(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Higher education reform in Morocco: Challenges, insights, and global perspectives

Sarah Houssami *

Department of English Studies, School of Arts and Humanities, Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco.

Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and challenges of higher education, with a particular focus on Morocco. Beginning with a historical overview, it traces the development of the modern university and its mission as defined by key figures such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Henry Newman. The paper examines how these ideas have shaped global higher education systems, including the Moroccan context. It highlights the persistent challenges in Moroccan higher education, such as outdated curricula, ineffective reforms, and the widening gap between graduates' skills and job market demands. Despite various reform efforts, including the adoption of the LMD ('Licence-Master-Doctorat') system, the paper argues that these initiatives have not fully addressed the structural deficiencies and have struggled to keep pace with globalization and labor market changes. Additionally, the paper discusses the tension between public and private higher education models, the issue of brain drain, and the growing importance of English as a global lingua franca in Moroccan universities. By drawing on both Moroccan and international examples, this study highlights the need for continuous, adaptive reforms that emphasize interdisciplinary learning, practical training, and stronger public-private partnerships. Ultimately, the paper calls for a holistic approach to reforming higher education in Morocco to ensure it serves as a public good and remains relevant in the global economy.

Keywords: Higher education; Educational reforms; Moroccan universities; Public-private divide; Brain drain

1. Introduction

Globalization and technological advancements have transformed job markets, requiring graduates to possess skills that traditional higher education systems may not prioritize. Universities worldwide, including in Morocco, are adapting to these pressures by reassessing curricula, teaching methods, and overall institutional goals.

Moroccan universities, influenced by both French and Arab traditions, has historically emphasized theoretical learning and humanities over more practical, skills-based training. This legacy often results in curricula that may not fully align with the demands of a globalized workforce, where skills like problem-solving, digital literacy, and adaptability are increasingly valued. Employers in various sectors now expect graduates to bring hands-on experience and a readiness to navigate modern, often tech-driven, work environments, which has highlighted a skills gap among Moroccan graduates.

To address these challenges, the Moroccan government and educational institutions have embarked on reforms aimed at modernizing university programs. These reforms often focus on revising curricula to include more practical and professional training, introducing new teaching technologies, and establishing stronger partnerships with industry to help students gain real-world experience before graduation. However, balancing this need for modernization with the desire to preserve Morocco's educational heritage presents an ongoing challenge.

* Corresponding author: Sarah Houssami

2. Definitions, Mission of Higher Education and Function of the University

According to Anderson (2009), the phrase "idea of the university" was first coined by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who founded the Humboldtian university in 1810. This model, which emphasized the union of teaching and research, became influential throughout Europe, with German universities being considered the best in the world by 1914. The Humboldtian principle was rooted in advancing knowledge through original and critical investigation, rather than merely transmitting past legacies or teaching skills.

John Henry Newman, a college tutor at Oxford, later expanded on this idea in a series of lectures at Dublin in the 1850s, which he titled "The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated." Newman argued that different personal gifts were required for teaching and research, with the latter best conducted outside the university. He famously defined the university as "a place of teaching universal knowledge," emphasizing that specialized training should be secondary to the broader pursuit of a liberal education (Anderson, 2009).

In 1963, the Robbins report introduced a uniquely English concept of the university, using Oxbridge as its model. The Robbins principle was that university places should be available to individuals who are qualified by ability and attainment. The report identified four essential objectives for a balanced higher education system:

- Instruction in skills (a utilitarian objective).
- The promotion of general mental faculties to produce well-rounded individuals.
- The union of teaching with the advancement of learning and the search for truth.
- The transmission of common culture and standards of citizenship.

3. Higher Education in Morocco

According to Ouakrime (1996), the university serves as an institution dedicated to educating generations of students. At the university level, students are expected to acquire both factual and experiential knowledge, develop a range of skills (including informational, cognitive, practical, and social skills), and adopt new personal qualities, attitudes, and values, such as open-mindedness, imagination, and creativity. To improve higher education, Ouakrime (1996) emphasizes the need for several key changes:

- **Redefining the Purposes of Higher Education:** It is essential to address fundamental questions: Why do we need higher education? What are its aims?
- **Methodology for Enhancing Higher Education:** How can we effectively teach? What practices might better meet students' needs?
- **Relevant and Stimulating Course Content:** What should be taught? Which courses will help students develop critical thinking skills?
- **Flexible and Formative Assessment Systems:** How should we assess students? Would a formative assessment approach be more effective?
- **Action-Oriented Research:** It is crucial to identify relevant questions and seek answers through research to improve higher education.

Historically, higher education in Morocco can be traced back to the establishment of Qarawyin University in Fez in the 9th century. After independence, Morocco adopted a higher education model similar to many African countries, initially replicating the French colonial system: utilizing French as the language of instruction and following the same curricula and assessment methods. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a shift towards Moroccanization and Arabization began, resulting in a bilingual system that incorporated both French and Arabic.

The primary mission assigned to Moroccan universities post-independence was to train professionals, such as teachers, engineers, and doctors, to replace departing French expatriates. By the end of the 1970s, a full Moroccanization of the academic staff had been achieved. However, graduates soon faced difficulties in securing employment, leading to a perception of universities as institutions merely designed to absorb an increasing number of secondary school graduates, often resulting in second-rate employment or unemployment (Ouakrime, 2003).

To address these challenges and expand access to higher education, Morocco implemented a universal policy of open access for students holding a baccalaureate degree in science or math. While faculties of law, economics, and humanities opened their doors to candidates without a baccalaureate, they required a special examination for admission. Due to

high demand, a selection process was introduced, which included minimum grade requirements in specific subjects or the necessity of obtaining a "new" baccalaureate in the application year.

In the past, Moroccan universities were categorized into three types: public institutions established shortly after independence, newer public institutions founded in the mid-1980s, and private non-profit schools (such as Al Akhawayn University, founded in 1993). Following the reform within the National Education Charter, three categories of universities emerged: public universities, private non-profit universities, and private profit-making universities. These reforms aimed to alleviate the burden on public universities while offering diverse learning and training opportunities.

4. Reform of Higher Education

4.1. Rationale for Reform

Reform is essential whenever a crisis occurs in higher education, as it contributes to the system's development. In Morocco, various factors have necessitated reform, including the obsolescence of the university's mission, as highlighted by Ouakrime (2003). The initial goal of replacing departing expatriates has become outdated. Additionally, there were significant inconsistencies in teaching methodologies, curricula, and assessment methods, which did not align with current educational needs and job market demands. The low employability rate among graduates further called for the urgent need for reform.

4.2. Historical Context of Reform Efforts

The first reform initiative in Morocco was launched in 1975, aiming to transition from a rigid, bureaucratic, and undemocratic colonial education system. This was followed by a second reform attempt in 1981, which sought to introduce changes to teaching programs and assessment systems. A third attempt in 1992 aimed at democratizing university governance. Between 1995 and 2001, additional reforms were proposed as part of the National Education Charter, with a focus on adapting to the changes brought about by globalization. This included establishing institutions that would combine teaching with practical training, implementing a system characterized by competitiveness, diversification, and regulation, and encouraging collaboration between the public and private sectors.

While reforms have brought improvements, the Moroccan university system still faces significant structural challenges. Effective governance and management remain critical for achieving reform objectives in Moroccan higher education. Recent studies emphasize that the absence of cohesive management controls hinders public universities from meeting strategic goals, emphasizing the need for comprehensive policy reforms (Mkharbcha & Taouab, 2023). Chiheb (2014) suggests that beyond merely diagnosing the crisis, the objective should be to contribute to developing proposed structural, educational, and ergonomic reforms without altering the existing architecture, particularly the LMD system, which consists of a B.A. degree, a Master's degree, and a doctorate degree. Initially introduced to promote student mobility, interdisciplinary connections, and general education, the LMD system has not sufficiently emphasized the professional dimension, leading to students remaining in a single discipline from their first year of undergraduate studies through to their final master's year without the opportunity for horizontal mobility.

5. English Language Teaching (ELT) in Morocco

5.1. History of English Language Teaching in Morocco

The University of Rabat was the first institution in Morocco to establish a department of English. This was followed by the opening of a second department in the Faculty of Arts in Fez. The English Department in Fez was set up in 1973 as part of the new annex to the Rabat Faculty (Ouakrime, 1985). Due to the increasing number of students enrolling in the department, the higher education system required decentralization. Consequently, in 1980, three new Faculties of Arts, each with its own Department of English, were opened in Oujda, Casablanca, and Marrakech, followed by another department established in Meknes a few years later.

5.2. Status of English in Morocco

Morocco's linguistic landscape is characterized by its historical multilingualism. In addition to the three dialects of the Amazigh language and Modern Standard Arabic, international languages like French, Spanish, and English are also widely used. While French and Spanish have colonial roots in Morocco, English does not carry the same historical burden. Moreover, Moroccans are increasingly recognizing the significance of English, as it has become the lingua franca

and a prestigious language with growing importance in various domains, including economics, politics, tourism, education, and employment (Buckner, 2011). The shift toward English as a medium of instruction has gained significant traction, especially among Moroccan science students who recognize English's role in global academia and employability. Recent findings indicate that language policies in higher education not only impact students' marketability but also influence their perspectives on academic and professional opportunities (Laaraj & El Kirat El Allame, 2024).

5.3. Specific Characteristics of English Departments

Several characteristics contribute to the uniqueness of English departments in Moroccan universities, as identified by Ouakrime (1985). These include the diverse composition of the teaching staff, which historically included members from various nationalities, resulting in a limited number of Moroccan professors. The rapidly increasing student population has also played a role. Additionally, professors enjoy significant academic freedom to determine course objectives, content, and methodologies. The nature of the foreign language as a medium of instruction promotes a relaxed classroom atmosphere, encouraging interaction among students and between students and professors.

6. Private vs. Public Higher Education

6.1. Higher Education in the United States of America

In the United States, public universities have historically relied on tax support, which has been in decline in recent years. Most public higher education institutions receive 80 to 90 percent of their funding from public sources, supplemented by modest gifts and grants. While these institutions are not at risk of becoming entirely private, the trend of decreased public funding has led to rising costs for students. Notably, private universities are not completely independent from state influence, as they benefit from tax exemptions and receive federal grants and contracts, constituting a direct taxpayer subsidy.

The debate surrounding public support for higher education often centers on the level of subsidy provided to individual institutions rather than outright withdrawal of support. This decline in taxpayer funding has resulted in increased net costs of higher education for students. Selective institutions, both public and private, often engage in negotiations with students to establish a "sticker price" or reference price, which is the listed cost of education. Through these negotiations, institutions and students agree on a private price that may vary from the public price based on individual circumstances.

6.2. Higher Education in the UK

Woodfield (2014) discusses several myths surrounding private higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. One common misconception is that there are few private providers in the UK. In reality, all higher education institutions are technically private, even though many receive government funding. Another myth is that private providers constitute a homogeneous group; however, Woodfield identifies six independent recognized bodies, four charities, and two for-profit companies within the sector. Furthermore, the perception that private higher education institutions provide poor-quality education may be prevalent in some countries but does not hold true in the UK. Lastly, the idea that the private and public sectors are entirely separate is misleading, as some governments in the UK maintain policy direction that does not isolate the independent sector.

6.3. Higher Education in India

India's higher education landscape is complex, as outlined by Powar (2015). Degree-awarding university institutions are classified into five categories:

- **Institutions of National Importance**: These are prestigious public institutions created by Acts of Parliament and are central to India's scientific, technical, and educational advancement. They include institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and National Institutes of Technology (NITs). These institutions receive significant government funding and are known for their high academic and research standards. They often play a leading role in advancing specialized fields and attract considerable international attention and collaboration.
- **Central Universities**: Also established through Acts of Parliament, central universities are public institutions administered by the Government of India, specifically through the Ministry of Education (formerly the Ministry of Human Resource Development). There are around 50 central universities across India, including institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the University of Delhi. These universities are known for providing

affordable education and are held to high academic standards, with funding and oversight coming directly from the central government.

- **State Universities**: Established by individual state governments through State Legislative Acts, state universities are also public but primarily funded by the state governments. These universities serve local populations and often focus on disciplines relevant to regional needs. Since they rely on state budgets, funding levels and quality vary widely between states, leading to disparities in resources, faculty, and infrastructure.

- **State Private Universities**: Created by Acts of State Legislatures, these institutions are privately funded but receive state government approval to operate and grant degrees. They provide an alternative to public institutions, especially in regions where demand for higher education exceeds public capacity. State private universities often have the autonomy to design their curricula and fee structures but must adhere to guidelines from regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC). They tend to focus on professional courses and may offer more specialized programs, though they sometimes face scrutiny over educational quality.

- **Deemed-to-be Universities**: This unique category consists of institutions that have earned a degree of autonomy granted by the Ministry of Education based on their high academic standards, particularly in specialized or innovative fields. These institutions, which can be public or private, are given the status of "deemed-to-be universities" by the University Grants Commission, allowing them to set their own curricula and manage finances independently. Examples include the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the Indian Institute of Science. Deemed universities are expected to demonstrate academic excellence and often focus on niche areas, such as advanced research or technical training.

India's classification reflects a blend of public and private, with a strong emphasis on regulatory oversight, quality assurance, and regional access. This multi-tiered structure seeks to balance accessibility, specialization, and academic rigor across the nation's diverse educational needs.

7. Is Higher Education a Public Good?

The classification of higher education as a public, mixed, or private good has sparked considerable debate. Cemmell (2003) defines a public good based on two core qualities:

- **Non-Rivalry**: In the context of higher education, non-rivalry suggests that one person's education does not directly reduce another's ability to access learning or benefit from it. However, in practical terms, institutions face limitations such as faculty availability and class size, which can introduce rivalrous aspects. Nevertheless, the knowledge generated and shared by universities (e.g., through research publications and public lectures) generally benefits society without depleting its value or limiting access.

- **Non-Excludability**: Non-excludability implies that higher education should be accessible to everyone without barriers. However, due to tuition fees, entrance exams, and capacity constraints, many institutions operate in a way that limits access to those who can meet certain academic or financial criteria. Despite this, public universities, government funding, and scholarships work toward reducing these barriers to promote broader access.

Cemmell (2003) identifies four major functions of higher education, each contributing to the argument that higher education serves as a public good:

- **The Research Function (Development of New Knowledge)**: Universities drive innovation and advancement across disciplines through research. This knowledge generation not only benefits those within academia but also supports public well-being, technological advancements, economic growth, and societal solutions. Research outputs are often shared publicly, fulfilling the non-excludability criterion and benefiting society as a whole.

- **The Teaching Function (Training of Highly Qualified Personnel)**: By educating and training individuals, higher education produces skilled workers essential for economic and social development. Graduates apply their expertise in various sectors, enhancing productivity and addressing societal needs. This function extends benefits beyond the individual, as educated professionals contribute positively to society through fields like healthcare, education, and public administration.

- **Provision of Services to Society**: Universities often engage in community service, extension programs, healthcare services, and consultancy. These activities directly serve the community by providing expertise and resources that might otherwise be inaccessible, reinforcing the role of higher education as a contributor to public welfare.

- **The Ethical Function (Social Criticism and Advocacy)**: Higher education institutions play a crucial role in fostering social criticism, ethical inquiry, and advocacy for social justice. This function involves promoting critical thinking, ethical awareness, and informed citizenship, which contribute to a democratic and just society. Universities, therefore, help cultivate a socially aware populace, which benefits society as a whole.

While higher education meets many criteria for being public good, certain elements categorize it as a mixed good (both private and public benefits). The private aspect includes the individual benefits (higher earnings, career advancement, and personal development) gained by graduates. The public good argument focuses on the social benefits derived from an educated populace improved public health, lower crime rates, innovation, and economic stability.

Given this combination of individual and societal advantages, higher education often requires both public funding (to support social benefits) and private investment (like tuition fees). This blend is what fuels the debate, as society wrestles with balancing public support to maximize social benefits while recognizing the private gains enjoyed by graduates.

For-profit higher education often faces criticism due to the perceived tension between quality and profit. The assumption is that profit motives lead to a decline in educational quality. However, Kinser (2013) argues that this quality-profit assumption can be challenged if the costs of delivering educational programs are reduced. This can occur if already inexpensive programs are offered at lower prices by traditional comprehensive universities, which cross-subsidize their more costly academic programs, or if unnecessary expenses are cut elsewhere in the university.

In a nutshell, higher education can indeed be considered a public good due to its societal contributions across these functions. However, practical limitations, such as access barriers and capacity constraints, introduce elements of excludability and rivalry, positioning higher education within the nuanced category of a mixed good.

8. Brain Drain

8.1. Definition and Factors Influencing Brain Drain

Brain drain refers to the migration of intellectuals and skilled professionals from their home country to another, often in search of better opportunities. This phenomenon can also be understood as the departure of educated individuals seeking higher pay or improved living conditions. The factors contributing to brain drain can be categorized into three main groups: push factors, pull factors, and individual reasons or motives.

- **Push Factors:** These include political instability, terrorism, economic crises, a lack of job opportunities, inadequate funding, low salaries, insufficient facilities and resources, discrimination in appointments and promotions, a lack of academic freedom, and limited research support (Sajjad, 2011).
- **Pull Factors:** In contrast, pull factors encompass the availability of meritocratic systems, political stability, better job opportunities, resources for research, higher salaries, improved living conditions, academic freedom, and internationalization.
- **Individual Reasons or Motives:** Some individuals may choose to leave their home country due to personal reasons, such as family conflicts, the allure of a different culture, better living conditions for their children, seeking political asylum, or pursuing self-development.

8.2. Impacts of Brain Drain

Brain drain can have both positive and negative effects on both the home and host countries. The negative impacts include the loss of talent and intellectual capital in the home country, which can hinder economic and social development. Conversely, host countries benefit from the influx of skilled professionals who contribute to their economies and innovation.

8.3. Strategies to Combat Brain Drain

In response to the challenges posed by brain drain, many countries are implementing measures to retain their talent. One strategy involves foreign faculty hiring programs designed to convert brain drain into brain gain by encouraging expatriate scholars to return home. For example, Pakistan has initiated a "Return of Professionals" program, initiated by Dr. Atta ur Rehman, which aims to engage expatriate Pakistanis in public sector institutions for short periods (Sajjad, 2011). Similarly, China allows faculty members who have left the country to return for one semester each year (Jaschik, 2011). Countries like Lithuania are also pursuing significant reforms in higher education to create an environment that encourages students to remain in their home country (Mitchell, 2014).

In Morocco, the government has made significant strides to engage its expatriate population, particularly those with high qualifications. A notable initiative is the Mobilization Program Skills (MPS), which seeks to involve Moroccan professionals willing to share their expertise and experience for the country's development. This program aims to create a supportive framework that informs these professionals of opportunities in Morocco, facilitates partnerships with local public and private sectors, and assists them in launching projects back home. Nevertheless, for these governmental initiatives to succeed, Morocco must implement comprehensive policies to enhance the business climate and address the socioeconomic issues that drive immigration (Morabety & Morabety, 2022).

9. Conclusion

Higher education has long been considered a cornerstone for societal progress, providing not only academic knowledge but also promoting critical thinking, skills, and personal growth. However, the sector faces challenges worldwide, and Morocco is no exception. The issues of outdated missions, methodological shortcomings, and the gap between education and the labor market have significantly impeded the system's ability to equip students with the skills required in the modern world.

The reforms implemented over the years, such as the adoption of the LMD system, were aimed at aligning Moroccan higher education with international standards. However, these reforms have often fallen short of their goals, partly due to the persistence of structural issues, including a lack of interdisciplinary flexibility and limited horizontal mobility for students. Moreover, the tension between quality and accessibility remains a significant concern.

At the heart of the problem is the mismatch between the education system and the demands of the job market, which has led to high unemployment rates among graduates. To address the persistent mismatch between university curricula and labor market demands, recent educational initiatives emphasize skills development within Moroccan universities. As Morocco continues to reform its higher education system, it needs to prioritize creating a more adaptable, interdisciplinary curriculum that meets the evolving needs of students and society. Additionally, a more robust partnership between the public and private sectors could enhance funding opportunities and improve educational outcomes.

Moving forward, Morocco can benefit from embracing a more action-oriented approach to research and teaching, where both are closely tied to societal needs. This would not only elevate the quality of education but also increase its relevance in the labor market. Furthermore, addressing the issue of brain drain by creating better opportunities for domestic intellectuals to thrive could reduce the loss of talent to other countries.

To conclude, while the reforms in Moroccan higher education have brought some progress, there is still much work to be done. A holistic and continuous reform process that emphasizes quality, adaptability, and societal relevance will be essential for the success of higher education in Morocco. By fostering a more flexible, inclusive, and globally competitive system, Morocco can ensure that higher education continues to serve as a vital public good and a driver of both personal and national development.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author of this paper declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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