

MARKET ORIENTATION IN TUNISIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The concept of 'market' in the academic world is becoming a global phenomenon. Notions such as efficiency, competitiveness and performance are familiar in the business world, and therefore they can be applied to the public sphere and particularly to the public higher educational institutions in order to create, as one scholar puts it, 'a compromise between the privatization, university autonomy and government control'. In order to be a significant player in society, the university must be able to adapt to the new trend of its 'market'. Our study tries to highlight the literature on market orientation in higher education and particularly in the Tunisian higher education sector. The various stages through which this sector has undergone constitutes a good opportunity to develop a more global orientation of its 'market'.

Keywords: market orientation, public management, higher education

Introduction

Today, in view of the general dissatisfaction of the different stakeholders of universities, it is necessary to consider various reforms. The university must take into account the expectations of stakeholders, since they can contribute in some way to the achievement of its objectives. Under these conditions, we propose to examine the concept of 'market orientation' in order to provide relevant means to improve the quality of education in the Tunisian university. Our research will translate the concept of market orientation so that it becomes applicable in the context of developing countries. The market orientation trend is the subject of great interest as the result multiple studies developed during recent years (Caruana et al., 1998; Van Vught, 1999; Tan, 2002; Young, 2002; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003 ; Webster et al., 2005; Voon Boo Ho, 2005; Jane and Izhar, 2006; Flavian and Lozano, 2006 Hammond et al., 2006; Svenson and Wood, 2007; Hadi et al., 2008; Kuster and Aviles-Valenzuela 2010). The Tunisian case study can contribute to this body of literature.

Consequently, the interest of our research focusses, firstly, on the study of the transposition of 'market orientation', which is often considered as belonging to the private sector alone, secondly, on the introduction of this concept in public higher education. Indeed, this concept seems to provide a better quality of higher education in Tunisia in line with labor market needs. Studies conducted to date on market orientation show that this concept is considered relevant to the attempt to provide a high level of service quality in higher education. Accordingly, market orientation should be defined as a global measure in the higher education sector (Caruana et al., 1998). Our goal is to enhance the quality of higher education Tunisian management, mobilizing concepts that have been, long, specific to the private sector. Although the debate of the "marketization" of higher education creates controversial both politically and ethically, our research aims primarily to improve the public service mission without distorting.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of market orientation

If 'marketing concept' is used to determine the needs and wants of target markets, and how efficiently and effectively these needs and wants are addressed, then 'market orientation' is the measure of the manifestation of this concept. Several authors agree that the market orientation is the 'superior ability' of an organization that understands and meets the needs of its customers. According to Day (1999) market orientation consists of three elements:

1. a corporate culture focused on the production of a higher value for customer to that offered by competitors;
2. distinctive competencies in marketing strategy; and
3. an organizational setting conducive to satisfying customer requirements.

Orientation market seems to be reduced to a strategic dimension that returns the action in the heart of marketing, prompting organizations to look more to their markets to optimize their performance and eventually become more competitive (Pras, 1999). The concept of market orientation has been likened to the strategic direction that expands the organization's market and includes other players and not just the consumer (Gatignon and Xuereb 1997; Voss and Voss, 2000). Yet despite the abundance of literature, market orientation remains controversial, especially because there are five different scales of measurement until 2007. Nevertheless, a consensus was reached between the researchers wishing to specify this concept, based on the integration of a double behavioral approach (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) and the culture (Narver and Slater, 1990) of market orientation. Studies that have been conducted so far on market orientation show that the concept is considered relevant for the provision of high quality service in higher education. Market orientation should be defined as a global measure in the higher education sector (Caruana et al., 1998). Our research sits at the borderline between marketing and management. On the one hand, students in university institutions can be assimilated to "clients" of the university. They can also be perceived as "products" created by the university and subsequently used in the labor market. We notice that the public service, to which academic institutions really depend, is getting worse and worse.

The public authorities have pursued a quantitative policy aimed at artificially increasing the number of graduates. It is clear that such a policy leads to shortcomings in view of the obsolete programs offered to students. The result is a growing gap between the functioning of institutions and the real needs of the labor market. Even though the debate on 'marketization' of higher education generates controversies at both political and ethical levels, our research is essentially aimed at improving the mission of the public service without distorting it. All the success of the university depends on the general image it throws on its sector which accordingly makes a direction towards its market indispensable. However, the reluctance of some researchers and political parties towards this approach can considerably slow down or even block the process of the evolution of higher education in Tunisia. Yet, emerging countries must modernize their public services in order to accelerate their development. Additionally, the modernization of public services, in this case the university, requires addressing all its stakeholders.

The concept of market orientation in the for-profit sector

Since the 1980s, the evolution of a company's relationship with its environment has anchored the relational marketing in the thinking which led the company to gain a thorough understanding of their environment and subsequently the development of guidance market. The concept of market has become a focus of research since the late 1980s (Webster, 1988, 1992; Shapiro 1988). It is divided into two opposing currents. The first seeks to conceptualize this market orientation, its key exponents being Kohli and Jaworski (1990), Narver and Slater (1990), Deshpande, Farley and Webster (1993), and Ruekert (1992); while the second focuses on the history of this concept (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993). Market orientation constitutes a "superior ability to understand and meet customer needs" (Day, 1994). A company wishing to move towards or into a market must develop the skills necessary to anticipate market developments and subsequently, it must become proactive to face it. After examining the origin and evolution of the concept of market orientation, we have to consider, in the first section, the conceptualization of market orientation in the profit and non-profit sectors. The second section will be dedicated to an examination of the implementation of the concept in higher education management sector in Tunisia. In the next section we propose to study the non-profit sector and its specifics as they relate to market orientation.

Conceptualization of Market Orientation in the Non-Profit Sector

Goerke (2003) admits that nonprofit organizations face market pressures and are subject to its dysfunctions. To this end, these organizations cannot not use the mechanisms of the for-profit sector to fulfill their missions as economic agents if

they want to ensure the smooth running of their activities (Kotler and Andreasen, 2003; Alexander and Weiner, 1998; Dolnicar et al, 2008). In non-profit organizations (NPO), managerial approaches have been accepted by all researchers, although some relativize the generalization of results in the public context (Bruce, 1995). For others, the same characteristics of NPO inherently prevent the use of such approaches. Andreasen and Kotler (2003) argue that the proponents of this approach are wrong if they believe that their 'product' will be accepted by the market. Several authors are in favor of a global orientation towards the 'market' of the non-profit sector, which focuses on the customer relationship / consumer / user / beneficiary, and any stakeholder within the NPO (Kara and al., 2004; Macedo and Pinho, 2006; Padanyi and Gainer, 2004; Sargeant et al, 2002). For Dolnicar and Lazarevski (2009), despite the difference between the for-profit sector and non-profit sector, the adoption of a market orientation for NPO can dramatically increase the efficiency of these organizations. The studies of Kotler and Levy (1969), Kotler and Zaltman (1971), and Shapiro (1974) that have highlighted the application of marketing in NPO and, as a result, have profoundly changed our views of the benefits of marketing in this sector.

The market orientation in the higher education sector

The concept of market is in phase to establish a comprehensive and sustained in academia (and Binsardi Ekwulugo, 2003). Concepts that come from the world of business—such as efficiency, competitive advantage and performance—have more and more come to be applied to the public sphere, especially in public institutions of higher education, representing a "compromise between privatization, university autonomy and control of the State" (Young, 2002). To play an important role in society, the university must adapt to new trends in the market (Van Vught, 1999). However, studies in the non-profit sector are relatively rare, especially ones that focus on higher education (Conway et al., 1994; Caruana et al. 1988; Smith, 2003; Lozano and Flavian, 2005, 2006; Hammond et al., 2006; Oplatka Hemsley-Brown, 2006; Svenson and Wood, 2007). During the last decade, market orientation has found some recognition in higher education. However, how not to be armed with all possible means to better manage university management and with all the urgent necessary caution, given the stakes involved?

Obviously, we are not trying to emulate outright market orientation of the private sphere in the academic world, with a simple approach based solely on economic performance. Our goal is to ensure the smooth functioning of the mission of higher education, namely, harmoniously combining the use of its resources with the needs of its 'clients'. It is no easy task but nevertheless necessary to contributing to effective teaching. All indications are that market orientation may allow a public higher education institution to achieve its objectives: obtain funding sources; earn a good reputation in its field; improve equipment and facilities; increase the competence of its faculty; and ensuring educational quality capable of meeting the needs of its current and future students (Caruana et al., 1998; Hammond et al., 2006; Svenson and Wood, 2007). For Kuster-Aviles and Valenzuela (2010), the most interesting studies on the relationship between market orientation and university concerns the causal connection between attitude and the teacher's market orientation behavior. Indeed, factors positively influence the level of market orientation adopted by the staff. The authors conclude that "the desire to be market-oriented has a positive impact on market development orientation of concept" (Flavian and Lozano, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006).

For some, the university is a service organization that focusses on understanding, application, and the implementation of the principles of marketing or market orientation (eg Klayton 1993). Others suggest that these institutions are competing in a global market, so that strategies need to be positioned at local, national, and international levels (Conway et al., 1994; Osoro, 1995; Kemp and Madden, 1998; Walker et al., 1998; Allen and Shen, 1999; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999; Mok, 1999; Coates and Adnett, 2003; Farr, 2003; Smith, 2003). In both perspectives, the same difficulties show up for these nonprofit organizations. Smith (2003) estimates that changes in the current environment have forced higher education institutions to redefine the post-secondary market, but that this phenomenon has not yet received appropriate institutional attention. The education market is changing. It requires a real understanding of all the stakeholders involved and, what is more, a competent grip of their often-competing interests. According to Harvey and Bushe (1996), to get good results in this market, it is necessary that marketing concepts, especially market orientation, are taken up and used mostly appropriately, that is to say, with an eye to the state of play amongst stakeholders.

Voon Boo Ho (2005) argues that, like other businesses, higher education institutions are required to understand and adapt to the continuous changes that occur in their economic, political, social and technological settings. Their main

'clients', that is to say, students, are increasingly demanding about the quality of teaching. Institutions should be able to provide, for instances, the courses that are wanted by their student bodies (Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing, 1998). Tan (2002) noted that the term 'market in education' is commonly used for 'consumers' who are all targets of the marketing of products and / or services. In order to survive and remain competitive, higher education institutions should put more emphasis on the satisfaction of their students in terms of educational quality. In this sense, we measure how well the strategic concept of market orientation can be useful for higher education. The truth of this observation is evident not only from the public nature of higher education institutions, but also their educational and administrative teams: clearly the application of an internal / external marketing adapted to all staff these public organizations is required (Siu and Wilson, 1998). As such, understanding and commitment of senior management of higher education institutions to market orientation is essential.

Ongoing evaluation of the relevance of courses and services offered by higher education institutions is essential to meet the needs of the market (Coates and Koerner 1996). Let us go further and affirm unequivocally that it is the perceived customer satisfaction that in the final product (that is to say, the teaching content) that derives the quality of higher education. Indeed, the higher education market oriented towards the service offered to students should focus on their future employability, professionalism, and, finally, continuing education. In the case of Australia and New Zealand, Caruana et al. (1998) found that universities that are market oriented achieve better results. They confirm the importance of reactivity (measured by the scale of MARKOR of Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) in higher education. Thus, work on the receptiveness of the market intelligence helps improve overall organizational performance. By the same logic, the study of Flavian and Lozano (2006) shows that between academic institutions and ministries of education, coordination is essential.

This coordination should facilitate the task of university administrators by giving them more autonomy in managing their business. Such coordination catalyses the implementation of any objective based on meeting the needs of students and, by implication, meeting the demand of society for greater education, research and cultural diffusion. In fact, we can say that market orientation brings a gradual improvement of the organization both in its structure and its internal and external environment. This is an ongoing process, not a radical change that would be imposed on higher education institutions. Therefore, institutional strengthening is required, for example with the establishment of an Industrial Relations office, business incubators, science and technology parks. According Fakhry et al., (2008), institution-building is the most appropriate approach to restructuring higher education in order to facilitate its transition to a market economy.

The Market Orientation in Higher Education Management in Tunisia

For a description of the Tunisian higher education context, we will highlight the major changes and reforms aimed at the continuous improvement of the Tunisian educational system. The purpose of such a description is to discern, in the context of the Tunisian higher education, the elements that have given rise to the prevailing interest in market orientation in research on the management of higher education institutions in Tunisia. We present the specific evolution of Tunisian higher education (massification, professionalisation, etc.) to better reflect the reforms initiated by both policymakers and by the institutions themselves. But it will also especially consider how these reforms can encourage the emergence of a management style that is market oriented. Reforms carried out at the Tunisian higher education are many. They aim to achieve a better management of these institutions and to adapt their production of knowledge and training in socio-economic needs of the country.

Massification

After World War II, all developed and developing countries opted for a strategy of 'massification' of their higher education in order to give their country the skills needed for the reconstruction of their national economies. Tunisia is considered among the first developing countries to have recognized the strategic importance of this decision. Four years after independence, the new state did not wait for the establishment of primary and secondary education. Instead, the country took initiative to "tunisifier" the sector and to throw the first stone on which to build the higher education. This political will "asserted" by François Siino (2004), to reform and modernize the system of Tunisian higher education can produce real results without the "increase in the number of people involved—students (some to become teachers) and teachers (who were students) is in itself one of the key elements of transformation and structuring of the university system."

Between 1958 and 1968, the first reforms were initiated, which led to the establishment of a Tunisian educational system, marked by the spread of education and the founding of the Tunisian University in 1960.

The University of Tunis, which was established March 31, 1960 (Act No. 60-2 of 03/31/1960, 60-98 decree supplemented by Decree of 03.01.1961) included five faculties (namely: mathematical science; physical and natural sciences; humanities, law, political science and economics; medicine and pharmacy; and theology). These faculties occupy the former premises of the IHET. The proliferation of channels following the creation of the University of Tunis (twenty in 1964–65) especially boosted the need to increase the number of higher education institutions. Thus, ‘between 1960 and 1967, the number of duplicate institutions, from ten to twelve. It doubled again in 1975 (24 institutions). The number of 30 institutions is exceeded in 1979. In two decades, the initial number of faculties and schools of higher learning will have been multiplied by six (37 establishments in 1981).’

Currently, Tunisian higher education has 13 universities (while only three universities existed in 1986), which are spread across the Tunisian territory. These universities include 198 campuses, 315,513 students, of whom 62.3% are women (2013), and a workforce of 22,878 teachers (including 11,037 women). The staff ratio is 15.1 students per teacher. To these universities, we count 25 Institutes of Higher Technological Studies (ISET), and six Teacher Training Institutes Superiors. The number of students has increased steadily over the past decade; it went from 102,682 in 1994–95 to 360,172 for the academic year 2008–09, for its diminished curve in 2011 with a workforce of 346,876 students to finally stabilizing in 2013 with 315,513 students. This growth in student numbers has resulted in the development of the enrollment rate of the population, which for persons 19–24 of age was 14% in 1997, and for which it grew to 33.3% in 2004, stabilizing at a rate of 36.9% in 2011.

However, it is clear that the massification strategy is ‘profitable’ in terms of human capital. However, these student flows pose a great problem to the Tunisian state, knowing that the number of graduates in 2004 reached the number of 40,321 and exceeded 52,092 in 2012. So how can the state manage so many students? How will it increase the intake capacity of institutions, whether local or proposed courses, in order to provide training that combines the needs of students with those of the labor market? A second constraint is bound to arise in terms of the financing of the sector, especially in respect of the quality of the teaching, and for which good management tools will be needed. The creation of a higher education system ‘professionalizing’ next to a school system “traditional” knowledge production was a strategic necessity to overcome the different needs of the workplace. It proved essential to urgently equip the future graduate with a skill set that aligns with the labor market and that tracks the evolution of competition. Finally, still in the passage of the massification professionalization, the LMD reform, which sets up the license system—master’s and doctorates—has ‘institutionalized’ the professionalization of higher education and thus amplifies and implements efforts the state made in this direction.

Professionalization

During the last decade, a crucial collaboration developed with the professional world (UTICA: Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicraft) in the description of training courses, the work of university committees, and seminars that were scientific and educational. This synergy sought to end the doubts and fears of academia and all stakeholders that are related both near and far from the university, regarding the quality and skills of university graduates on the one hand, and for the increasing unemployment rate in recent years on the other. This professionalization, in our opinion, would restore some confidence between academia and the industry; and such a relationship would clearly be beneficial to everyone, and would result in a ‘win-win’ strategy. However, this professionalization can in no case omit or reduce the academic objectives of the university. Those who claim that the professionalization of higher education will affect the role of a creative discipline of knowledge and research are pessimists. We must put the university at the center of national concerns and integrate all socio-economic decisions to advance the nation.

There is another criticism against the professionalization of politics at too low a level of academic proficiency of students: with the former regime of study (four years), the overall level of a student's knowledge had already strongly waned with time, so what with this new training LMD advocating short term training (license for three years of study). The professionalization of higher education is a response to this question of competence. This market logic puts the student at the center of the university ‘as a customer’ and so requires the satisfaction of their needs in respect of knowledge acquisition and professional skills development. Following the commercial logic adopted in the university sphere, today we speak of a current or rather the concept of ‘academic capitalism’ (used in the analysis of the report of the World Bank on the Tunisian higher education), which puts the university in a vicious circle of competition and prompts the challenge of financing (Thys-Clement, 2001). Moreover, Slaughter and Leslie (2001) want to apply this market logic to higher education for three reasons:

'the movement of standardization of locations, modes of production and circulation of scientific knowledge, privatizations made by the state, and 'loose coupling' 'universities'.

The market conception of higher education as well as academic capitalism assume the use of techniques and methods of a 'management / governance' context. The increase in student numbers has led the Tunisian University to review its management. According to Siino (2000), the university as a social institution must analyze its educational policy in terms of research excellence. But to get there, it cannot proceed by way of a market logic. Tunisia has followed most of the OECD countries in higher education strategy. Thus, it has invested in this sector and the state has set targets and deadlines to respond to the relevant guidelines. These guidelines include improved student–staff ratios, the implementation of certifications, encouraging the mastery of languages, integration in professional life, and so on. All this is not aimed at anything other than to ensure a high rate of integrating the new graduate into society and the workforce. Among the objectives of this wave of reforms is the promotion of engineering education, whose students have doubled by 2013. Aware of their mission, engineering schools have had to adapt to market fluctuations, establishing training for jobs that create value or sources of employment. As for the university, it values its purpose by creating applied and vocational training capable of building bridges with the labor market. Eventually, it will come out of its traditional conception of teaching to try to turn to the market and to enter a market logic that is opposed to any archaic form of governance.

The concept of entrepreneurial culture must nourish the discourse of the politician and the university in order to instill in the mind of the student the concept of entrepreneurship, which can be crucial for an emerging economy like Tunisia. Incubators or spin-off centers like those created at the University of Sfax already constitute a big step towards the professionalization of Tunisian higher education. Given the intellectual property developed in universities, Tunisian higher education contributes and participates in building the country's economic fabric. The entrepreneurial spirit is a form of behavior and culture that ought to be encouraged at a young age. At the foundation, it must have adequate structures to develop this concept. There is even a coordination between public institutions of the state, university, and civil society. The goal or mission of the university is not only to 'produce employees', but to also provide students the professional skills that will give them a chance in their professional lives. After studying the massification and attempts to professionalize the Tunisian higher education, we now turn to the concept of autonomy, which, in our opinion, is the barometer of any successful construction.

Autonomy

According to Boivigny, autonomy is dependent on budget control, the development strategy of student recruitment policy, recruitment and personnel management, investment and property management movable and immovable, internal audit ... the two most coveted items of autonomy by our Tunisian higher education system relate to the management (governance) and management staff (staff recruitment system). The management of autonomy refers to programs imposed by policymakers, which sometimes frustrate the expectations of students and which also hinders higher education institutions in their innovation, which then struggle to adapt to the requirements of the labor market. This was reinforced after the revolution of 14 January 2011 by academics like Hedi Zaiem, Tunisian professor of economics, who said: 'Give autonomy to higher education institutions.'

For Bugandwa (2008), management autonomy is crucial for the establishment of strategies, and consequently for 'the adoption of market orientation'. Along the same line of reasoning, the author adds that one of the three fundamental dimensions of market orientation, namely, the organizational response (responsiveness), reflects the adjustment of supply of higher education institutions. But this dimension of market orientation can be configured without prior knowledge of a concrete and active autonomy. The second part of the autonomy is about personnel management, which entails a condition in which the recruitment of administrative and teaching staff is managed by the institution itself, reflecting the fact that it alone knows its needs. Such autonomy enables the avoidance of certain practices by public authorities, common throughout the last decades, under the pretext of the application of the 1958 law, in which directors of universities are appointed, while deans are elected. Therefore, teachers should resume their historical status as constituting a major pillar of the creation of skills (Schuler, 1996; Harris and Ogbonna, 2001).

To develop their independence, several countries have committed to making their public management systems transparent or at least more transparent. Indeed, under the New Public Management regime, a new deal was imposed to

guarantee and legitimize this independence as constituting a ‘contract’ between the state and the university. Indeed, several countries have signed contracts with their higher education institutions, starting with France, which is the reference model in almost all political and socio-economic strategies of the Tunisian State. France went through a series of preparatory measures in the creation of a ‘Circular on the renewal of the public service’ in 1989, which subsequently was added to in 2001 by the ‘Organic Law on Finance Laws’ (OBL), before ending with the Law of 10 August 2007. In Tunisia, it is with the Law of orientation of higher education that the university setting will respond to new projects and goals. This change at the legislative level will lead the Tunisian University to become a player in the determination of its social, political, and economic environment in the higher education sector. The timeline in the various transformations of the Tunisian higher education seems necessary. Moreover, the transformations experienced by the higher education sector in the last two decades were predictable.

Conclusion

The lack of rigor in the university and the rise in unemployment (which is the problem of the employability of graduates) raise issues that can no longer remain ignored. Higher education is a vital sector for all generations, it is the ‘factory’ that produces skills that will be subsequently injected into the labor market. And that is why sustained employability gives us an idea of the health of the higher education sector. The concept of market orientation applied to this sector can readily introduce managerial thinking in the governance of higher education institutions. A radical change has affected these public institutions: they are always conscious of performance and willing to do their utmost to achieve their mission to produce competent graduates capable of integrating into large businesses. Beyond acquired theoretical knowledge, the university should develop the entrepreneurial skills of students in order to integrate effectively in the labor market. To improve their quality of service, public institutions of higher education must adopt a market orientation that functions to satisfy the needs of all stakeholders, starting with the students themselves.

However, some researchers and political parties vis-à-vis this approach can significantly slow or even stop the process of evolution of higher education in Tunisia. However, for emerging countries it is imperative to modernize public services in order to accelerate their development. And the modernization of public services, in this case the university, requires us to move towards and address the concerns of all its stakeholders. However, this logic seems inevitable and can only be achieved if the entire staff and faculty engage in a construction contract. It seems that this phase can be improved by political interference in a democratic context, by creating and enabling an environment dynamic that works in the interest of public authorities with regard to higher education.

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