

EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

COUNTRY PROFILE: TUNISIA

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BACKGROUND

Tunisia is a country of two very contrasting narratives. On the one hand, the World Economic Forum rated Tunisia's education system 12th in the world in 2007,¹ and the high proportion of GDP spent on education (6.3%, constituting 22.7% of government expenditure in 2008²) was widely considered exemplary. On the other, outcomes were, and remain, poor, with some of the widest use of private lessons in the world (70% of all 15-year-olds), massive *redoublement* (43% of all students report having repeated a year at some point in their education), low PISA scores (significantly below the international average in all subjects) and fast-rising graduate unemployment (42.5% of Tunisia's unemployed were graduates in 2008³). The reality is perhaps somewhere between the two: Tunisia has certainly well understood the vital role of education in development, and has invested heavily in it with some impressive results; but the effectiveness of reform, and the transformative potential of education have, in the view of many observers, been undermined by lack of transparency, antiquated pedagogy, teacher demoralization, over-centralization and the failure to institute external scrutiny through effective inspection and objective examination. Perhaps most important of all, education policy has paid far too little attention to the requirements of the labour market.

At the level of the Millennium Development Goals, much has certainly been achieved in primary enrolment (in 2013, 111.8% and 107.8% Gross Enrolment by sex; 98% Net Attendance), in literacy (youth literacy is 98.2%/96.1%) and in gender equity, (with 101.6 girls reaching the last year of school for every 100 boys).⁴ But Tunisian education suffers from the complex malaise of all North African countries and produces outcomes significantly inferior to the expectations generated by its high investment.

At Independence in 1956 Tunisia inherited an education system rather different from those of Algeria and Morocco. It was fairly small, and focused on the needs of European children. But Tunisia's late colonization meant much less educational exclusion, and a small Western-educated Tunisian elite soon developed, building on nineteenth-century Ottoman education reforms quite different to anything seen in Morocco or Algeria. Rich Tunisians were able to travel to France to study, and a small graduate elite emerged even before the Great War, swelling in the postwar generation when men like the future President Bourguiba went to study in the *métropole*. The priorities in the years after Independence were expansion, Arabization and the training of a class of skilled workers to replace the Europeans. The education system developed on a French model (and is very similar in structure to those of Algeria and Morocco, though slightly longer), a 6-3-4 structure of basic, middle and upper-secondary school culminating in the baccalaureate exam, with a pass rate of around 50%, which governs entrance to university. The language of education in the public system is Arabic, though some science and maths subjects are taught in French at secondary school.

One striking characteristic of Tunisian education is the very high level of private tuition. The OECD (INTES) integrity audit of the system in 2013 highlighted this as a serious integrity problem, noting that, especially at the secondary level, the majority of private tuition is provided by the same teachers who are also providing classroom tuition, and who are responsible for all annual pupil assessments up to the bac (to which they also contribute 25% of the marks). It is combined with

a slightly lower level than found in Egypt and Morocco of education in private institutions.⁵ Expenditure on education, at nearly a quarter of the national budget,⁶ is high (almost double the OECD average). But the majority of the expenditure is on teachers' salaries, and these (as in Morocco, though not to quite the same extent) are high, at 1.7 times per capita GDP. This is higher than the OECD average, while Tunisian teachers work, at 493 hours per year over 30 weeks, notably less than Egyptians (614 hours, or the OECD average of 577 hours over 38 weeks).⁷ This suggests that productivity is low, as well as there being significant leakage from the public to the private sector.

It seems certain that full primary enrolment will be achieved for 2015: the latest UNESCO figures show well over 100% Gross Enrolment for both sexes and 98% Net Attendance. 95–97% of pupils reach the last year of primary; and Net Attendance at secondary school is a very impressive 77% for girls and 69% for boys. Girls do very well with higher rates of survival to the end of primary (101.6x boys); and higher enrolment at secondary (103.3x).⁸ A caution though, in that Tunisia, despite its impressive record on women's reproductive health, employment and empowerment shown in its being placed 48th out of 144 countries in UNDP's Gender Inequality Index,⁹ scores much lower in the UNDP's newer Gender Development Index (GDI), which is a simpler disaggregation and comparison of male and female scores in the Human Development Index. Here Tunisia is placed 116th, only a fraction ahead of Egypt (125th), Algeria (129th) and Morocco (132nd).¹⁰

Test results – and Tunisia has been courageous enough to participate in PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS – are not as good as one might have hoped. In PISA 2009 more than 50% of all Tunisian students were below the PISA baseline on reading proficiency (and maths and science scores were 359 and 346 respectively at grade 4; and 425 and 439 at grade 8 – against international averages of 500). Finally, unemployment is a scourge in Tunisia as elsewhere in North Africa. Rapid growth of the education system has outstripped the ability, or the will, of Tunisian governments to create employment for those emerging from it. As noted above, 42.5% of the unemployed are graduates, often from faculties and courses that simply do not impart the skills and aptitudes needed by the job market. Serious attempts are taking place to rebalance the distribution of students between courses in favour of employability, stressing applied subjects and de-emphasizing the courses with poor employment outcomes. As so often though in expanding systems, the economic imperatives push back, since the low-outcome courses in the humanities and social sciences tend to be much cheaper per student than the high-outcome schools of science, engineering and medicine.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Tunisia's French-based school system architecture consists of preschool, followed by six years of basic education, and three of lower secondary (or middle school), leading to four years at upper secondary. The latter is made up of a year of common curriculum followed by three years of specialization. Education is compulsory from 6–16, and is in Arabic except for some science and technical subjects at upper secondary. French has been the main second language since Independence, but English is rapidly becoming more important (and is now a mandatory part of all degree courses as well as being taught in secondary schools). A slackening of demographic pressure is taking some of the burden off schools (growth since 2004 has been only about 1.3% per annum¹¹, and the secondary-age population fell 3.2% between 2008 and 2013¹²).

This is a temporary respite. Enrolment in preschool is increasing fast (from 7% in 1990 to 14% in 2000,¹³ 22.4% in 2003,¹⁴ and to 44.5% in 2011/12¹⁵). Most preschool provision is private (86% in 2003). The World Bank's 2015 report *Expanding Opportunities for the Next Generation: Early Childhood Development in the Middle East and North Africa*, notes that a child from the richest quintile of the Tunisian population has an 82% chance of ECCE (preschool education) at 3–4 years of age, while a child from the poorest quintile has a 13% chance.¹⁶

At primary level, where enrolment and attendance are over and very close to 100% respectively, survival to the last grade is also very high, at 95/75% (depending on sources¹⁷). In 2009 the Minister of Education asserted that 99% of 6-year-olds, 98% of 6–11s and 80% of 12–18s were in school.¹⁸ This very high level of *scolarisation* is not without its dangers: after 15 years of rapid growth between Independence and 1971, and over 6% of GDP already spent on education, the government was obliged to scale back the rate of progression into secondary from 40% to 25%, to meet budgetary constraints. The threshold remained low until 1980, when the government felt it necessary to relax the pressure again, and growth resumed.

Net Attendance figures at secondary show a distinct advantage to girls, at 77%, over boys, at 69%, in a total of 527,900 (2011). The pass rate for the bac, which governs entry to Higher Education, is about 50%.

Negative features of the Tunisian school system, noted already, include the massive prevalence of private lessons (70% of 15-year-olds take them). These are more often than not taken from the child's own classroom teacher (54% of all secondary students, most of them from the richest quarter of Tunisian society are taught privately by their own public school teachers¹⁹). This leads at least to diversion of effort from the classroom, and in many cases to the use of private lessons as a vehicle for improper reward and achievement, a situation made more acute by the fact that all school exams are set and assessed in-school except for the bac itself, and even the bac sees 25% of its marks allocated by the school. Added to this, the schools inspection regime is weak, and teachers relatively unproductive. The OECD integrity report concludes that "the effectiveness of classroom teaching seems to be very low", and between 2007 and 2013 the WEF demoted the effectiveness of the Tunisian education system as a whole from 12th to 68th out of the 144 countries ranked. Rather than reflecting a precipitous decline in real achievements, this demotion is a realization that the situation was not as it had been presented.

THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The first university in Tunisia, the University of Tunis, was established in 1960 by bringing together a number of non-university institutions. In 1988 it was split in three, forming the Universities of Tunis I, II and III; and since then the system has expanded to comprise 198 public Higher Education Institutions (13 of which are universities), 46 private university level HEIs, 24 Higher Institutes of Technical Studies and 6 Higher Institutes for Teacher Training. The 17,000 students of 1975 were 345,000 by 2007, 380,000 in 2011, and almost half a million today. The Gross Enrolment Rate at tertiary rose from 2.6% in 1974 to 30.1% in 2007 and 35.2% in 2013, placing Tunisia 73rd of the countries surveyed by the WEF.²⁰ The Bologna Process LMD structure was fully in place by 2012.

The Higher Education system takes in 6.1% of the state budget and processes a third of young Tunisians as undergraduates, graduating 78,600 in 2010. However, there is a marked mismatch between labour market needs and the products of the universities, resulting in burgeoning graduate unemployment. Apart from a small number of the best, students entering the system after the bac do not get a free choice of course, rather being assigned to courses. The result of this is, on the one hand, an over-concentration of students in the lower per-capita-cost courses (humanities and social sciences), which are the least private-sector-friendly; and on the other hand, in a focus by students on the degree as a certificate of achievement/survival rather than the content of the degree course. Various commentators have called this the “sheepskin syndrome”, the prizing of a degree on parchment over an education. Although there are now serious moves to encourage students into “applied” subjects, the cost imperatives often run counter to this, and careers advice is not yet a strong suit in Tunisia.

The impulse to address some of these issues is also clear in legislation to allow decentralization of control. Since 2008, in some circumstances HE institutions can opt to become EPSTs (Etablissement Public à Caractère Scientifique et Technologique), operating on contract to the Ministry of Higher Education, with their own budgets and significant policy control overseen by a new government Quality Assurance Agency (PAQ); and in 2014 the whole question of sector reform and governance was addressed through the creation of a Direction Générale de la Rénovation Universitaire, charged with overseeing reform.

It should be noted that a significant number of Tunisian students – about 19,500 in 2012–13 – study abroad. Almost 12,000 (59%) of them went to France, 1,654 to the Grandes Écoles. For those at French university there is a more significant take-up of the humanities and social sciences (26%) than for other North African countries, though the sciences (34%) top the list of preferences.²¹

RESEARCH

Between 2000 and 2009 R&D expenditure in Tunisia doubled, from 0.5% to 1.1% of GDP (compared to 0.1% in Algeria and 0.6% in Morocco).²² Tunisia has by far the largest number of researchers of any of the five North African countries (1,588 per million of population). This compares to Morocco’s 647 and Egypt’s 617.²³ In terms of ranking by patents filed, however, Tunisia ranks much lower than Egypt, which filed 65 patents in 2009: Tunisia filed four, and Morocco three – and over the decade 2000–10 as a whole the picture is consistently dismal, with Morocco leading Tunisia by 22 patents to 17.²⁴ The numbers of researchers is better reflected in journal publication and citation figures. From 91 articles in 1993, Tunisia reached 1,022 in 2009 (while in 2009 Algeria published 606 and Morocco 391).²⁵ In terms of citations too, Tunisia leads, with 5.7 citations per 100 thousand inhabitants in 2010, well ahead of Egypt (2.1), Morocco (1.5) and Algeria (1.1). Jejel Ezzine, commenting on the jagged profile of success and failure to benefit from it says, “the low [level] of high technology export performance. Indeed, Tunisia exported 4.9% [of total exports] in 2010, while Morocco achieved 7.7%. These results are a revelation of a breakdown in the Tunisian NIS [National Innovation System], despite the noticeable evolution in the number of researchers, engineers and scientists and scientific publications.”²⁶

PRIVATE SECTOR

Tunisia has a growing private sector in education, though it is not as large as that of Egypt or Morocco. 2.4% of primary and 4.8% of secondary students are educated in private schools. The level of secondary private education is similar to its neighbours (Egypt 5.5%, Morocco 4.8% – though Algeria has negligible private education at 0.5%); but significantly fewer children are privately educated at primary level (2.4% as against 7.8% in Egypt and 12.9% in Morocco). This may reflect a greater confidence in public primary than in public secondary education – but it seems likely also to reflect the creeping “privatization”, through private tuition, of the state secondary system, which perhaps allows money to buy outcomes to an extent that offsets the need to pay for private education. At tertiary there are 46 private university-level HEIs.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

TVET in Tunisia has not prospered, though it has been the object of repeated efforts at reform. A first wave of reforms, beginning in the early 1990s, “did not,” according to a 2014 report published by the Tunisian Ministry of Professional Education and Employment, with the ETF, “achieve their planned objectives, nor realize the results anticipated”. These reforms showed “the absence of a clear or precise logic, and were marked by the dominance of the political dimension over the economic and social”. The same report (the self-evaluation required under the Turin Process in Professional Education, in which Tunisia has participated since 2010) notes that the major problems are the lack of any overall vision, poor linking of strategy to the needs of the labour market, inappropriate governance, serious over-centralization and poor choice of partners.²⁷

The EC has supported this process since 2011. In 2013 attempts to reform the sector resumed, building on the perceived problems noted above. In January 2014 an agreement was signed between the government, UGTT (the trade union confederation) and UTICA (the employer’s organization). This was then approved in November 2014, when a Guidance Document was published. Implementation is planned for the quadrennium 2014–18, addressing integration into national planning, better governance and funding reforms (including of Life-long Learning). Like those of the other countries in the region, Tunisia’s TVET system suffers from low esteem relative to the academic stream of education through university, though unlike the others, the Tunisian system has seen some overall growth, from 10% to 14% of eligible students in the decade to 2009. (It should be noted, though, that the starting figure of 10% is very low compared to the Egyptian starting figure of 30% and a figure for the Arab states of around 35%. Tunisia’s 2009 figure of 14% is still very modest even compared to Egypt’s – and to the Arab states’ much reduced figure of 20% after a decade of decline.) The World Bank notes that secondary technical colleges in Tunisia (as in Algeria and Morocco) are regularly undersubscribed.²⁸

General TVET falls under the authority of the Ministry of Professional Training and Employment (MPTE), with more sector-specific training (in areas like tourism and agriculture) provided under the relevant ministries. There are various routes into vocational training: the first moment of enrolment is at 16, after finishing basic education. More two-year TVET courses start after the first (*tronc commun*) year of secondary, leading to the Certificat d’aptitude professionnel,

and these in turn can lead on to qualifications called the Brevet de technician professionnelle (two further years) and the Brevet de technician supérieure (four further years). There are, in effect, virtually no routes back from TVET into the academic education stream.

The system is well resourced, drawing as it does on state funding, a hypothecated tax for Vocational Training (TFP) and donor funding. The total budget (leaving aside private expenditure) was 258 million dinars in 2013 (as against 195 million dinars in 2011). The vast bulk of this funding – 92% – goes into initial, pre-employment, training, with only 8% dedicated to continuing education and training. Government social inclusion policy pushes out vocational training to excluded groups (like rural girls, youth with physical and mental handicaps, and prisoners).

As noted elsewhere in this chapter, those emerging from the TVET system suffer levels of unemployment that may be slightly lower than those of university graduates but are nonetheless high, and rising: at all levels, unemployment has risen between 2010 and 2013, from 24.2% to 27.9% for the highest level of qualification (BTS), from 21.5% to 26.8% for the middle level (BTP); and from 19.9% to 26.2% for the lower level (CAP).

ENGAGEMENT AND PROGRESSION

As noted, Tunisian children have a very high rate of progression between cycles, with over 30% of the age group reaching tertiary education. But this is not reflected in the kind of results which high levels of school attendance and massive government investment in education would seem to promise. Although headline literacy rates are high – youth literacy stands at 96.8% (98.1% for males and 95.8% for females)²⁹ – the results of internationally comparative testing are not entirely reassuring. PISA 2009 showed results in literacy that are very different in their implications, with 50% of all students below the literacy baseline, and 5% in the lowest band. The same story holds good in science and maths: TIMSS 2011 places Tunisia close to the bottom of the scale in both (scores of 425 and 346 respectively against an average of 500), and places 21% and 25% of students assessed as having scores “too low for estimation” (i.e. not significantly different from the scores that would be achieved by random guesswork).³⁰

EMPLOYABILITY

Population growth in Tunisia is fairly low, at 1.3% per year, and overall unemployment is falling (by 9.15% in the 15+ population during 2013). However those seeking work are significantly more educated in terms of the level they have reached in the system, with more graduates and more seekers of managerial jobs. And although falling, unemployment, at 15.3% by the end of 2013, is still higher than before the revolution.³¹

Graduate unemployment in Tunisia has soared from 1.5% in 1989 to 33.2% in 2012. This is slightly lower than the overall 15–14 unemployment rate of 37.6% (Q3 2013) but is very high indeed by international standards. A Master’s degree seems to confer little advantage – those with Master’s degrees make up about 55% of the total graduate unemployed, despite being less than 15% of the total number of students. On top of this, the unemployment rates are gender-biased, with 43.5% of

women with degrees unemployed, as against 20.9% of men with degrees.³² Much the same is true of graduates from the TVET system: at all levels, unemployment has risen between 2010 and 2013, from 24.2% to 27.9% for the highest level of qualification (BTS), from 21.5% to 26.8% for the middle level (BTP); and from 19.9% to 26.2% for the lower level (CAP).³³ “Youth unemployment in Tunisia is the result of structural issues in its education system and its labour market, as well as an ingrained understanding of ‘employment’ based on decades of social and political development,” says CIPE.³⁴

The mismatch between over-theoretical degrees and the needs of the employment market is an important factor, beginning now to be addressed. So too is a preference for public sector employment, common across North Africa, for its security and benefits, which saps enthusiasm for entrepreneurship (though understandable in the light of the fact that 37% of all private sector employment – mainly of course at the lower end – is informal and without any social benefits at all³⁵). CIPE also notes labour market inflexibility as crucial, with high hiring and severance costs and high levels of job security depressing graduate employment.

DIFFERENTIALS OF GENDER AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Differentials of gender are, as always, complicated. In most comparators females do well against males: although they are slightly underrepresented in primary school gross enrolment (female: male 96.4), their survival rate to the last year of primary is higher (101.6) and by secondary school girls outnumber boys (103.3). This trend continues into tertiary education, where 61% of students are female. However, as *Al-Fanar* reported in May 2015, employment pushes in the opposite direction: 21% of 2014 male graduates with a BA were unemployed, as against 40% of 2014 women BAs.³⁶

What is very clear, though, is that girls seem to outperform boys at primary in the science and maths, to see that initial advantage narrowed and eliminated later; and to hold a clear reading advantage as late as upper secondary. However, it is also clear from the World Inequality Database on Education that wealth and rural/urban discrepancies weight more heavily.³⁷

When looking at development indices, as noted above, there is a gap between structure and performance: the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index places Tunisia high at 48th, reflecting the access to economic opportunity, reproductive health, political empowerment and education; but in the Gender Development Index, which simply disaggregates and compares male and female components in the Human Development Index, Tunisia ranks much lower at 116th.³⁸

NOTES

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25. Ibid.
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27. *Le Processus de Turin 2014. Pays : Tunisie*, p. 34.
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