

Navigating Morocco's Public Higher Education Landscape: Characteristics, Endeavors & Setbacks.

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Abstract:

Since Morocco's independence in 1956, Morocco's higher education system has reached new heights, embarking on a series of changes and reforms aimed at modernizing and improving its quality and performance. However, despite notable investments and efforts to elevate the system, its persistent shortcomings have long perplexed Moroccan policymakers, as it continues to face numerous challenges that prevent the effective implementation of undertaken reforms and holding back their sustained progress.

Our article adopts a theoretical approach through a review of the existing literature. It provides an in-depth exploration of the Moroccan higher education landscape, with a strong emphasis on Moroccan public universities, by examining the key factors shaping the system, its unique characteristics and endeavors, while unpacking the main challenges weighing on the achievement of its full potential and desired outcomes.

In pursuit of elevating the Moroccan higher education sector, our article concludes that a steadfast commitment to world-class education standards is essential to enhancing its performance, visibility, and competitiveness on the global stage. This involves reinforcing English as a medium of instruction, overhauling academic catalogs, improving the quality of teaching and research output, and expanding international partnerships and collaborations, all while emancipating from colonial legacies and adopting a 'glocal' approach, balancing Western, non-Western, and Moroccan perspectives to better suit the country's unique needs and characteristics, ensuring a modern, inclusive, and sustainable public higher education system in Morocco.

Keywords: Morocco's Higher Education, Moroccan Public Universities, Governance, Funding, Access and Admission, Quality in Teaching and Scientific Research, Internationalization, Ranking, Language Dynamics, Student Mobility, Challenges.

Introduction

Morocco, officially the Kingdom of Morocco, is an Arab, Islamic, and African nation situated in the northwest of Africa. It is bordered to the North by the Mediterranean Sea and to the West by the Atlantic Ocean, with Algeria to the East and Mauritania to the South. The official languages are Arabic and Berber (Assad & Ait Si Mhamed, 2019). As of September 2024, the population was 36.8 million (HCP, 2024).

Since Morocco's independence from French occupation in March 1956, the Moroccan higher education scene has evolved significantly. It has undergone a series of ambitious reforms aimed at improving and modernizing its higher education system. Despite the significant investment, endeavors, and ambitious stripes, the Moroccan higher education system's underperformance has long perplexed Moroccan policymakers, as the system hits several dysfunctions and mountainous challenges.

While numerous challenges weigh on Morocco's public higher education system, several particularly stand out, including the heavy colonial legacies, dualistic system, linguistic dilemmas, weak presence in international rankings, massification, overstretched and insufficient human and financial resources, insufficient quality of teaching and scientific research, governance issues, including limited autonomy, and the discontinuity and inconsistency of reforms, among others.

Throughout the sections of this article, we will navigate Morocco's higher education landscape by exploring its key characteristics, governance, access and admission system, and the various actions taken to improve its performance and internationalization, all while also shedding light on the cardinal challenges that impede its efficiency and sustained progress. It should be noted that this article will focus particularly on Morocco's public higher education sector, with special emphasis on Moroccan public universities, which will be highlighted in several sections of the article.

1. Governance of Morocco's public higher education institutions

Governance refers to the process of policymaking and decision-making at the macro level (Kezar and Eckel, 2004). At the university scale, the concept of governance is of cardinal importance, as it is considered a major lever for improving the higher education sector (Hénard and Mittlerle, 2010).

1.1. Administration & Regulation of the Higher Education System

For a long time, the government held exclusive responsibility for the higher education system. From 1975 to 2000, universities were governed by the first law organizing and regulating higher education, namely, Law n° 1.75.102, which dated back to 1975 (Ayad et al, 2020). Back then, the university system was under the Ministry of Education, which centralized all decision-making authority, leaving universities with little to no autonomy in pedagogical, administrative, or financial matters (Mansouri, 2023).

However, the reform of Law No. 01-00, enacted in 2000, which is considered a milestone in the development of higher education in Morocco, has ended this government monopoly. It shifted the governance from a model controlled by the State to a model of governance supervised by the State, by introducing new management practices that emphasize university autonomy in financial, administrative, educational, and scientific matters, along with promoting important governance principles like transparency, participation of stakeholders, responsibility, evaluation, and accountability (Ayad et al, 2020). This change reflects a national commitment to promote decentralization (Ayad et al, 2020), a process in which the state transfers and delegates certain responsibilities to universities under its supervision. The relationship between the Central Department of Higher Education and universities has evolved to focus on mutual responsibilities and shared governance, involving university stakeholders as well as external representatives from the community and economic sectors (Assad & Ait Si Mhamed, 2019). Subsequent reforms, including the framework law n° 51-17 promulgated in 2019, further reaffirmed, supported, and enhanced these objectives by emphasizing shared governance and stakeholder involvement, besides other practices. In contrast to the 1975 Law and Law 01.00 of 2000, which focused solely on higher education, Framework Law 51.17 seeks to reform and regulate both the education and scientific research sectors (Ayad et al, 2020).

Since the late eighties, Morocco established a dedicated ministry for higher education (Meziani, 1999). It is common for the name and structure of the mentioned ministry to undergo slight changes at the beginning of each new government term in Morocco. As of 2021, the ministry

who assumes primary responsibility for the nation's Higher Education System in Morocco, is the *Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation* (In French: Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation). It serves as the central body responsible for steering and coordinating higher education institutions across the country. Its mission also includes developing policies, while Moroccan public universities function as academic powerhouses tasked with following and implementing these ministerial guidelines. Additionally, the Ministry oversees and accredits both Public and Private Higher Education institutions, as well as their academic programs.

Alongside the Ministry, several central coordination and regulatory bodies have been established to support the governance of higher education in Morocco. These bodies handle various aspects of the educational system, they include: National Commission for Coordination of Higher Education (CNCES), Coordination Council (CC), Coordination Commission for Private Higher Education (COCESP), National Agency for Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education and Scientific Research (ANEAQ) (Mediterranean Network of National Information Centres on the Recognition of Qualifications, 2019).

1.2. Funding of Moroccan Public Universities

Public Higher Education in Morocco is funded by several ministries, with the majority of public expenditure coming from the Higher Education Department and going directly toward public universities (Assad & Ait Si Mhamed, 2019). Despite the autonomy of Moroccan Public Universities, their funding primarily relies on the government budget (Assad & Ait Si Mhamed, 2019), with only a small portion derived from other sources of funding, such as, research funds, tuition fees from professional development training programs (also known as lifelong learning or continuing education).

While public funds account for 70–97% of university resources, Moroccan Public Universities remain heavily dependent on state funding and have not seriously experienced having huge autonomy to generate significant revenues. Consequently, these institutions have contributed very little to developing flexible, modern, and high-quality training programs that are better attuned to the needs of a rapidly changing job market and an increasingly value-driven ecosystem, neglecting the numerous economic shifts and strategic transformations that have shaped Morocco's evolving economy over the past three decades (Benhayoun, 2023).

1.3. Governance is the Weak Link in the Moroccan Public University System

Morocco has witnessed several reforms and enacted various laws aimed at restructuring its higher education system. This evolution in governance can be divided into three main stages, beginning with the Higher Education Law in 1975 (Law No. 1.75.102), Law 01.00 of 2000, and Framework Law 51.17 of 2019. One cannot deny the country's genuine efforts toward the expansion, modernization of its universities, and the democratization of access to public universities. However, despite all these significant reforms, the Moroccan university system continues to face major challenges and provoke widespread controversy, particularly in the aspect of governance, which is increasingly seen as the weak link in Moroccan public universities (Ayad et al, 2020).

Governance in Moroccan public universities face numerous challenges across pedagogical, administrative, financial, and scientific levels. These challenges cause several dysfunctions and impact the university's performance and, consequently, affect various stakeholders and the broader socioeconomic environment (Ayad et al, 2020).

1.3.1. At the Managerial Level

One of the managerial issues is the misalignment in managerial orientation between university leadership and institutional managers (such as deans and directors), which hinders collaborative work that depends on a shared vision and common goals. Additionally, strategic documents, activity reports, and evaluation reports are rarely shared and made available to the public. Furthermore, in nearly all Moroccan public universities, strategic planning tends to focus solely on the short term, while often overlooking the long-term dimension during their council discussions (CSEFRS, 2018, as cited in Ayad et al, 2020).

1.3.2. In Terms of University Autonomy

The autonomy enjoyed by Moroccan public universities is regarded as unsustainable, as they still have low autonomy that negatively impacts their ability to develop their resources and the value of their material and human capital (Ibid).

For example, the large size of Moroccan public universities limits their flexibility in decision-making, and in defining and implementing their strategic direction (Ibid). The financial management is viewed as complex and slow, further impaired by difficulties in diversifying funding sources (while public funds constitute 70–97% of university resources, the research scholarships do not exceed 10% in the best of cases). Additionally, the Moroccan public universities have a low administrative staffing ratio, with fewer administrative executives made

available to the student population, which limits effective management and operational efficiency (Ayad et al, 2020). Moreover, the limited autonomy has contributed to a decline in the quality of education, as the lack of flexibility has hindered the development of high-quality programs that meet evolving market demands.

1.3.3. In Terms of Accountability

Accountability in Moroccan public universities is weak, which is negatively affecting the university's performance and outcomes. For instance, activity and financial reports are not shared with the media or public, they are only made available internally (CSEFRS, 2018, as cited in Ayad et al, 2020). Additionally, the evaluation of learning outcomes is almost absent, with only 1 out of 9 universities conducting this evaluation, and fewer than half of universities evaluate their teaching methodology (Ibid).

Accountability encompasses quality of education, financial accountability, and financial integrity; however, Moroccan public universities stress a greater emphasis on financial integrity, with sanctions in place for misappropriation, improper spending, or dubious procurement (Ibid).

1.3.4. In Terms of Participation

As stated by Ayad et al (2020), Moroccan public universities are governed by a university council, considered the highest decision-making body, which is chaired by the University President. This council includes ex-officio members, elected representatives, and appointed members. The number of council members depends on the university's size and the number of academic institutions involved.

These authors pointed out that participation in the university council tends to be more formal than real. This can adversely affect decision-making and disrupt the university's operations and its collaboration with the socioeconomic environment. With a sizable number of members making up the university council, including education professionals, teachers by grade, the union, and administrative staff, it is challenging to discuss, negotiate, and approve decisions, especially given the council's heterogeneous composition that leads to different opinions and expectations. Additionally, with consecutive absences from some external stakeholders, the council typically sees little to no involvement from them. This absence allows internal university members to dominate and influence the flow of discussions and the decisions made.

1.3.5. In Terms of Evaluation

Although mandated by law, evaluation is nearly nonexistent in the various governance structures within Moroccan public universities, including those responsible at the ministry level, as well as presidents, deans, directors, and professors (CSEFRS, 2016, as cited in Ayad et al, 2020). This often leads to significant repercussions for the university's performance.

1.3.6. Discontinuity and Inconsistency of Reforms: The Leaking Bucket of Moroccan Higher Education

An overshadowing characteristic of Moroccan higher education is the discontinuity and inconsistency of reforms. Many successive Moroccan governments have repeatedly introduced new reforms while invalidating previous policies and starting all over again instead of capitalizing on them and consolidating them. Many reforms have been cyclic rather than structural (Kabba & Ejbari, 2019), which remains a stumbling block that reform efforts have been hitting against. A primary reason for this issue is that education is being highly politicized, in the way that some reforms are designed to fit political agendas and assert the political power of politicians and parties rather than genuinely fostering improvement and development (R'boul & El Amrani, 2024).

2. Admission and access to public higher education: a dualistic system

In an attempt to democratize education, Morocco made a commitment to offer free Public Higher Education after its independence, both for Moroccan citizens and foreign nationals. All students holding a Baccalaureate diploma are eligible for a spot at a public university in Morocco, where tuition is free. However, this automatic admission is limited to certain institutions, classified as open-access.

In public universities, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of institutions, “*open-access*” and “*limited-access*”. Open-access institutions (known as *accès ouvert* in French) are required by law to accept every student holding a Baccalaureate on a non-selective basis; in other words, they do not implement any selection process for admitting undergraduate students. They include institutions of legal, economic, and social sciences; the basic sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics); arts and humanities; and traditional education. Open-access institutions account for most university enrollments in Morocco. Specifically, the faculties of arts and humanities, along with those of legal, economic, and social sciences, together enroll nearly 74% of all public university students (Sanga, 2022).

In contrast, admission to limited-access institutions (known as *accès régulé* in French) is highly competitive and far more selective, requiring applicants to pass entrance exams and fulfill other criteria, such as academic records, while competing with both Moroccan and international students for a limited number of seats. The restricted-access institutions include institutions of engineering, business and management, medicine and pharmacy, dental medicine, paramedics, education, sports sciences, science and technology, teacher training, and technology (Sanga, 2022).

2.1. The Dualistic Educational System Profoundly Deepens Inequalities within Morocco's Public Higher Education Sector

Limited-access institutions are well-equipped, possess significant resources, have low enrollment per class, and maintain an adequate student-to-faculty ratio; in 2016, there were 17 students per professor (CSEFRS, 2020). Their aim is to promote professionalism and excellence within Moroccan universities (CSEFRS, 2020). However, open-access institutions are bounded by a lot of challenges, including limited resources and a very high student-to-faculty ratio. In 2016, each professor had 83 students (CSEFRS, 2018), which affects the quality of both training and research. Large class sizes in lecture halls hinder the teaching and learning experience, while the heavy teaching load on faculty may limit their research capacity.

This dual system, reflected in the coexistence of two very distinct systems, is a key feature of Moroccan public higher education. However, these two systems run at two different speeds, and even with some advantages, they contribute to considerable dysfunctions within the Moroccan higher education sector. Moreover, while the education system is characterized by a seeming openness to all social classes, this perpetuates profound social inequalities, which goes against the principle of equality among citizens.

The regulated system has the best resources and welcomes the best students. Through a competitive selection, the system allows to extract the best and to drive the rest of the students into the open-Access system. The latter suffers from a lack of resources and unfavorable conditions. It is marked by issues such as laxity, massification, high absenteeism and dropout rates, a negative societal perception, and poor quality, factors that render it inadequate in the eyes of labor market stakeholders (CSEFRS, 2018). It is worth mentioning too that the market integration rates of students graduating from open-access institutions were the lowest of all graduates (CSEFRS, 2019).

The gap widened by the dichotomy between "limited-access" and "open-access", clearly challenges heavily the goal of creating a unified and diverse university system that is fair and of the quality outlined in the Strategic Vision (CSEFRS, 2019).

2.2. The Unbalanced Geographical Distribution of Higher Education Institutions and Financial Constraints Restricts Access to Educational Opportunities for Underprivileged Students

Although Morocco offers tuition-free and relatively accessible public higher education, this has not been sufficient to resolve access inequalities across the country. Many barriers hold back the access of students to educational opportunities, particularly those from low earning families and distant areas. These include a lack of information about available higher education options and requirements, financial constraints, and the unbalanced geographical distribution of higher education institutions across the country.

Despite efforts made to financially and socially support needy students through scholarships and housing assistance, these measures remain insufficient, on one side to support and include all students in vulnerable situations, and on the other side to cover the full costs of their educational journey (Bouguidou, 2023).

Moreover, the geographical distribution of public colleges and universities is uneven and features a huge imbalance. In Morocco, the majority of higher education institutions are concentrated in urban areas like Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, and Marrakech, leaving rural and remote regions with limited access to educational opportunities. This heavy imbalance creates significant challenges for students from these underserved areas, who often face long commutes or the financial and social strain of relocating. As a result, some students may have to settle for programs in some institutions that aren't aligned with their true interests and opt for them only because they are geographically closer to them or, in some cases, may end up dropping out or choosing not to pursue higher education at all.

3. Internationalization of Morocco's higher education

The internationalization of higher education encompasses a range of activities, strategies, policies, and procedures that institutions, or higher education systems, perform to match the growing trends of globalization (Tight, 2021).

Morocco's internationalization is on the rise. It has taken genuine steps toward the internationalization of its higher education institutions, aiming to position them in the international arena. Notably, this was marked by the adoption of the LMD Model of Higher

Education, a French version of the European Bologna Process (Kohstall, 2020), an attempt to adopt the Bachelor system used in the Anglophone world, the reinforcement of English presence in teaching and scientific research in higher education. Additionally, Morocco has pursued many international collaborations and cooperative programs, which give birth to many incoming and outgoing mobility opportunities, the establishment of international education institutions, whether it be within the framework of private or public-private collaborations, without forgetting Morocco's first American-style university, the iconic *Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane* (AUI), which offers a full English curriculum, since 1995.

It is noteworthy that Morocco's cooperation efforts in the field of higher education and scientific research are historically and largely shifted towards Europe, due to the longstanding historical ties between the two regions.

3.1. Language Dynamics: Evolving Multilingualism Between Diversity and Disparity

Morocco is a multilingual nation where several languages hold varying degrees of importance and power (Benzehaf, 2021). While Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Amazigh are the official languages of Morocco, until the present day, French is widespread and prevalent in higher education and professional environments. It continues to be the prime medium of instruction in Moroccan public universities, mainly in fields such as business, STEM, medicine, and certain humanities and social sciences courses. However, a segment of the non-scientific Public Higher Education sector uses Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the main language of instruction.

The language of instruction at Moroccan public universities has long been a subject of controversy. When pursuing higher education in Moroccan public universities, many students who have received their education in Arabic during their primary and secondary education encounter language barriers, typically those from low and middle-class backgrounds. These students struggle to cope with a whole new learning environment dominated by French (Kabba & Ejbari, 2019), unlike their peers from private schools, who transition more easily due to prior exposure to French instruction. This linguistic dualism or discrepancy between primary/secondary and higher education across Morocco is a source of inequity in Moroccan higher education (Ibid), putting at a disadvantage mainly students who were not exposed enough to academic French, which unfortunately impedes their academic progress (Hughey,

2024), and ultimately their employability, as the job market tends to favor graduates with strong proficiency in foreign languages.

Under the impact of globalization and internationalization, English has recently gained greater ground in Moroccan universities, more specifically, as the language of scientific and technical studies and scientific research (Laaraj, & Allame, 2024). There is now growing support for the adoption of English in higher education in Morocco. The Ministry of Higher Education has backed the creation of new academic programs offered entirely in English. For instance, in 2023, *Mohammed V University in Rabat*, a Public Moroccan University, launched a Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program fully taught in English. Moreover, R'boul (2022) notes that students are increasingly encouraged to write their research papers in English and publish them in ranked English-language journals. Several Moroccan Universities, such as *Al Akhawayn University*, the pioneer of English-medium instruction university in Morocco, and the *International University of Rabat*, have already adopted English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Additionally, Morocco hosts some academic institutions that operate entirely in English, including the *Institution SIST* which delivers British Education in Morocco, awarding Bachelor, Masters and MBA degrees from *Cardiff Metropolitan University*, and the American University, namely, *University of New England* in Tangier (UNE).

Recognizing the importance of English as an international academic and workplace language, by adopting it increasingly in the Moroccan higher education landscape will significantly enhance the international visibility of Moroccan universities, attract both local and international students, facilitate the inbound and outbound student mobility, broaden students' knowledge, increase the value of their diplomas, enhance their employability, and better equip them for global opportunities.

3.2. The Adoption of the European LMD Model and the Abandoned Anglo-Saxon Reform Project

Like many other countries previously colonized by France, Morocco adopted a westernized model. Its geographical proximity to Europe and strong historical ties with France played a significant role in influencing Morocco's Higher Education System, which mirrors the European Higher Education Model (Benckouk, 2023), particularly through following the Bologna Process and adopting the LMD Model, which is mainly used in Francophone countries and shared by some countries in the European Union. According to the LMD architecture, once the students graduate from high school and get their Baccalaureate diploma, they have the

opportunity to continue their studies by pursuing a Bachelor's degree (In French: Licence) in 3 years (Bac+3); Master degree in 2 years (Bac+5), and the Doctorate in 3 additional years (Bac+8). That is a total of 8 years allegedly required to complete the three degrees. The following table describes in detail the Moroccan Higher Education Diploma levels.

As pointed out by Mansouri (2023), after 17 years of adopting the LMD System in Morocco, its evaluation revealed several dysfunctions that rose to the surface, leading the LMD reform to fall short of meeting both the international standards of the Bologna Process and the national pedagogical framework outlined by the *National Charter for Education and Training*.

In fact, the LMD model, based on a more flexible and modular structure, aimed to optimize the organization of studies and promote both national and international student mobility between institutions. However, during that reform, Morocco's modular system did not evolve into a standardized credit-based system that aligns with international standards, as the grading system in Moroccan universities was still based on grading students out of a 20-point scale, limiting students' international mobility and reducing the visibility of Moroccan universities. While some universities have taken steps to introduce the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in the past, its use was far from universal in Morocco (Sanga, 2022).

Additionally, while the LMD system called for practical teaching in small groups and the integration of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), the original objectives of the LMD system could not be effectively achieved in the context of the overcrowded, open-admission institutions, with large class sizes, insufficient human and material resources, and inadequate equipment, especially in professional degrees (CSEFRS, 2019).

Given the aforementioned obstacles, along with others such as low market integration and degree completion rates for students within the open-admission system (Cour des Comptes, 2018), the former government introduced the "Bachelor's reform", a system that is widely utilized in Anglophone countries, aimed to award Bachelor's degrees after four years of undergraduate study. It was highly promoted as a way to enhance students' skills, respond to the demands of the job market (MENFPESRS, 2020), and align Moroccan higher education with the international standards.

Although some universities had already adopted the Bachelor's System and implemented it in several faculties prior to its nationwide generalization in 2021, coinciding with the election of the new government, the new ministry abandoned the Bachelor's Program before its official launch in favor of a new reform that resumed the LMD System (Sanga, 2022). This ministry's decision was justified by the absence of a legal framework and a clear vision, notably post-

bachelor, additionally, the ministry also considered that Morocco's higher education system had not fully gone all the way with the LMD reform (Benabdellah, 2022). A relevant example is that Morocco, throughout the years of adopting the LMD system, has not adopted the European Credit System (ECTS) and therefore this has made it hard to harmonize international mobility. However, the recent readoption of the LMD System was further strengthened with the introduction of new measures aimed at improving the training programs, particularly by incorporating and promoting the learning of foreign languages, communication skills, and soft skills among students (Felahi, 2022). Not only did the new ministry order the resumption of the LMD System, but it also mandated an overhaul of the whole higher education system, by initiating a new project called the "National Plan to Accelerate the Transformation of the Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation Ecosystem" (PACTE - ESRI 2030), which puts into motion the priorities outlined in Morocco's New Economic Development Model (Mansouri, 2023).

3.3. Outbound & Inbound Student Mobility

An integral part of the internationalization of higher education is student mobility. In 2021, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimated that 68,717 Moroccan students were studying abroad (outbound mobility), surpassing the neighboring countries. Additionally, Morocco hosted 23,584 inbound internationally mobile students in 2022, reflecting its growing role in global student exchange (Benchouk, 2023).

It is noteworthy that Morocco is deemed one of the largest sources of Africa's international students, this aligns with the government's hope of turning the country into a regional education hub. Statistics from 2020 indicate that 85 percent of all international students in Morocco came from other African countries (Sanga, 2022). Morocco has become a popular destination for students from various French-speaking Sub-Saharan countries such as Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gabon, and Senegal, primarily due to several factors: lower tuition fees, a lower cost of living, and thousands of scholarships offered by the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI) to predominantly students from Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa (6,500 scholarships granted in 2017), a simpler visa process compared to Europe or North America, the recognition of Moroccan degrees in their home countries (Benchouk, 2023), the country's political stability in a volatile region, and its comfortable Mediterranean climate are also key factors (Sanga, 2022).

Morocco is geo-strategically well-placed at the crossroads of two adjacent continents to draw far more international students. While the country has made genuine efforts to attract international students, several challenges hinder its appeal as a study destination. Notably, the lack of world-class education standards, quality concerns, and the lack of English-taught programs further limit international student enrollment. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as limited on-campus housing, and the absence of a credit system complicate mobility between Moroccan and foreign institutions (Sanga, 2022), among other challenges.

3.4. Rankings & International Visibility

On an international scale, the appearance of Moroccan universities in international rankings such as Times Higher Education (THE) and QS World University Rankings dates to recent years only. Moroccan universities still struggle to gain global visibility and secure advanced spots in prominent international rankings. In the 2024 Academic Ranking of World Universities Research (ARWU), only one Moroccan public university made it to the ranking, namely, *Hassan II University of Casablanca*, by landing between 901st and 1000th place (Shanghai Ranking, 2024). Additionally, only one Moroccan public university appeared in the 2025 QS World University Rankings, namely *Mohammed V University of Rabat*, being ranked in the 1001-1200 range (University Rankings, 2024). While in the 2025 THE World University Rankings, *Mohammed VI Polytechnic University* (UM6P), a semi-public Moroccan university, was successful to make its entry into the Top 500, while many Moroccan public universities were placed in the top 1,500 out of 2,092 institutions worldwide (Times Higher Education, 2024).

Although still modest, the appearance of Moroccan universities in global rankings is promising. It reflects the formidable strides made in recent years, yet these efforts must be multiplied to align with the standards of world-class education, in order to secure a respectful position among some of the top-performing universities worldwide.

With the launch of the *Pacte ESRI-2030 Plan*, Morocco signals a major overhaul of its higher education system, in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the *New Development Model General Report*. Through this reform, Moroccan universities may expect, in only a few years, to stand in full alignment with the standards needed to provide up-to-date world-class education (Benhayoun, 2023).

4. Further weighing challenges facing moroccan public universities

4.1. Overcrowding and High Dropout Rates

Morocco's higher education landscape is dominated by public institutions, which face exponential increases in student flows. In the 2021/2022 academic year, only 62,600 students, or about 5 percent of all higher education students, were enrolled in private institutions (Sanga, 2022). The government aims to increase this figure to 20 percent in the coming years to reduce some of the pressure on public universities (Ibid). This is particularly crucial given the country's growing youth population and rising Bac pass rates, which have driven a rapid increase in university enrollment. At the same time, Moroccan public universities have struggled to offer enough seats for students in the most sought-after fields. Over the past 15 years, enrollment in Moroccan public universities has surged by over 250 percent, climbing from 292,776 in 2007/2008 to 1,061,256 in 2021/2022 (Ibid).

Critics highlight the limited availability of spots in limited-access programs, which has resulted in far more students accommodated to open-access institutions, such as faculties of law, economics, humanities, and faculties of fundamental science, leading to overcrowding issues. Most of the national mass of university students are often packed into course programs that have "a poor affinity with the dynamics of social change and market trends related to employability, economic productivity, and social adaptability" (Benhayoun, 2023).

The overcrowding has negatively affected the quality of education at open-access faculties, resulting in alarmingly high dropout rates. In 2018, It was reported that 47.2 percent of university students fail to complete their degrees (Ibid). Additionally, the time taken to finish a degree is considerably lengthy; a 2021 British Council report indicated that it is not uncommon for students to take six years to graduate from a typical three-year undergraduate program (Ibid).

4.2. Overstretched and Insufficient Human and Financial Resources

Moroccan public universities have struggled to recruit new professors at a pace sufficient to match the rapidly increasing student population and to replace a rapidly aging workforce. Between the 2007/2008 and 2021/2022 academic years, public university enrollment surged by over 250 percent, while the number of teaching staff grew by only 60 percent, increasing from 9,867 to 15,830 (Sanga, 2022). As mentioned earlier, open-access institutions face a high student-to-faculty ratio. In 2016, each professor had an average of 83 students (CSEFRS, 2018), which negatively affects the quality of learning, teaching and research. Similarly, Moroccan

public universities have a low administrative rate. In 2017, it was reported that there was only 1 executive for every 130 students (Ayad et al, 2020).

Regarding intake capacity, particularly in open-access institutions within Moroccan public universities, the expansion of physical infrastructure has not kept pace with the significant growth in student enrollment driven by massification. This leads to the overuse of existing facilities, with utilization rates exceeding acceptable standards for quality higher education (Bouguidou, 2023).

4.3. Undermined Quality in Teaching and Scientific Research

The quality of teaching in Morocco is negatively affected by a range of interconnected factors, each of which contributes to or exacerbates the others, such as insufficient funding, overcrowding that leads to the overutilization of available capacity and causes disruption in the learning environment, shortage of physical facilities and equipment, limited human resources, particularly reflected in a very high student-to-faculty ratio, in addition to unsuitable and outdated syllabuses, partly stemming from the limited autonomy of universities, which limits the development of high-quality programs that address the evolving demands of the job market, among other factors.

As for scientific research, Moroccan universities confront hurdles in fostering scientific research, while carrying out low-level scientific activity with limited economic and material means. This is largely due to factors similar to those affecting the teaching experience, including low funding, outdated and insufficient resources, poor research productivity due to a shortage of skilled researchers, and the heavy teaching loads carried by the professors, leaving little time for research. Furthermore, opportunities for advanced training and international collaboration are scarce, thus restricting research output. Additionally, brain drain poses a serious problem, weakening Morocco's research sector as many of the country's top academics are based in North American or European institutions (Sanga, 2022), without losing sight of the country's limited visibility in the global scientific scene, as Moroccan researchers face many difficulties in publishing in high-impact international journals. According to the Nature Index, which tracks global scientific output, Morocco was ranked 64th worldwide in 2022 (Ibid).

4.4. Roadblocks to Job Market Integration for University Graduates

In Morocco, as reported by the World Bank (2022), Youth employment raises serious challenges. One of its main patterns is the high unemployment among tertiary graduates (referring to students who have completed a higher education program). That is to say, youth unemployment escalates dramatically in the range of educated people; in 2018, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15 to 24 with tertiary education reached an alarming 64%.

Youth unemployment among Moroccan university graduates stems from several issues, some of which are external, such as the challenge of job creation which has lagged behind economic growth in Morocco. In recent years, not enough jobs have been created to absorb the growing working-age population. Additionally, some challenges are internal to the university system (World Bank, 2022). In particular, the massification, combined with the lack of quality education at Moroccan public universities, has significantly affected students' completion rates and their ability to integrate into the job market. The labor market was unable to absorb the large number of graduates, contributing to a chronic unemployment crisis.

However, it is important to note that unemployment rates varied largely among graduates depending on the type of institution—whether open or limited access—and the degree obtained (Mansouri, 2023). Graduates of open-access university institutions face considerably more challenging employment prospects compared to those graduating from more selective public institutions or from private and international universities (Sanga, 2022). It has been shown by the World Bank (2022) that the field of study impacts unemployment rates among graduates. In particular, graduates in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, including health, tend to experience better labor market outcomes and higher employment rates compared to their counterparts in other disciplines, such as economics, law, management, and especially in arts and humanities.

Additionally, several challenges have heavily contributed to reinforcing graduate unemployment, including: the mismatch between academic programs and labor market needs, caused by curricula that are less responsive to the evolving socio-economic environment, as well as a lack of focus on soft skills (such as communication, leadership, cooperation, and problem-solving) and foreign languages, while being long focused on the transmission of conventional academic knowledge. Poor and limited career counseling further pushes students toward degrees that do not align with their abilities, ambitions, or market demands and thus constitute a true hurdle for students for better professional integration and access to appropriate

career opportunities. It is worthy of mention that this orientation problem took its roots from pre-university education. Due to the lack of a universal and relevant advising policy, generations of high school students land the university poorly advised and ill-prepared (Lahlou, 2010, as cited in Mansouri, 2023), often lacking guidance and clear career goals, which deeply reinforces inequalities in access to employment opportunities.

4.5. Emancipation of Morocco's Higher Education from Colonial Legacies

Morocco, like many countries with a colonial past, struggles with the legacies of colonialism in its higher education system. This is most apparent in the prevalence of French as the main language of instruction and the broader teaching-learning systems, such as the adoption of French models like the LMD System, which has been the backbone of Moroccan higher education for years, reflecting the deep-rooted legacy of French colonial influence in the nation's educational policies and structures.

Moroccan higher education has been critiqued constantly for its underlying French orientations and adoption of Western frameworks, without considering nuanced, context-sensitive elements. Many reform attempts have failed partly due to imported models being replicated without incorporating Morocco's unique complexities, conditions, and possibilities; this lack of contextual adaptation has heavily impacted the effectiveness and sustainability of these reforms. R'boul & El Amrani (2024) eloquently argued that “the colonial legacies that still function within and through education in postcolonial spaces and the sustained attachment toward ready-made perspectives and conclusions about the sociocultural framings of educational structures problematize the very endeavors for developing critical, nuanced, and effective educational policies that work toward the overall prosperity of the state and society”.

To curb this problem, R'boul & El Amrani (2024) called for the necessity of decolonizing educational knowledge. It is not about rejecting western systems but rather involves critically assessing and contextualizing them to fit Morocco's unique conditions, needs, possibilities, and aspirations. Education should then be framed to foster the nation's development while taking into account colonial legacies. According to them, the educational knowledge encapsulates the range of facts, information, concepts, principles, approaches, laws, theories, strategies, and skills about education including pedagogy, curriculum, delivery, and evaluation acquired through experience, education, research, and analysis.

Decolonizing educational knowledge can be achieved through implementing an **emancipatory education** that preserves the best aspects of Western, non-Western, and Moroccan ways of

knowing and thinking. Moroccan Education must take on a "glocal" character, moving beyond Eurocentric or Arabo-centric educational perspectives. In keeping with globalization trends, as the import and export of educational values intensify, this must be harnessed carefully to attend to Moroccan particularities, conditions, and needs, to create a more inclusive, diverse, and empowering educational system (Ibid).

Conclusion

The Moroccan public higher education sector has taken important stripes to continually improve its components, yet huge obstacles are hampering Moroccan Public universities in achieving desired outcomes. While there are many challenges that have had a significant bearing on Moroccan higher education, a few stand out, such as overcrowding, lack of quality in teaching and scientific research, high drop-out rates, insufficient funding, limited and overstretched human resources, less responsive curricula to the evolving socio-economic environment, limited autonomy of universities, and discontinuity and inconsistency of reforms, among others. Elevating the Moroccan higher education sector requires a steadfast commitment to world-class standards to enhance its quality and performance, thereby boosting its international visibility. This involves reinforcing English as a medium of instruction, renovating and revamping academic catalogs, expanding partnerships and collaborations, and improving the quality of teaching and research output, along with other measures.

In the wake of globalization, Moroccan higher education must be 'glocal' and emancipated, moving beyond colonial legacies, while preserving the best aspects of Western, non-Western, and Moroccan ways and perspectives, all while aligning with the country's unique particularities, conditions, and needs, to foster a modern, inclusive, empowering, and sustainable Moroccan public higher education system.

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