

EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

COUNTRY PROFILE: ALGERIA

Martin Rose

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MARTIN ROSE

Martin Rose is currently working as a consultant to the British Council's MENA Region. He has worked for the British Council since 1988, serving in Baghdad, Rome, Brussels, Ottawa and – until August 2014 – Rabat, as well as on London postings. The latter included the establishment, as founding Director, of Counterpoint, the Council's think tank on Cultural Relations. He has taken a youth expedition by sea to Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, founded the Pontignano Conference in Italy and run the Our Shared Europe project looking at the predicament and contribution of Muslim Europeans. Martin was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, in Modern History and at St Antony's in Modern Middle Eastern Studies (M Phil). He was the 2009 Sheikh Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecturer, and is a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and a Visiting Fellow at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies at Cambridge. He is a member of the Advisory Board of London University's Centre for Post-Colonial Studies, and is the Chair of Trustees at BAX (British-Arab Exchanges). He has co-edited with Andrew Hussey the collection *The Challenge of North Africa*, in which his essay *Bavures and Shibboleths: The Changing Ecology of Culture and Language in Morocco*, appears.

BACKGROUND

Statistics on Algeria are thin – though not to the extent of statistics on Libya – and many of the international series are sparsely populated, and often the most recent figures available are several years old.

Algeria's education system is based on the twin foundations of the settler-focused French colonial system, and a determined expansion, reform and Arabization of what little remained after Independence. The inheritance in 1962 was dire, with less than a third of Algerian Muslims in primary school. Only 30% of students at secondary and 10% at university were native Algerians.¹ The result is structurally similar to that of Morocco, which underwent a broadly similar (though shorter and less deeply damaging) colonial experience; and to Egypt, which provided much of the expertise that went into creating, and Arabizing, the new Algerian system. Education was seen as being at the heart of rebuilding the nation, training a skilled workforce, creating a shared national consciousness and opening opportunity to all Algerians. As a result, early expenditure was high, at 29.7% of the national budget in 1990. Today education accounts for 20.27% of government expenditure.

Algerians are guaranteed access to free education at all levels if they qualify by passing the previous cycle. The first two cycles (nine years from ages 6 to 14) are compulsory and have very high attendance; secondary education is compulsory too, but in practice sees serious drop-off. Progression from primary to middle school, from middle school to secondary and from secondary to tertiary are all controlled by assessments or exams, with significant numbers falling by the wayside at each stage and repeating years. Pedagogy is traditional, fact-based and involves much rote learning. The foundational education ordinance of 1976 makes education a state monopoly, and although this was relaxed in 2004 and again in 2008 to allow some private education, the private sector is not yet significant (0.5% of children are in private institutions, and there are not yet any private universities, though there are some private non-university institutions).²

Education promises much but delivers rather less. Literacy figures are respectable: the 2006 figures show 72.6% of the population as a whole (83.3% of males and 63.9% of females) as being literate; while the youth figure for the same year is 91.8%.³ But it is in the employment market that the real scale of failure is to be seen. Algeria's state economy, with state-owned hydrocarbons dominating external trade (95% of foreign exchange revenue) and a weak, though growing, private sector, has consistently failed to provide jobs for the young. While unemployment as a whole is on a strong downward trend (from 30% in 2000 to 10% in 2010), youth unemployment remains obstinately high at 21.5% for the 15–24 age bracket. And Algeria suffers from the same inverted pyramid phenomenon as its neighbours, whereby each additional stage of education increases unemployment: those without any formal education see a rate of 1.9% unemployment; those who leave school at the end of the third cycle, 10.7%; and those with degrees, 20.3% (with strong gender differentiation of 10.4% for men and 33.3% for women). It is clear that the education system suffers from a major mismatch with the skills demands of the hiring market. This market shows private sector growth and public sector shrinkage (the public sector accounted for only 40% of employees by 2011 and this figure may have fallen to 32% today⁴), though the majority of secure long-term employment remains in the public sector, and it is a much preferred destination.⁵ In 2010 Gallup

found 44% of Algerian 15–34 years olds expressing preference for employment in the public sector.⁶

Education spending as a percentage of GDP is also falling, from 7.2% in 1979 to 6.6% in 1981, and 4.3% in 2008. To some extent this reflects changing demographics. Fertility has dropped dramatically since 1985 – from 5.8% to 2.4% in 2007,⁷ with concomitant drop in population growth from 3.1% to 1.5% per annum.⁸ Against this background the continuing problem of graduate unemployment is particularly striking.

Having said this, there have been highly creditable achievements in terms of raising school enrolment (to 117% gross at primary, with 96.8% attendance for boys and 96.2% for girls; and to 57.4% of boys and 64.5% of girls at secondary⁹. By 2012 only 25,300 children were still wholly outside the school system (down from 86,200 in 2009 and 590,000 in 1980),¹⁰ the big drop since 2009 perhaps thanks to a 2010 law imposing fines on parents who fail to enforce attendance on their children during the nine-year basic cycle. Dropout rates however are very high.

It is to be noted, though, that Algeria's scores and rankings in the *WEF Africa Competitiveness Report* are disquieting. While its positions on secondary (52nd/144) and tertiary (74th/144) enrolment are very good against the other countries of the region, the same cannot be said of its quality measures. On "Quality of the Education System" it ranks 131st/144, ahead only of Egypt (139th) and Libya (142nd), and behind Tunisia (68th) and Morocco (105th). On "Quality of Science and Maths Education", it stands 129th, on its management school, 131st, and on the extent of staff training, last of the five countries at 142nd/144.¹¹

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Algerian school system consists of three stages, or cycles, which have been redesigned over the last decade from a 6-3-3 (primary/middle school/secondary) architecture, to the current 5-4-3 which was instituted in 2003. Over succeeding years this reform has touched many of the fundamentals of school education, and recognizes unsatisfactory outcomes in the previous system in terms of class size, high dropout and repetition rates, shortage of qualified teachers, and unsatisfactory teaching programmes and pedagogies. The dropout rates in particular were alarming, with 500,000 students a year quitting education without any qualification, and 10–16% of students repeating whole years.¹²

Student numbers given by UNESCO's UIS are 2,989,000 (primary), 3,363,000 (middle) and 1,203,000 (secondary) – a total of 7,555,000 in the system.¹³ In 2009 there were 24,600 schools at all levels, and 370,000 teachers; and the Ministry intended the addition of 3,000 primary, 1,000 middle, 850 secondary and 2,000 boarding schools (crucial for the education of children from remote rural communities) over the present five-year plan period.¹⁴ Promotion from primary into middle school is by assessment, and many fail at the first attempt: the pass rate in 2010 was 66.4%. *Redoublement* – the repeating of whole years – is common (arguably another French cultural legacy), and accounts for the high gross enrolment figures. At the end of the second cycle, grade 9, the *brevet d'enseignement fondamentale* is issued, permitting progression to secondary school for those who succeed – 66.4% of pupils in 2010.

Secondary school begins with a foundation year, known as the *tronc commun*, which is divided into three sections – general, science and technical – each supporting a further two years of study leading to the baccalaureate in that speciality. In 2001/2 the bac pass rate on the first sitting was 43%, but had risen to 61.2% by 2010.

The reform initiative begun in 2003 has not been entirely successful. It has “failed” – according to a report issued by the CLA (the Council for Secondary Schools in Algiers), an independent teachers’ union, in March 2013 – or it “wasn’t fully implemented” according to SNAPEST, the CLA’s official counterpart. CLA’s grievances include the assertion that “pupils don’t master the three academic elements (reading, writing and arithmetic)” and the statement that 70% of maths teachers report pupil levels as “low”. Their demands are for smaller classes, the extirpation of ideology in the classroom, reform of the curriculum, opening schools up to “universal knowledge”, encouraging children’s self-expression and – interestingly – “a return to technical education”.¹⁵ In early 2014 widespread teachers’ strikes over professional and salary demands paralysed education for over a month, as they had in 2009 and 2010, with a claimed 65% teacher participation (9.3% according to the Ministry of Education). As noted above, the WEF’s assessment of the overall system quality, and its contribution to national competitiveness, is still not high.¹⁶

Since 2008 the British Council has been involved with the Ministry of Education in work on the teaching of English. In 2014 this was embodied in the very ambitious SEEDS programme, a comprehensive strategy for blended learning/training at all levels of the schools education system.



THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The tertiary system, which is free to qualified students, is large and growing fast. It currently consists of 84 establishments, of which 36 are universities and 15 university centres, alongside 21 Écoles Normales Supérieures and 10 Écoles Préparatoires on the traditional French model. Since Independence the French model has dominated higher education, and only in the decade since 2004 has there been serious reform, with the progressive adoption of the LMD system under the Bologna Process, to which international comparability and outcome-defined learning are central.

From 2,809 students at Independence in 1962, Algerian Higher Education has grown to 19,213 (1970); 79,351 (1980), 258,995 (1989), and 423,000 (1999). The current figure is around 1.1 million (also reported as 1.34 million), and the current planning period sees forecast additions of 600,000, with a total of 2 million students by 2017 also noted.¹⁷ Universities are large: the University of Algiers had 106,000 students in 2007 and Constantine 63,000. Algeria's first business school, the École Supérieure d'Affaires, was founded in the mid-2000s and is supported by a French consortium including the French Embassy in Algiers.

There are about 52,000 academic staff in the system, only 28% of them holding doctorates, and the qualitative improvement of this teaching body through reform at home and government-funded study abroad is a priority: programmes for several hundred Algerian doctoral students to join foreign universities, many in the UK, are currently being negotiated; and the British Council is working with the Ministry on a large-scale postgraduate study-abroad programme which will help underpin the reform of the system.

Problems remain. *Massification* without adequate per capita resourcing is a constant threat to quality, and teachers are underqualified, underpaid and overstretched. There is a dangerously high dropout rate, frequent changes of course by individual students (and as a result, extensions of the length of education). The last two phenomena are both results in part at least of the very difficult graduate employment situation: pessimism and despair lead on the one hand to abandonment, and on the other to prolonging access to the small financial support, and (however attenuated) sense of purpose that university study gives.

Most important is the failure of the system to produce graduates with skills appropriate to the Algerian job market. As explored below, graduate unemployment at 20.3% is double the national average and significantly higher than the rate of unemployment for the holders of any lesser level of educational qualification (or none). This failure, and the concentration of students in the faculties offering the lowest rates of employment (54.6% of Algerian students are in the humanities and social sciences¹⁸), suggest a system that is stuck, or as one writer puts it, characterized by "the dominance of theory over practice and the virtual non-existence of internships or stages in professional working environments, despite the existence of an enabling legal framework for them".¹⁹

Significant numbers of Algerian students study abroad, virtually all of them in France, where there were 218,000 in the last year recorded, of whom 197,000 were at university, the majority studying science.²⁰

PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector is small: the 1976 Ordinance made education a state monopoly, and although this has been relaxed, there has not been very significant growth. In 2004 some private schools were allowed, and in 2008, private universities. There are now 136 private schools in Algeria, but their impact is limited by high fees and the fact that more than half of them are located in Algiers. Only 0.5% of primary and secondary pupils receive private school education. Other private institutions have been permitted to offer only the state's Brevet de Technicien Supérieure (BTS), but have to some extent circumvented this limitation by offering, in partnership, the diplomas of foreign institutions. Only one serious project for a private university is in the tightly controlled pipeline. However, it is clear that this sector will grow, and should have a positive effect on Higher Education in Algeria as it does so.²¹

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Algerian TVET is founded in the need to create a skilled workforce after the departure of the French in 1962. Thus although there is certainly something of the same stigma that colours TVET in neighbouring countries as a second-class educational option, it is perhaps less marked: the 743 tertiary TVET *collèges* in Algeria are seeing rising applications, mainly because their record at preparing students for the employment market is better than universities (though secondary TVET institutes are regularly undersubscribed). Partnerships with industry allow them to tailor their offerings in a way that universities cannot – or at any rate, do not. It is notable that the litany of complaints by the CLA teachers' union in March 2013 included a demand for revalidating and increasing the provision of technical education. And indeed the current Five Year Plan foresees 30 new specialized and 80 general TVET institutions catering for 54,000 students; and at a lower level, 130 new vocational training centres, with a capacity for 130,000 trainees.²² But there are very high dropout rates: in 2005 the system lost 69,000 students, 90% of them simply abandoning their studies. And at secondary level TVET students are dropping in number, and *collèges* undersubscribed.²³

ENGAGEMENT AND PROGRESSION

In 1990 80% of primary schoolchildren completed (87% male, 74% female), though only 33% achieved the BEF, the Brevet d'enseignement fondamentale. By 2011 93% completed, with more girls (94.6%) than boys (91.1%). Figures for 1999 show that only 55% of the cohort actually then progressed to secondary education. But by 2011 this figure had reached 97.7% (100% of boys and 95.3% of girls).²⁴ Progression from secondary school to university is also by highly selective baccalaureate exam: in 2012 only 35% of students reached the pass mark on the first sitting, with another 9% passing on the resit at the end of the summer. The attrition rate of pupils at all levels is a major concern, with at least half a million students leaving the system unqualified each year. Algeria has not taken part in TIMSS, PIRLS or PISA exercises making quality comparisons difficult.

EMPLOYABILITY

Employment, and employability, are very serious issues in Algeria, where the public sector, although no longer the largest employer, is the primary source of secure long-term jobs. The typical post-Independence compact, by which all graduates were absorbed into public sector employment, has long gone. Although Algeria has managed to reduce overall unemployment to around 9.8% in 2013 (from an all-time high of 29.5% in 2000), these reductions have had virtually no positive impact on graduate or female unemployment, which remain very much higher than the national level. Youth unemployment figures show 24.8% in 2013, down from 27.5% in 2012, despite dropping fertility and slowing labour force growth.²⁵ Breaking down these figures shows the impact on women: 37.4% of females in the 16–24 age bracket are unemployed, against 18.6% of males. But the really extraordinary distribution is of unemployment by level of education: as noted above, unemployment increases significantly with each level of education completed: starting at only 1.9% for those with no education, it rises to 7.6% for primary completers, 8.9% for secondary completers, and 20.3% for graduates. Even this doesn't tell the whole story: although the figures for women are higher than those for men at each level, the discrepancy grows significantly, to 10.3 percentage points for secondary completers (17.2% for females, against 7% for males) and 19.9% for graduates (33.3% against 10.4% for males).²⁶

Davide Furceri, writing for the IMF, suggests three reasons beyond simple labour market inflexibility and the structural preference for hiring “insiders”. These are the skills mismatch on the labour market, between graduate offer and private sector employer demand; the failure of Algeria's political and business elite to create high-skilled jobs for graduates; and the self-destructive choice of field of study at university. He analyses the 21.4% graduate unemployment across faculties, and highlights the humanities and social sciences as leading the unemployment list with 27.3% and 28.7%, respectively, as against 18.1% for science and 14.8% for engineers. Dramatic as this is, it still leaves the most employable of all Algerian graduates, engineers, well above the national unemployment rate.

But there is final caution. Male/female distribution of unemployment between graduates of different faculties is also heavily weighted in favour of male graduates. In the humanities the percentage point difference between male and female graduates is 19.7%; in the social sciences, 29.7%. And in engineering and science, where employment is least inaccessible, it remains a male preserve: 39.7% of female engineering graduates are unemployed (9.4% of males) and 28.6% of science graduates (9.8% of males).²⁷

DIFFERENTIALS OF GENDER AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Algeria is an upper middle middle-income country where 23% of the population is below the poverty line. Its achievements in making health, empowerment and economic activity available to women are fairly respectable: UNDP places it 81st/144 globally in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), ahead of Morocco (92nd) and Egypt (130th) but behind Libya (40th) and Tunisia (48th). However, on the newer Gender Development Index (GDI) it is placed much lower, at 129th, behind all North African countries except Morocco. This reflects difficulties of equal access: the GDI is simply a comparator of male and female HDI scores.

Girls dominate educational enrolment at all levels above primary (99.5%:95.7% Gross Enrolment at secondary; 37.7%:25.4% at tertiary ²⁸. Education is clearly seen as an instrument of empowerment, a route to personal betterment in a society that is still fairly traditional in many aspects. Dropping-out of education is a predominantly male phenomenon. But this is regionally different: in the rural south, where dropout rates are anyway higher than on the coast, girls represent a higher proportion, withdrawn by their families for domestic and agricultural duties.

And despite higher female participation rates, the imbalance of employment outcomes in favour of men is remarkable. The figures for women are higher than those for men at each level, the discrepancy grows significantly, to 10.3 percentage points for secondary completers (17.2% for females, against 7% for males) and 19.9% for graduates (33.3% against 10.4% for males).²⁹ Furthermore, the unemployment rate for women with university degrees is 20–30% higher than that for men in all disciplines.³⁰



NOTES

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ALGERIA

40 Rue des Frères Benali Abdellah,
Ex Parmentier 16035 Algiers, Algeria
www.britishcouncil.dz

EGYPT

192 El Nil Street, Agouza, Cairo, Egypt
www.britishcouncil.org.eg

LIBYA

Casablanca Street, Hey El Wihda El Arabia Siyahia,
PO Box 6797, Tripoli, Libya
www.britishcouncil.ly

MOROCCO

11 Avenue Allal Ben Abdellah, 5eme etage
Rabat, Morocco
www.britishcouncil.ma

TUNISIA

87 Avenue Mohamed V, 1002 Tunis
Belvedere, Tunisia
www.britishcouncil.tn

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