An investigation of the Weberian notion of bureaucracy in the context of service higher education institutions. A qualitative study at the University of Damascus.

Submitted by Lubna Almasri to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management studies in March 2011.

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Signature: …… ..............................
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Abstract

This thesis uses elements of Weberian theory, particularly the Weberian notion of bureaucracy, in order to speculate on the impact of bureaucracy on academia. It examines bureaucracy within the specific context of the higher education institution of the University of Damascus in Syria, using various qualitative research methodologies and techniques including documentary/archival material, observation, and interviews. The study presents a contrasting assessment of the bureaucratic mode of academic administration at the University of Damascus, considering the links and the relationship between the University and the State on national and organisational levels. On a national level, the study explores the relationship between the University and the State by analysing documentary/archival material supported by literature on the history of Syria and of the University of Damascus. The analysis at national level illustrates that the centralised conduct of bureaucracy the limits imposed by the bureaucratic model of academic administration are in place to safeguard certain ethics and to secure the ethical responsibility of the University towards the State.

The empirical study shows that the role of bureaucracy in ensuring the accountability of the University to the State and in safeguarding equal opportunities among academics is the primary factor demonstrating the positive aspects of bureaucracy in the context of academic administration in the public sector. However, the empirical study also explores the negative consequences that the bureaucratic mode of academic administration has on the academic profession. Although academics can enjoy a level of participation in academic administration by virtue of the collegial elements outlined here, the adoption of excessive regulations and the concentration of strategic academic, financial, and administrative decisions at the apex of the bureaucratic hierarchy shrinks the autonomy of professional academics and can negatively affect creative academic work by constraining academics in their teaching and scholarly work.

This study reveals that an understanding of the bureaucratic conduct of Higher Education institutions is incomplete without an appreciation of the context within which the academic instructions operate. Considering this context, particularly the political context of Higher
Education institutions in the analysis, helps us to reassess critiques of the bureaucratic model and to present an alternative understanding of bureaucratic constraints in the public Higher Education sector.
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