

# To Bridge the Gap between Higher Education and Employment in Tunisia

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*Nadia Naccache*

## SUMMARY

Following independence in 1956, Tunisia prioritised education in its public policies. However, while Tunisia has long shown positive results in terms of literacy, enrolment rates, and research, it paid a little attention to the needs of the labour market and, respectively, the students' employability in a dynamic and challenging economic environment. This led to a mismatch between what the university offers as qualifications and what the labour market requires as competencies. In an attempt to address this mismatch, this policy paper aims to suggest interventions to improve the higher education system in a way that ensures better employability for graduates.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education has been considered in Tunisia as a symbol of national pride and as a priority since the country's independence in 1956. Tunisia adopted a "Napoleonic model" of education that was implemented under the French protectorate. The country has modernised primary and secondary education, implemented reforms since 1956 and made education free in all its stages and compulsory for children aged from 6 to 16. However, while education plays a crucial role in improving well-being and human development, it must be questioned whether the education sector may or may not contribute to unemployment of graduates. Whereas it is often criticised that the labour market cannot absorb Tunisia's graduates from university, less attention is paid to the education sector: The higher education system in Tunisia has its limitations and needs to be adjusted in a way that contribute to improving employability of youth whose the transition from education to labour market remains one of the most pressing challenges.

In Tunisia, similar to other countries in MENA region, unemployment rates are among the highest in the world. It mainly affects youth, women and

well-educated people. While education is quite advanced in Tunisia, it somehow fails to develop a network of potentially employable graduates. This is due to the gap created between university degrees, competencies, skills and labour market needs

Based on both a literature review and data extracted from semi-structured interviews with university students and young professionals, the policy paper examines the interrelation between education and employability. Recommendations are proposed to improve the higher education system in Tunisia to bridge the gap between education and employment.

## II. THE MISMATCH BETWEEN EDUCATION OFFERS AND LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

The mismatch between what university offers and what the labour market needs remains a persisting problem in Tunisia. Its mayor consequence is the high rate of youth unemployment that includes young graduates and non-graduates. The youth unemployment rate in Tunisia remains stable at 33.4% in 2018 (compared to some 15% general unemployment rate). This rate is estimated at 33.6% for men and 33.1% for women<sup>1</sup>. In 2019, an average 28% of university graduates are unemployed.

Although the contemporary generation of youth is more educated and connected to the world than previous ones, and by consequence both, more aware of the future, as scared by their fate, many of them are not able to secure a sustainable income for them and, later, their families. As a result of, largely, frustration, youth could become "an overwhelming power for destruction" instead of being the potential of a better future.<sup>2</sup> Further, highly skilled and well-educated people tend to leave Tunisia to look for better opportunities abroad. A quarter of Tunisian emigrants before and after the revolution are highly educated. This impacts the labour market in Tunisia and makes it less competitive.

Unemployment is by no means one of the major causes leading to poverty and consequently to economic crisis; it is also inflation, low wages, low productivity, bad financing of business, unfavourable trade relations, or continuous political instability and crisis. Still, there is the factor of

<sup>1</sup> Institut National des Statistiques (2019) Evolution de la population active en chômage.

<sup>2</sup> UNDP (2016) Arab Human Development Report 2016.

education, as there is a gap between educational progress and development: While access to education is increasing, economic growth, poverty reduction and equality are not following the same steps of improvement.<sup>3</sup>

### Tunisia’s education system

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) is responsible for both designing and implementing higher education policies in Tunisia.

The education system is divided into three major levels:

- Basic education which is relevant to primary and preparatory studies;
- Secondary education which is relevant to the studies provided in high schools;
- Post-secondary or tertiary education: following the baccalaureate diploma, students can have access to universities depending on the score they received.

In Tunisia, there are 13 universities, including a virtual university, that oversee all the 203 educational establishments and institutes across the country, all of which are under the supervision of the MHESR. There are also 74 establishments under the co-supervision of the MHESR and other ministries. In 2019, 57,378 students succeeded the national exam of baccalaureate with a concentration in Tunis governorates (Manouba, Tunis, Ben Arous, Ariana) where 25% of the total number of baccalaureate holders are enrolled in high schools in Tunis. This considerable rate is explained by the spread of education in the capital city and its surroundings.

Following their success at high school, students enter universities depending on their baccalaureate scores. There is a variety of fields of studies in Tunisia but still limitation to general common disciplines such as: business management and administration studies, medical studies, engineering, journalism, information technology, mathematics and statistics, law, architecture etc...

The most common field in both public and private education systems is business management and administration studies. As of 2019, 17% of baccalaureate holders registered for this field. This

could be explained by the availability of places for this discipline in and outside Tunis. Many universities, both public and private offer studies in business management and similar disciplines across the country.

### Rate graduates per field of studies for 2017/2018<sup>4</sup>

Field of studies	Public universities and schools	Private universities and schools
Education	265	n/a
Literature and arts	7.597	214
Social sciences, commerce and law	14.073	2.526
Sciences	12.216	1.554
Engineering, transformation and production industries	9.551	1.714
Agriculture	901	n/a
Health and social protection	3.540	1.723
Services	2.164	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>50.307</b>	<b>7.741</b>

Education has long been relying on the public sector. However, the private sector has been investing in education over the last decade. The private sector has seen a strong growth following the revolution in 2011 to reach a total of 76 private universities (2019) with the majority focusing in engineering, social sciences and business. Hence, the considerable rates of graduates attending private universities in these mentioned fields of studies.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2006, Tunisia has reformed the higher education system by introducing the licence-master-doctorate system (LMD) accredited by France. The LMD system was implemented to offer students both professional and academic oriented programmes through applied and fundamental national diplomas for bachelor and research and professional types of curriculum for master degree.

However, Tunisia’s higher education system lacks diversification, creativity and innovation. As already mentioned, the fields of studies offered to potential students are limited which leads to the existence of limited fields of expertise and a lack of competencies in other necessary fields. This lack of competencies is not only related to the inexistence of specific disciplines or fields of studies but also to a high rate of school drop-out which further leads to a decrease of potential skilled students that could be an asset in specific fields such as entrepreneurship, technical studies etc.<sup>6</sup>

3 Ibid.

4 Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (2019) L’enseignement supérieur et la recherche scientifique en chiffre. Tunis.

5 Oxford Business Group (2016) Education in Tunisia seeing increased private sector interest.

6 UNDP (2016) Arab Human Development Report 2016.

### III. CAUSES OF THE MISMATCH

What can be considered the main causes for the mismatch between education and labour market? Five sections of causes can be distinguished.<sup>7</sup>

#### **An old-school system overlooking critical thinking**

Tunisia is known as a pioneering Arab nation in promoting education and pushing for learning. The University of Zitouna in Tunisia, established in 737 and subsequently modernised in 1956, was the first university of its kind in the Arab world. In its early ages, it was a universally recognised university where many great scholars like Ibn Khaldoun and Ibn Arafa were taught. Yet, despite its international recognition and its modernisation, the Tunisian national educational system lacks consideration for critical thinking and innovation. University teachings are still organised in a traditional way of ‘producing’ students who are used to take information for granted without critically interacting with subjects, methods, and even their instructors.

#### **Graduates unprepared for labour market**

Due to a lack of support and mentoring of students throughout their university studies, graduates tend to be confused and unprepared for professional life after their graduation. A non-representative inquiry in business, architecture and engineering graduates’ thinking showed that the majority of students have encountered the same issues following their graduation: The problem of access to information and lack of websites and platforms that publish work opportunities is a common answer among respondents. In Tunisia, there’s only few platforms such as Jamaity for development work that publish job offers for specific fields.

The feeling of confusion and lack of confidence developed during students’ post-graduation could be explained by their lack of competencies and knowledge on how to search for a job, make a good CV or apply properly to a job; and their lack of early professional experience. Universities contribute to this failure through a traditional system, ‘producing’ students who are used to take information for granted without searching for its source. In addition, universities make unprepared students to labour market who are trying their best to fit in a society overlooking their capabilities.<sup>8</sup>

#### **An unstructured labour market**

The Tunisian labour market suffers from many structural dysfunctions contributing to an economy of low productivity activities and low quality jobs. During the last decade, the creation of jobs has been standing at a rate of 2.5 percent per year. The new jobs opportunities offered to Tunisians are limited and they were not able to cover many categories of white collar workers, thus skilled young graduates. Further, there is a structural mismatch between the existing competencies in the labour market and the stagnation of the economy. Among the main impediments to the creation of good quality and secure jobs, there is the lack of investment in the private sector. This poor existence of the private sector could be explained by the business environment characterised by failing economic policies, regulations causing a lack of competition and bureaucratic burden and labour rules resulting in jobs insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Regional disparities and unequal access to opportunities**

Broadly speaking, inequality in educational attainment is a crucial determinant of overall inequality. In this depiction, studies showed that this rate is higher among Arab countries than in other countries. However, it is worth noting that unequal access to education has been addressed since the 1980s. By way of illustration, Arab countries improved in terms of human development thanks to a better access to education and health between 1980 and 2010.<sup>10</sup>

In Tunisia, regional inequality is one of the major consequences of the country’s failing public policies. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy rates are much lower in Tunis than in other regions like the south and the centre of the country. These regional disparities have exacerbated by an increasing inequality in terms of public services delivery which is more concentrated in the coastal region. As a consequence, interior regions are less well served in terms of basic services like health and education. This disparity touches mainly primary and secondary schools. In 2015, the region of Centre West of Tunisia presented the highest level of inequality index of education compared to other regions of the country. The centre west of Tunisia is known for its lack of investment in many public sectors including access to basic education.<sup>11</sup>

7 The following is partly based on individual semi-structured interviews conducted with students and young professionals (May-June 2020).

8 Data collected through interviews with a number of graduates searching for jobs in Tunisia.

9 World Bank (2014) Labour Policy to Promote Good Jobs in Tunisia.

10 UNDP (2016) Arab Human Development Report 2016.

11 Hasnaoui and Belhadj (2015) Fuzzy multidimensional inequality measurement. Policies to reduce inequality in Tunisia.

### **Lack of innovation/incentives for creativity and entrepreneurial spirit**

In Tunisia, classic formal education tends to discourage entrepreneurship among youth because the curriculum is designed to prepare students to labour market assuming that each graduate will work in his field of studies. This approach reduces creativity and entrepreneurial spirit. Further, although young generations are increasingly coming up with innovative ideas to create their own projects, they are facing obstacles such as complicated procedures and heavy administrative paperwork that prevent them from advancing in their project and turn their business ideas into concrete start-ups.

In addition, another factor contributing to the reluctance of young people to create their own projects is the feeling of security that formal jobs in private and public sectors offer. People generally avoid risk-taking and opt for sustainable jobs with a clear status and long-term position. Although progress in such positions might be overlooked, people prefer to have a secure job with a sustainable income rather than a risky position that might bring them success and personal development.

In Tunisia particularly, young people are influenced by their families and their educational environment, i.e. their parents and teachers. They consider them as their idols and models in life. Consequently, they aim at securing sustainable jobs rather than developing their creativity.

## **IV. ONGOING EFFORTS TO REFORM HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN TUNISIA**

### **Government-led initiatives**

#### *The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research*

Tunisian authorities have tried to address the issue of employability regularly in the past. Among the efforts to improve the situation, it was crucial to consider restructuring training, research, management and governance in universities. In support to this initiative, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Crafts (UTICA) signed an agreement in 2005, which was updated in 2014, to contribute to bridging the gap between university and business through strengthening students' employability. This was implemented through the design of applied bachelor programmes and professional masters imple-

mented in partnership between professionals and academics, the introduction of compulsory internships and graduation professional projects for bachelor programmes and professional masters students. The agreement included also the launch of university observatories network to monitor and improve the measures taken to maintain the employability of fresh graduate and the development of an action plan to enhance entrepreneurship culture among youth.<sup>12</sup>

The agreement was again updated in 2020 and it aims to improve professionalisation and adjust university qualifications to the job market requirements. The continuous efforts between the ministry and UTICA can serve as a proof of the success of the programme even though the problems encountered by youth are still numerous in Tunisia and youth unemployment is on top of the list. The newly signed agreement aims to develop cooperation in the fields of basic education, advanced education level and scientific research in the context of a threefold relationship between the higher education system, scientific research, employment and competitiveness and to professionalise university education in a way that ensures that its content is in line with the requirements of the labour market and economic development. To implement this agreement, a programme has been designed to recruit PhD students in private higher education institutions and economic enterprises. The programme also aims to promote the studies offered by public and private higher education institutions to international students, particularly African students, so that Tunisia can become a university destination.

Another initiative implemented by the Ministry of Higher Education aiming to address the mismatch between the labour market needs and universities qualifications is called '4C' ('Career and Competencies Certification Centres'). In reference to the strategic plan of Reform (2016-2020) developed by the Higher Education and Scientific Research and particularly in line with its objective of improving the professional integration of graduates, the Ministry has launched the "4C" programme which basically consists in a mentoring scheme that aims to improve students' employability through advising, coaching, training and opening up to the socio-economic environment. 162 centres across Tunisia were implemented in universities to address adversities and overcome the challenges experienced by youth on a local level. The Centres established in academic institutions ser-

<sup>12</sup> MERIC NET (2019) The Higher Education system in Tunisia: National Report.

ve as a link between the university, graduates, and socio-economic actors.

### ***The Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment***

The new national employment strategy will be implemented for the period of 2020-2030. Its formulation was made based on a participatory approach within the strategic steering committee bringing together the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment, the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT), the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts (UTICA) and the office of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Tunisia.

For the purpose of addressing the gap between labour market requirements and university offers, the new strategy includes a set of programmes, mechanisms and budgets that aim to improve the rate of integration into the labour market and to decrease the unemployment rate, which stood at 15.5% in 2018, according to figures from the National Institute of Statistics (INS). The new national employment strategy will implement support and mentoring scheme for young promoters, funding mechanisms for the social economy, and funds for private companies particularly active in professional training and preparation for the labour market.

Like other countries in similar situations, Tunisia has been adopting active labour market policies to help young job-hunters find a sustainable job. These measures are implemented through training, public work programmes, employment and assistance in jobs seeking services and wage subsidies. These policies are considered to be effective during economic crisis, such as the one since 2011. However, now, they are more considered as promising policies than policies producing sustainable jobs. So, in Tunisia, active labour market programmes (ALMP)<sup>13</sup> are divided into two types of programmes: programmes of training and integration of jobseekers in labour market, including public work schemes which mainly target unskilled and poor people, and programmes devoted to funding self-employment and small business development.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ALMP are numerous in Tunisia. They offer initiation training to professional life (SIVP), Higher Education Graduates Insertion Contract (CIDES), Voluntary Public Service (SCV), Employment Solidarity Contract (CES), Contract of Adaptation and Professional Integration (CAIP), Contract of Reintegration into Working Life (CRVA), AMAL Programme.

<sup>14</sup> Haouas et al. (2012) Youth unemployment in Tunisia: Characteristics and policy responses.

Further, the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment has launched more promising programmes to help job seekers find the adequate job. For instance, 'Forsati' ('My Chance') is a programme conceived for job seekers to help them find the convenient job through benefitting from a four-phase programme including a diagnosis and preparation phase and a professional project's implementation phase. 'Forsati' gives the opportunity to job seekers to identify their needs in terms of support to improve their job searching approach. Once the needs are identified, the accompaniment system will help the job seeker to develop a professional project with clear goals and to implement it through the guidance of a job advisor. In addition, a programme such as the contract of insertion of the graduates, has been launched to equip job seekers with the necessary professional skills by altering between a training school and a private firm.

### **Non-government-led initiatives**

In addition to the government efforts, local and international organisations have been implementing programmes to strengthen the link between the university and the labour market. One of them is 'TUNAD – Tunisian Network for Employability and Development', a graduates' skills project funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme. Implemented in 2016, the programme aims to strengthen the link between Tunisian universities and the professional world and to facilitate the integration of young graduates into the labour market.

Another initiative is 'CORP – Centre of Orientation and Professional Reconversion' created in 2015, and executed by the Tunisian-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce. It aims to bring the qualifications of job seekers closer to the real needs of companies, to equip job seekers with skills to improve their employability, and it works to achieve the appropriate match between the candidate's profile and the expectations of the companies. It provides services to job-seekers such as support, capacity-building and retraining to help them change their career.

CORP's approach appears to be productive, as it brings together the employer and the student and bridging the gap between academic life and labour market. However, it does not address employability problems through an education-perspective, which seems crucial for students to benefit from such initiatives while finishing their studies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

“The potential of education is achieved only when it confers the skills and knowledge that constitute human capital.”<sup>15</sup> Particularly higher education is considered as the steppingstone to the student's future. Therefore, it is important to put in place an effective system which would contribute to bridging the gap between education, skills and the labour market needs: a modern system that would develop a culture of creativity and equip students with the necessary skills to help them embark on a professional experience and adapt to unstable contexts and changes.

The following recommendations are suggested in order to contribute to addressing the tension between education, skills and business environment, and to enhance employability through analysing the problem from an education-perspective. In order to achieve this objective in general, it is necessary to put in place a national learning system to help a smooth transition for youth from the education sector into the labour market which could serve as a career guidance and which could help youth overcome the challenges they face when they seek for jobs.

### Towards a critical thinking-oriented educational system

- To implement an innovative educational system inspired by international standards and best practices that help students develop critical-thinking skills and boost their post-graduation autonomy and independence: This would be done through recruiting an independent team of education experts and specialists at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research whose mission is to do research on best practices and international models that could be adapted to Tunisia's system.
- To reform curricula from early school years including reform teachers' training (and strengthen critical thinking, participatory and reflective approaches of learning), support research in social sciences and skills necessary for social cohesion, change public discourses on learning for children and youth and replace top down-with bottom up learning, self-experiencing and self-responsibility and transform the role of teachers into motivators rather than instructors.
- To design and implement an annual monitoring system that assesses the quality of education

and its impact on employability. A quality assurance system that involves a systematic review of educational approaches to evaluate the educational system, identify areas of improvement in order to maintain an efficient system.

- To advocate for increasing the budget allocated to higher education and scientific research: Advocacy campaigns could involve civil society organisations, education sector's stakeholders like students, parents, teachers and researchers. Improving educational system in a way that supports investment in research is not possible with a way too limited budget, compared to other sectors (such as the public administration, security, or subsidised public enterprises).

### To prepare university graduates for labour market

- To conceive a career development module as a core module delivered for all the fields of studies to assist students in writing their resume/curriculum vitae, applying for jobs and preparing for interviews.
- To create a virtual career centre at universities through designing an online career network to help students choose their career path, to advise them on job-related issues and to share with them best practices on job-searching. The virtual career centre provides online services for the students, employers and graduates. It should be conceived in a way that offers advice and support to students and recent graduates, offers information on internships and professional exchange programmes for undergraduates and entry-level job offers for graduates. It should help keeping students more informed about existing labour market offers, with information being systematically provided by labour market authorities, unions, and companies.
- To implement a scheme for graduates looking for an entry-level job to acquire their first professional experience. The graduate scheme should be implemented through a partnership between universities and companies. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research along with the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment should put in place incentives for the public and private sectors to encourage them to hire more graduates and to offer more entry-level job positions in the labour market.
- To engage students in civil society in order to develop their skills in different fields (communication, project management, marketing etc...).

<sup>15</sup> World Bank (2018) Expectations and Aspirations. A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa, p.13.

This could be done through university or other associations which could work in collaboration with companies looking for young employees. These civil society organisations would bring young ambitious graduates, and companies provide trainings in soft skills to ensure fresh graduates are equipped with the required skills to secure a job at their companies.

- To assist civil society organisations to advocate for reforming education systems at a policy level through providing services and platforms to address the mismatch between education and employability.
- To orientate students towards initiatives like CORP following their graduation to help them get prepared for labour market before they leave university. This could be done through a partnership between the ministry of higher education and scientific research and initiatives like CORP.

#### **To have a structured labour market**

- To initiate a collaborative diagnosis of labour market needs co-designed by the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment and the Ministry of Higher Education to identify new education programmes that match with the requirements of job-market.
- To design a national or several regional platforms that provide all the necessary information on work opportunities per sector. The platforms could be a reference and information entry-point for all university students and graduates.
- To improve economic policies, regulations, encourage legal competition and address bureaucratic burden and labour rules resulting in jobs insecurity to incite the investment in private sector which would help generate employment opportunities.

#### **To address regional disparities and improve equal access to opportunities**

- To encourage the creation of regional centres boosting employability in various regions and assisting young graduates to gain information about regional job markets outside the capital of Tunis.
- To advocate for enhancing access to jobs in interior regions through giving incentives from the government to create partnerships between regional delegate of education and

regional representatives of employment at a local level; e.g. the local delegation of higher education communicates the list of fresh graduates by field to the local delegation of employment which will help them eventually find a job in the region.

- To incite companies in regions outside Tunis to accept more students and graduates from universities based in those regions through offering them internships, entry-level jobs or even temporary jobs to help them acquire professional experience and gain more confidence to look further for opportunities and improve themselves professionally.

#### **To boost innovation creativity and entrepreneurial spirit among youth**

- To promote an entrepreneurial culture among students at universities and encourage them to start their project in their field of expertise. To implement practical programmes in the curriculum other than professional internships. The programmes could be small entrepreneurship competition or business games inciting students to come up with innovative solutions to respond to existing issues through setting up a small business.
- To cooperate with the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment to help foster entrepreneurship among youth through facilitating the procedures and administrative system and to contribute to facilitating the access to information through putting in place a consolidated simple process explaining the different steps an entrepreneur should go through to set up his own business.
- To engage with the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment, with civil society and other stakeholders to introduce more policies like the Startup Act to foster entrepreneurship in different fields and not only medium and high technology.
- To incite the Ministry of Higher Education to cooperate with other ministries like the Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation to attract investors and build partnerships with international highly ranked universities: to increase international agreements and introduce more exchange projects to improve Tunisian and international students mobility. Creating a multicultural environment within Tunisian universities would improve the exchange of best practices among local and international students.

## CONCLUSION

Education and employment are two sides of the same coin. Education is not only a key towards a successful professional career, but it has also a great potential to contribute to human capital. Education is also a vehicle for human development and wellbeing improvement, it is considered as a means for a better and prosperous future.

Therefore, as demonstrated through the findings of this policy paper, implementing an effective educational system that follows international standards and best practices is crucial to the country's economic and social development. It is true that long-term solutions to employment problems may require deeper reforms of labour market and employment policies. However, addressing these issues through an education-perspective is equally important and could better contribute to overcome labour market's obstacles.

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