importance. Sharing a common centralist tradition, most of the Mediterranean states' apparatus is typically top-heavy, an omnipresent bureaucracy, inimical to both free and open thought, and to the development of sharp, pertinent reactions to the riddles that confront humanity today. Saitis' paper, in particular, presents us with a blow-by-blow account of the maddeningly tedious operations of the Greek higher education bureaucracy, an account that leaves us gasping for the fresh breath of change. The state, however, can be even more of an obstacle to the fulfilment of the university's vocation, when it silences or co-opts the intellectual, playing on the centuries-old Mediterranean tradition of patronage that ensures loyalty to 'friends', rather than to the quest for 'truth' – a point that Sultana develops in his contribution, and which is applicable to most states in the region, even if the dynamics of such patronage differ from country to country. And yet, the state needs the university, if only to increase its legitimacy, as the case of Cyprus suggests.

Asked to cede more academic and administrative autonomy to universities, Mediterranean states nevertheless and generally speaking, still have to carry much of the burgeoning burden of financing an expensive tertiary education system, in a situation where the primary and secondary education sectors are far from operating at optimum levels. The demand for resources from what are, in some instances, bankrupt states, can generate new tensions and dynamics. If the report by Hashweh and Hashweh on the status of higher education in Palestine perhaps paints the most dramatic picture in this regard, it is not confined solely to that context. Gines-Mora's paper on Spain and Cabrito's report on Portugal, for instance, indicate clearly how financial pressures lead a state down the road of privatisation, the transfer of costs of higher education onto citizens, and the adoption of market policies in an area which has hitherto been regarded as the realm of 'public good'. Some states remain generous, going beyond their means

to subsidise costs, and even, as in the case of Malta, covered here by Baldacchino's report, providing a stipend to students. This in itself raises other issues, such as the extent to which state financial transfers to the tertiary education sector starve the primary and secondary ones, the morality of using scarce funds to support students who, more often than not, come from privileged social backgrounds (see the contributions by Sultana, Todeschini and Baldacchino), and the link between financial largesse on the part of the state, and the resultant strength of the same state in setting the agenda, for it is well known that it is the one who pays the piper who calls the tune.

The dynamics brought about by the confluence of factors that include finance and state intervention are noteworthy. Universities everywhere, and not just in the Mediterranean, are being called upon to make a more solid contribution to the society which supports them. This goes beyond the issue of ensuring the production and circulation of scientific knowledge; it also involves the attempt to get a good 'fit' between the skills and profiles of graduates, and the 'needs' of the labour market. Baldacchino, Boubekeur, Guri-Rosenblit, Meziani, Sabour, Sultana, – all indicate the problems in achieving this match between supply and demand, particularly given the phenomenon of the inordinate 'pull' of social over pure science faculties in universities in the region generally, and in Middle East and North African countries more specifically.

Financial and political considerations have a reach that goes beyond the intra-state dimension. The issue of globalisation signals not only the inevitable insertion of the Mediterranean university in the world-system – a process facilitated by the new communication technologies and the mobility of students – but also what can be referred to as the 'new circuits of imperialism', where knowledge transfer from the north to the south, even when it takes place under the appealing aura of aid, carries with it hegemonic – not to mention 'predatory' – overtones. Kuitunen's article on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in research and higher education raises some of these issues, which are generally absent from analyses that prefer to remain diplomatically technicist and anodyne. In particular, Kuitunen reminds us that what is considered to constitute a 'problem' is in itself political, since there is an assumption that the referent is necessarily the western-style university.

These are only some of the main themes that are addressed in this rich – and we dare say unique – collection of papers. Key words and issues that arise in most of them include: massification, diversification, globalisation, autonomy, accountability, quality assurance, management, privatisation, cost-sharing, communication technologies, language and medium of instruction, standards, research and scholarship, the role of the state, marketisation and corporatisation, resources, the role of the intelligentsia, the link between higher education and the labour market, student mobility and brain drain, technology and knowledge

transfer, the politics of international links in academia, the process of reform, credentialism and the 'diploma disease', differential access to higher learning on the basis of gender and social attributes. Several of these themes overlap with those that have been identified in the western, 'developed' world, although these concerns might here be experienced differently, with variable degrees of intensity, and with cultural overtones that add shades of new meaning to what might appear to be, on first sight, similar problems or challenges. Other themes – 'secularisation' immediately springs to mind – are more specific to the Mediterranean region.

This is not to say that the collection is 'complete' in any sense. Some Mediterranean countries – notably Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria – are not covered, except in the comparative papers by Sultana and by Kuitunen, and the synthesis report by Sabour. In addition, the amount of documentation and the available data on different higher education systems varies greatly. Thus, some of the analyses are thicker and more detailed whereas others are slimmer in scope and perspective. The presence of both full length articles and shorter reports should also be noted, with the latter being embryonic projects that will, eventually, be developed into fuller accounts in a book that is being planned as a follow-up to this initial and exploratory venture. Despite these limitations, we are convinced that the present volume makes a worthwhile contribution to an area that has been both neglected and under-researched, and helps give voice to countries and concerns that have not surfaced to the extent that they should have in international literature on higher education systems. We trust that readers will share that conviction, and that they will feel that our aspirations have, however partially, been fulfilled.