

Globalisation and higher education in the Arab Gulf States

By Gari Donn and Yahya Al Manthri. Symposium Books, Oxford, 2010, 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-873927-31-1 (pbk)

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There is no doubt that globalisation has its tremendous impact(s) on different fields and different areas including higher education. However, before *Globalisation and Higher Education in the Arab Gulf States* by Gari Donn and Yahya Al Manthri, there was no interesting book able to check and balance the issue of globalisation. This book looks at globalisation in the market philosophy of neoliberalism which David Harvey, cited by Donn and Al Manthri (p. 7), defines as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human beings can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.”

This book sees globalisation as a new form of colonialism which tends to focus on competition and production of winners and losers. In fact many other thinkers and researchers in this area see this global revolution as an opportunity that is widening inequalities and polarisation. More specifically, Philip Altbach, cited by Donn and Al Manthri (p. 9), says that education is increasingly becoming an internationally traded commodity in the sense that it is purchased by a consumer in order to build a “skills set” to be used in the marketplace, or a product to be bought and sold by multinational corporations and academic institutions.

The structure of the book is methodologically designed to win its argumentation of the issue as far as aspects of globalisation policies and their impact(s) on Arab Gulf States are concerned. The balance of such an outline is set by looking at whether or not globalisation is a system of maintaining the lead in institutions’ learning systems. The answer to that is of course not clear with Arab Gulf States since for the most part, as the book explains in six chapters, they adopt the process of “policy borrowing” of economic and educational policies, whereas other countries such as Finland adopt “progressive educational developments” and

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thereby maintain the lead in learning systems. To fulfil the main purpose of this work and the utility of the information provided, and to grasp the general theme in the book, I found the background information in chapters one, two and three on globalisation, country outline portraits and the labour market in the Gulf States extremely useful. They set the tone for a good understanding of the complex, yet well-grounded issue of internationalisation of curriculum reforms as well as providing an illustrated analysis of globalisation and its policies in the Gulf States.

In many ways, the book highlights very specific issues grounded in globalisation as having perhaps more negative than positive outcomes, especially for higher education in the Gulf States. The focus of the topic and the methodology applied to present this work are a contribution to knowledge about and understanding of the region as far as decisions made by global and regional players on higher education in the Arab Gulf States are concerned. The information on methodology is scattered through the book. It would be more interesting if the book had one chapter explaining how the data were collected for empirical evidence and how they were processed by the authors. However, in many areas when we start reading the findings and conclusions, we – as readers – begin to question whether the results generated from this or that methodology implemented are valid and reliable enough for generalisation of the results in some respects. To illustrate this point of critique, let me provide a few examples. On page 123, the authors describe in about one page their interviewing process of the policy-makers in Oman. The authors say that they “ascertained an agreed-upon chronology and portfolio of persons and organisations involved in the development of the private sector in higher education in Oman” (p. 123). They generated key questions for semi-structured interviews to be held with 35 higher education policy-makers. These interviews were completed in one year in a sort of complex jigsaw. They add that they conducted specific interviews during a two-week period in 2007. Even in the description of the methodology on this page, it is important that the authors should focus on either graphically visualising the “jigsaw method” or at least provide a more extensive description of the interview process conducted over one year. Turning to page 124, some of the findings indicate – and I believe the findings to have been generated from the interviews conducted – that the role of the private sector in Omani higher education is very significant and that even the leading public sector is sometimes involved in the development of higher education. As a reader, I would like to know how this finding was generated from the analysis of qualitative data, how the finding came to me in the “complex jigsaw” analysis, and why we are not given any quotations or evidence for the findings generated. After all, the complexity of the issue of globalisation and higher education is so controversial that we are required to carefully present our evidence to prove our points.

Another issue I see with the methodology is that authors in some (not in all) areas tried to test some of the theories or ideas they may have read about or come across in literature research. For instance they mention that the aim of interviews is to delineate the vision of higher education held by the players. In other words, they wanted – as they put it – to see whether these players believed in an implicit, or explicit, “market model of higher education” or whether they held other visions of higher education which include conceptions of human interests. This hypothesis

could have been tested by running a survey research with a bigger sample than 35 policy-makers; or by running any other quantitative analysis for this purpose. After all, isn't qualitative research about understating a situation in order to generate a hypothesis, not about testing it?

To sum up, *Globalisation and Higher Education in the Arab Gulf States* contributes tremendously to the field of comparative international higher education with a topic seen to be difficult and controversial in its nature. The approach applied to discuss the topic is innovative and to the point, particularly for those readers who need a creatively painted picture of policy borrowing in the Gulf States versus Progressive Educational Developments as is the case in Finland. I would, however, like to stress here the importance of explaining the method(s) of data collection including the interviewing process since that enhances the quality of understanding some of the findings and conclusions in the book. In no way should my observation be taken as though I critique the whole method of analysis; I simply see the importance of a better explanation of the research methodology in a way that helps the reader to consistently connect the dots between data collection, findings and conclusions.