# Needs and involvement of the public sector in higher education in emergent economies. The Moroccan case

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# Needs and involvement of the public sector in higher education in emergent economies. The Moroccan case

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the involvement of the public sector in higher education. Empirical findings and field observations are presented using the Moroccan case. The main challenges are presented and discussed. Growing population demand for higher education, imperative financial burdens, weak private sector participation, and market forces are discussed. Drastic societal changes are creating new and complex tensions within public universities. Cultural-political-religious issues and values create new disruptive challenges for university managers and professors. Faculty promotion and stature are less based on their teaching skills and more on published research papers. Governance concerns and resistances to changes from students and professors within the higher education system are indicated. Ministries, university managers, professors, students and parents seem to be on different pathways. The pace of implementing changes is slow compared to the growing needs. In addition, the collapse of elementary and high school education systems presents the biggest future challenge for improving higher education.

**Keywords.** Morocco – Education reform – Public – Private – Dual system – Bilingual system – Growing demand – Financing – Politics – Governance.

***Besoins et engagement du secteur public dans l'enseignement supérieur dans les économies émergentes. Le cas du Maroc***

***Résumé.*** *Cet article explore l'engagement du secteur public dans l'enseignement supérieur. Des résultats empiriques et des observations de terrain sont présentés en utilisant le cas du Maroc. Les principaux défis sont présentés et discutés. Sont examinés : la demande d'une population croissante en matière d'enseignement supérieur, la charge financière impérative, la faible participation du secteur privé, et les forces du marché. Les changements sociétaux drastiques créent de nouvelles tensions complexes chez les universités publiques. Les problématiques et les valeurs culturo-politico-religieuses entraînent de nouveaux défis perturbateurs pour les gestionnaires et les professeurs des universités. La promotion et l'envergure des facultés sont moins basées sur leurs compétences pour enseigner et davantage sur les articles de recherche publiés. Les préoccupations de gouvernance et les résistances aux changements provenant des étudiants et professeurs dans le système d'éducation supérieure sont indiquées. Les ministères, les gestionnaires des universités, les professeurs, les étudiants et les parents semblent avoir en vue des parcours différents. Le rythme de mise en place des changements est lent comparé aux besoins croissants. En outre, l'échec des systèmes d'enseignement élémentaire et secondaire constitue le plus grand défi futur en vue d'améliorer l'éducation supérieure.*

***Mots-clés.*** *Maroc – Réforme éducative – Public – Privé – Système dual – Système bilingue – Demande croissante – Financement – Politique – Gouvernance.*

## I – Introduction

Higher education in Morocco is mainly provided by open access public universities that are hosting 89% of enrolled students, followed by public specialized engineering and business institutes with 5% enrolled students. The private higher education system is recent and enrolls only 6% of

the total number of higher education students (Ministère de l'Education Nationale and Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, 2015; Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015). We will characterize the education system, outline its weaknesses and strengths and present its main challenges.

Many top-down government attempts to reform the educational system have had limited success. A major breakthrough was achieved when all partners (government, political parties, unions, civil society representatives…) agreed to sign a general commitment called "La Charte Nationale de l' Education". Morocco has established the Higher Council for Education and Scientific Research "Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation, et de la Recherche Scientifique". It provides a platform for wide-ranging consultation and exchange of views among educational social partners. The council serves as an active observatory system to monitor and assess the entire national educational system and has the mandate to suggest necessary reforms to the government. A new reform was introduced in 2000 that used many principles of the Bologna EU reform to harmonize the higher education system and introduce needed changes.

Based on Moroccan and IAV Hassan II experiences, the main hurdles that are causing delays and unnecessary obstacles to achieve needed changes are highlighted below.

## II – A dual and unbalanced education system

As in many francophone African countries, the Moroccan higher education system includes a new private system and a strong dual public system. The private higher education system is recent and enrolls only 6% of the total number of students (Ministère de l'Education Nationale and Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, 2015; Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015). The public system includes two distinct components.

The first component of the public higher education system involves a wide range of universities covering mainly the fields of literature, social sciences, law, biology, mathematics, chemistry and physics fields. The majority (89%) of students are enrolled in these open access universities (Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015). Students are admitted with no special requirements, providing they completed high school and received their high school final diploma called "Bacalaureat". This system is completely open access and free of charge. It is governed and managed by the Ministry of Higher Education (see Fig. 1).

The second component of the public higher education system includes specialized engineering and business institutes covering mainly technical fields such as civil engineering, architecture, agriculture, management and medicine (5% of the total number of students). Access to these specialized institutes is regulated and very competitive. For the engineering and business institutes, the number of applicants exceeds the available seats. For instance, IAV Hassan II administrative records show that the institute receives more than 13,000 applicants each year for 450 available seats. In fact, specialized institutes receive and train a small number of students compared to open universities. However, they offer higher quality training and their graduates have easy access to the job market. These specialized institutes are under the authority and governance of technical Ministries (Ministry of Health oversees medical universities, Ministry of Agriculture oversees agronomy and veterinary institutes, Ministry of Public Works oversees civil engineering institutes, etc.). For these institutes, the Ministry of Higher Education issues regulations and accredits specialized curricula but has no management mandate over this high education sub-system.

These two components of the public higher education system are entirely free of charge. The government provides investment budgets, as well as those to cover university-operating costs. In addition, many students receive scholarships to cover their living expenses.
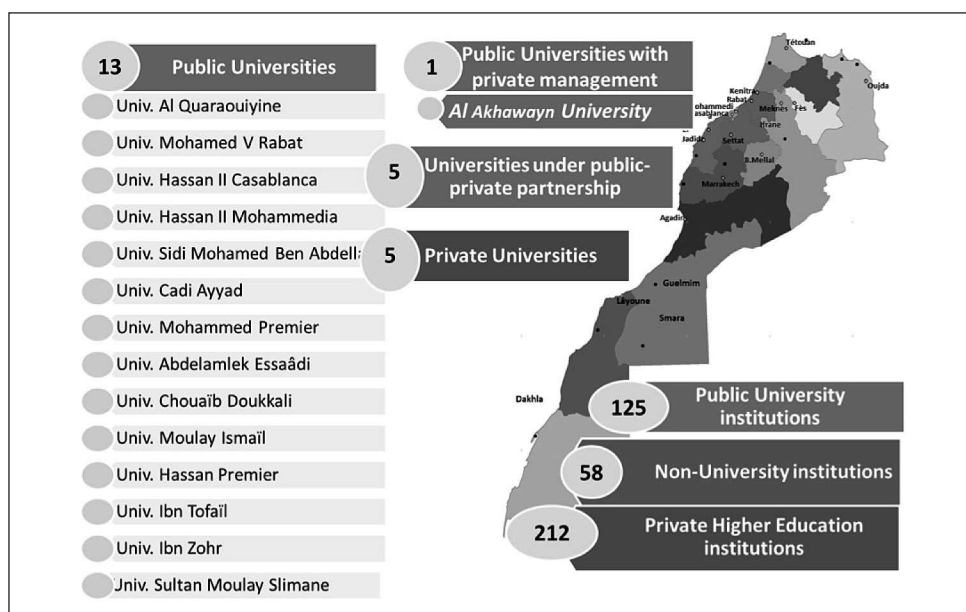
**Fig. 1. Moroccan Higher Education System.**

Adapted from Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015.

## III – Fast growing demand, equity, quality and financial burden

The system is facing a rapid growing population demand. The number of registered students in the public higher education system increased drastically from 306,000 in 2010 to 471,000 in 2013 and reached 615,000 in 2015 in the Open University system. These trends will continue in the coming years (Fig. 2).
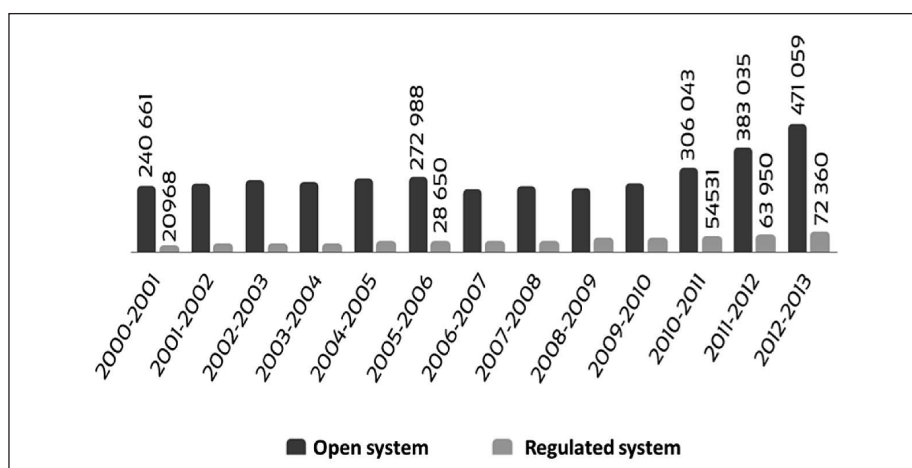


**Fig. 2. Number of university-enrolled students Enrolled in 2015 = 615,000 students.**

Source: Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015.

In spite of these high figures, it should be stressed that the entire education system is lacking equity and efficiency since only 19% of high school graduates find their way to higher education (Fig. 3). There are many economic-social factors that are causing this low figure: The need of high school graduates to get jobs and help their poor families, lack of financial means to move to cities where universities are located, social resistance of traditional families to send graduate girls to cities.
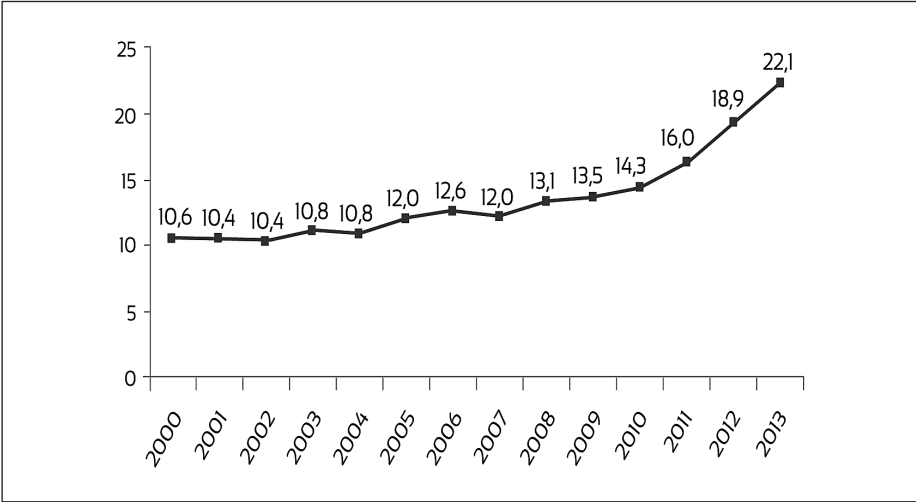


**Fig. 3. Evolution of the raw rate of high-school students able to enroll in higher education.**

Source: Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015.

This means that 81% of high school students are directly excluded and never reach universities. In addition, 2/3 of the enrolled 19% never make it through university, as students drop without receiving any university degree. Thus, only 6% of all high school students will finish university studies and will get some kind of university degree![1] (Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015).

The contribution of the private sector in meeting the higher education demand increased three folds but is still modest. The newly registered students in the private sector increased from 11,000 to 37,000 between 2000 and 2013 (Fig. 4).

In addition, the private sector is still weak and is struggling to be recognized with the same rights and duties as public universities (Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015; Belfqih, 2000). In fact, public universities and government agencies still do not recognize diplomas delivered by private higher education universities as equivalent to public university-delivered degrees. In addition, striking quality and standard differences exist among public and private higher education institutions.

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[1] Data of Ministère de l'Education Nationale, and of Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique, processed by l'Instance Nationale d'Evaluation, 2015.
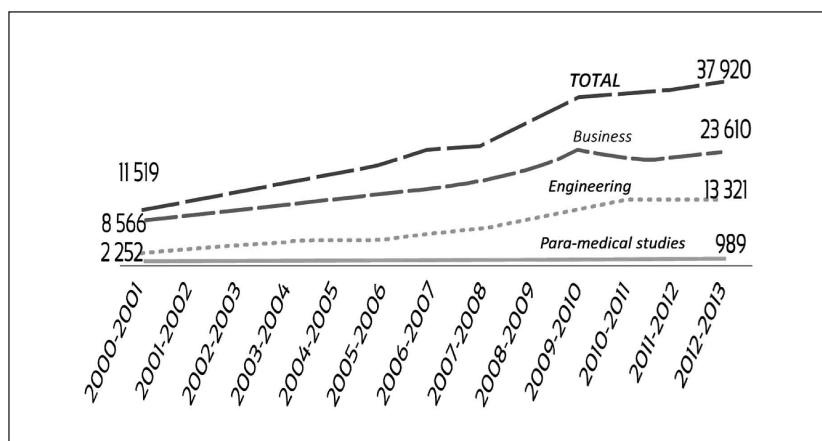
**Fig. 4. Evolution of student enrollments in private higher education institutions by field of study.**

Source: Ministère de l'Education Nationale and Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015.

The fast growing demand for university seats is a continuous burden for the national budget. In fact, during the last 15 years, the total budget allocated to the education sector represented more than one third (30-36%) of the entire national budget (Fig. 5)[2] (Chedati, 2009).
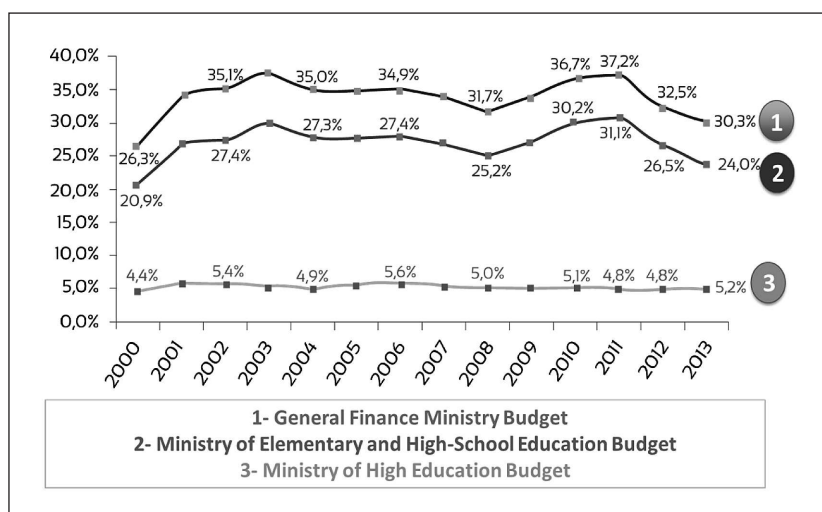


**Fig. 5. Respective budget portions in the general budget of national education and higher education.**

Source: Belfqih M., 2000 and Chedati, 2009.

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[2] Data of The Law of Finances, General Budget and Budgets of the Ministère de l'Education Nationale and of Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique.

This indicates that the education sector has high priority and is politically sensitive, as to continue attracting large governmental financial efforts.

## IV – Politics and the conflicting interests of stakeholders

Universities are considered the main social ladder by large segments of the population. Universities have always been a major fighting arena among political parties on one hand and between these political forces and government on the other. Political, ideological, religious and ethnic conflicts were created and exacerbated to mobilize youth and professors towards supporting certain political agendas. This resulted in many decisions that handicapped the future of higher education. One of the decisions, made by the Independence conservative party, in control of the Education Ministry, was to move from the Arabic-French bilingual elementary-high school education to the single Arabic system. The experience was a complete failure. An international survey showed that 60% of Moroccan students did not reach the minimum required levels in sciences and mathematics compared to 32% Tunisian and 3% Singaporean students (Fig. 6) (Mullis *et al.*, 2012a, b).
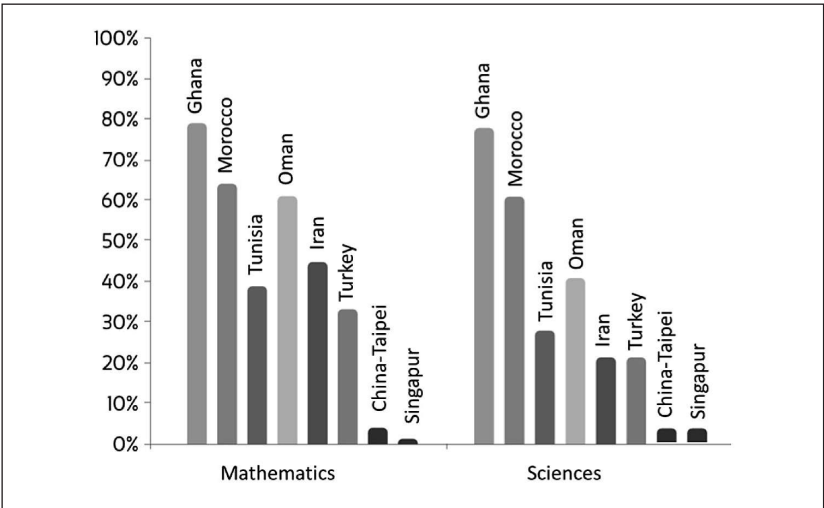


**Fig. 6. Proportion of pupils who reached the lower level of competences in 2011 by country.**

Source: Mullis *et al.* (2012a, b).

The quality collapse of the elementary-high school education system is a reality and one of the biggest challenges towards the improvement of the Moroccan higher education system.

University students, freshly coming from high schools where they were taught mainly in Arabic, enrolled in engineering, architecture, biology, physics, medicine, or technical universities have difficulties in adjusting overnight to curricula now taught in the French language (it is as if they are changing countries without any special language preparation). On the other hand, students joining Arabic-speaking universities (liberal arts, law and social sciences, etc.) have no language difficulty but face old-fashion pedagogy methods and lack international references (they use mainly Arabic oriented journals, books and supporting materials).

For all the students, the impact goes beyond the language itself and impairs students' capacity for critical thinking and their "cultural fabric": After the independence the Moroccan entire educational system was bilingual (Arabic and French). Overtime, students that where taught in both Arabic and French moved to the use of a single Arabic language. Consequently, students' culture changed from international, open cultural-dimensions to a single more conservative "oriental-middle east" state of mind. In fact, the introduction of a single Arabic language in elementary and high school education system created new generations of students, who were not able to read, understand and access to international literature and culture (use of only Arabic references, books, journals, TV programs, Media, etc.). In spite of all this, another unexpected decision was implemented by the introduction of the Berber language in schools. This was more symbolic, but generated more uncertainty and created another source of confusion.

## V – Student and faculty resistance

The degradation of the Moroccan educational system has become a key national issue and a large mobilization, of various forces across political spectrum, was initiated to address this strategic issue. It was decided to introduce an important reform in 2000; the LMD Bologna principles were presented and implemented.

The reform introduced the choice of university presidents and deans via a competitive process instead of the old bureaucratic appointment. On the negative side, most of the selected university presidents, deans and department heads came from academia and had little or no adapted management skills. In addition, faculty support is lacking and for university managers, dealing with "problem faculty" is one of their main concerns. It is striking to notice that a recent survey of 3000 American academic department heads revealed the same findings: that "dealing with problem faculty" was their top concern (Crookston, 2012). It is striking to observe that resistances to changes within universities are as important as the resistances of universities' social-economic environments.

The reform also introduced the review and evaluation of faculty performance and the need for regular curricula changes and program accreditation. Fifteen years later, no systematic review and no faculty evaluations have been carried out, due to faculty resistance and bureaucratic constraints. An update was proposed to the Law 00-01. The first draft of the new reform was rejected, because it was problematic and created polemic religious-political-language concerns, far from student and parental needs. A new proposed reform by the National Evaluation Council is suggesting more modern-progressive innovations and is recommending the need to re-introduce the Arabic-French bilingual system in elementary-high schools, as well as other languages at later stages (English, German, Spanish…) (Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015 ; Belfqih, 2000). On the students' side, the conservative wave is still dominating their agenda. Cultural-political-religious issues outside education attract their attention and create side conflicts that complicate university administrators' job, and distract the whole university system from addressing key education and globalization issues.

## VI – Linking to policy-makers and professional partners

There is a large communication gap between professionals and policy-makers on one-side and university professors on the other side. Professional partners complain about the poor qualification of the university graduates. Moroccan business associations repeatedly declare that their needs are not met and most of the graduated students, mainly from the public Open University system, are considered not directly operational and are lacking professional job soft skills. Inadequate curricula and rare interactions with the private sector during student training results in weak acquisition of key job skills. Many surveys showed that professionals are requesting more adapted training and stronger soft job skills (communication, team work, creativity, critical thinking).

Moroccan professionals complain that hired university graduates are not efficient and are lacking needed ready-to-use soft skills (communication skills, competences for teamwork, writing skills, leadership). Similar criticisms and findings are reported worldwide (P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning ; Cyber Summit, 2010; World Bank, 2006).

In contrast to the Open University system, many engineering and management institutes are able to develop links with the private and public sectors and produce a more acceptable and resourceful workforce. These schools are very attractive: For instance, IAV Hassan II receives more than 13,000 applications/year from high school students for 450 available seats (Institut Agronomique et Vétérinaire Hassan II, 2015). More than 95% of graduated students from engineering, business and medical institutes are hired quickly and they get their first job within one year. Again, there are large differences among schools and science fields: agriculture, civil engineering, and management are better off compared to other fields, and their graduates insertion in the job market is more successful.

The capacity of the government and its social partners to mobilize jointly and rapidly in addressing these educational structure matters is vital. Any delay will further weaken universities and drastically limit the economic-social development of the entire country, as the education system provides the needed qualified workforces for all the economic sectors. A successful higher education system needs to be built on three main pillars and adopt an optimum mix of key ingredients and drivers; such mix is derived from errors and wisdom (Fig. 7).
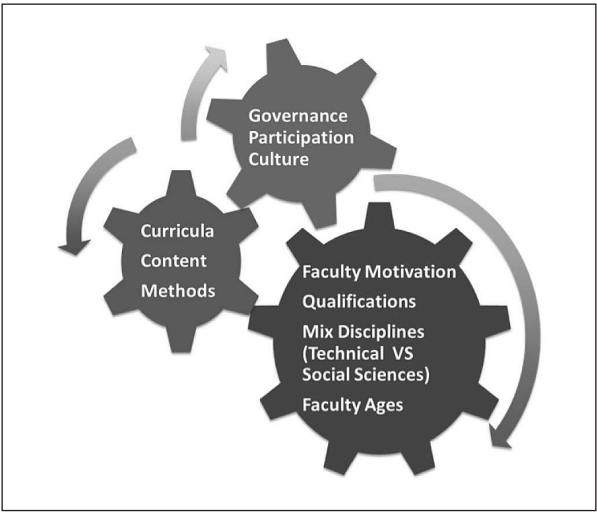


**Fig. 7. Three pillars for building a future efficient Training-Research-Innovation system.**

Source: Authors elaboration.

# VII – Reducing the cultural-dialogue gap

The majority of policy-makers still regard universities as risky institutions producing useless theories and believe that local university faculty members are a constellation of intellectuals disconnected from the real word. On the other hand, university faculty members regard policy-makers as a cluster of incompetent and bureaucratic groups unable to grasp high-technology sciences

and the need for changes caused by globalization. The two groups are relaxing in their comfort zones and nurturing their Zen-attitudes. As long as this endless "deaf dialogue" is not over, the reform of the university system will continue to crawl, hindered by this cultural dimension.

## VIII – Conclusion

As in many emerging countries, the degradation of the Moroccan educational system has become a key national issue and a large mobilization of various forces across the political spectrum is needed to address the following key challenging education issues.

The education system is facing a rapid growing population demand. The number of registered students in the public higher education system increased drastically from 306,000 in 2010 to 471,000 in 2013 and reached 615,000 in 2015 in the Open University system. These trends will continue in the coming years and the education system is using more than one third of available national financial-budget resources.

In spite of this high public financial spending, it should be stressed that the entire education system is lacking equity and efficiency since only 19% of high school graduates find their way to university higher education. Financial constraints and social family traditions are limiting the access for poor segments of the population that have no means to send their kids to cities for advanced education training.

We also showed that the high education system is a dual and unbalanced system. It includes (i) an inefficient Open University system that enrols 89% of students; (ii) a more efficient competitive system that includes engineering and business institutes (5%); and (iii) the third component is represented by a new weak private system struggling to make its way (6%).

We indicated also that political, ideological, religious and ethnic conflicts were created and exacerbated to mobilize youth and professors towards supporting certain political agendas. This resulted in many decisions in the 80s', that handicapped the future of the high education system. One of the decisions made was to move from the Arabic-French bilingual education system after the Moroccan independence to the single Arabic system. The experience was a complete failure and the new reform will restore the international bilingual education system.

In addition, meeting the market needs is still a key challenge. Moroccan professionals complain that hired university graduates are not operational and are lacking needed ready-to-use soft skills (communication skills, competences for teamwork, writing skills, leadership). Adapting training and linking university with the business community and the job market are critical for the university survival.

The capacity of the government and its social partners to mobilize jointly and rapidly in addressing these educational key structural issues is vital. Any delay will further weaken universities and drastically limit the economic-social development of the entire country, as the education system provides not only the needed qualified workforces but also more open-tolerant-human-caring citizens.

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