

A degree of overkill

Martin Rose describes Morocco's university education trap, providing too many graduates for too few jobs

Expansion of opportunity in higher education is a good thing, right? Well, it's not quite that simple, and North Africa provides a chastening example of why: a lot of money is spent on education, universities are proliferating and student numbers ballooning. But graduate unemployment is rising fast.

Every country in North Africa offers shocking figures, but as *The Economist* noted of Egypt in 2016: 'The more time you spend in school, the less chance you have of finding a job.' It is this perverse truth that undermines the explosive growth of higher education in the Middle East and North Africa region.

The unemployed graduate has been very visible in the Arab Spring, in the riots that swept Tunisia in January, in the Hirak protest movement in Morocco's Rif region and in 'graduate recruitment' to the ranks of the Islamic State jihadist group.

Morocco provides a useful petri dish, spending 26 per cent of its state budget on education, more than its North African neighbours. Its 'youth bulge', combined with success in getting children into primary school and a dramatically increasing pass-rate at the 'Bac' school-leaving examination, has meant huge growth in student numbers. State universities have grown from 308,000 students in 2009/10 to 822,000 in 2017/18, a rise of 167 per cent in eight years, and it is far from finished. This 'massification' of higher education is well ahead of population growth, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio – the proportion of

the age-group in tertiary education – growing from 10.9 per cent in 2003 to 28.14 per cent in 2015.

This year the system expects to launch 98,129 new graduates on to a job market that cannot absorb them. Graduate unemployment in Morocco has risen from 6 per cent in 1984 to 24.4 per cent in 2015, with most of these graduates still chasing their first job.

The speed of growth makes resource planning intractable: ever more students are being taught by ever fewer professors. This has a serious impact on quality. Only one university, public or private – Cadi Ayyad in Marrakech – appears in the *Times Higher Education's* top 1,000 universities in 2016. Most professors in open-access faculties – essentially all except medicine, engineering and some science – are overwhelmed with a paralyzing teaching load.

Most employers agree that there is a serious problem with both curriculum and teaching. Since independence, university education has been the gateway to public administration, and the certificate has been more important than its subject or quality.

When the public service was still a significant recruiter, humanities and social sciences were filled with students simply wanting entry to a secure, well-paid, well-pensioned career.

The size of the public administration has been cut back dramatically since the 1980s. Morocco, where in 2008 public salaries ate up 51 per cent of the state budget, has been particularly effective in cutting civil

service numbers, but it has not staunched the deluge of graduates coming out of the 'soft' faculties. A recent education minister described humanities departments as 'factories of unemployment'.

There is little effective attempt to adjust syllabuses or teaching to what employers, or the economy, need. In 2016-17, some 75 per cent of students were studying the humanities and social sciences, and only 22.1 per cent science and technology. Added to this is the fact that the first two faculties teach in Arabic and only the sciences in French. Good careers require French, and fluent, 'educated' French is effectively confined to the well-off by the preponderance of Arabic in state schools and open-access university faculties. Expansion in the low-prestige, faculties that teach in Arabic is much cheaper and defends the privileges of the francophone upper class.

Driss Guerraoui, an expert on Moroccan graduate unemployment, wrote in 2013 that 80 per cent of the graduate unemployed came from five departments: Arabic literature and Islamic studies, and chemistry, biology and physics, which are taught for the annual teacher recruitment, and useless in industry for the majority who fail to get a teaching job.

The result is a mass of unemployed graduates who demonstrate every week outside parliament demanding 'unconditional and non-competitive absorption into the public administration'. Skills are irrelevant: they just, understandably, want meal tickets for life. With a constipated labour market and high hiring and firing costs, their choices are heart-breaking – the black economy, under-employment or family-funded idleness while sticking out for 'appropriate' work.

Small-scale entrepreneurship is much touted as a solution, and while such skills are starting to be taught, the legal and administrative infrastructure remains very resistant. Real solutions to the graduate unemployment problem need to reach well outside the education system into language policy and labour market reform.

The knock-on for the private sector is damaging. Major firms recruit management trainees directly from the 50,000 or so young Moroccans studying abroad, mostly in France – job fairs for top Moroccan entry-level management jobs are held in Paris – and those that recruit at home lament the lack of appropriate 'soft' skills in domestic graduates.

Only the selective faculties, with 17 per



Trainee teachers protest in Rabat about their lack of job prospects

prospects.' Some four million Moroccans with university degrees live outside the country, and 8,000 Moroccan-trained doctors practise around the world. Under King Hassan II, in the 1970s and 80s, the public administration could still absorb most graduates, and growth in student numbers was deliberately held down to forestall a destabilizing pool of disappointed and volatile unemployed graduates. Social and political pressures mean that this is no longer an option and expansion seems unstoppable.

Private universities, some very good, flourish in Morocco, and are seen as a significant part of the country's educational mix. But they both reinforce the direct relationship between wealth and life-chances, and provide excuses for failure to reform the public system.

As an official at the Ecole de Gouvernance told the *Financial Times* in 2015: 'The government is unable to introduce changes in the public system, so it has been compelled to find another solution. It's easier to start small, new universities than to reform the big ones.'

Very recently the government has announced controls on fees at private institutions, apparently also authorizing for the first time the introduction of fees at public institutions. This would be a major change – a serious attempt to address the problem of funding in a system that is rapidly expanding, but it is also arguably inequitable and deeply divisive.

Overall, the result is a fragile situation. Volatility seems certain to increase dramatically if the pressure cooker of unemployment – particularly among graduates – continues to heat up. Just as important for Morocco is the wasted potential. Its economy is growing and diversifying fast, but depends on a small sliver of the population while large numbers stand idle, not because they are incompetent or lazy, but because they and Morocco have both been failed by a grossly inadequate education system.

What is needed is a radical rethinking of how and why society educates its young. The alternative is a damaging lid on economic growth and diversification, and intensifying social and generational discord.

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cent of public university students, do well: their graduates have an unemployment rate of only 5.4 per cent. A lack of appropriate skills is a constantly cited constraint in business expansion. More importantly, the low quality of most education outside a narrow elite, particularly in language and technical skills, means that Morocco's burgeoning knowledge and digital economy rests on a small base that will severely limit its expansion and development.

What is lacking above all are 'soft skills' – problem-solving, effective communication, team-working, presentation, report-writing and so on – not characteristic of an education stressing rote-learning and high-stakes exams. Language-learning is vital to Morocco's future, but beset by destructive conservatism about Arabic, and damaging caution over the development of English, the one international language that would place Morocco well ahead of its regional competitors. There is change, but it tends to begin in elite, often private, institutions, where the past is easier to escape.

In 2013, King Mohammed VI remarked bitterly that: 'The state of education is worse now than it was 20 years ago.' Attempts at reform have continued. The €3 billion Emergency Plan of 2009-12, despite grand ambitions, failed to engineer the real change it promised and there have been further initiatives without much success.

Leadership is a problem. The summer of 2017 saw the investigation of several high

functionaries in the Ministry of Education for corruption in the running of the Emergency Plan, and at the end of the year the reforming minister of education, responsible for the successor programme, the so-called Strategic Vision, was himself dismissed for his actions in a previous job. His post has now been vacant for four months. The World Economic Forum Competitiveness Report (2014-15) placed Morocco 103rd out of 144 countries for secondary education, and 106th for tertiary education.

To attract foreign direct investment, and to feed industrial and commercial diversification into new sectors, Morocco needs a labour force with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that employers actually want. Vocational education, rather than producing the skilled and versatile technicians and operatives that the economy needs, is largely stagnant, the prestige of its qualifications dim beside the allure of a degree. Employment figures in this sector are little better than for universities. Unemployment ran at 19.7 per cent as against a national rate of 8.9 per cent and a rate for graduates of the 'open' faculties at public universities of 22.3 per cent. But disturbingly unemployment rates for VOCED graduates three years after graduation rise to 31.9 per cent.

Despair is rife, and emigration high. A World Bank report in 2012 asserted that: 'One out of every three young Moroccans desires or plans to leave because of poor