

# Leveraging the Quality of Higher Education in Lebanon

## Study Summary Report

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### Background

Several factors have led to the increased demand for quality assurance in the higher education sector worldwide. Among these factors is the massification of higher education and the changing global economic trends and evolving labor market demands. The rising unemployment rates across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and across the world has also exerted pressure on institutions of higher education to deliver “employable” graduates. The quality of the education and services rendered by these institutions are strongly believed to have direct impact on the graduates of the institutions. In Lebanon, both institutions and the government came to realize that it was critical to regulate quality within the sector in order for Lebanon to remain competitive within higher education across the region. A law was drafted to establish a national agency for quality assurance in higher education that would hold (private and public) institutions accountable for the services they provide to the public. The process of developing this draft law was a lengthy one that was delayed due to both political factors and the local political context. However, it was also strongly supported by a number of policy-makers, experts and practitioners in the sector. In order to gain insight into the policy-making process in Lebanon, we have selected the draft quality assurance law as a case study for policy analysis. The study adapted the policy-tracing methodology employed in analyzing health policies in Lebanon (El-Jardali, 2014a; El-Jardali, 2014b).

### Objectives

This case study presents an example of a stagnated policy development process, highlighting the factors that have delayed the progress of the draft law for quality assurance in higher education and the factors that have promoted this policy. It also sheds light on the importance of having wide stakeholder

support in order to overcome some of the obstacles that hinder the process. This case study maps how and why this policy was developed, and draws on lessons learned for informing future public policy-making, and provides insights for structuring the decision-making process in Lebanon.

## Guiding frameworks

Analysis of the policy process under study was examined using the policy triangle framework (Walt & Gilson, 1994). Using the policy triangle framework suggested by Walt and Gilson (1994), attention is given not only to content, but also to actors involved in the policy reform, the process contingent on developing the policy, and implementing change, and the context within which policy was developed (Walt and Gilson, 1994). In the case of the quality assurance in higher education draft law, understanding the process through which the policy was developed may provide some explanations as to why the desired policy outcome has so far failed to emerge. Kingdon's multiple streams framework (1995) was also employed to examine some of the factors that played a key role in shaping this public policy. Kingdon's multiple streams theory presents policy-making as a dynamic process (Ness, 2010). It illustrates how issues rise to the agenda and how policy alternatives emerge, emphasizing the political dynamics. According to this framework, people identify problems (the problem stream), then design solutions for public policy change (the policy stream), and then they engage in political activity to promote the change they seek (the politics stream).

## Methodology

This study investigated the process of developing a policy for establishing a national agency for quality assurance in higher education in Lebanon. It employed a qualitative research methodology using a case study approach. It particularly followed the policy tracing methodology developed by El-Jardali (2014a and 2014b) that was developed to map health policies in Lebanon. It presented both a retrospective and concurrent policy analysis aiming at generating in-depth insights about how policies are made in Lebanon and the influence over policy-making. It mapped the development of the higher education policy on quality assurance over 11 years. It also provided support to future policy-making as the draft law is yet to be passed. Through this exercise, we were able to explore how and why the policy on establishing a national agency on quality assurance in higher education was developed, and why it was held back so far. Data collection and analysis were guided by the policy analysis triangle framework

by Walt & Gilson (1994) and Kingdon's multiple streams theory which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the policy-making process and for an understanding of factors that influenced the decision. The data was collected from a number of sources including the media, key informant interviews with stakeholders and publically available official documents. Following the interviews, expert and participant validation was sought through individual meetings in order to allow for further shaping of the emergent themes and abstractions prior to the analysis of the data collected. Emergent themes were categorized into context, actors, process and content, as well as the policy process which included the problem, policy and politics streams.

### **Preliminary Findings**

All actors engaged in the development of the draft law on quality assurance for higher education in Lebanon agreed that it was critical to regulate quality in institutions of higher education in the country. The draft law received strong support, however, the realization of this draft law has so far been hindered by a number of political factors and personal interests. Findings show that personal interests [embodied by the interests of some institutions of higher education] led to political influences during the discussions of the law as it was being developed. Many owners of universities in Lebanon used their connections to attempt to modify the draft quality assurance law. In addition, the political context referred to in this study extends beyond the content of the draft law to encompass the overall politicized environment of legislation in the country. The regular changes in the government and the inactivity of the parliament also hindered the passing of the draft law. Findings also show that expert and technical judgement dominated the personal interests and political influences exerted to modify the draft quality assurance law and delayed it. The strong network of experts that was formed as a result of the process of formulating the draft law provided a forward push against the pressure that was exerted to amend the draft law, particularly the governance structure of the agency intended by the law.

### **Conclusion**

There remains a certain level of ambiguity within the process of formulating national policies in Lebanon, which was evident through the mapping of the development process of the draft law on quality assurance in higher education in Lebanon. This study highlights the complex and non-linear nature of policy-making in the country and the various factors that influence the process of decision-making. It also identifies the barriers to the development and adoption of the draft quality assurance

law, in addition to the factors that supported its formulation and progress. Findings also reveal the benefits of involving all stakeholders in the process of formulating the draft law for increased support, which in this case replaced the need for generating local evidence to support policy. It was also evident that engaging actors who are experts usually facilitates the development of the draft law. This was particularly helpful in providing a sense of ownership to those directly impacted by the policy, which in this case were institutions of higher education from which experts were recruited to draft the law. The findings of this study can help analyze how policy-making is made in Lebanon and other countries of the MENA region as policy-makers and scholars can learn from this experience in drafting a law.