

## Dignity Denied: Higher Education and Tunisian Revolution

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### Summary

For several decades Tunisia served as an example of stability and development in Africa and the Arab region. Pleasing statistics have, however, masked huge disparities, tensions suppressed by the autocratic regime and a highly centralized sector of higher education that had apparently lost contact with any reality other than the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). While the technocrats are most likely doing their best to inspire universities responding to the country's needs, even the World Bank has failed injecting a sense of desire for university autonomy in the monolithic sector towered by MHESR in the backdrop of some 100 m USD investments over the past two decades, while Bologna Process has allowed justifying graduating students instead of the previous 4 years just in 2.5-3 years. As new reform plans are being developed in high offices, little help seems to be on the way to those who started the Dignity Revolution – the excluded in the southern and interior governorates of the country or highly educated women with no job prospects.

### Abstract

I

For several decades Tunisia was considered as one of the most successful countries in Africa and the Arab world for its well functioning state as well as for the steady economic growth at the level of 5% of GDP a year since Ben Ali seized the power in 1987. For the purposes of broad international comparisons these features apparently by far outweighed the repressive nature of the Tunisian regime in the eyes of the development agencies as well the senior international partners such as the US and EU.

One of the main features of Tunisia that impressed the western world was its education system. While for example in 1956 only 13% of primary school aged girls and 33% of boys attended schools regularly, in 1991 school attendance for all children between the ages of six and sixteen was made mandatory by law (Perkins 2014).

Success in building a higher education system from almost the scratch at the time of gaining its independence from France on 20 March 1956 was even more impressive. Habib Bourguiba's nationalist dictatorship faced a massive task of replacing the departing French functionaries as some 170 000 Europeans left the country in 1955-1959 and a need to build a higher education sector to train the civil servants. What was built was a highly centralized sector of higher education where the State saw itself as the provider of education. For a decade or so almost unlimited job opportunities were available to university graduates.

Although the French were to leave, Bourguiba imposed the French republican model on the Tunisian society more vigorously than the French colonizers themselves succeeded doing, with little regard to the underlying features of the

Tunisian society, some of which broke wide open after the Jasmine Revolution in 2010-11.

Even in a long term the aggregate figures in Tunisian higher education have remained well pleasing to the eye of an expert of international development - cross enrolment in higher education has reached the impressive 35%, while the country spends app. 6% of its GDP or app. 21% of the total government spending on education, 22% if this is going to higher education.<sup>1</sup> Tunisian higher education has experienced an enormous growth over the past twenty years, from roughly 100,000 students back in 1995 to close to 360,000 students and 21,500 teaching staff members in 2014. In 2003-2004 several new public universities were opened, offering 130,000 additional student places. To accommodate growing numbers of secondary school graduates additional 100,000 student places need to be created within the next few years. Currently roughly 60% of higher education students are female, while 40% of higher education teaching faculty are female.

It is also quite remarkable to notice that some 17% of higher education graduates obtain degrees in computer science and telecommunications<sup>2</sup>, suggesting a major government intervention and demonstrating its potential to mobilize resources to achieve its goals.

## II

On 17 December 2010 26 years old Mohamed Bouazizi set himself in fire against police brutality and corruption, triggering the Jasmine Revolution also known as the *Dignity Revolution* in Tunisia, and the Arab Spring that followed. For some reason economic growth, functioning state apparatus and expanding education system failed to provide the most essential – basic human dignity - to much of the Tunisian society. It is quite remarkable that Tunisia was for such a long time able to present itself as a successful country to the international community (see e.g. Geyer 1998), to the extent of gaining associate membership in European Union as early as in 1995. Apparently it was an issue of no concern that Ben Ali's clan controlled some 20 per cent of the country's GDP. Unfortunately it is the dimension of human *dignity* the commentators of the Tunisian Revolution and Arab Spring have been missing before as well as after the revolutions.

Tunisian centralized system of higher education, initially founded for the purposes of training the civil service of a repressive nationalistic regime has not succeeded assuming the role of an engine of the economic development, democracy and social justice despite its impressive size and resources invested. It appears that the technocratic wisdom has its limits making education work for the country's development. Perhaps the opposite is the case – the un-performing higher education sector has become a major burden on the economy and its

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1 <http://knoema.com/WBEdStats2014Apr/education-statistics-world-bank-april-2014?country=1001560-tunisia>

2 [http://www.mesrst.tn/anglais/donnees\\_de\\_base/p\\_etud.htm](http://www.mesrst.tn/anglais/donnees_de_base/p_etud.htm)

expected further expansion makes it even more so. While one may agree with many recent criticisms on the address of commodification of higher education, Tunisian version of de-commodification does not appear as an attractive alternative. Tunisian higher education to a significant degree became a Clarkian (Clarkm 1960/2008) cooling-out machine absorbing demand and with this cooling social tensions, but also sending graduates to ever growing civil service waitlists as well as to direct unemployment.

The high rate of female participation in higher education Tunisia has been proud of also as another side to it, as it fails to enable access to employment (World Bank 2014). Less than one in five young women in rural and two in five in urban Tunisia has a job. Higher education appears therefore more as the final stage of relative freedom before young Tunisian women assume, as expected, family responsibilities for the rest of their lives. While some argue that higher education strengthens young men's position on the marriage market, others suggest that having a job is actually more important. Universities are located mostly in the coastal regions – trying to attract the imagination of foreign investment capital, while access to higher education remains limited to the extreme in the southern and interior governorates – the cradle of the Arab Spring.

Despite all the efforts by the skillful and well-trained technocrats in the civil service, Tunisian higher education has not become the engine of the country's economic development, as the economy is relying mostly on slow-skilled jobs. Even the massive effort training information and telecommunication specialists has failed to make a noticeable contribution to the Tunisian telecommunications industry.

Unemployment among individuals with higher education is higher than among any other educational category, including individuals with primary education and less (Thyne 2014). While the State is spending significant public resources in an attempt to create a highly productive economy, it is the traditional sectors that keep the economy going. Meanwhile it has been argued that a rational calculation would suggest dropping-out of the school before completing secondary education (World Bank 2014). The greatest share of entrepreneurs are also individuals who have not completed secondary education, while family connections are seen as the most significant factor finding employment.

Although problems emerged already as early as in the late 1960s when the socialist project failed together with its first and the last 10-year plan, the system remains fundamentally the same, having grown meanwhile increasingly dysfunctional. Even the great European import – Bologna Process – has not been able to improve the situation.

### III

Over the past two decades higher education globally has experienced unprecedented expansion. What used to be a privilege for a selected few has become an obligation for many, as in the world where higher education participation rates in low-middle income countries are rapidly reaching the 50%

mark indicating the entry to “mass higher education” as Martin Trow defined it in 1974, calculation to enter higher education is no longer about the opportunities that this would open, but about the disadvantages the decision not to enroll is likely to cause. Surprisingly enough, it also happens that in certain cases opportunity costs may exceed any possible returns – public or private, particularly in countries where high-skilled job opportunities are limited. As Schendel and McGowan have recently argued, experience from Low and Low Middle Income Countries tend not to confirm the structure of benefits higher education brings in High Income Countries (Schendel, McGowan 2015).

The promises that have fueled the 3-4-fold increase in higher education participation globally over the past twenty years are many, ranging from the public and private economic benefits to the promises of democracy, healthy lifestyle and safety. But as Trow also wisely noticed – in the very process of widening access the nature of education is changing:

No society, no matter rich, can afford a system of higher education for 20 or 30 percent of age grade at the cost levels of the elite higher education that it formerly provided for 5 percent of the population (Trow 1974/2012: 123)

As the popular demand for higher education is being absorbed in increasingly low-cost sub-sectors, the benefits of expansion may require a thorough revisiting.

While spreading skills more equally within societies by means of higher education may lead in a long term to higher social equality, economic rewards from higher education diminish as graduates occupy lower skilled jobs or have no jobs at all available to occupy. Consequently, however, frustration caused by unmet expectations may lead to rather radical and not necessarily democratic reactions.

The discussion whether higher education serves as a sector of consumption, some may even call it entertainment, that expands following the economic growth, or constitutes an engine of economic development, has been going on for a quite some time. While widening access is necessary, it is not sufficient for building prosperous democratic societies, as the Tunisian example is likely to demonstrate. *Redistribution* is important to achieve social justice and so is *recognition* (Fraser, Honneth 2003), but it also seems to be the case that without creating more value to go around, the goals of dignity and justice are hard to achieve. Higher education hiding behind the walls of its centuries’ long traditions and values, denying its direct transformative potential on the economy and society is increasingly taking on the rather unfortunate cooling-out function (Clark 1960/2008) with the rising chances for the cool to get lost.

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