

Academic Advising as a Pre-Step for the Introduction of the Human Capital Approach to Solve the Issue of Quality in the Algerian University

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Abstract

This paper looks at higher education problems in Algeria and the necessity of introducing 'academic advising' as a pre-step of the human-capital approach to solve the issue of quality. In the aftermaths of 'the bloody decade', Algeria lost the pillars of its tertiary education. To compensate, the government relied on mass access to universities which has in its turn resulted in low quality. This work seeks to check the usability of the human capital approach in solving the quality problem in Algerian universities. Because education could offer both monetary and non-monetary profits, it is considered lucrative to invest in developing human skills and competences which constitute the capital that guarantees earning a living. This research, thus, proposes 'academic advising' as a first step on the short term. The current paper presents a descriptive analysis of 50 questionnaires answered by middle and high school teachers and headmasters, university students and professors and guidance counselors. The results of this qualitative study show how 'academic advising' when extended up to the university level can harness the learner's capital.

Keywords: Academic advising, Algerian higher education, quality, the human capital approach

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Introduction

Tertiary education has the supreme mission of promoting and producing international intellectual individuals capable of making contributions in their societies. Higher education institutions must remain consistent in offering the best teaching and training, as well as remarkable academic and research performance (The Role, 1991). Universities ought, therefore, to produce and maintain a balance in their services and the quality. According to the Second UNISCO- Non- Governmental Organizations Collective Consultation on Higher Education, these institutions must:

support teaching and training programmes designed to reply directly to the identified needs of specific contexts [...] promote innovation in content and methods which can assure enhanced access to higher education while still preserving the quality of education and its relevance to social requirements [and] continue to encourage research in higher education as a means of strengthening the social function of this domain. (The Role, 1991, p. 16)

In this respect, higher education must contribute to the entire educational system. It should also keep up with this globalized world and produce international citizens fit for the globalized pool of work. Higher education, thus, functions on both the social and the economic levels. In this vein, UNISCO (1991) argues that “logically if we can recognize the major trends and challenges of higher education, then, it is high time to develop innovative approaches” (The Role, 1991, p. 20). Said otherwise, if the social role of higher education and its intellectual and educational missions are recognized and balanced, higher education can truly fulfill and play its role. To do so, it is essential to reflect on the current situations before taking any further action.

Quality in Higher Education

Quality in higher education has been a hot topic for several decades. It is so because universities are constantly under pressure to exhibit and conform to a set of criteria that determine quality. It is this quality that drives universities into competition and set some apart, and above, the others. In her paper entitled “Quality in Higher Education: Developing a Virtue of Professional Practice”, Ming Cheng (2016) claims that quality refers to the efficiency of the teaching and the learning practices and to the academic individual endeavors (p. 10). Professor Eduardo Portella (1991), in the Second UNISCO- Non- Governmental Organizations Collective Consultation on Higher Education, states that quality in higher education refers to “the intellectual and the educational missions of higher education” (The Role, 1991, p. 22). In other words, quality refers to the “excellence in knowledge and training that they [tertiary education institutions] impart” (The Role, 1991, p. 22). With these views into consideration, quality, therefore, resides in teachers and students alike in the sense that teachers are the communicators of knowledge whereas students are the activators of this knowledge. It refers also to the teacher- student exchange of knowledge and the activation of it outside the academic circle. Measuring quality, thus, could be difficult as the exchange and the activation of knowledge are abstract. Unless specific criteria are predetermined and the achievements of universities are assessed against these criteria, no clear approach to quality assessment could be reached (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 228).

Setting specific criteria for measuring the quality of higher education is a challenge being inconsistent and variant from one institution to another. Broadly speaking, an institution could be recognized as having quality when students themselves acknowledge the quality of the institution in question; when the academic goals underlined are achieved; and when the courses presented are socially useful to the learners. Tsinidou et al. (2010) advance a well known approach to quality evaluation called the Quality Evaluation Deployment (QED). The latter “can be applied for process and design improvement [whose purpose] is to visualize cause-and-effect relationships starting from the customer needs all the way down to the production process” (p. 229). The authors also propose Parasuraman et al. “five-dimension (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) model” (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 229).

The authors explain that the Tangibles represent physical infrastructure, equipments and the staff. The Reliability refers to the accuracy of the knowledge and the skills taught. Responsiveness represents the efficiency and the satisfaction of the learners’ needs. Assurance refers to the trust contract between the institution and the customer. Lastly, Empathy is the care that the institution shows towards its customers (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis & Fitsilis, 2010, p. 229). It is in taking these criteria into account that quality can be assessed. This model assures that what is taught in universities is both accurate and efficient to the learners. It assures that trust exists between the institution and the receivers of services.

Higher Education in Algeria

The last decade of the twentieth century is recorded in the Algerian history as ‘the bloody decade’. During this period, bloody massacres took place in most of the parts of Algeria. Many celebrities were victims of atrocious murder. People feared for their lives and leaving home to one’s work was a great risk. In the course of these events, the Algerian University suffered great losses as a number of professors and students were killed. There was a high rate of brain drain as people opted to leave their country in order to keep their lives and to pursue their careers. During this period, Algerian universities became almost deserted. A report issued by the ministry of higher education in Algeria shows that, in the first three years following ‘the bloody decade’, less than seven thousand BA holders accessed universities all over Algeria (MERS-DGEFS, 2016, p. 7). As many intellectuals run abroad, specialists were lacking in several fields. This was accompanied with a shortage in scientific papers and publications.

With The National Reconciliation Programme finalized on February 27th, 2006, efforts were made by the government to resurrect and revive tertiary education in Algeria. To overcome the dreadful aftermaths of ‘the bloody decade’, the government passed several laws. Among them, law N- 98/11 of August 2nd, 1998, insists on the importance of providing the necessary tools and resources to promote higher education and scientific and technological research in Algeria (as cited in Kabbar, 2014, p. 303). Access to universities was, therefore, facilitated to recapitulate the shortage. Also, a great deal of financial resources was spent on promoting tertiary institutions in Algeria.

University access facilitations led to mass education in Algerian universities. The number of BA holders joining universities was on continuous rise every year. In 2015, MERS’s report shows that around a million and half students enrolled in universities (MERS-DGEFS,

2016, p. 6). Mass education, as opposed to elite education, led to the absence of quality. Despite the efforts and the policies issued to elevate higher education in Algeria, universities are still underrated. Ranking Web of Universities issued a report in January, 2nd, 2019 indicating that the best Algerian university (University of Constantine/ Mentouri Brothers) only ranked 1932 on a list containing about twenty-eight thousand university (Ranking Web of Universities, 2019, p. 19).

In his book published in 2000, Dr. Oueld Khalifa insists on the idea that Algeria is in possession of human and financial resources that still need to be activated not through imitation but through investing in people who are able to make contributions to their society (as cited in Boufalaga, 2016). In the light of this idea, an approach to refining and reshaping human resources must be incorporated in order to create competent learners capable of producing scientific or technological research papers and to direct their creativity to generate new knowledge and products.

A trend known as Education For All (EFA) came to light in the last years in several countries all over the world. The EFA is based on the premise of offering a basic education to all and which, in its turn, consists of a package of skills, knowledge and attitudes meant to build a flexible human capital that is ready to fit in the global economy (Coraggio, 1994, p. 1). Out of this trend, the idea that investment in education means investment in people grew up and started to crystallize in order to move with economy forwards by preparing people to obtain jobs in the global economy. This theory puts human beings at the center of any economic or social development. It supports the idea that increased poverty could only be solved via increased education. Investing not only in infrastructure but also in education leads to higher, long-term and sustained productivity ratios. To reach this, “educational policies must be [then] integral to social and economic policies, if they are to be instrumental to the betterment of everyday life” (Corragio, 1994, p. 3).

The Human Capital Approach

In the light of EFA and the integration of educational policies with the social and the economic ones, the government’s role is primordial (Corragio, 1994, p. 3). Policy makers must, then, work on improving textbooks and fostering the growth of individual and collective motivation of how to acquire and produce knowledge. Focus must be on teachers since they are vehicles of change and bearers of historical memory. Teachers also administrate social programs and conduct researches. The government must also “nurture the political will necessary to prioritize education as an investment capable of multiplying development opportunities” (Corragio, 1994, p. 4).

The human capital approach, then, grows out of the idea of linking economic development to education. People with developed education and skills would contribute to the economic growth. Higher education must receive greater attention under this approach because members of tertiary education have more awareness of the importance of education in the pool of work.

After ‘the bloody decade’, Algeria has become a more stable nation that fosters democratic principles. Therefore, it should foster and support the growth of both education and work

opportunities. The idea of bridging the gap between educational and economic policies is at the heart of the human capital approach and is the key to promote higher education in Algeria.

Increased outlays for education along with sustained policies would lead to increased returns (Schiller, 2008, p. 16). Within the same idea, greater education capital investment leads to greater monetary and non-monetary profits (Taubman & Wales, 1974, p. 25). The greater the education capital is, the greater the returns are going to be. Investment in education as an initial step would bring a stream of future incomes. Taubman & Wales (1974) state that greater investment in higher education is fruitful because:

Higher education is capable of teaching a person general facts, the use of specific tools, and general problem-solving techniques. In addition, it can influence a person's behavior by making him more tolerant of diversity, better able to stand stress, a better leader, and more disciplined mentally. All these aspects of cognitive and affective behavior could make a person a more productive and effective worker. (p. 26)

Todaro & Smith (2003) introduce the relation existing between education and health as an example. They believe that investment in developing better health study programmes at the university would produce individuals in possession of the necessary skills to contribute to the field of health both with doctors and extra research papers (Todaro & Smith, 2003, p. 4).

If put simply, the human capital approach can refer to any investment in people which contributes and amplifies their productivity. In order to achieve higher ratios of productivity, the human capital approach must be taken into consideration when preparing learning programmes and when advising students to make choices for their academic paths. Capital, being defined roughly as resources, “refers to any characteristic of a worker (skills, special knowledge, health, or mobility) that helps make that worker productive” (Leigh, 1997, p. 6). In the academic field, “human capital theory offers a valuable, unifying perspective in which to judge the value of students’ choices made during the advising process and to insure the quality of the investment they are making in their educations” (Leigh, 1997, p. 6)

Because of the changing attitude towards work and profit making, universities and colleges must work on preparing students for entry in the work pool. Focus must, then, shift from the value of the degree itself to the value of the students’ acquisitions and the readability to put them into practice. On this idea, Leigh states that “college students can pursue and obtain a formal credential, and yet not develop their human capital to its fullest potential” (Leigh, 1997, p. 6). In the Algerian context, the human capital theory can be used as a “teaching tool to challenge the assumptions of a credentialist orientation, as a framework for student decision making in choosing a major programme of study” (Leigh, 1997, p. 6). In Algeria, focus on the diploma acquisition orients higher education. Focus should not be on the completion of studies but rather on what is being taught and how much of it has been grasped by the learners.

Leigh advances the five categories of investment in human capital that were identified by Schultz (1961): formal education, adult education, on-the-job training, health and geographic mobility. Out of these categories, the second and the third one are related to tertiary education

(Leigh, 1997, p. 6). Leigh (1997) again quotes Harrington & Levinson (1992) who believe that human capital, which is the product of formal education, “is created when people acquire transferable skills that can be applied in many settings and that can inform many different occupations” (as cited in Leigh, 1997, p. 6).

Difficulties Facing Higher Education in Algeria

In the last few years, there have been a lot of changes that affected different institutions, be they educational, economic or political. In the process, interest in human resources as the key for development has increased. This interest arose due to the indispensability of humans in any institution. In tertiary education institutions, focus is on teachers and learners as they are the promoters of this field. Yet, Algerian teachers and learners are faced with a set of insurmountable handicaps: the lack of financial support and the absence of clear administration of the field. The field is not equipped with well trained teachers who complain from the lack of sufficient training opportunities. Teachers receive some formal training that does not take their needs into account. No needs analysis is conducted prior to the training and no assessment is performed post the training. The training that novice teachers receive is limited in the amount of time as well the content. The latter is standardized for all teachers and does not address the different specialties and the teachers' lacks.

On the other hand, graduates from universities find themselves with mere diplomas that do not meet the needs of the work pool, if there any job positions at all. Learners are graduating with the stereotype that no job awaits for them which in its turn resulted into a massive disinterest. Algerian universities are, then, saturated with underprepared, unmotivated learners whose graduation does not matter anymore as their outlook seems defeatist. In an issue by the ministry of higher education in Algeria, there were more than a million and half university students in 2015 with only fifty-four thousand university teachers (MERS-DGEFS, 2016, p. 6).

Other issues burden the system as well. Significant barbs are being communicated with regard to the incompetency of novice teachers, the nature of the content being taught and the undefined blurry assumptions of higher education. Does the mission of the Algerian university lie in preparing graduates for the jobs they would hold? Do all the majors guarantee a job upon graduation? There are some major options that are considered by the students as ‘dead losses’ since there are no actual jobs for these majors upon graduation. These barbs are overarched with the hot debate of how much money is being paid to university teachers. All these issues come to the spotlights at a time where serious emergency measures should be taken to remediate the ailing Algerian university.

In the same issue by the ministry, missions of higher education and the reforms undertaken to elevate it were identified as: to respond effectively to the needs of the society in terms of quality, to respond to the employability concerns of the graduates, and to create an osmosis between the university and the socio-economic environment (MERS-DGEFS, 2016 p. 15-16).

Questionnaire Design and Methodology

This section is devoted to the descriptive analysis of 50 questionnaires. The participants in this questionnaire were middle and high school teachers, middle and high school headmasters, middle and high school guidance counselors, university freshman and university professors in the city of

Jijel, Algeria. There were 10 middle and high school teachers, 7 middle and high school headmasters, 5 middle and high school guidance counselors, 20 freshmen and 8 university professors. 64% of the participants were female and the other 36% were male.

Descriptive Statistics

The questionnaire was divided into three sections; the first dealing with personal information regarding gender, age, degree and the current job of the participants; the second presenting a set of yes or no questions about the importance of academic advising; and the third offering a set of open-ended questions on the opinions of the participants with regard to when academic advising should be introduced.

The results of the questionnaire were analysed to find out whether ‘academic advising’ is given enough attention in middle and high education cycles and whether it should be extended further to higher education.

Table1. Frequencies of the participants’ replies regarding the importance of ‘academic advising’ and when the learner realizes his potential (N=50)

Academic advising and the learner’s potential	A lot	Relative	None
	(N) %	(N) %	(N) %
Not much attention is paid to the advising/ counseling process in Algeria	(36) 72%	(1) 2%	(13) 26%
The role of academic advisors is important to help learners make choices	(48) 96%	(2) 4%	-
The importance of academic advising being a continuous process	(37) 74%	(3) 6%	(10) 20%
Importance for the learner to realize his/her potential and qualifications	(31) 62%	(4) 8%	(15) 30%

Table 1 introduces how much important is the counseling process; the role of academic advisors/ guidance counselors to help learners make choices about education and career paths; whether academic advising should be a continuous process and how important it is for learners to realize their qualifications and capacities.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

When closely examining each section of the data collected from the questionnaires, it is noticed that the participants' answers meet up at four points. Firstly, the Algerian educational system with its different cycles does not pay much attention to the counseling process that is only present in middle and high schools. Even at the level of middle and high education, the counseling process focuses on the stream choice with a session only devoted to the details. Secondly, teachers, headmasters, psycho pedagogy consultants and guidance counselors should all play an active role in helping the learners make their choice. The third point is that academic advising and counseling is a continuous process that is not limited to middle and high schools only. Academic advising should be extended to post formal education into universities and colleges. The fourth point agreed upon by the questionnaire participants is how much important it is when the learners become aware of their potential. When the learners realize their strengths, weakness and potential and they receive enough guidance about the proper choices they need to make about their education and career path; the learners' capital is, therefore, recognized and will be well invested in.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With regard to what has already been introduced on education and the necessity to put people at the centre of any reform and the importance of integrating economic reforms to the social ones, the Algerian government must rely on an approach that emphasizes investment in humans. The latter are the key to sustained economic development and productive educational programmes.

With regard to the usefulness of the human capital approach in the Algerian context, the first step to be taken in the short-term towards reform is to introduce "academic advising". The latter must be a pre-step and pre-requisite to university admission. With regard to this idea, Leigh (1997) advances Coleman' (1988) and Davis' (1993) ideas which claim that students on the verge of entering college or university must be made aware of the fact that they are in possession of set of marketable skills in which they must invest in to develop so that they can fit in this modern world. All the knowledge, theoretical skills, and attitudes learnt in the university will not be a waste. This general knowledge has its own usefulness in shaping the students' mind and attitude towards work life (Leigh, 1997, p. 8).

Academic advising could help learners find better suited ways to upgrade their theoretical knowledge and how to put it into practice. Because academic advising can help learners recognize their capital (skills and knowledge), Leigh claims that "students need to realize that [this] human capital makes it possible for them to be more productive than other employees [...] offering them opportunities for advancement" (Leigh, 1997, p. 9).

In the Algerian context, the government can include supplementary courses for the students (apart from their major requirements) to upgrade their capital. Leigh mentions a philosophy used in several universities and colleges known as 'writing across the curriculum' whose aim is to

“supplement traditional composition courses” that “can help increase the student’s skills, and therefore, their human capital” (Leigh, 1997, p. 8). As for oral skills, “Dyadic Communication, Small Group Communication, and so forth, have the potential to develop a student’s oral skills in ways that promote the growth of human capital” (Leigh, 1997, p. 8). These methods could be used gradually in the Algerian universities as a means of raising students’ awareness of their existing potential and of the ways to promote it. Along with the written and the oral skills, students can venture in computational courses as ICTs have become a necessity in this technological age.

The role of an academic advisor in the Algerian context can help students realize that taking supplementary courses (even if not funded by the government) can harness their capital and redirect it to fit in the global economy. If a student seeks to specialize in the field of, for instance, human development, an academic advisor would help this student make options that would concretize his vision for future career. Leigh (1997) states that:

It will increasingly fall to academic advisors to clarify for college students the value of human capital, the limits of credentials even the college degree-as a basis for economic success, and the strategies they can employ to maximize their human capital. (p. 10)

The role of the Algerian government is, therefore, to equip not only middle and secondary schools but also universities with academic advisors who are ready to teach students about the concept of human capital and the best way to invest in it. This step must be done prior to making major choice. Even if universities do not offer all the courses that necessarily promote a student’s capital, students need to be convinced of the need of promoting their own capital and to make investments of their own for the sake of preparing themselves for the globalized economy.

In her article entitled “Professional Advisers in Engineering and Technology Undergraduate Programs: Opportunities and Challenges”, Mosher (2017) quotes Beggs, Bantham & Taylor (2008) who claim that “high quality advising has also been shown to play a critical role in student academic, career, and professional development” (Mosher, 2017, p. 26). In a system where academic advising should be equal to good quality instruction, neither middle nor high schools in Algeria give this issue great importance. Most Algerian institutions are not equipped with professional advisors and responsibility of aiding learners in their choice making falls on the shoulders of teachers. It is of no doubt that teachers play an essential role in helping students choose their future educational and career path, but a professional advisor equipped with knowledge about the country’s resources, financial state and job availability should contribute to a task of such importance.

Academic advisors can, then, help students realize their potential and the pools where to put it into practice. With regard to this idea, Cox & Orehovec (2007) state that interaction of the students with advisors makes them “feel valued and important [and those who engage in such interactions] clearly recognized the ‘humanizing’ and ‘personalizing’ effects” (Cox & Orehovec, 2007, p. 20).

The following step to be undertaken in the process of bringing about change to the Algerian education system and the introduction of the human capital approach is ‘mentoring’. Mentoring as introduced by Cox & Orehovec (2007) can be defined:

Not in terms of programmes, but in terms of relationships. Specifically, we considered mentoring to be the “highest end on a continuum of helping relationships” (Jacobi, 1991, p 511). To be labeled as a mentoring relationship in our study, the relationship must have met all three criteria set forth by Anderson et al. (1995), who summarized Jacobi’s work: (a) direct assistance with career and professional development, (b) emotional and psychosocial support, and (c) role modeling. (p. 21)

Cox & Orehovec (2007) add that “mentoring minimally required an extended relationship built on both functional and personal interactions” (p. 21).

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