



The Rebirth: Tunisia's potential development pathways to 2040

Education

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Education

Tunisia has achieved remarkable progress in education outcomes since independence by investing in pre-primary education and making education free and compulsory for learners aged six to 16. At present, Tunisia has the second most educated population in North Africa after Libya and ranks ninth on the continent, as measured by the average years of education attained by Tunisian adults (15 years and older).

The adult literacy rate is just above 80%, which makes it the 16th highest in Africa, and about 16 and six percentage points higher than the African and OLMICs average, respectively.

In 2019, the average Tunisian adult had about 8.2 years of education, projected to increase to 9.4 years by 2040. The average woman had about 7.7 years of education while the average man had 8.7. Yet, in spite of the high levels of female education women's share of the labour force is, on average, around five percentage points below that for OLMICs (although significantly above the MENA average).

On the Current Path, gender parity in education will improve, with the average man and woman in 2040 having 9.8 and 9.4 years of education, respectively. Only about 23% of adults in Tunisia have no education or incomplete primary education — roughly on par with the average rate of 24% in OLMICs.

The legacy of colonialism and Tunisia's proximity to the EU have complicated progress, however. Since the 1970s, education has experienced significant Arabisation, although most scientific subjects are still taught in French. The language policy designates classical Arabic as the language of instruction at the initial stages of learning. Thereafter learners are expected to learn and take exams in French.

In spite of its generally impressive educational outcomes, Tunisia is experiencing bottlenecks in upper secondary transition and completion rates, where the requirement for literacy in French in key subjects like science contributes to high drop-out rates.

Gross enrolment and graduation rates for tertiary education, although generally good, are impacted by the bottlenecks at the secondary level.

Chart 11: Education flow (latest data from 2015 & 2018)



Geography	Primary		Lower secondary		Upper secondary		Tertiary	
	Gross enrolment rate	Completion rate	Gross enrolment rate	Completion rate	Gross enrolment rate	Completion rate	Gross enrolment rate	Graduation rate
Tunisia	115.3	95.5	104.4	74.2	77.5	48.7	34.6	22.4
Algeria	116.2	109.8	132.0	93.5	62.7	35.5	6.6	30.2
OMICs	106.8	86.7	85.4	66.6	64.3	48.2	24.1	23.8
UMICs	107.3	98.7	105.1	88.4	92.5	67.1	54.5	37.4

Source: IFs version 7.45, historical data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF MICs 2018 survey

View on Tableau Public

Share

Given the budgetary constraints and increasing demand for secondary education, government finances are under considerable pressure, but Tunisia still spends significantly more on education than the OLMICs' average.

Chart 12: Education in IFs and definitions [1]

In IFs, education is conceptualised as a pipeline in which learners progress from primary to secondary and all the way to tertiary level (i.e. completion of one level enables transition to the subsequent level). The more learners a country can enrol in primary school, the larger the pool of learners who can graduate and transition to secondary and tertiary level.

Gross enrolment rate: The number of learners enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education.

Completion rate: The number of persons in the relevant age group who have completed the last grade of the given level of education, as a percentage of the population at the theoretical graduation age for the given level of education.

Gross graduation rate: The number of graduates who have completed the last grade of a given level of education, regardless of age, as a percentage of the population at the theoretical graduation age for the given level of education.

Despite successful efforts in improving public education and enrolment, the system is now faced with challenges in the quality of education it is offering.

There has been a drop in learner scores in international assessment measures like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment. [2] In addition, the country's low education outcomes are evident in the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys in 2018, which showed that 33% and 72% of children aged 7–14 do not have foundational reading or math skills, respectively, with large disparities depending on residence and socio-economic status.

The decline in baccalaureate pass rates (end of secondary) at 41% in 2018 from 52% in 2016 is another indication of the challenges faced by the education system.

Apart from straightforward challenges such as the quality of the curriculum and teachers, geographical location also creates differences in educational outcomes.

Educational facilities and institutions are mostly located in Greater Tunis and along the coast. The shortage of educational resources, including human resources, in areas like the governorate of Kairouan impedes learning. In addition, educational infrastructure, like school buildings, is fragile and poorly maintained, especially in rural areas. [3]

Overall, the education curriculum is considered to be out of step with the requirements of the job market and the economic and social realities of Tunisia. In addition, recent years have also seen a greater demand for English in the workplace — a requirement that Tunisia will have to grapple with if it wishes to remain economically competitive.

Tunisia's Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 2016–2020 seeks to address the quality of education in the country. The five-year plan aims to improve teacher training, upgrade the curriculum and education infrastructure, and promote private partnerships. Moreover, vocational training is limited in Tunisia but is necessary for the country to absorb learners who do not proceed to upper secondary school and to provide crucial skills for technical jobs. [4]

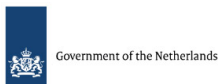
Tunisians are generally well educated and enrolment rates are quite high by global standards. The considerable number of well-educated people without economic opportunities contributed to the Freedom and Dignity Revolution.

It is critical that the country reforms its education system, ensuring that it is relevant globally and appropriate for the Tunisian context, if it hopes to produce graduates who can create jobs, promote economic growth, reduce socio-economic inequalities and contribute to social stability.

Endnotes

1. Definitions from [UNESCO, Glossary](#)
2. OECD, [PISA 2015 results](#) (Volume V)
3. A Nagazi, [Reading the shortcomings of the Tunisian educational system](#), World Bank, 30 October 2017,
4. With the help of the World Bank, Tunisia undertook the Tertiary Education for Employability Project in 2016 to address the disconnect between skills and the needs of the labour market. Oxford Business Group, [Tunisia's education system to be overhauled](#),

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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