


BOOK REVIEW

Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era

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In *Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era*, Elizabeth Buckner draws upon her extensive experience of living, teaching, and researching in various Arab states over a span of fifteen years, providing a nuanced exploration of the intricate interplay between global models of education and political factors that shape higher education in the Arab world. Employing comparative and multilevel analysis, she skillfully elucidates the broader policy landscape but also weaves in the personal experiences of individuals navigating the evolving policies and opportunity structures in their lives, bringing a human dimension to what might otherwise be perceived as abstract or apolitical policies. In doing so, she relies not only on her personal experiences in the region but also on a growing set of critical literature on Arab states' higher education systems that have been increasing over the past decade.

Moving away from the often apolitical and technical literature on higher education policies in the region, Buckner notes how she avoids containment within a singular case study or ethnography. She aligns her approach with scholars who advocate for the use of theoretical and conceptual tools from a comparative education perspective. This perspective sheds light on both broad policies and their impact on real-life experiences that emerge from them. In the introductory chapter, she meticulously outlines the countries under examination, emphasizing the diversity stemming from their distinct encounters with colonialism, state structures, and economic circumstances. By focusing on three subregions—Egypt and Levant (Syria and Lebanon), Francophone North Africa (Tunisia and Morocco), and the Arab Gulf states (Qatar and the UAE)—Buckner underscores their differences and positions these cases within the global poliscap, enabling readers to discern alignments and disparities between them. For readers not acquainted with the region, this chapter serves as a reference point for navigating the rest of the book. However, using these regional analytical units does raise concerns over the possibility of falling into the limits of methodological nationalism. For example, while Buckner recognizes the connection between these countries, most alarming is her declaration, “I do not consider the peoples of the Arab Middle East and North Africa to have a common history” (p. 17). Something one can contest by examining how protests in Tunis in 2010 triggered uprisings across the broader Arab region. This connection may be linked not only to a collective sense of identity but also to the region's historical shaping, particularly in its interactions with colonialism and the subsequent emergence of independence movements.

In subsequent chapters, Buckner offers a detailed analysis of specific policies such as admissions, quality assurance, privatization, internationalization, and knowledge production in higher education, providing a comprehensive examination of these policies across the different regions. When examining university admission policy (Chapter 2), Buckner demonstrates how the different countries have different approaches to admission, but in most

cases, she concludes, what is evident is that admission policies are a political matter; sorting students and deciding their fate is very much a state affair. For example, in Jordan, “[a]dmissions policies are part of a larger political balance” that in exchange for accepting a significant number of Palestinians, the Jordanian monarchy has granted special privileges to East Bank Jordanians hailing from rural backgrounds (p. 71). In Chapter 3, she finds a common discourse in international organizations’ development approach to the region, which views higher education institutions in the Arab states as constantly “lacking.” She explains such an approach led to the emergence of the quality assurance discourse, which is entwined and dependent on a continued sense of a “crisis in education.” Frequently, she explains, quality assurance initiatives neglect the political and structural issues underlying the higher education crisis and narrowly adopt a rational approach that naively assumes quality assurance can be resolved by merely increasing spending or adopting policies such as accreditation or even privatization.

In Chapter 4, Buckner focuses on the increasing role of privatization in higher education in the Arab states today, which she explains is part of a larger movement across the world. Buckner demonstrates that privatization in higher education has taken on different shapes depending on the region. In Lebanon, it had a historical presence, like in the American University of Beirut, and in the Gulf, as in Dubai’s branch campuses. Regardless of its variations, privatization raises important questions regarding the fate of public education and the significance of the private university degrees that have a reputation of being “for sale” (p. 121). This is not to mention the dangers of further societal stratification when particular people can afford access to private schools while many others find it prohibitory.

In Chapter 5, Buckner takes on the internationalization of higher education policies, which in the region tended to address branch campuses in the Gulf; nonetheless, Buckner stretches the lens to include internationalization in the context of state-funded national institutions. Like many scholars of critical internationalization studies, Buckner finds that internationalization tends to be equated with Westernization and language policy that prioritizes English over the native language, which the institutions intend to serve. These policy changes certainly have an impact on the level of knowledge production, which is delved into in Chapter 6. As she does in the other chapters, she exposes how a rational approach to the idea of improving research outcomes ignores not only the day-to-day obstacles academics face but also the political conditions that constrain, for example, academic freedom and places them in precarious conditions.

The concluding chapter serves as a masterful synthesis of the book’s overarching theme, skillfully advocating for a reevaluation of the technical approaches to studying higher education in the Arab region. Buckner convincingly argues against adopting a posture of superiority when studying higher educational institutions in the Arab states and challenges the notion of a deficiency in higher education systems and academics in the region. She persuasively advocates for a shift in perspective, urging scholars to reconsider concepts like excellence and emphasizing the imperative of localizing policies rather than indiscriminately importing recommendations from international development organizations.

While the book successfully navigates macro-to-micro perspectives, offering valuable insights into broad higher education policies, the comprehensive approach involving seven states does present a challenge. The risk of diluting the depth and richness of the material, particularly concerning the lived experiences of the diverse actors portrayed in relation to the examined policies, is an inherent trade-off. Even within a single state, various groups undergo distinct encounters with these policies, as evidenced by the variations in experiences related to factors such as gender. Overall, *Degrees of Dignity* stands as a significant contribution to the discourse on higher education in the Arab region. Buckner’s work provides a refreshing and insightful departure from technical and Orientalist descriptions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that shape higher education in the Arab world.