

Transnational Education in Morocco: Current and Future Challenges

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Abstract

Transnational education (TNE) is becoming a phenomenon in the world of education in many countries. Morocco is included. The flourishing and spreading of many foreign educational institutions, products, and activities is becoming noticeable. As an Islamic nation, Morocco has long maintained its business and educational ties with different foreign nations. It has also maintained its traditional means of education alongside the adapted European style of education which spread all over the country following its independence. Given that reality, this paper will seek answers to the following concerns:

- To what extent does transnational education have an impact on local and national culture, identity and gender issues?
- Are there inherent tensions between the external providers and the local cultural setting, and the conservative and liberal political parties?
- What would be the future of TNE and educational design in Morocco?

In addition to the above concerns, the issue of external vs. local educational products is an extremely complex issue that is worth investigating.

Keywords: Transnational Education (TNE), Target Language (TL), Intercultural Competence (ICC), Cross-cultural Competence (CCC), Education Reform Policy in Morocco, Education in Morocco

Introduction

This paper is about transnational education and its implications in Morocco. However, it will not concentrate on a number of practical aspects related to transnational education, nor will it dwell on the technical parts of its application and provision. The main issues addressed in this context shall include, to an extent, the motivations and drivers supporting transnational education engagement at different levels (socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious); strategic approaches to transnational education with the different modes of delivery (including distance and on-line education), and Moroccan's favorite external providers. There will also be reference to the existing issues and obstacles related to international partnerships for delivery in Morocco; and whether Morocco will be able to export, or at least liaise transnational education providers and partners, to the rest of the African countries.

General Background

Morocco (the full Arabic name, al-Mamlaka al-Mağribiyya, translated as "*The Western Kingdom*"), which had been under the French Protectorate since 1912, gained its independence in 1956. Long before that, Morocco had been a Royal Monarchy for more than 1200 years. Unlike other countries, the Royal Monarchy in Morocco is constitutional and the King shares political power with the elected parliament which represents the people. Moreover, the King is referred to as '*Ameer Al Mu'minin*' (meaning *Commander of the Faithful*). Laila Beghi (2011) states that, "The Moroccan Monarch is invested with the power of the divine will in his capacity as the Commander of the Faithful. He maintains both a temporal and a religious status as the political leader of a community of believers."

In addition, the total population of Morocco consists of different ethnic groups. Most Moroccans are Sunni Muslims, mainly of Arab-Berber, Arabized Berber or Berber stock. Morocco was inhabited by Berbers at least 5,000 years ago. According to different historical sources, Morocco's Jewish minority has decreased significantly and today numbers about 5,000. Most of the 100,000 foreign residents are French or Spanish. According to CIA, The World Fact Book, Morocco, the total population is 32,309,239 (July 2012 est.) and the ethnic distribution is as follows:

- 1 Muslim 98.7%,
- 2 Christian 1.1%,
- 3 Jewish 0.2%.

It is important to note that Morocco is well known for its linguistic and cultural richness and diversity. Though Classical (or Standard) Arabic is Morocco's official language (it is the "classical" Arabic of the Holy Qur'an, widely used in literature and news media), the country has a distinctive dialect of Arabic known

as Moroccan Arabic or '*Darija*' (which is L1 for those who are not Berber speakers). Besides Arabic, French is widely used as L2 (second language), and the Berber in its divers varieties such as *Tashlhit*, *Tamazight*, *Zayaniyah*, and *Tarifit*, is used by non-Arab of Berber origins. For further information regarding the distribution of those varieties, Benahnia (2006).

Since 1956, the Government of Morocco has embarked on implementing political and educational comprehensive reforms, as well as the creation of technical vocational training. The introduction of modern schools, based on the French system, was a true revolution and challenge to the long existing Qur'anic Schools. It is worth mentioning here that Morocco holds the oldest continuously operating university in the world 'The Qaraouine University' in the famous city known as Fes, which was established in 859, and founded by a woman called 'Fatimah Al Fihriyah'.

Even though Morocco was facing tremendous economic challenges and difficulties in the 1990s and early 2000, the government continued concerted efforts to improve overall educational landscape. Thus, many new universities and higher educational institutions were established. The number of students has been rising since its year of independence. Moreover, as mentioned in *Researching Virtual Initiatives in Education* website, the gross enrollment rates have been rising steadily for all levels of education since the early 2000s. Completion rates at the primary level have increased from 57.8 in 2004 to 61.7 percent in 2006. According to the above mentioned source, in 2006 the expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was 5.5 percent higher than the education expenditure as a percent of GDP for Arab countries such as Oman, Kuwait and Egypt (ibid).

Despite the above mentioned efforts to improve education, Morocco is ranked 130th in the Human Development Index (HDI). It had adult literacy rate of 52 percent in 2004. Although education completion and enrollment rates have improved, the possibility of achieving the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) for Morocco is uncertain.

Political Background

As far as politics is concerned, Morocco is often regarded as a stable country which plays a fundamental role in the Arab World as well as the international community. Being at the gate of Europe, it is a crucial neighbor of the Mediterranean area as well as the European Union (EU). Morocco started political and economic reforms way before the Arab Spring Movement i.e., when the King Mohammed VI reined Morocco in 1998. The country's income relies basically on agricultural products export, mineral resources such as phosphate, as well as tourism. Famous cities such as Rabat, Fez, Marrakesh, Tangier, Ouarzazate, Agadir, Ifran, and Casablanca are still the preferred destinations for many foreign tourists all year long.

As a free democratic and parliamentary monarchy, Morocco is an independent country with free elections that include around thirty-five (35) different political parties. These parties consist of liberal; socialist (left wing); conservative (right wing); and religious (Islamist) trends. The largest traditional party is the 'Istiqlal' (Independence) Party, whose leader after its formation in 1943 was Alal al-Fasi. However, the current PJD party ('Al Adala Wa Attanmiyah') formed 1998 and lead by Mr. Abdelilah BenKiran since 2008 (Prime Minister of Morocco since 2011) has won the large portion of votes during the 2011 elections. It is also supported by a large segment of the Moroccan society. Mr. Abdelilah BenKiran and his team have so far proven to be eager to lead Morocco to a new era of substantial change based on the guidelines and directives of the newly updated constitution, and His Majesty King Mohammed VI, and the high expectations of the Moroccan new generation. Furthermore, unlike many of the Arab countries, Morocco is constantly relying on the fundamental positive contribution of Moroccan women in various sectors, and mainly in healthcare and education.

The Education Management System in Morocco in brief:

Since its independence, Morocco has concentrated on three tracks for its system of education. This system offers the following venues:

- 1) The Modern track, which is the continuation of the French system (using both Arabic and French as a medium of instruction).
- 2) Original track, which focuses on Qura'nic teachings (using Arabic as a medium of instruction and the Holy book of Qur'an as a main reference for all studies).
- 3) The technical track, leading towards preparing a skilled workforce.

It was not until 1963 that education was made compulsory for all Moroccan children between the ages of 6 and 13. The means of instruction was French and Arabic during primary schooling. During this time, all subjects were Arabized (using Arabic as means of instruction instead of French) in the first and second grades, while French was maintained as the language of instruction for scientific subjects such as math and science in both primary and secondary levels (for more details see, Benahnia, 1996). Due to the demographic rise and the willingness of Moroccans to let their kids join the modern schools, as well as the rising demand for secondary education in 1970s, Morocco imported French speaking teachers from countries such as France, Romania, and Bulgaria to teach math and sciences. Arabic teachers were brought from Egypt and other countries to teach

humanities and social studies. The effort of Arabization was successful to a great extent, and by 1989, all subjects across all grades in both primary and secondary education were Arabized. However, French was maintained as the medium of instruction for scientific subjects in technical and professional secondary schools, technical institutes and universities.

The government has made several reforms to improve the access of education and reduce regional differences in the provision of education. The King announced the period between 1999–2009 years as the “Education Decade.” During this time the government’s reform initiative focused on five main themes to facilitate the role of knowledge in economic development; the key themes were education, governance, private sector development, e-commerce and access. Also with the help of the World Bank and other multilateral agencies, Morocco has succeeded in improving the basic education system.

The Role Of Tertiary Education In Morocco:

Since 1956, Morocco's major goal has been establishing strong educational institutions that would not only spread knowledge, but also inspire the fast growing young population and empower them with knowledge and get them ready for the labor market. In this regard, Morocco established fourteen large public universities throughout major cities. These included Al-Qaraouine University in Fes, Ibn Youssef University (this university no longer exists and the author is a member of an association of Moroccan intellectuals working on its revival), as well as Al Qadi Ayad University in Marrakesh, and Mohammed V University in Rabat. There are no tuition fees to enroll in these universities (except for Al-Qaraouine University since it is semi-private). In addition, students whose family has low income are entitled to a scholarship.

Hence, the higher education system consists of two types of institutes: private and public. In addition to the above mentioned universities, there is a number of private universities and higher institutions. However, and due to the labor market demand, Morocco's educational objectives are geared now towards preparing graduates for business, management, and technological labor opportunities. Some of these institutions are using educational products from western providers. The total number of graduates at the tertiary level in 2007, according to *World Bank 2009.Edstats*, were 88,137. The gross enrollment rate at the tertiary level is 11 percent and it has not fluctuated significantly for the past few years. Admission to public universities requires only the Baccalauréat degree (high school degree), whereas admission to other higher public education, such as engineering schools, and the colleges of medicine and pharmacy require competitive special tests called 'concours d'entrée' (entrance exams) and special training before the exams.

Apart from engineering and medicine there is another growing field and that is business management. According to reports by the Ministry of Education the enrollment in Business Management increased by 3.1 percent in the year 2003-04 when compared to the preceding year 2002-2003. Generally, an undergraduate business degree requires four years and an average of two years for Master’s degree (mentioned in Driouchi 2006 and cited in *World Bank 2009.Edstats*).

The integration and implementation of foreign educational curricula via western providers significantly increased the need for information and communication technology. A number of universities have started providing imported educational products. Therefore, software and hardware engineering business witnessed a steady demand, and annually the academic sector in the field of information and communication technologies produces about 2,000 graduates every year.

Another aspect of TNE can be seen through the Moroccan institutions' establishment of partnerships with Canadian and European institutes located in those countries. The agreement aims at offering joint degree programs in various fields from well-known universities.

During a meeting with His Excellency the Minister of Higher Education Dr. Lahcen Daoudi in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (2012), he assured us that Morocco is working on building five new private universities sponsored by foreign countries such as Korea, Saudi Arabia, Russia, France, and probably others. This will definitely expand the phenomenon of TNE in Morocco. The 9th of November 2012, witnessed the King's inauguration of a new private university called 'Mohammed VI Polytechnic University' that will be built in a new city called 'The Green City' in Ben Guerir (close to Marrakesh and will be ready to host over 90000 people). This university will have partnership with the French Institute known as HEC, the American institute MIT, and others.

The Main Reform Efforts in the Education Sector:

1. Old regime

Since the independence days, Morocco's main concern has always been developing a better educational system and equip the nation with knowledge and craftsmanship necessary for the labor market and economy. Many nationwide reforms have taken place after long debates at all government levels. Some of those reforms were, to an extent, influenced by the political ruling parties. One of the major reforms took place right after Morocco got its independence in 1956. The Royal Commission for Education Reform, as stated in Samanta Jay website (2008), was the country's main concern because "it laid down the basic principals of post-independence

Moroccan education. Developed during fifty years of colonial rule, the French educational model was adopted by the newly independent Moroccan state ..."(p.1). Let's not forget to mention here that this era witnessed the establishment of the Ministry of Education which became responsible for training a native teaching corps to replace foreign teachers, build new schools and implement governmental education reforms (ibid., p.1). According to Samanta Jay, the 1990s can be considered as a defy to Morocco because although the country was suffering from severe drought, it was still able to successfully and significantly lift the level of literacy:

"Later, Morocco faced a period of economic stagnation in the late 1990s due to extreme drought which placed a strain on its predominantly agricultural economy. Despite the economic difficulties during this period, Morocco achieved remarkable progress not only in building remarkable Morocco property, but also in developing its education system.

Enrolment in primary school increased from 52 percent to 92 percent, in the middle school level from 18 percent to 32 percent, and in secondary education from 6 percent to 15 percent during 1990-2004 years." (ibid. p.1)

The most recent reforms concentrate on a more comprehensive renovation of the education and training system along with a great national desire to tackle the issue of illiteracy. Hence, new training and educational programs were developed in a participatory manner based on the vision for long-term expansion of this sector in response to the country's fast growing population, its social and economic development requirements, and the labor market satisfaction and challenges.

2. Transnational Education (TNE)

According to Lee Harvey (2004), the core definition of Transnational education is as follows: "Transnational education is higher education provision that is available in more than one country." He also advocates that Transnational education is associated with but not identical to *internationalization*. In addition, Transnational education is a more general term than *off-shore provision*. Lee Harvey further states that: "Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE, 1997) defined transnational education as an export product: "Transnational Education denotes any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be crossed by information about the education, and by staff and/or educational materials." (GATE, 1997, p. 1. Cited in Lee Harvey p.1)

For further clarification, we state the simple definition advocated by British Council (undated) which states that: "Transnational education (TNE), in brief, means delivering education where the learners are located in a different country from the one where the awarding institution is based." (British Council).

It seems like the movement of widely accepting external educational products from foreign providers in Morocco is hence at the slow pace. This is perhaps due to several factors and one of them is the government's concentration on national education improvement.

Therefore, improving the quality of the outcome in the whole educational sector has become a key priority the Morocco's elected government. To overcome the challenges faced by the sector of education, the Government embarked on a more comprehensive reform of the education and training system since early 1980s. The newly advocated National Education and Training Charter (CNEF) of 1999, for example, was considered as a great move. The CNEF with strong national consensus, declared 2000-2009 the decade for education and training, and established education and training as a priority of the whole nation, besides territorial integrity. The reform program, as laid out by the CNEF received not only strong support from the government itself, but also from the donor community. However, implementation of the reform program encountered delays.

Furthermore, Morocco, as well as other North African countries, seems to be nowadays fully committed to eradicating illiteracy. The country has established even radio programs since early independence to reach remote regions, as well as many other governmental moves (including civil association) to reduce the illiteracy rate throughout the country. Morocco, for example, officially adopted its National Literacy and Non-formal Education Strategy in 2004. An integrated vision of literacy, development and poverty reduction was promoted by National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), launched by the King Mohammed VI in May 2005 (ibid). Yet, according to the latest reports by the World Bank, the illiteracy rate in Morocco is still high. i.e., over 40% and according to CIA, *The Worldfact Book*, the percentage of Moroccan aged ten and above who can read/write is 61.55% (2007).

One of the aspects of Transnational Education in Morocco is manifested through the international donors such as USAID and UNICEF. Their efforts in implementing various programs to improve the quality of education at the basic level, as well as reducing the illiteracy rate across the country, and providing training to teachers is quite noticeable. One of the significant donors as well (mentioned above) is The World Bank which also provides assistance in infrastructural upgrades at all levels of education and offers skill development training in all public sectors, and integrated employment creation strategies to various stakeholders at the request of the Government's highest authorities, a bold Education Emergency Plan (EEP) was drawn up to catch up on

this reform process (USAID2004.*Strengthening Education in the Muslim World: Country Profile and Analysis*.pp18, cited in Wikipedia).. The EEP, spanning the period 2009-12, draws on the lessons learned during the last decade. In this context, the Government requested five major donors (European Union (EU), European Investment Bank (EIB), Agence Française de Développement (AFD), African Development Bank (AFDB) and the World Bank) to assist in the implementation of the EEP reform agenda (Ministry of Education official site: *Report on the GENIE program*, in Arabic). Further more, it seems like TNE is becoming an inevitable reality in Morocco, however it may be faced with many challenges as well.

Main Challenges in the Education Sector:

a)– The impact of Transnational Education on local and national culture: identity and gender issues.

It seems that a great deal of human relationships is based on cultural ties and cross-cultural understanding. Being aware of these complicated processes within which we all act as individuals and as groups, is a civilized intuition which leads to better survival within our communities. Therefore, cultural awareness imposes itself as one of the pillars to our existence as social beings. The willingness to accept intellectual products, coming from other nations or abroad requires a well-defined and broadened platform. One of the key elements is the curriculum via which illustrations show the benefits of being aware of the learner's own linguistic and cultural background. Research has shown that students who are aware of their own culture tend to do better in their overall output in the target language and focus more on the importance of *Cross-cultural Competence (CCC)* among EFL learners, for example. This is essential, given the nature of language learning in itself, which has the chief aim of communicating with other cultures (for a broader sense of this issue, see Benahnia (1992)). Yet, it seems vital that an agreement among educators should be reached that 'culture' should be an essential part apparent across curriculum. Culture, which is often overlooked in our studies and classrooms, has many definitions. However, they all show simplicity, as well as complexity of its integration in education.

One of the common definitions is the one by Chamberlain (2005). He advocates that:

"Culture represents the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world" (p197). In other words, culture is more ancient than civilization, i.e., culture began when language began, and this could have been more than a million years ago; whereas civilization began when agriculture began, probably not more than a few thousand years ago. The opposite of culture then is death and "annihilation"; whereas the opposite of civilization is "... savagery" (cited in Lafayette, 1976, p22).

Chamberlain's understanding of the meaning of culture is linked to civilization. This latter implies that we, 'civilized' human beings', tend to exchange tools and knowledge for survival, as well as goals and objectives. Transnational Education's engagement is one of the manifestations and results of true cross-cultural understanding among nations. Therefore, accepting educational products from abroad should be embraced as long as it will enrich the local system and never intend to abolish the local existing values and principles.

As far as identity is concerned, it does also have different meanings (see for example, Benahnia 2012). One aspect of identity is what probably ties a person to his or her community or nation. In other words, the notion of identity becomes broader once it is associated with one's tribe, nationality, or country. Language teachers, for example, are often exposed to issues related to identity, especially when it comes to academic writing. During the early stages of EFL learning, you might notice the over-use of the pronoun "I" in the writing of your students. Literature in this regard shows that this phenomenon of the over-use of the pronoun "I" is much more apparent in some nations more than others, and it is more common among male learners than female, i.e., nations that are male dominated such as some countries of the Middle East (see John & Tang, 2009, for example). Moreover, we must note that identity formation is a complex process by itself, especially in target language (TL) learning situations as it is explained by Norton (1997): "In the case of L2 learning, the identity process can be complicated by the facts that learners are under the influence of two cultural systems whose values can be extremely different from each other. In addition, the construction of identity cannot be separated from identity negotiation in which an individual seeks the answer to the question, 'who am I' and for his/her relationship to the world" (cited in Lin, 2009, p44).

Intercultural Competence (ICC) as a Component of TNE:

The concept of accepting educational products from foreign providers, let alone engaging in a partnership with foreign universities and higher institutions is a big challenge in itself. However, it is very evident that the idea of TNE is somehow tithed up to the notion of globalization. This latter implies that a ground for a more universal understanding among people as well as nations has to be initially set. If a nation is willing to be part of this 'Global Village' to which we all belong nowadays, then it will become a need to educate its individuals and build up their intercultural competence.

Intercultural Competence (ICC), often also referred to as Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC), is

becoming a vital tool for cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Therefore, the notion of university studies is no more a local or national thing, but a more global and cross-borders thing. This implies that the world is now sharing not only new knowledge and information, but also new methods of teaching and learning. The new role of universities is well explained by Sherri Williams (2008):

"Today...internationalization of the university means far more than inter-personal or even inter-institutional cooperation across borders. It is a necessary, vital, and deliberate transformation of how we teach and learn and it is essential... to the future of Canada. In a world characterized by challenges and opportunities of global proportions, universities are key agents of change." (The University of British Columbia, 2006, p. 2).

b) - Are there inherent tensions between the provider and the local cultural setting and conservative and liberal political parties?

I believe that Morocco is a unique country when it comes to being open to other cultures, and to dealing with foreign educational products. Though there has always been a sort of bridging between the nation's identity, principles, and its main goals and objectives, religious and philosophical approaches towards foreign educational issues and products seem distinct.

As mentioned before, Morocco is a country where more than thirty different political parties compete in a more civilized sense in order to break down major economic obstacles. Each political party believes in its agenda and its method of fixing the exiting economic and social situation. It is worth mentioning here that the conservative parties (such as the 'Istiqlal' and the 'Al Adala Wa Attanmiyah') will remain in defense of the legitimacy in maintaining and preserving the Moroccan religious, social, and cultural principles deeply rooted in history. At the same time, they seem open in letting other foreign educational products shared and to co-exist with local inherited modern system as long as these products do not alter nor interfere with the local objectives, principles, and most of all, the Moroccan unity and identity.

Conclusion

Available data and research studies exemplify that if a nation is not open to other cultures, or if it is unwilling to recognize other ways of social life and remains in splendid isolation, it would be starved of knowledge. Social values and respecting cultural tradition should not seek ambiguity with cocooned concepts in restricting communication with its neighboring countries. If openness is considered as a taboo then that nation would remain undeveloped in its political, economic, scientific and technological standards. Therefore religious or cultural resistance should not become deterrent towards Transnational Education engagements else it would plunge a nation's social structure into the darkness of ignorance and the public would remain stigmatized. Morocco is indeed trying to stride with other nations and is showing its willingness to develop by sharing and promoting knowledge locally and elsewhere. It still seems that integration of foreign educational plans and procedures designed by foreign providers are moving erratically due to known barriers of religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and social colors. Although Morocco is pushing educational partnership issue with foreign universities and higher education institutions quite hard, this spirit will remain under the conservative, Islamist, political and religious visions and concepts for the sake of the nation's principles, unity, integrity, identity, and pride. Such reality issues behind a progressing nation somehow seem to remain bound to the great surging waves of national patriotism and unity for preserving traditional values. Consequently, the new foreign based educational procedures, technical programs and induction of beneficial partnerships in Morocco may not go into jeopardy; and the nation, under the directives of its beloved King, seems to proceed in the search for the development of its education system for the best of its people.

Recommendations

The above facts signify that the key element of success of the political parties in Morocco, as well as the civic associations, is preservation and safeguarding the nation's religious, cultural, linguistic, identity and monarchy. Foreign educational sources should be intelligently harnessed with cooperation and implored to tailor their programs to suit nation's principles, objectives and goals, and also accommodate the psyche of the traditional learner in the country. It is also an important reality that the idea behind TNE by some Western providers (who are eager to just make quick huge profit by taking advantage of developing countries) is making few educational custodians and policy makers suspicious and repulsive. However, the advantage of inducting new positive ideas, global understanding, intercultural awareness is embarrassing to many Sheikhs (religious scholars) who tend to pose deaf to the voices of those who are eager to cooperate for intercultural coexistence with people of other nations while holding tight to their values, principles, and deeply rooted identity.

Further suggested research may explore the actual educational outcomes of TNE in developing countries. Also, the impact of TNE on local indigenous culture and local linguistic heritage in the Moroccan society.

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