



**EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA  
SINCE INDEPENDENCE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Between 1951, when the new kingdom of Libya became independent of Italy under King Idris, and 1962, when Algeria finally followed after its long war of independence with France, the five countries of the southern Mediterranean coast each took control, in different ways, of their own futures. Amongst a sobering battery of challenges, one of the more pressing for all of them was education. A large proportion of colonial civil servants, businessmen, skilled workers and teachers left at independence, especially from the francophone countries where settler colonialism was particularly dense. In Egypt the 1952 Revolution, followed by the Suez War and the expulsion of the *mutamassirun*, or resident foreigners (Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Italians), had a similar effect, though Egyptian capacity in most areas was already far more developed than that of the Maghreb. At about the same time, in late Protectorate Morocco, for instance, there were three times as many French *fonctionnaires* as there were British civil servants in India, with its population forty times the size of Morocco's – quite apart from a large European commercial and artisan classes.<sup>1</sup> Each country faced an urgent need for skilled labour to fill the vacuum. Each country's educated local elite was both much too small, and mostly unsuited, to fill that need itself, and at the same time largely unequipped to train the next generation. Each government faced a pent-up demand for the social escalator that education represented, and from which the vast majority of the Muslim population had been excluded under French rule. Constructing a new education system was for each an urgent and absolutely crucial area of national development.

Libya and the francophone countries of the Maghreb started from a very low base. Egypt was better placed, with a proud legacy of elite education and the highest level of school enrolment in the region, at around 50%. In Morocco in 1956 only 13% of Muslim children of school age attended school (against 3% in 1940<sup>2</sup>), and the country boasted a total of 640 native graduates: Tunisia, where 33% of Muslim children were in school, counted 1,300. In Algeria the enrolment figure was 21% (this reflected a recent growth from around 8% during the Second World War).<sup>3</sup> In the brand new United Kingdom of Libya more than 90% of the population was illiterate and there were just over eight hundred students in secondary school.<sup>4</sup> Girls were of course vastly under-represented in, though not entirely absent from, schools across the region as a whole.

Education during the colonial period had resolved, in slightly different ways in the three countries of francophone North Africa, into a differentiated system of European and "native" instruction. Where it was available to Muslims, education was limited in scale and had an effective ceiling: with a small number of exceptions for the local elites, it was very hard for Muslims to become educated beyond the level necessary for the subaltern positions to which their institutions were carefully geared. In Algeria there was for many years "no public conception of education of and for the locals", and settler pressure led to virtual exclusion of Muslims from state schools. In Morocco, French schooling was closed to all but a few of the Moroccan elite; and only in Tunisia, where the system was the most open, with a *collège* or secondary school in Tunis open to native students, had some real progress at opening up the system been made. And as for employment, "the public service", in the words of Pierre Vermeren, "was out of bounds for native people, in Algeria because only French citizens could be employed in it, and in the Protectorates because these were foreign countries". With few exceptions, the best that most native Muslims could hope for was vocational schooling and artisanal employment.<sup>5</sup> Of Libya, UNESCO reported in 1951

that “few countries in the world are less advanced economically, have a higher proportion of illiteracy or have been longer under foreign domination than Libya”, which was made up of three disparate and very poor provinces brought together for the first time at independence.<sup>6</sup> Its largest exports were scrap metal and esparto grass.<sup>7</sup>

In order to develop their economies, the new governments urgently needed skilled administrators and industrial and agricultural workers, and producing this skilled workforce was the task of their education systems. Getting many more children into school and retaining them for as long as possible formed the central challenge. Much of the urban population certainly saw education as a way to open up chances for the future from which they had hitherto been excluded; but in the countryside there was often more resistance, with attitudes conditioned, if at all, by the traditional experience of the Qur’anic *maktab*, *kuttaab* or *msid* (the traditional preschools that teach memorization of the holy books). Extending educational opportunities into the poorer rural areas was a constant theme, though growing urban migration was shifting the balance in favour of the cities. Schools were built, scholarships were established, and the growing needs of the public sector as an employer made sure that there was a clear reward, in terms of secure jobs, for pupils and students who persevered. Vocational education systems were established to train skilled workers; secondary schools and universities were expanded to supply graduates to the public administration and particularly, in numerical terms, to its largest branch, the education system itself.

The result was a generation during which opportunity expanded dramatically, and the education systems grew to accommodate the growing take-up. Graduates of secondary schools and universities found immediate employment, largely in government service. School enrolment grew, reaching about 50% by 1970 in all three countries.<sup>8</sup> The first wave of expansion took the colonial education systems as its model, and continued to educate its youth largely in French, though with a nationalist political urge to Arabize as that became possible. Egypt, the cultural giant in terms of Arab identity, played a special role in this process: it set the example, followed across North Africa, of offering free education as a constitutional right to all citizens, and at the same time it supplied many of the teachers needed to fill the yawning gaps in Algeria and Morocco as Arabic became the medium of instruction. But French culture remained dominant in this first generation, with many more French than Egyptian teachers in those two countries.

In the 1970s a corner was turned, and a tide of Arabization swept through education in North Africa. It was a development with clear political and cultural motivation in a postcolonial world of pan-Arab sentiments, dominated by Nasser’s Egypt. Seldom well-enough planned or well well-enough resourced, the change proceeded in fits and starts, conquering primary schools first, pausing, and then sweeping through secondary schools and finally universities. Arabization has never been entirely completed, with STEM subjects at universities in what used to be known as “French North Africa” largely taught in French to this day, and showing little sign of lowering their barriers. Pushed forward for reasons of doctrinaire Arab nationalism, it also reflected a growing governmental unease at the political unrest seen as rooted in access to foreign-language teaching and teachers, Western ideas and subjects like philosophy. In this sense the rise of Arabic-medium teaching, often accompanied by Islamic Studies, has been a fumbling method of social and political control in several countries, of which Morocco in the “leaden years” of Hassan II is an obvious case. This development in North African education clearly needs to be judged on a number of different

criteria. It may have reinforced national and Islamic sentiment (though the form of the latter, and the Islamist ballast that many of the Egyptian teachers brought with them do not perhaps seem quite as welcome today as they once did); but it has not been kind to educational achievement, and many would argue that the unruly speed of change, the linguistic confusion caused by generally poorly taught Arabic, and the requirement to change language in mid-education if pursuing the sciences, have all contributed to something approaching an educational disaster. Educational outcomes, as we shall see below, are generally very disappointing, and while Arabization is not the only reason, it is clearly a major contributor. Vermeren summarizes brutally: “Out of this reform came the swollen crisis generation, that of the graduate unemployed and the bilingual illiterates.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the grand contradiction of North African education and its development since independence: how can a process so earnestly and expensively entered into have yielded quite such slender dividends? Six years ago the World Bank produced a report that is fundamental to any thinking about the whole question of education reform in the Arab World. Called *The Road Not Travelled*, it explores judiciously and carefully what had been achieved, what had yet to be achieved, and how best to achieve what remained to be.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the report, its authors write:

“The modern history of education reform in MENA is a tale of brazen ambition, struggle against internal and external odds, unintended consequence, tactical error and success, accomplishment and unfinished business. It is also the story of the interaction of competing visions of the purpose and ends of education, pitching global trends in education strategy and content against age-old education traditions. Along this tumultuous path the region should be proud of its accomplishments. However ...”<sup>11</sup>

In the years since that “however ...” was penned, much has changed in North Africa. The “Arab Spring” has upset the apparently static certainties of 2008,<sup>12</sup> and released a great deal of energy, most of it from the young – the people whose education, employment and economic activity, or lack of all three, are the heart of the report. Their deep frustrations over education and unemployment – with such overwhelming impact on social betterment, personal prosperity, life chances, marriage and happiness – are one of the main themes running through the uprisings of 2011. Their continued frustration in many places continues to shape events. If the education/employment nexus seemed important to governments in 2008, we may be sure that the social and political impact of failure to address that nexus is even better understood today.

A poignantly clear illustration of the fundamental place of education and employment in the politics of North Africa comes from Samya Bouazizi, sister of Mohamed, the man whose self-immolation triggered the Tunisian revolution. She told *Al-Jazeera* that, “My sister was the one in university and he would pay for her, and I am still a student and he would spend money on me”. Another sister, Basma, said, “His dream was to see his sisters go to university”. The marginalized vegetable seller who had dropped out of secondary school without graduating and, in his mother’s words “didn’t expect to graduate because we didn’t have the money”, was supporting two sisters in education: he saw the future for his family in education, and he clearly thought it just as important to educate girls as boys.<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Bouazizi is a very potent icon of North African youth, representing many things, but perhaps above all the crushing weight of unemployment and the bright hope of education: whenever we are tempted to think in brute numbers, as macro-economists or education policymakers, it behoves us to remember Mohamed Bouazizi and his sisters.

It is of course too easy to assume geographical and cultural continuities along an axis that runs 2,280 miles from Casablanca to Cairo. There are real variants of income level (two Upper Middle Income countries and three Lower Middle Income countries by World Bank classification<sup>14</sup>), of political culture and of colonial history. But the shape of the challenges posed by education and the approach to solutions do have many common features, and it is useful to talk, with caution, about a closely related set of problems and achievements running from Morocco to Egypt. The UNDP's Arab Human Development Report, a profoundly important series of documents, felt able to generalize over a wider spectrum than just these five countries, commenting in its 2003 volume, *Building a Knowledge Society*, that "The most serious problem facing Arab education today is its deteriorating quality"; that "curricula taught in Arab countries seem to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thought"; and that there is an underlying concept of "education as an industrial process, where curricula and their content serve as moulds into which fresh minds are supposed to be poured".<sup>15</sup> Much has changed in a decade, but the stress on improving "the quality of education, a long-neglected priority in Arab societies" remains central. This is the next frontier.

The postcolonial governments of North Africa have been strenuous in building the education systems they felt they needed. The focus at first was of course on quantity – on getting more children into school and keeping them there, on getting more children through post-compulsory education, more students into Higher Education, more recorded literacy. It was a very statist approach, a top-down, centralized drive that owed much to ideas of central planning, to the Nasserist Egyptian model and also, in the old French possessions, to the highly centralized education system of metropolitan France. In tune with the development ideas of the time, there was also a deliberate incentive provided, in the form of the promise of public sector employment, to pull young people into education. It was what the World Bank describes as an "engineering" approach, driven and enforced from above, judging success by inputs as much as outputs; and it was quite appropriate for that first phase of reform.

In many ways, on the surface, the results have been good. Literacy, school enrolment, gender differentials, rural education and most other measures have improved. But there is a strong sense, which forms the central argument of *The Road Not Travelled*, that this first stage of education reform has exhausted its potential, and that a new approach is needed for the next stage, a stage demanding a workforce suitable to create and support a higher-skilled, globally competitive knowledge economy. Writing in her foreword to the report, Daniela Gressani, World Bank Vice-President for MENA, said: "Notwithstanding these successes – and the considerable resources invested in education – reforms have not fully delivered on their promises. In particular, the relationship between education and economic growth has remained weak, the divide between education and employment has not been bridged, and the quality of education continues to be disappointing." And lest it be objected that she was writing more than half a decade ago, voices continue to be raised: King Mohamed VI of Morocco said in an August 2013 speech to the nation, "I am indeed sad to note that the state of education is worse now than it was twenty years ago. ... We still have a long, arduous journey ahead of us if we are to enable this sector to actually play its role as an engine for the achievement of economic and social advancement."<sup>16</sup> The same could be said across much of North Africa, with different emphases and different provisos, but with equal force.

Such problems are of course not unique to North Africa, and it is important to remember that Western countries are facing many analogous problems, albeit on a different scale and with different resources to tackle them. This is particularly so at the tertiary level, where the rapid growth of Higher Education – which in French is called *massification* – has made necessary major structural change to the whole system of education, and radical changes to its financing in many Western countries. In Great Britain university education has been extended from under 10% to over 45% of the age group in little more than a generation, with huge and still controversial consequences. The same arguments about the purpose and utility of education, to the state and to the individual, are being worked out at all levels. It isn't always comfortable, and there are unhappy champions of liberal education for its own sake in Great Britain as in North Africa who are deeply uncomfortable with the utilitarian and employment-focused approach that the World Bank carries forward so effectively. But as David Willetts, until recently Secretary of State and a stout champion of education reform, wrote in a newspaper article recently, they are not mutually exclusive, and utility is, in truth, seldom far from any student's mind:

“Going to university is worthwhile in its own right. It deepens our understanding and broadens the mind. But for some people going to university is mainly a transaction to get a well-paid job. The great Robbins report of 1963 put it like this: ‘Confucius said in the *Analects* that it was not easy to find a man who had studied for three years without aiming at pay. We deceive ourselves if we claim that more than a small fraction of students in institutions of higher education would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read; and it is a mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this.’ So caring about employability is not new and not the betrayal of some previous golden age of innocence.”<sup>17</sup>

This is as relevant to the prosperity of nations as of individuals, because development requires a well-educated, innovative and flexible workforce. Mohamed Bouazizi's concern for his sisters' education was for their futures: the state's concern for the same girls' education must also be for its own future.



## EDUCATION REFORM

The countries of North Africa have a combined population of well over 170 million, with an exceptionally large “youth bulge”, the demographic expansion that has come later to MENA than to many other developing regions of the world. The proportion of the North African population under the age of 14 varies by country, from 23% in Tunisia to 31% in Egypt; and its “youth population”, those between 15 and 24, ranges from 27% in Libya and Tunisia to 31% in Egypt. Nowhere, in other words, is the proportion of the population younger than 24 years old less than 50%, and at the high end, in Egypt, it reaches 62%. The relatively good news is that the rate of growth is easing, and that only Libya and Egypt can expect to see continued growth of their youth population between now and 2050 (by 4% and 10%, respectively), while Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia should see drops of 16%, 13% and 20%, respectively.<sup>18</sup> The bulge will, however, continue up through the education system for the time being, peaking much earlier in Tunisia and Algeria than in Morocco and Libya, where primary demand will peak only in 2020–30.<sup>19</sup>

The challenge of educating this enormous slice of population is a very great one, and the particular challenge is to cope with the bulge as it moves up through the system, at different speeds in different countries. Greater still is the closely related challenge of finding the educated young suitable employment at the end of their education, and bringing the excluded, uneducated or defectively educated young into a structure of skilled employment. North Africa has the highest rate of youth unemployment of any region in the world, at 24%, and a youth labour force participation rate of 38%,<sup>20</sup> the lowest in the world apart from that for MENA as a whole (36%).<sup>21</sup>

The governments of North Africa have certainly not ignored this problem. Spending on education by the five countries of North Africa has been some of the highest in the world, both as a proportion of their GDP and as a proportion of their government budgets. Broadly speaking they have spent 5% of GDP and 20% of government budget on education over the past 40 years, which compares astonishingly well – in headline terms – with the United Kingdom’s figures (2012) of 6.2% of GDP and 13.3% of government budget. There is a clear understanding that education is fundamental to economic development, and that it is also both a non-negotiable pillar of identity building in a newly fledged – or re-fledged – state, and a basic right to be enjoyed by all citizens. In all five countries the right to an education is guaranteed in the constitution; and in all five that education is, effectively, free to the user.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the main measures of success are quantitative. Having inherited education systems that were geared in the Maghreb to the children of European colons, and in Egypt largely (though certainly not exclusively) to the Egyptian elite, the independent states judged performance by expanded coverage. So, as Spencer Segalla writes of Morocco, “only 13 percent of children of primary school age attended school in 1956, and only 2.25 percent of secondary school age – and Morocco’s population explosion had barely begun”.<sup>22</sup> Vermeren reports that at Independence Morocco counted 640 native graduates, and Tunisia, 1,300.<sup>23</sup> In Algeria “less than one-third of school-age Muslim children were enrolled in schools at the primary level. At the secondary and university levels, only 30 percent and 10 percent of the students, respectively, were Algerians.”<sup>24</sup> As for Egypt, the situation was a little better: “At the time of the 1952 Revolution, fewer than 50 percent of all primary-school-age children attended school, and the



majority of the children who were enrolled were boys. Nearly 75 percent of the population over ten years of age was illiterate.”<sup>25</sup>

Extension of education was the order of the day, and its measures are the three component measures of the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG2), that is of achieving universal primary education for boys and girls alike by 2015. These are the *Net Enrolment Ratio* at primary level, the *Retention Ratio* (from first to last year of primary) and the *Youth (15–24) Literacy Rate*.

In the first, North Africa has made great progress and is very close to achieving the goal of 100%. From 80% net enrolment in 1990, the region reached 90% in 2000 and 99% in 2010. Retention was well over 90%.<sup>26</sup> As for youth literacy (which reached 94.69% in MENA in 2011), progress has also been impressive in North Africa, with reported youth literacy rates in 2011 ranging from 81.51% in Morocco to 99.92% in Libya. Within these figures, all countries had a maximum gap of 5% between boys and girls, except for Egypt (with a gender gap of 8.3%) and Morocco (14.8%).<sup>27</sup> And perhaps most spectacular of all, in the wider MENA region the proportion of those entirely unschooled, those who never touch the education system at all, has dropped by 40–50% between 1975 and 2005.<sup>28</sup>

As for gender equity, there has been much progress. There remain gender differentials in enrolment and attendance at primary level, and there are significant distances still between countries, but the trend in all cases is towards this gap’s closing further. The 2012 Gender Parity Index in education (though the data are frustratingly incomplete) shows figures ranging from 0.94 (Algeria) to 0.98 (Tunisia). At secondary level, the gap opens up a little between three countries (Algeria, Libya and Tunisia), seeing female enrolment exceed male, with scores of 1.04–1.18; and Egypt (0.98) and Morocco (0.86). At tertiary level the gap opens further: Algeria (1.48), Libya (1.1) and Tunisia (1.59) are over par; Egypt (0.96) and Morocco (0.89) slightly below.<sup>29</sup>

However, the story can be fleshed out in at least two ways. First by looking at unemployment: here the differentials between young (15–24) male and female unemployed are very marked. In all countries where statistics are available, female unemployment in the 15–24 bracket is higher than male, in some cases enormously so: Algeria has female youth unemployment of 39.7% (against 24.8%) for youth overall; Egypt 53% (against 29.7%); and Tunisia 45.4% (against 42.3%). Only in Morocco is the female youth unemployment rate, at 18.1%, lower than that for youth generally. (Female employment is much more dependent on the public sector than male, and in Morocco, with its relatively smaller public sector, the contraction of public sector employment has had a less marked effect on young women.<sup>30</sup>) Of Libya it can only be said, without the capacity to drill down, that youth unemployment stands at 48.7%.<sup>31</sup>

Graduates fare significantly worse than the norm, and in one analysis of Algeria show differences in unemployment between male and female graduates of various faculties of 29.7% (social sciences), 25.8% (science) and 30.3% (engineering).<sup>32</sup>

Finally, it is perhaps worth noting here that the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index places Libya 55th in the world, Tunisia 90th, Algeria 93rd, Egypt 125th and Morocco 129th – rankings which drop

significantly in the newer and more unsparing (because it is a purely arithmetical comparison of HDI scores for the two sexes) Gender Development Index, to 93rd, 116th, 129th, 125th and 132nd, respectively.

At the basic level, albeit with some of the reservations outlined above, much has been achieved, and we can go further and look at the enrolment rates for secondary and tertiary, the number of students graduating from Higher Education Institutions, and gender ratios at different levels, and find similar progress. Although there is real concern that enrolment successes are being diluted by high dropout and repetition rates, there is much to be satisfied with, as long as progress continues in the countries lower on the scale: all five countries started half a century ago from a very low inherited base and have put in place, at considerable cost, the infrastructure for universal education and the creation, so far only in part, of an educated workforce. It is no mean achievement.

## NEXT PROBLEMS: QUALITY, EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

And yet all in the garden is not quite as rosy as it seems. Daniela Gressani, quoted above, highlighted three underlying problems: quality, employment and economic growth. *The Road Not Travelled* identifies the first two as the prime targets of the next, vital, stage of education reform, and is very clear that the tools that have been effective in the first stage – top-down engineering of inputs and allocation of resources, backed by enforcement of compliance – will not be sufficient to drive the next. To understand why, it is necessary to look at each in turn to see where the first 40 years of education reform have reached their high-water mark.

### QUALITY

The quality of education is a huge challenge. One of the dangers of a wholly state-driven system, by its nature largely cut off from any competitive market in education, is that measurements are, or become, internally referenced. In the most extreme example of this, Tunisia's schools examination system has no external component until the baccalaureate exam at the end of secondary school – and even this has an input of 25% from the examinee's own school. In many, perhaps most, of the countries being considered, a largely closed internal circulation of educational goods has been established in which quality can easily become a secondary consideration. Teachers are deeply involved in private tutoring in Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia, so that the education that is a child's by right risks being broken down into free and commercialized segments, with the latter indispensable for passing exams.

With a rigidly exam-based system that relies heavily on rote memorization, and largely exam-based promotion from level to level of education, this has the unhealthy result of making each qualification an end (sometimes effectively tradable) in itself. The ultimate valuation of the mere fact of a certificate over its content and real value has been called the "sheepskin effect", after the parchment of an old degree certificate, and tends to devalue the whole educational system. The OECD commissioned a very interesting "integrity audit" of the Tunisian educational system in 2013, which highlighted this unhealthy informal market, noting that 70% of all Tunisian

secondary finalists had, at one time or another, taken private lessons – and that an astonishing 54% of secondary students took private lessons from the same teacher who taught them in class.<sup>33</sup> Tunisia is not unique in facing this conundrum – but it is unique in courageously exposing itself to this very uncomfortable external analysis. According to CAPMAS (Egypt’s central statistics agency), over 60% of all education investment in Egypt goes into private tutoring.<sup>34</sup>

This represents a nest of very difficult problems. Pedagogical traditions play a great part in the very teacher-centred, memorization-based and exam-focused system that is found across the region. These traditions are both from the Islamic educational history of all five countries, where memorization and recital (of the Qur’an and other texts) has been a central core for many centuries; and from the colonial French (and British) legacies which continue to cast a shadow over teaching methods long after Europe has moved on to much more pupil-centred methods and more open systems of assessment (though France retains in many respects the educational philosophy and practice that it gave to its North African possessions).

There are moves however towards external measurement, and while the results themselves are often troubling, the impact of international comparison is very important. Tunisia took part in PISA 2009, the only country in this group to do so.<sup>35</sup> Morocco has participated in all TIMSS and PIRLS exercises since 1999; Tunisia has done the same for TIMSS since 1999, and Egypt joined TIMSS briefly in 2003 and 2007. This participation, the more so if (as in Morocco’s and Tunisia’s cases) it is consistent, is highly creditable. It has to be said, though, that the recorded results serve to underline the gap between system engineering for quantitative impact and the focus on quality that is now so badly needed. Taking only the most recent TIMSS and PIRLS exercises (2011, which confines the focus to Tunisia and Morocco) shows the scale of the mountain still to climb in two countries that have traditionally been viewed as, respectively, one of the foremost and one of the more challenged, of the five under consideration.<sup>36</sup>

In TIMSS, applied at Grade 4 to test maths, Morocco and Tunisia both ranked in the lowest three of the 45 participating countries, with only 26% and 35% respectively of children tested passing the Low International Benchmark, beside an International Median of 90%. (The LIB is the lowest of the four levels measured: below it, in Morocco, well over 25% of students had results too low to be reliably scored at all; in Tunisia this unmeasurable band stood at 15–25%.<sup>a</sup>) At Grade 8, the situation improved a little, with 61% of Tunisian students and 36% of Moroccans reaching the LIB (with an International Median, at this higher level, of 75%). At neither level did either country record any statistically significant achievement at the top level, the Advanced International Benchmark (AIB). What is particularly striking is that the only comparisons possible, for Tunisia, show a slight improvement over the years at Grade 4, but a significant decline at Grade 8 since a peak in 1999. Only at the HIB has Tunisia reached its 1999 Grade 8 score again in 2014: at the Intermediate International Benchmark (IIB) the 2011 score is 25%, against 34% in 1999; and at the LIB, 61% against 78% in 1999. Egypt also showed a significant decline in achievement between its two participations, and in 2007 53% of Egyptian students didn’t reach the LIB in maths; while 45% fell below it in science.

a The four benchmarks are, in ascending order, the Low International Benchmark (LIB), the Intermediate International Benchmark (IIB), the High International Benchmark (HIB) and the Advanced International Benchmark (AIB).

The “unmeasurable” band comprises those whose scores do not reach the level of random answer selection.

PIRLS, which tests literacy and runs alongside TIMSS, tells a not dissimilar story, though Morocco is alone in participating. Applied in Grade 4 (2011), it shows 21% of Moroccan students reaching the LIB (with an International Median of 95%), 7% the IIB (International Median 80%) and 1% the HIB (44%). Morocco also entered Grade 6 students for the Grade 4 test, naturally with better results: 61% reached the LIB, 30% the IIB and 7% the HIB: but in neither case did any statistically significant number of students reach the AIB, and again, “more than 25%” of students scored too low to be marked at all.

In taking Morocco and Tunisia as examples, it needs iterating that both countries have exposed themselves courageously to international comparison in the belief that this will help them to improve quality as, if used well, it will. But it also illustrates the limitations of the quantitative approach to education reform. Expansion can go only so far – the next, real, challenge is deepening. Literacy is a very good example of this dilemma. On the one hand, literacy figures as scored for the MDGs and “Education for All” are bounding ahead reassuringly: Morocco’s youth literacy rate is 82%, Tunisia’s 97%.<sup>37</sup> These figures date from 2011, the same year as the PIRLS scores cited above, and it is hard to reconcile Morocco’s 82% youth literacy with the fact that only 21% of Moroccan Grade 4 students reached even the lowest threshold of the PIRLS literacy assessment, and “more than 25%” scored too low to be meaningfully assessed. The gap between the two figures is richly symbolic of the present challenge.

As Ragui Assaad, writing in an IZA discussion paper in 2013, put it brutally but frankly: “The low quality of the human capital produced is clearly manifested by the very low scores obtained by Arab students in standardised international tests.”<sup>38</sup>

There are of course many more indicators of quality, and it is certainly true that several of the countries under consideration have made significant changes to their inspection and Quality Assurance regimes, though particularly at the tertiary level. Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have Quality Assurance agencies; Morocco and Algeria are en route to doing so. But the figures still speak, thus far, for themselves.

## EMPLOYMENT

Dr Gressani’s second major area of concern was the labour market. The essential question is how to translate education into economic growth, and this involves bridging the currently yawning gap between the region’s education systems and its employment markets. This problem needs to be approached from two ends: that of the adaptation of education to the needs of increasingly sophisticated labour market demands and the employment opportunities the market makes available; and that of the market’s present inability to absorb the steady outflow of young people from schools, colleges and HEIs who need productive employment. The main focus here is on the educational – supply – end of the equation, but the demand side is also crucial, not least because of the huge and suffocating presence of the public sector as an employer-of-choice and dominant presence right across the region, with its startling power to deform the education system.

North Africa has very high rates of youth unemployment, and the disturbing phenomenon of a labour market in which education seems, in many cases, to *retard* the individual’s future, and to

diminish chances of employment (though of course always relative to the opportunities that jobseekers deem appropriate and acceptable). In Egypt those with secondary education make up 42% of the population and 80% of the unemployed; in Algeria those figures are 20% and 40% ; and in Morocco 16% and 30%.<sup>39</sup> In other words educated unemployment runs at about double the national unemployment rate in each country.

Graduate unemployment in particular – *le chômage diplômé* – is a particular scourge in all five countries. In Tunisia, where the problem is arguably a little less ineluctably structural, the 33.2% graduate unemployment figure is below the general rate of 37.6%, but still progressive in a very negative sense: Master’s degree holders, a mere 15% of the Tunisian student population, make up 55% of the graduate unemployed.<sup>40</sup> In Algeria, 20.3% of graduates are unemployed, against a global unemployment figure of 9.8% (though 24.3% of 15–24 year olds are unemployed); in Morocco 22.7%, against 8.9% globally (and 17.6% for 15–24 year olds); Egypt sees 19% graduate unemployment as against a global 12% (and a youth figure of 17%).<sup>41</sup> Libya is more difficult to call, but “World Bank estimates show that youth unemployment has remained at about 50%, *with the majority of unemployed holding university degrees* [my italics].<sup>42</sup> This is a perverse and soul-destroying environment for the young, their efforts often unrewarded, their aspirations crushed. “It seems,” as one UNDP report drily puts it, writing of Egypt, “true that an educated person is at no advantage when it comes to finding his/her way in the job market. In fact the opposite seems to be true.”<sup>43</sup>

However, it needs to be stressed that, heartbreaking as graduate unemployment certainly is, it is in a rather grim sense a luxury available to those who can afford to be unemployed. Many are prepared to suffer hardship and, if available, to rely on family support, rather than take work that they feel unsuitable – or forego the prospect of public employment. Often this means that, as one analyst comments, “those who can afford to spend time queuing for public sector jobs, with the expectation of relatively high pay for low productivity”, do so.<sup>44</sup>

The same analyst points out that there is a greater unemployment problem hidden in the statistics – that of the NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training) who fall outside the statistics altogether. When the figures for youth employment, unemployment and education are added together, they total only about 60–70% of the youth cohort. This means that 30–40% of the 15–24 bracket are invisible: effectively uneducated to any level higher than the basic, excluded and without any stable employment, these are the NEETs. Egypt has some 35.9% of the 15–24 group (and 40.5% of 15–29s) in this condition; Tunisia 25.4% (and 32.2% of 15–29s). Young women are hugely over-represented amongst NEETs: Egypt’s 40.5% breaks down into 9.3% of young men and 49.5% of young women; Tunisia’s 32.2% into 22.4% of men, 42.2% of women. Bringing as many as possible of these young people back into education through second chances and adult education schemes is a vital need in all countries, and not highly enough prioritized.<sup>45</sup>

## EMPLOYABILITY

The figures indicate that something is very wrong, and understanding it goes a long way towards unravelling the puzzle of education reform in North Africa. The fundamental challenge is of course the changing global economy. A globalized knowledge-based economy demands “a well-educated, technically skilled workforce producing high-value-added, knowledge-intensive goods and services ... in enterprises that have the managerial capacity to find, adapt and adopt modern up-to-date technology and sell sophisticated goods and services in local and global markets”.<sup>46</sup> A low-educated and inflexible workforce is no longer the answer to any country’s development needs, and the education systems of North Africa are not yet producing anything like enough graduates at each level equipped with the transversal skills, the “expert thinking” and the “complex communication” capacity that the world now demands, and which their countries need if they are to build really competitive international economies. And the modern knowledge economy is not optional: the traditional post-independence low-skill-labour economies have not produced the growth needed to absorb the region’s young productively. There is no going back.

The problems that the region’s education systems either create or fail to solve are in many ways the outcomes of the quantitative period of education reform. Low levels of effective – as opposed to headline – literacy militate against the creation of a skilled workforce right from the start; the disjointed language policy visible particularly, but not exclusively, in Morocco and Tunisia, disrupts education progress all the way through the process. “Teaching to the test”, emphasizes the ability to memorize and repeat factual information, not the ability to think critically.

On top of this there are a number of serious, structural problems that are found across the region. The first is the whole area of vocational education (TVET), and its failure to produce a significant class of skilled technicians, adapted to the modern economy. The second is that of the magnetic attraction of the public sector as employer of first choice. And the third is the difficulty that all countries in North Africa have had adapting academic courses and their graduates to the needs of the market.

These three problems are closely interrelated. The public sector has traditionally offered jobs to graduates in the humanities and social sciences, and a shrinking public sector has left many of these graduates stranded, with skills that are not useful elsewhere. The academic route through the baccalaureate to university has been so overwhelmingly more prestigious in all countries than the TVET route, that the latter has much more often been seen as a sign of failure than as a route to specialized employment. And none of the countries has created the conditions for a lightly regulated private sector, confident in its security and its financing, able to easily hire and invest in staff and create wealth.



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## PUBLIC SECTOR PREFERENCE

The dominance of the public sector in employment is a phenomenon that is shared by all North African, and most Arab, countries, though it has now begun to be addressed in several. It is the result of early post-independence development needs for administrative staff (including teachers, who are civil servants throughout the region); and it has also been the lure – the reward – for commitment by young men and women to extending their education. It took the form of a guarantee, formal or tacit, of employment for graduates in the public service. It was in that sense a social elevator, and quickly became a very important part of each country's employment landscape (perhaps at its most acute in Egypt and Algeria). It is also clear that substantial access to public sector employment has generally been the purchase-price for tranquillity amongst the educated middle class.<sup>47</sup>

Its attractions, compared to a private sector that was small and in many cases marginalized for ideological reasons, and to a large, often chaotic and generally insecure informal sector, were clear: security, prestige and relatively high reward, generally including pension rights. As higher education expanded, so did the public sector workforce, “responding to the demand for guaranteed, secure jobs by the middle and upper classes”.<sup>48</sup> It would be wrong to imagine that public sector employees accepted lower salaries than they might have earned in the private sector (had it had the capacity to absorb them) in return for these advantages. Rewards were generally good. By the first decade of this century, the 22% of Tunisians in the public sector were absorbing 63% of the government's total budget; the 10% of Moroccans were carrying away 51% of the budget; the 29% of Algerians, 31%, and the 29% of Egyptian workers in the public sector earned 29% of the government budget. Of Libya, where comparable figures are not available, it perhaps needs only to be said that 66% of the entire national workforce was on the public payroll in 2000.<sup>49</sup> These figures are declining with retrenchment, but the expectations created by public sector recruitment, and the inability of the private sector to take up the slack, are powerful motors of youth discontent. Unemployment is corrosive.

Figures for preference are interesting. Of the five countries, the preference for public over private employment expressed by youths in the 15–34 age bracket was highest in Egypt, at about 60% of those polled by Gallup in 2010. Tunisia runs second, with c. 55%, followed by Algeria at c. 44%, Morocco at c. 38% and Libya at c. 14%.<sup>50</sup> (The Libyan figure may mean something a little different to the others – in an economy where 66% of employment was in the public sector anyway, frustrations and ambitions may have been imaginatively different, at least in 2010.) A year later a different source found broadly similar figures, though with Egypt showing an astonishing 71% preference across all age groups.<sup>51</sup> The UK, in comparison, saw a high public sector employment preference amongst students of 29% (2011), even as major public sector cuts began to have their impact. Re-engineering of public sector employment practices has proceeded (as it has in the UK), notably in Morocco, but the intense resistance there from unemployed graduates who see “non-competitive and unconditional absorption” into the *fonction publique* as theirs by right, shows little sign of abating, and the issue is a regular political football.

Among the various identifiable results (which include unsustainable public pension bills), are an ingrained risk-aversion amongst students: the combination of security, prestige and high reward are



irresistible and make the public service a preferred destination for many, and in some cases most, students. Since public sector hiring has been largely based on the simple fact of having a degree rather than on an identifiable set of skills or aptitudes, it has been a damper on change in education. As one commentator puts it: “the public sector not only regulates the educational and training system – with very little involvement of employers – but also is its main client”; and “as a result, the education system has created signals for public sector hiring rather than equipping graduates with the employability capital needed to succeed in the wider labour market”.<sup>52</sup> Another writes baldly, “Though many Arab countries have experienced some of the most rapid increases in educational attainment in the world over the past three decades, much of the investment in human capital has been in pursuit of the credentials useful to access public sector jobs rather than the skills demanded by globalizing economies”.<sup>53</sup>

Since in terms of public sector recruitment, “a degree is a degree is a degree”, large-scale public sector hiring tends to cluster students in the low-cost, open-access faculties – the humanities and social sciences (H&SS). Once again this is part of a vicious circle, whereby a demand for “sheepskin” promotes its production. The scaling-back of public sector recruitment leaves large numbers of H&SS graduates beached, with skill-sets generally unsuitable for work anywhere else: “to increase the chances of receiving a public sector job, young people chose higher education degrees that are not relevant to the private sector.”<sup>54</sup> In Algeria, students in H&SS (including education) represent 54.6% of the total student body; in Egypt 76.2%; in Morocco 75.4%; in Libya 48.6%; and in Tunisia 49%.<sup>55</sup> Where it is possible to attribute unemployment by subjects studied (and there is a marked reticence about this in several countries), the results are predictable: one analyst of Algeria notes that 27.3% of humanities graduates and 28.7% of social science graduates are unemployed, against 18.1% for science graduates and 14.8% of engineers (with a huge weighting against women, whose unemployment rates are 19.7% higher than men’s in the humanities and 29.7% higher in the social sciences).<sup>56</sup>

Of Morocco, Driss Guerraoui, the country’s leading expert on graduate unemployment writes: “Unemployment affects principally those educated in Arabic Literature, Islamic Studies, biology, chemistry and physics, who in 2010 made up more than 80% of the graduate unemployed recorded in the database of the Prime Minister’s Department.”<sup>57</sup> (Why the sciences? Because they are studied for entry into the public sector as teachers, rather than for industrial research, their graduates are all too often one-trick ponies: if unsuccessful in competition for teacher recruitment, they are not well equipped for other employment.)

Reform here is under way, more advanced in some countries than others. Tunisia, for example, has begun tentatively to reallocate students to “applied” courses with better employment prospects. Somewhat hamstrung by the traditional use of public sector employment as a safety-valve for wider unemployment, governments across the region are nonetheless managing to scale it back. Egypt has done so with some success: while 20% of all men and 50% of all women born in 1978 could expect their first job to be in the public sector, those figures are now down to 5% and 20%.<sup>58</sup> And the proportion of those completing secondary school who found a job in the public sector had dropped from 60% in 1970s to around 20% by the 1990s.<sup>59</sup>

However, aspirations may be harder to shift than realities, and the consequences of the widespread public sector preference will resonate in education for years to come, by condoning the acquisition of certificates rather than a portfolio of skills, by encouraging the over-subscription of university courses with low-employment value in the private sector, and by turning a significant proportion of students against the idea of private sector employment.

## VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) should be creating a by-pass around this academic blockage by producing skilled workers ready for a changing employment market. Unfortunately, on the whole, it is not.

After independence or (in Egypt's case) revolution, countries that had had a large European population filling skilled jobs faced the immediate challenge of training technicians to replace those departing. Each of the five North African countries moved to build a system for training young people in trades and skills at all levels, and each of the systems was designed and operated with excellent intentions.

But each of them found that with the best will in the world it is hard to maintain "parity of esteem", and all too easy for the TVET route to become seen as a second-class education. This is of course particularly clear in societies where the academic degree is a prized status symbol, and where the most prestigious and desirable career path – the public sector – depends on academic certification. Generalizing about the region, the World Bank noted in 2013 that education needs to be made "more inclusive, more directed towards learning, and less directed towards selecting and exclusively rewarding the academically able while leaving the rest behind".<sup>60</sup>

In addition, because TVET is generally cheaper on a per capita basis than its academic equivalent at all levels it has often been used as a pressure-valve to take the strain off secondary schools and universities when swelling enrolment has begun to overstrain education budgets.<sup>61</sup> In the only cases for which World Bank data is available, Algeria and Libya spent 7.5% and 14% of their education budgets on TVET at the most recent report (2007 and 2008 respectively): for up to a third of the age cohort this does not seem lavish.

In all countries there are different routes into TVET, at different levels. The first is generally straight from basic education into a technical stream or college for secondary education: this forking of paths takes up to a third of all students out of the academic stream, and although there is generally no option of returning, some at least will proceed to technical colleges at tertiary. Others will leave the general secondary stream without completing and find their way into TVET at tertiary: but unforced transfer in this direction appears very rare. So suspicious are many families of the quality of education offered that in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia secondary technical colleges are regularly undersubscribed.<sup>62</sup> "The share of VET at upper secondary is extremely small," as the ETF's Labour Market Specialist puts it, "in all Arab Mediterranean Countries with the exception of Egypt."<sup>63</sup>

There has in fact been a decline in TVET enrolment globally, but between 1999 and 2009 the biggest drop was in the Arab states, where TVET declined from around 35% to just over 20%

of total secondary enrolments. In Egypt this is mirrored with a drop from around 30% to just over 20%, though Tunisia actually saw growth (from c. 10% to c. 14%).

An Egyptian employer is quoted by the World Bank as expressing a preference for hiring those who have not gone through the system<sup>64</sup>; and two Enterprise Surveys in 2007 and 2008 that questioned employers, exploring the barriers to recruitment, found 50% of Egyptian employers citing labour skill levels as a major barrier to business creation, followed by 37% of Algerians and 31% of Moroccans<sup>65</sup>

Clearly there is much that needs doing in this sector, whether by governments directly or, as the World Bank recommends, by private and NGO suppliers. It is interesting to note the comment, again by the World Bank, that the Don Bosco Institute, a highly reputed TVET college in Egypt run by Italian Salesian Brothers, “offers three and five year diplomas that provide a path to employment, decent pay and career progression – the very elements lacking in most public TVET institutions”. And that is quite a comprehensive lack.

TVET is a major focus of EC bilateral aid work; and the European Training Foundation’s GEMM project is attacking this problem with its partners in all five countries. It focuses on three important objectives. The first is aligning TVET “supply” with labour market “demand”, and refining labour market information systems, in a bid to make the system more attractive to students. The second is to support development of integrated TVET governance systems. And the third is to support the development of common QA systems. It is notable that Algeria, Libya and Egypt are signed up to projects under strand one (alignment); Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt to projects under strand two (governance and structure); but only Tunisia to strand three on quality assurance.<sup>66</sup>

## LABOUR MARKETS

A very short word about labour markets is worth adding, as the last piece in this jigsaw puzzle. Not perhaps normally part of a consideration of education systems, it is nonetheless vital to note that the nature and workings of the labour markets in all five countries militate against easy absorption of educated youth, and easy adaptability of the skills portfolios that they bring with them to those markets.

As observed at length above, the public sector looms large in any thinking about flexible labour markets, and its slow retrenchment is a necessary prerequisite of real change. A large part of its place – and of that of the informal economy, which understandably does not tempt many graduates – must be taken by private enterprises that can use the region’s human capital to create wealth. This has not yet substantially happened: as the public sectors shrink, the formally waged private sector is generally static, with the slack being taken up by the “informal sector”. Focusing on Egypt as an example, of young Egyptians entering the labour market in 1970 with at least secondary school completion, 67% went into public sector jobs, and 20% into formally waged private sector jobs. Thirty years later, 19% of entrants went into the public sector, but only 18% went into formally waged private sector jobs. The rest were swallowed up in a rising tide of informal private sector jobs (rising from 5% to 40%) and unwaged family employment 5% to 18%).<sup>67</sup>

Labour market inflexibilities, the very high costs of hiring and firing (particularly in Morocco and Tunisia), the complex regulatory framework in which firms must operate, and in several of the countries we are considering, high levels of perceived corruption, all inhibit the growth of a formal private sector.

It is illuminating to look at the rankings in the WEF's *Global Competitiveness Survey 2014–15*: on the pillar of “Labour Market Efficiency”, Morocco stands 122nd out of 177 ranked globally, Libya 137th, Egypt 142nd and Algeria 144th (Tunisia is not ranked). The WEF's assessment of overall “Quality of Education” in the context of competitiveness is also sobering: Morocco again leads at 105th, followed by Algeria at 131st, Egypt 139th and Libya 142nd.<sup>68</sup>

Only a thriving private sector can realistically create the businesses that will hire graduates in sufficient numbers to influence the content of the education they receive, and the WEF, at least, still harbours reservations on the score not only of the crucial labour markets, but also of the underlying quality of education. Both are indispensable in creating an environment conducive to local business expansion and deeper FDI. Both are still weak.

## PRESCRIPTIONS

The problems are fairly clear – and so are the achievements, the “tremendous gains in education” that the World Bank acknowledges and their clear social benefits. The question is how to get from here to where the region needs to arrive. *The Road Not Travelled* argues that in an environment where regional educational budgets are probably stretched to the maximum, amongst the highest in the world as a proportion of GDP and government spending, further progress needs to be smart and cost-effective, using resources better, creating efficiencies and drawing on external sources of income.

The Bank argues further that the potential of the top-down approach, which it refers to as “engineering”, is more or less exhausted. Engineering has been the dominant methodology of the period of expansion, but it is not nearly as suitable for the next phase, the deepening, quality-focused campaign to make education serve the needs of job-hungry individuals, skills-hungry employers and development-hungry governments. This can only be done with different tools, and these the Bank identifies primarily as *incentivization* and public accountability.

Incentives need to replace the compliance regime of inspectorates largely devoted to procedural enforcement, and public accountability to replace the limited accountability that is essentially internal to the educational bureaucracy and largely bypasses both students and their families. This is usefully described in terms of the “principal-agent dilemma”, a term taken from industrial organization: the puzzle of how to align systems so that the people you need to do things for you are positioned in such a way that they become self-motivated to do what you want them to do. Instead of agents – teachers, schools, inspectors, local education authorities – who are able to deliver quantitative targets and mandatory change because they are chased to do so and know how to operate (and sometimes to manipulate) the system, with no incentive to excel, the next phase of education reform and development demands agents whose rewards are geared to the qualitative progress that they make, the qualitative results they deliver. This demands a much more

“intelligent” education system, one in which not only does incentivization drive teachers and administrators to exceed such targets; but in which the best institutions can thrive without undue bureaucratic impediment. Much greater transparency, accessible performance data, increased autonomy and an element of choice are powerful parts of the prescription.

Choice is of course an interesting concept in what are largely state education systems, though we have noted the tendency to express choice in one dimension by moving out of TVET in at least three countries. At school level the formal private education sector – another dimension of choice – in all five countries is fairly small. Algeria has 0.5% of its pupils at both primary and secondary levels in private institutions; Tunisia 2.4% and 0.5%; Egypt 7.8% and 5.5%; and Morocco 12.9% and 4.8%.<sup>69</sup> But in several of these cases it is growing fast – and in any case, the urge to vote by choosing is expressed very often through buying educational top-up services, rather than by opting out of state provision entirely – in Egypt, as noted above, some 60% of all educational investment goes into private tutoring, a very clear statement to which any thinking government must respond.

The success of this prescription at any level “requires a strong regulatory regime and a special attention to issues of equity. It should also be recognized that the role of the private sector in education is likely to remain limited into the foreseeable future. Thus, no country can afford to slack in its effort at reforming public schools.” This means reforms to pedagogy, autonomy, transparency and the restructuring of rewards and careers to promote qualitative success.<sup>70</sup>

Incentivization and choice are in their infancy. There is no case in the region where results-linked payment to teachers has been successfully tried out, largely because the profession is shaped as part of the civil service, with payment and promotion by seniority, and reward that is not linked in any direct way to success. Opacity is still more common than transparency in many cases, and the teaching profession is often not keen to see more of the latter, as the Moroccan Ministry of Education discovered in 2014 when it rolled out an excellently conceived, system-wide information management tool called Massar. There was vociferous resistance from the teaching unions, pupils and parents to the whole concept of transparency, which seemed to threaten all sorts of private arrangements, absences, second jobs and quiet obscurities by recording teacher and pupil attendance, marks, test results and many other details on a national database.

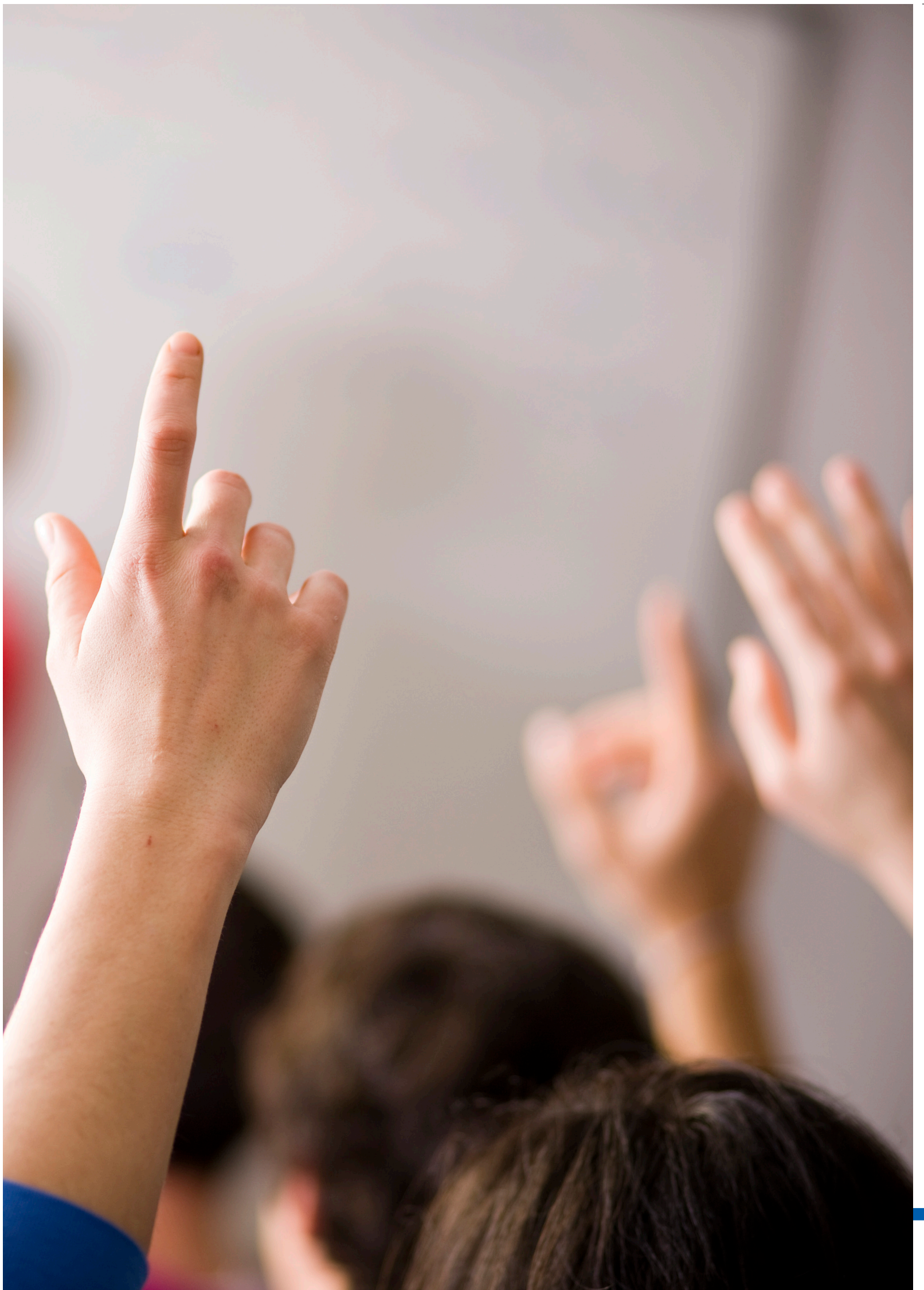
It is also worth noting here that there are other dimensions of choice which tend to create parallel tracks of education, and sometimes of employment. In several countries there remain quasi-traditional education systems in informal Islamic preschools, *msids*, which articulate with the national systems in different ways. Often simply used as a preschool option, Islamic education in Egypt and Morocco also shapes an entire parallel track, from infancy to graduation, run by Cairo’s Al-Azhar and Fes’s Qairouyyine, respectively. Supervised by the state, these institutions bear a considerable load (particularly in Egypt where the Al-Azhar system covers 10.3% of all children in education) and occupy a slightly uneasy middle ground where quality and employability are not easy to judge. There are also what one might describe as “extra-territorial” options in the form of foreign schools, of which the most remarkable are Morocco’s *lycées de mission*, schools owned and run by the French government, which train Morocco’s francophone elite. Graduates of these lycées are heavily represented among the 30,000 Moroccan students in France and the five hundred or so who qualify annually for the Grandes Écoles; and amongst those who are recruited directly into the private sector labour market through job fairs run in Paris by Moroccan companies.

Finding the balance between “engineering” management and next-generation smart management is a tricky series of choices. Private education will yield benefits if it is on offer predominantly at post-compulsory levels (and coupled with state support to poorer students), while the state provides a universal high-quality primary offer. But this has to be engineered through regulation, because the “easy money” is at private primary provision. And where competitive advantage for their children is permitted to be offered in this way, parents who can afford it will take it. In fact the figures cited above reveal that the bulk of private schooling is being offered and taken up not at post-compulsory, but at primary level, with results that will tend to reinforce, not reduce, inequalities. This unintended consequence mirrors an imbalance of investment whereby Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia spend 1.52, 2.56 and 1.53 times as much per capita on public secondary as on public primary education, respectively (and Tunisia and Morocco spend 1.88 and 2.66 times as much, respectively, on each tertiary student as on each secondary pupil.<sup>71</sup>

With enrolment and attendance rising, and set to rise much further at the higher levels of the education systems, this gearing of costs will place huge additional pressures on education budgets: “The region has steadily reallocated resources from primary to secondary and tertiary education, but not enough to offset the increased enrolment at higher levels of instruction.”<sup>72</sup> With education spending already at very high levels, it is a zero-sum game, and results in the under-resourcing of basic education, with two results – under-educating those whose education consists only of the basic level; and building very shaky foundations for those who go on to secondary and tertiary in greater and greater numbers. Inclusivity would seem to demand a re-ordering of priorities here, one which would be of huge benefit in tackling the underperformance revealed in TIMSS and PIRLS scores, applying as they do to the whole school population of each country.

A similar need for intervention is very clear in the distribution of undergraduate courses, where Tunisia has led the way in pushing students towards courses that will tend to increase their employment prospects. The preponderance of H&SS graduates across the region is partly, as noted, a question of public sector recruitment processes; but it is also a reflection of financial pressures. Put crudely, the unit cost of an H&SS student is low compared to that of a science or engineering student, and since there is no full employment of the latter in any North African country (though their unemployment is certainly lower), it is cheaper to produce unemployed Arabic literature graduates than unemployed engineering graduates.

Reallocation of students to more appropriate courses is vital, but without changes to the way the labour market works, and an acceleration of job creation, it will certainly not be enough in itself to solve any problems.



## CONCLUSIONS

North Africa is at a point in its development that could not have been foreseen ten years ago. Revolutions have taken place (in some cases more than once) in three countries since the publication of the World Bank's flagship report, and significant, less abrupt, change has come to a fourth. The heady youth-driven energy of 2011 has been diluted by post-revolutionary politics, and the world recession has bitten North Africa, as it has everywhere. Elsewhere in the region there is widespread war, generally imagined in religious terms, part of what has become a long-term cycle of sectarian competition and violent reaction to it. Much effort on the part of North African governments goes into remaining apart from the currents that have disturbed and rocked nations in the Mashreq and the Sahel.

Continuing assiduously and imaginatively with educational reform is a part of those efforts. Quite apart from the fundamental rights of their populations to education, governments see clearly that the satisfaction of legitimate demands for schooling, higher education and jobs – and the life chances that come with them – is central to building national futures and to averting a growing frustration and anger amongst young people that could have devastating consequences. The prescriptions remain the same, and in writing this report I have shamelessly followed the analysis of the World Bank on both education and employment. But there are other questions that need consideration and which have lain on the edge of, or outside, the Bank's ambit: to these I shall briefly draw attention.

The World Bank's prescription remains axiomatic: the next period of education reform requires a subtle approach, characterized less by central planning, system-engineering and enforcement and more by persuasion and co-option, by making willing allies in quality improvement of the people and individuals who deliver education, and by tackling some of the key labour market deformations. The extraordinary achievements of the postcolonial period, of enrolment, retention, gender equality and literacy need to be completed and consolidated. But there is no time to be lost in serious improvements to the quality of education and the utility of outcomes. This means asking hard questions about which bits of the education system (whether we speak of institutions or subjects, languages, careers advice services or teacher training, TVET colleges or preschools) actually work, and which do not, and to base decisions on the evidence assembled. There is a need for a certain ruthlessness in making choices now, a phase of engineering designed to leave a more autonomous, more internally competitive, more child and student-focused system of education, able to stand on its own feet, trusted to deliver results.

Clearly there is a top-level test of success – in the rate of absorption of young people across the region into employment, their engagement in the production of wealth and the economic development of their countries. But there are other tests too. It is too easy (for example) when looking at faculties and employment rates to say that the social sciences do not yield useful employment, that the country's priorities must be the training of engineers and doctors, scientists and technicians. But a nation that cannot reflect on itself as a society, cannot analyse its own mentalities, and the processes of social heredity and social change, is losing something very precious, and very important to its future. There is a need for discriminating care in the necessary utilitarian reform – an understanding that there are more values in play than the purely material.



The health of the humanities and social sciences is crucial to any society. Slimmed down they certainly must be, but like a rose bushes, pruned that they may grow smaller, but *stronger* and *better*.

Other questions that strike me as important, and worth adding to this paper as footnotes, are those of language and culture. While the language question has different shapes in each of the five countries, it is fundamental in all of them, in two forms: firstly because of its absolute importance to literacy acquisition, and secondly because of the long-running, but growing question of foreign languages in education.

Literacy, as the discrepancy between headline indicators for the MDGs and the results of international comparisons like PIRLS makes clear, remains highly problematic (and much more problematic than is generally admitted) in much of the region. In French two concepts usefully define this discrepancy: the societies of North Africa are no longer mostly *analphabète* – technically *illiterate* in an absolute sense – but they remain to different extents *illettré* – non-reading cultures. Many authorities believe that a large part of the problem lies in the language of instruction at primary school. Where the language of literacy is Modern Standard Arabic, but the mother tongue of the children is something else (whether it is colloquial Arabic, or one of the many Tamazight dialects) there is a high risk of in-building diglossia, a two-language mental world which damages the ability to learn to read and to practice reading, and in all probability creates the puzzled discouragement that leads to high dropout rates and high rates of repetition.

If this were the only language problem (and it affects countries more severely the further west they are, with higher proportions of non-Arabic speakers and Arabic dialects that are further from MSA) it would be severe enough. But the readily understandable urge to decolonize the mind by Arabizing the education system has in some countries done great damage too, because of haste, because of not being completed systematically (or even well), and because in a world of globalized knowledge and economic activity, those cut off from international communication and international languages are seriously handicapped. (This is made more complex by the fact that there are many – Amazigh for the most part – in the Maghreb who would regard, or affect to regard, Arabic itself as a language of colonization.)

The King of Morocco, in his 2013 speech cited elsewhere, went on to say, “another reason [for the problems in Moroccan education] has to do with the disruptions caused by changing the language of instruction from Arabic, at the primary and secondary levels, to some foreign languages, for the teaching of scientific and technical subjects in higher education”. This switching of languages in the scientific subjects is common to Morocco and Tunisia, and to some extent Algeria, and it is lethal: not only does it inhibit learning by filtering it through a language that is generally ill-understood at an academic level; but it also greatly privileges the entry of those educated in French – privately, outside the state system – into the most prestigious subjects, institutions and opportunities for study abroad.

Serious and evidence-based thought about language policy in education is needed, in circumstances where both questions – that of the language of literacy and that of the language of scientific, and indeed all higher, instruction – are politically charged and deeply rooted in the identity of North Africans as Arabs (a contested category) and Muslims.

And finally, into the arena of language debate comes the question of English. All five education systems are addressing vigorously the need for more English as a prerequisite for success. Several are experimenting with large-scale extension of teaching of, and in, English at school (Egypt with experimental language schools, Morocco with foreign language baccalaureate options being developed in French, English and Spanish, of which English is the new and very robust entrant). It is increasingly clear that English – or Globish, as it is perhaps better to call it in resolutely non-nationalist terms – is, and will for some time yet continue to be, the predominant international language of research, entertainment, commerce and social media.

But above all, that offer is one that looks for commonalities and shared experience. The situation in each country of North Africa is unique, but nonetheless has much in common with its neighbours. What is clear, looking at Great Britain and its own educational reforms of recent decades, is that we too have much in common with North Africa – more, perhaps than we realize, disguised by differences of history, development and wealth. The *massification* of Higher Education, the relentless quest for quality with limited means, the development of sophisticated techniques for orientating students to careers and the job market, life-long learning, the teaching of reading skills, the design of innovative inspection regimes, the teaching of English to non-native speakers – all these are potential overlaps.

## NOTES

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7. Widely quoted, e.g. *New Internationalist*, no. 177, November 1987. Some sources add castor oil.
8. Vermeren, “The North African Educational Challenge”, p. 55.
9. Vermeren, *École, élite et pouvoir*, p. 11. The French phrases he uses, *chômeurs diplômés* and *analphabètes bilingues* are horribly resonant.
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11. Ibid. p. 297.
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