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RESISTANCE TO INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION IN JORDAN

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Introduction

Jordan is a developing country that has comparatively few natural resources. Unlike its affluent Arab Gulf sisters, it has no oil wealth to support its economy. And unlike its sisters in the Fertile Crescent, it has no large tracks of fertile agricultural land. The only source of wealth in the country has been, and remains, its people. As a result, Jordan invests heavily in its human resources development (HRD), and in the attempt to stimulate economic and social development through HRD, Jordanian planners and decision-makers have long built the foundation of its economy on a well-educated population. This policy has been reflected by the frequently cited saying of His Majesty the Late King Hussein, “Our precious resource is our people”.

Hoping to transform itself into an inventory of qualified skilled talents to be exported to surrounding Arab oil-rich countries, Jordan has sacrificed its scarce resources by investing heavily in education at the elementary, secondary and higher levels. Government expenditure on basic education, excluding expenditure on higher education, represents an average of 7.5% of the state budget.¹ Emphasis on education has been increasing, as reflected in the increase of the allocation of the Ministry of Education in the state budget from 9.07% in 1992 to 11% in 1998.²

The higher education institutions include eight government universities and twenty private universities. The government puts forward the policy of elementary, secondary and higher education, and the Ministry of Education relies heavily on the faculty of public universities, particularly those in public administration, to conduct research on the policy of education and to conduct evaluation studies of the curricula of both government and private universities. The writer has participated in a number of the evaluation committees concerning the curricula of these universities.

A major contribution to education and training has been through the Institute of Public Administration, which is headquartered in Amman and has three branches located in the southern, western and central regions of the country. The government, through the Ministry of Administrative Reform, has engaged in the process of reforming its public service by means of research, consultation and training. The Ministry has faced a shortage of qualified trained staff to meet its needs, and so has relied heavily on professors of public administration to fill its requirements.

Aware of Jordan’s strategic position in the region as well as of current trends in globalization, the Department of Public Administration of Yarmouk University has constantly revised and adjusted its curricula in order to

better meet the needs and requirements of the public sector, the joint sector (government and private joint ventures), and newly privatized public agencies. Emphasis is on English (to meet the requirements of globalization), IT (computer literacy) and international business practices.

This shift in emphasis in education and training represents a major shift in Jordan as a whole, which affects not only institutions and government but the entire value system along with students and parents. In order to better accommodate these changes, public administration in the university setting has experienced more and more expansion. Not only offered as a major or minor degree, it is now often seen as a dual degree in conjunction with IT, business, English, finance, economics, science or accounting. In the ongoing training of PA faculty, emphasis has shifted away from theoretical PA to practical skills. The process of evaluation of university structure and procedures points to modernization and simplification.

In response to increasing reports of dissatisfaction with the quality of the output of the institutions of higher education (i.e., the lack of practical and analytical skills on the part of their graduates) a series of studies revealed that the higher education system has achieved remarkable quantitative accomplishments as reflected in the annual influx of university graduates in the various scientific and humanitarian specialties. Its qualitative accomplishments however, as reflected in the practical skills provided to its graduates, have been declining.

For example, the National Competitiveness Unit at the Ministry of Planning prepared a study to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Higher Education sector and to formulate strategies to increase its competitiveness. The study praised the quantitative accomplishments of Jordanian universities, but found that a large number of the university graduates were not qualified to enter the labor market, neither public nor private. According to the study, fresh graduates lacked not only practical and analytical skills, but also exhibited low levels of computer skills and weak language skills.3

This is despite the fact that many faculty have studied in the USA and have high standards and qualifications. During the late seventies and early eighties, the first generation of teaching staff obtained their doctoral degrees from American and other Western universities. Unfortunately most of the professors in this category have not been responsive to voluntary training in order to accommodate recent remarkable changes in teaching methods due to the information revolution. Also, during the 1990’s, despite resistance from the first generation teaching faculty, a substantial number of holders of doctoral degrees from the universities of the Far East and other developing countries infiltrated the system with qualifications and skills that fall short of those of the first generation.

3 www.mop.gov.jo/partners/issue42_nov/page2.html
Additional factors include the requirements for the promotion of faculty, which is based on the number of articles publish, i.e., peer evaluated research. Student evaluation, evaluation of colleagues and an instructor’s excellence in teaching or community service are given little weight, if any at all, in the promotion process. Therefore, most professors dedicate their time to publishing.

**Institutional and Societal Pressures**

The social structure of Jordan is characterized by the large extended family and wage earners most often bear responsibility for the livelihood of many. Professors may have to take on extra teaching or other outside work to make ends meet. Additional obligations include mandatory attendance at family gatherings on weekends and other celebrations. With large families this can become very time consuming.

A university teacher’s load typically has large classes, which means that the prevalent teaching method is the lecture method. Despite its weaknesses, it provides professors with the means to complete the required course material and provides students with a clear-cut minimum of material that they can easily memorize. The role of the teacher is to lecture and students are expected to attend classes, listen to the instructor, and take notes.

Student evaluation is based on performance in three written exams, to be given at dates stated in the course description sheet delivered to the class at the beginning of the semester. Because of the large size of classes, and to facilitate correction, students are given objective questions from the material that has been explicitly covered in the class lectures. The classical style of instruction model is adequate for graduation of large numbers of students with minimal thinking and analysis skills, and it has been very successful in graduating thousands annually who join the unemployment club because they lack the skills required by the labor market.

Another critical factor is the English language medium, which creates a difficult classroom situation, since the language of instruction is English while the mother language of students is Arabic. Each professor is required to assign a textbook in the course plan distributed to students at the beginning of a semester. In order to help students comprehend the important contents of the textbook, many professors develop a manual, which is a summary of the important ideas and concepts of the textbook. Since most of the exam questions come directly from the summary manual, it is customary among students to memorize the manual, thus guaranteeing passing the course.
The typical classroom has a wide discrepancy in the level of the students’ English comprehension skills. This is a result of the difference in exposure to English language studies in the primary and secondary schools. Those who attended private schools are usually skilled in English, while those who attended government schools are less good. Until recently, the Ministry of Education policy for government schools was to begin English studies in the fifth grade when private schools usually included English in their curriculum from the first grade. (Note: This situation has been addressed by a recent change in policy that requires all schools to include English in the curriculum from the first grade.)

An important factor that has reinforced weak English skills is the influence of the "Makroma" program, i.e., providing university admission to students who cannot be admitted on competitive basis. These students include children of disadvantaged groups and areas, children of retired army officers and children of schoolteachers. To accommodate the abilities of these students, professors lower the academic requirements of classes. Despite that, many of these students cannot pass without washta, or intercession by a third party, which results in the passing of everybody.

Since it is hard to separate the informal and formal roles of a professor, and since most students expect higher grades from a professor who maintains a good informal relationship with them, most professors prefer to keep their relationships with their students on the formal level.

**Student Perspective**

It is the dream of every Jordanian family to see their children graduate with a university degree. Jordanians are socialized to give provision of higher education to their children top priority, and they are willing to sacrifice their scarce resources for that purpose. Even when a family does not have the resources to cover university expenses, they look for other options such as lobbying the palace and the government for a scholarship. According to the Jordanian value system, higher education has a value of its own, irrespective of its functional value. As a result, one of the main contradictions and challenges that Jordan is currently witnessing is that despite the unprecedented unemployment of university graduates, our universities continue to flood the market with thousands upon thousands of graduates who have no hope of getting a job.⁴

Some writers believe that the roots of this social disease go back to the 1950’s when the British Mandatory power gave scholarships to the children of the aristocratic families and appointed them in the government service upon graduation. According to these writers, the overriding consideration in training them was their blind loyalty to the British.

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Gradually, a position in civil service became a status symbol, a channel to fame and source of income.\(^5\)

A former prime minister of Jordan, Dr. Abdulsalam Majali, expressed that Jordanians suffer what he terms as a “shame culture”- a phenomenon of despising high-paying manual or technical work and crafts (so called dirty jobs) and honoring work in administrative offices (so called clean work) even if it pays less. Early on in life, a Jordanian girl is socialized to dream of marrying a chap who has a clean job, and a Jordanian boy is socialized to dream of working in an office.

During the writer’s extensive interviews with a sample of university faculty members, bitter complaints were voiced about student apathy towards education. However, according to a survey of a sample of the university students, there are four major reasons that account for their apathy:

- Since there are no jobs waiting for graduates, there is no incentive to study.
- Assuming that there are vacancies at civil service, only those with wasta, or intercession, can obtain them, so again, why study.
- Since anyone with wasta can easily pass any course, it is much more rational to spend efforts on looking for wasta than on studying.
- Since working in a clerical position in civil service does not really require sophisticated education, all one needs to obtain the physical university degree is passing grades, which can be obtained through good social relationships, rather than through hard study.

There is a widespread perception that wasta can do anything, and whether this is true or not is unimportant.\(^6\) The worst struggle of a professor with wasta comes at the end of a semester during the final exams. According to one professor, he receives at least 100 wasta requests during final exams. According to that professor, “it was impossible to fail anybody because once you pass a student who doesn’t deserve to pass, it is more ethical to pass them all”. Few professors withstand all the pressures of wasta, but only at the expense of disrupting their social relationships.

**Reform Vision and Strategy**

Upon his accession to the throne of the Hashemite Kingdom, H.M. King Abdullah renewed the demand for a strategy to develop higher education. In 2000, he approved re-instatement of the Ministry of Higher Education in

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\(^5\) Badran, Ibid, p. 204.
order to supervise public and private higher education institutions, to upgrade the level of higher education and to formulate plans and educational programs that address the needs of the Jordanian society and its aspirations for modernization and change.

The Ministry of Higher Education then sponsored a number of academic conferences to develop a strategy for modernization of the higher education system. According to an unpublished report at the Ministry, higher education in Jordan is facing a multitude of challenges. Of highest priority is the development of a clear policy that reflects the actual needs of the Jordanian society, the challenges of globalization and the information technology revolution, and the development of marketable skills of graduates towards the needs of the Jordanian, Arab and international markets. Ever-changing requirements of labor markets have resulted in structural unemployment of university graduates, which emphasizes the need for adequate evaluation mechanisms and standards to assess university curricula and outputs.

Rapid growth has created a need for a comprehensive educational policy within the framework of a strategic plan that would encompass all stages and sectors of education (i.e., secondary, technical, vocational and tertiary institutions), especially concerning high school graduate outputs and the admission capacity of Jordanian universities. Also, coordination should be facilitated between Jordan's state and private universities concerning teaching programs and plans, exchange of information, and joint research projects in order to accelerate the pace of development and to address present social problems and future challenges.

Rising budget deficits and corresponding increases in the financial burden at the governmental level, the student family level and the university level have impacted the focus of the universities’ mission. Trends favor teaching at the expense of scientific research, local community service and the development of student creative, analytical, inquiring, and assertive abilities. In addition, the lack of advanced doctoral and other university programs and the low level of scientific research projects at Jordanian universities is reflected by the fact that the ratio of doctoral students at Jordanian universities does not exceed 1% of the total student body.

The report compares the role of a traditional university to that of an incubator that utilizes traditional theoretical memorization methods to hatch semi-educated graduates with minimal practical and analytical skills. It continues the analogy by describing a modern university as an incubator of ideas, a science park or a house of experiences that promotes thinking, creativity and research. As a pivotal social institution that influences and is influenced by the present, and plans and envisions the future, a modern university should build its vision of higher education in Jordan on the following pillars:
1) To transform higher education from theory to practice and application by developing educational methods based on thinking and analysis, rather than memorizing and storing of information.
2) To emphasize total quality and international competitiveness, by providing graduates with the needed skills required by the local as well as the international labor markets.
3) To develop the quantity and quality of scientific research by tying it to the needs of production centers and the local market and by increasing its utilization in solving the problems of development and the needs of the Jordanian society.
4) To regain the university role as an institution of entrepreneurship and new initiatives. This requires that Jordanian universities adjust themselves to become future-oriented utilizing the benefits of global education and learning such as the Internet and other modern communication and teaching techniques.\(^7\)

**The Creative Teacher**

Review of available literature on the status and challenges of higher education in Jordan reveals a conviction on the part of decision makers that a comprehensive review and revitalization of the field is needed. Since the public administration instructor is an essential element in this system, its revitalization is impossible, no matter how good the plans and strategies, without rejuvenation of the role of the instructors, who in turn should be adequately qualified and trained.\(^8\)

The writer attempted to assess the current situation with a multi-level approach: 1) observation during teaching experience in the Department of Public Administration of Yarmouk University in Irdid, Jordan (1986-present); 2) extensive interviews with a number of public administration faculty; 3) analysis of a survey of a sample of student responses concerning present teaching methods and practices, and, 4) review of literature on modern teaching methods and practices. Unfortunately, many faculty seem to lack required skills, attitudes or incentives to meet the creative challenges of a revitalized higher education system.

In order to develop a positive learning environment, the creative teacher can strive to make the class interesting. The true value of educational material and of skills acquired in the classroom depends on usefulness in facing real-life challenges. Also effective learning addresses the learner’s expectations and is compatible with individual abilities and potential, while fostering ability to accept and adapt to social change. Encouragement of a

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cooperative learning climate can play a critical role towards the development of innovative thinking and problem solving skills.⁹

Some students enjoy opportunities to work the group setting and often have plenty of free time - they don’t have to rush to work in restaurants, etc., because there are few available jobs. Project management in the classroom can emphasize practical skills in a creative and fun format coupled with awareness raising. For example, organization of a campus clean-up fosters environmental awareness and organization of a field trip will broaden horizons, while a tourism exhibition provides opportunities for a multi-level organizational experience of activities - everything from presenting local crafts, food and artifacts to publicity, traffic control and public relations.

“Tourism Class, Adventures in Cultural Confusion” – a true case study:

The development of tourism infrastructure in Jordan has had high priority and in response a class targeting tourism management practices attracted great interest. The university required that the material in the text be covered. Therefore the text was divided into major sections for presentation to the students. After comprehension of the theoretical material, extra-curricular activities were planned and implemented by the students. Approximately 70 students would then devote Saturdays for outings designed to translate theory into practical skills in a joyful way.

For example, after learning about tour management, the class conducted actual tours of an important archeological site in Jordan (such as Ajlun Castle). The exercise comprised of student groups with 2 students acting as tour guides while others assumed the role of foreign tourists and prepared questions about Jordanian ways of life and traditions. Evaluation of the activity included testing on the theoretical material and required students to write evaluations of the tour.

Many students enjoyed these activities and were very proactive while others were intimidated, which was reflected in the results. Out of the 70 students, 5 fully grasped the intention of the exercise (A’s) while approximately 50 aimed at a B by obtaining A’s in the practical and C’s in the theory, mainly due to the fact that they were unable to link the theory to practice. The remaining students were subject to parental resistance to the practical exercise, especially in the cases of females. These families adhered to a value system that restricted the daughters to reporting only to school. As a result the girls gave many excuses (such as family obligations) and/or brought male relatives as chaperones on the exercise.

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Often these females were very hesitant to participate at first, and some later became enthusiastic.

Often males would be affected by conflicts within the value system as well. For example, in one instance a student’s father graciously received the class while on the exercise, exhibiting the all-important traditional value of generous hospitality. Unfortunately the boy did not comprehend the theoretical link to the practical exercise and as a result his final grade was low. One cannot describe the suffering and bewilderment of the father and the painful discussions wherein the professor had to explain the reason for the low grade.

**Prevalent Teaching Methods**

University administration is often positive and supportive of such initiatives, but are not totally comfortable because such activities are out of their control. Although university regulations provide for various ways to evaluate the academic performance of students, exams are currently the only way to do so. Current university management practices view attempts of diversification of student evaluation methods as alien and disruptive while academic management often can be bureaucratic, considering innovations disruptive.

**"This Innovative Teacher is a Headache" - a true case study:**

A few minutes after Professor Innovative posted the final grades of one of his courses on the bulletin board, one of his female students dropped at his office with tears in her eyes. She respectfully told him that she didn’t understand why he subtracted 10 points off her final grade. When the professor checked his records he realized that he made a mistake in tallying her score, which was posted as 80, instead of the correct total of 90. He apologized and told her to petition for correcting her grade.

According to university regulations, a petition for correction is referred to the concerned professor who checks it and writes his view on the petition. It is then forwarded to the chairman of the department, followed by the dean’s office that refers it to the college council, ultimately arriving at the dean’s council, which makes the final decision.

Accordingly, Professor Innovative mentioned on the petition that his teaching load for the semester was 6 courses with an average of 75 students in each, with 96 students in the course where the tallying mistake was made. Under these conditions, it was natural to make mistakes, according to Professor Innovative. He requested that her grade be corrected to 90.

The college council reviewed the student’s petition, and denied her request because Professor Innovative did not abide by university rules in
his final exam. When Professor Innovative asked for elaboration, the dean told him that 10 points of his final exam were given to a strange test called “The Course Concepts Contest” game, and according to the dean, “games were illegal at university exams”. Professor Innovative explained to the dean the concepts exercise game. Briefly speaking, each of the major course concepts was written on a piece of paper, which were then randomly thrown in a plastic bag, and each of the students would pick a paper, and give the concept’s meaning in front of his colleagues. The game included other activities that would make it attractive and entertaining. The dean told Professor Innovative that he always admired his creative experiments, not just in this course but also in other courses as well. However, he explained that he was getting a lot of flak from the college council that sarcastically considered these experiments as games designed “as excuses to divert energies away from the real job of a professor”.

The parents of the aggrieved student protested the decision of the college council but to no avail. They did not understand why Professor Innovative used odd teaching methods while other professors employed straightforward easy to comprehend ones. “All we look for is to have our daughter graduate as soon as possible”, they argued, “and there are no jobs anyhow, whether she learned something or not”, they continued to say. Professor Innovative failed to convince them of the long-term desirable effects of his teaching methods.

The word about the student’s bad luck spread very quickly among other students. Since then, many of Professor Innovative students are afraid of his teaching experiments. Though furious and frustrated, the professor is still convinced that his modern experiential teaching methods are much more helpful to students than the dictation and memorizing methods that 90% of his colleagues follow.

Reform Inhibitors: Institutional and Societal Pressures

Obstacles Confronting Innovative Instructors:

Despite all odds, there are a few professors and students who are trying very hard to break the grip of the sluggish teaching system. For example, analysis of the responses of a sample of students at the College of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Yarmouk University concerning preferred instructor teaching methods indicated that only 6 professors out of the total number of professors at that college (9%) use other teaching methods besides the lecture method and/or use other student evaluation methods other than the objective exam method. As the case study on teaching methods indicates, these creative professors face tremendous social and institutional troubles, instead of being supported and appreciated.
During extensive interviews with a sample of faculty members, bitter complaints were voiced concerning student apathy towards education. According to the sample of the students, four reasons account for their apathy:

1) Since there are no jobs waiting for graduates, there is no incentive to study.
2) Assuming that there are vacancies at civil service, only those with *wasta*, or intercession, can obtain them, so again, why study.
3) Since anyone with *wasta* can easily pass any course, it is much more rational to spend efforts on looking for *wasta* than on studying.
4) Since working in a clerical position in civil service does not really require a sophisticated education, all one needs to obtain a university degree is passing grades, which can be obtained through good social relationships rather than through hard study.

In the words of one student, “Our present instructors do not allow dialogue, do not encourage classroom discussion, do not encourage students to become sources of complementary information, and do not allow information that does not agree with their ideas. Our present teachers think that they are more qualified than the students and that every thing they say is correct and accurate. That kind of teaching closes the door to exploration and gives a student’s mind an open vacation. The university instructor we need is not the tyrant type who is above discussion and questioning.”

**Heavy Teaching Loads:**

H.M. Late King Hussein established the foundation of Jordanian public policy concerning admission to higher education by declaring that all Jordanian have the right to higher education. Slogans such as “Higher Education for All” and “Higher Education is a Basic Right” were promoted. Previously, only the children of wealthy families and those who obtained scholarships based on their high performance in the Jordanian secondary education general exam could join universities.

Two major consequences of above policy have been the increasing class sizes, hence increasing student/teacher ratio, and the lowering of teaching standards to accommodate the mass of students who came from disadvantaged areas without the required language, comprehension and analytical skills.

The following chart reflects the student/teacher ratio for selected Arab countries during the period from 1986-1995. Jordan suffered the third highest ratio among these countries during that time period.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Higher Education Institutions</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Teaching Staff</th>
<th>St/Professor Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>88812</td>
<td>4243</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
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<td>181151</td>
<td>2235</td>
<td>81</td>
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<td>15279</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>91376</td>
<td>5849</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart No. 1: Average Number of Higher Education Institutions, Students and Student/Instructor Ratio for Selected Arab Countries, 1986-1995.  

**Current Enrollment:**

The current situation has deteriorated considerably. During the academic year 2000/2001, 118,657 students were enrolled at Jordanian universities: 81,985 of them (69%) attended the eight state universities, while the 12 private universities had only 31%. The influx of students into the state universities is much higher because the fees are only 8.00 Jordanian dinars (about $11.00 per credit hour) for tuition fees, while private universities charge a much higher rate, an average of JD 50 ($70.00) per credit hour.

Based on available data, high school students are more attracted to the humanities and social sciences than to the physical and hard sciences. For example, during the academic year 2000/2001, only 35,196 students (30%) of the total 118,657 were enrolled at colleges of agriculture, medicine, pharmacy, engineering and the physical and mathematical sciences. Among the humanities and social science colleges, there is more competition for admission to the Colleges of Economics and Administrative Sciences. For example, during the same year, out of the total Yarmouk University student body of 17,478, 3249 (19%) were enrolled at the various departments of the College of Economics and Administrative Sciences. In addition to students specializing in the various economic/administrative sciences, many students from other colleges choose their elective requirements from the courses offered by this college. Since the number of faculty at the college during that year was 64, the share of each was 51 students. This number does not include those students who take these courses as electives. The demand for admission to the college has been steadily increasing, while the number of teaching faculty is either stable or declining. During the academic year

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12 Department of Statistics, Ibid, Table 3.2.11, p. 116.
2001/2002, the number of students enrolled at the college was 4513, thus increasing the student/professor ratio to 70.

The teaching load of teaching staff varies considerably, depending on many social and academic considerations. In 2002 for example, there were about 100 students in each course taught by a certain professor, while the number of students in all four courses of another professor did not exceed a 100 students. This writer teaches five or six courses a semester, depending on the number of faculty professors who are on leave, where the number of students ranges between a minimum of 60 students in core courses (such as Concepts and Theories of Public Administration - a rather difficult course required for only public administration students) to a maximum of 95 in the introductory courses (such as Introduction to Public Administration in Jordan).

**Incremental Strategies**

Innovation in the public administration classroom in Jordan has need to be cultivated as a means to facilitate positive growth in the educational environment. A small step to help stimulate interest in such teaching methods could be to establish rewards and recognition programs for those who innovate. In addition, public administration teachers could benefit from empowerment by some gradual decentralization of authority of the university administration. However, institutions must always maintain vigilance for the risk of corruption.

This is a societal problem more than an educational problem and there is no easy answer. However, if government jobs disappear as an inevitable result of the current privatization trend, those who teach marketable skills will, over time, win.