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# HIGHER EDUCATION IN TUNISIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

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## **Executive summary:**

This note first provides an overview of the of the Tunisian higher education sector and Government reform plans, the current state of UK-Tunisia higher education collaboration as well as opportunities and barriers to developing stronger collaborative ties. The note also outlines the newly established Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission (HEC), its objectives and key players.

## **Key Action:**

University representatives with an interest in collaborating with Tunisia are asked to provide input to UUKi on their priorities and ways in which the HEC can help to overcome barriers to collaboration.

## **Audience:**

Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Directors International and International Office staff with responsibility for the MENA region.

# INTRODUCTION

The UK and Tunisia currently have a limited relationship in higher education, research and innovation. However, there is appetite in both countries to strengthen this relationship. The Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission was formed in spring 2018 to structure, supervise and ultimately strengthen the countries' bilateral cooperation in higher education and scientific research.

This Information Note presents an overview of the Tunisian higher education system, the challenges it

faces and its current reform plans. It outlines the current state of UK-Tunisia higher education collaboration, including opportunities and barriers; introduces the Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission; and reviews UUKi's engagement with Tunisia, on the back of increased intergovernmental collaboration.

UUKi, February 2019.

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN TUNISIA

## Tunisia's Higher Education System

Upon gaining independence from France in 1956, Tunisia inherited a fairly small education system focused on the education of European children. In the years after independence, priorities included expansion, 'Arabization' and training of a class of skilled workers to replace the Europeans. However, the education system developed on the basis of the French model, with a small well-educated Tunisian elite studying in France. The system has a 6-3-4 structure of basic, middle and upper-secondary school leading up to the baccalaureate exam which governs entrance to university. The language of instruction in public schools is Arabic, yet some science and maths subjects are taught in French at secondary school.<sup>1</sup>

The University of Tunisia was established in 1960, as the first university in the country. Since then the system has expanded significantly. The public sector of higher education comprises 13 universities (including the Virtual University) and a network of 25 higher technological studies institutes. Further, there are 68 private higher education institutions (HEIs). In the academic year 2014/2015, 10.4% of all students were enrolled in private Tunisian HEIs. Gross enrolment rate at tertiary level rose from 30.1% to 34.6% in 2015, placing Tunisia 79th of 137 countries surveyed by the World Economic Forum (WEF).<sup>2</sup>

Public HEIs are under direct supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) which develops and implements higher education policy after consultation with the Universities Council comprising the presidents of the

### Note

<sup>1</sup> <https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/attachments/education-in-north-africa-since-independence-tunisia.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017-2018/competitiveness-rankings/#series=ENROL3GR>

<sup>3</sup> [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches\\_tunisia\\_2017.pdf](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches_tunisia_2017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches\\_tunisia\\_2017.pdf](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches_tunisia_2017.pdf)

country's universities. The MESRS also allocates funds to them and controls the spending of the respective funds. Private HEIs do not receive any direct or indirect public funding, but instead their main source of income are tuition fees.<sup>3</sup>

Higher education is divided into three levels: Tunisia offers two types of three-year bachelor's degrees; the "academic (fundamental) bachelor" tends to be theoretical and prepares students for the continuation of academic study, while "applied bachelors" are geared towards preparing students to directly enter the workplace and include an obligatory internship. There are also two types of master's degrees which are typically two years: academic masters prepare students for a research career and are the prerequisite for a PhD. Professional masters prepare students for direct entry into the workplace. The third level of study includes doctoral academic studies (PhD) with a minimum of three years of research and courses.<sup>4</sup> Currently around 290,000 students are enrolled in the Tunisian HE system and most students graduate in engineering (2,470 in 2016) and professional masters (933 in 2016).<sup>5</sup> The government is looking to encourage more private sector employment and youth entrepreneurship.

## Challenges and Reform Plans

Tunisia faces the challenge of high youth (15 to 24-year olds) unemployment, which at 36.3% in 2018 is well above the regional average of 26.9%.<sup>6</sup> This is driven largely by a poor-quality education system: Tunisia ranked 66<sup>th</sup> out of 70 countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the OECD in 2015/16.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the Global Competitiveness Index 2017-2018, which

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research Tunisia, 2018/2019

<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?year\\_high\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?year_high_desc=true)

<sup>7</sup> <http://factsmaps.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-average-score-of-math-science-reading/>

ranks 137 countries, Tunisia only ranks 103<sup>rd</sup> in terms of quality of the higher education system, 106<sup>th</sup> in HE teacher training and 106<sup>th</sup> in R&D collaboration between universities and industry. Also, a mismatch between labour market needs and qualifications and skills acquired prevents the country from using talent efficiently in the labour market –the capacity to retain and attract talent and female participation in the labour force is limited. Finally, graduates prefer careers in the bloated public sector over entrepreneurial activity and private sector work. Inefficient government bureaucracy has been identified by the Global Competitiveness Index as the main obstacle for doing business.<sup>8</sup>

The Tunisian MESRS is therefore working to introduce a series of reforms as part of the [Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 2016-20](#) (in Arabic only). The five-year plan aims to improve quality standards through improved teacher training, upgraded curricula and infrastructure, as well as an enhanced framework for private sector partnerships.

Specifically, at the higher education level, the MESRS launched the National Dialogue On Education Reform in 2015, an initiative that is bringing together the concerned ministries, universities, teachers' unions and students to address four key issues: governance, university life, curriculum development and scientific research. The national dialogue follows the announcement of a 10-year tertiary educational development plan, known as the [Strategic Plan for the Reform of Higher Education and Scientific Research 2015-25](#) (in French only). The plan is based on five main objectives:

- Improving the quality of teaching and thus the employability of new graduates
- Promoting research and innovation
- Fostering good governance and optimising resource management
- Reviewing university planning to ensure regional balance
- Developing teachers' training.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017-2018/countryeconomy-profiles/#economy=TUN>

<sup>9</sup> <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/track-series-reforms-are-set-overhaul-sector>

# UK-TUNISIA RELATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At present, cooperation between the UK and Tunisia in higher education and scientific research is limited. As a former French colony, French remains the second most widely spoken language in the country (about two thirds of the population speak French<sup>10</sup>) and Tunisia's political, economic and societal links with the Francophone world have historically been strong.

Similarly, Tunisia's higher education system builds on the French system and collaborations have reflected this. However, in the context of its ambitious reform plans, the Tunisian government has repeatedly highlighted its interest in strengthening the UK-Tunisia relationship in the realm of higher education and scientific research.

## UK-Tunisia Intergovernmental Relations

Diplomatic engagement between the UK and Tunisia increased significantly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The UK government has identified Tunisia – an emerging liberal democracy – as a key strategic partner in North Africa and views youth unemployment as a major risk to the stable democratic development of the country.

In this context, educational links have been identified as critical to the bilateral relationship and the UK Government is committed to supporting cooperation in this area, as well as facilitating access to commercial opportunities, specifically in the teaching and professional and vocational skills markets.

In March 2018, the FCO organised a roundtable including relevant government departments and HE

sector organisations to identify ways to deliver a step-change in education cooperation between the UK and Tunisia. Subsequently, close cooperation with the Tunisian government and the MESRS led to the establishment of the Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission (HEC) (further information on the HEC see below).

The inaugural meeting of the HEC coincided with a delegation of UK HE sector representatives and HEIs to Tunisia in June 2018 and a meeting between Mr Slim Khalbous, Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research, Alistair Burt, Minister of State for the Middle East and HMG Ambassador to Tunisia, H.E. Louise de Sousa. In January 2019, meetings of the Tunisian Minister with senior UK Ministers and university leaders in London further strengthened this commitment.<sup>11</sup>

## UK-Tunisia Higher Education Collaboration

### Research Collaboration

Tunisia's top five partners for research collaboration are France, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Italy and the United States – the UK only ranks ninth. Despite a 31.6% increase in the number of publications – only 410 co-authored publications were produced between Tunisian and UK scholars in the years 2015 to 2017. The most important areas for research were Medicine (22.6%), Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology (8.7%), Agricultural and Biological Sciences (8.6%), Immunology and Microbiology (6.9%) and Computer Science (6.7%), while Social Sciences (3.4%) only made up a small number of publications.<sup>12</sup> As Tunisia is looking to promote research and innovation for a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy, there is an opportunity to boost UK-Tunisian research collaborations. Key subjects

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ts.html>

<sup>11</sup>

[http://www.mes.tn/detail\\_evennement.php?code\\_menu=548&code\\_evennement=2433](http://www.mes.tn/detail_evennement.php?code_menu=548&code_evennement=2433)

<sup>12</sup> SciVal Data, 2015-2017.

for Tunisia include STEM, agriculture, medicine and finance.

### **Mobility and English language**

HESA data shows that mobility between the two countries is low. In the academic year 2016/2017, a total of 85 Tunisian undergraduates and 45 Tunisian postgraduates came to study in the UK. The most popular subject areas for Tunisian students in the UK include business and administrative studies, social studies, engineering and technology and languages. Despite the low numbers, a gradual increase in the number of Tunisian students spending a period of their studies in the UK has been noticeable since 2011/2012, when only a total of 65 Tunisian students came to the UK. At the same time, mobility of UK students to Tunisia is even lower: only five UK postgraduates studied abroad in Tunisia in 2016/17.<sup>13</sup>

Tunisian business leaders frequently highlight the lack of English language skills and soft skills as a barrier to employment. Yet, Tunisia does not have enough teachers to cater to this demand and there is a shortage of university professors able to teach disciplines such as English language and literature.

The MESRS is planning to provide an Excellence Scholarship granted to Tunisian students (number of scholarships per year still tbc), primarily for master's degrees and/or PhD. The specific arrangements would be subject to an agreement between UK HEIs and the Ministry, with the expectation that the Tunisian Government would supply a monthly stipend to cover travel, accommodation and health insurance, while UK HEIs would cover or waive the tuition fees. Scholarship recipients would be expected to return to Tunisia to act as champions or leaders in their respective fields

Student and staff exchange has the potential to address these challenges. Enabling Tunisian students to spend time in the UK will increase their English language proficiency and employability, while time spent in Tunisia – studying or via an English Language Teaching programme – will benefit UK students, contributing to the UK's national goal to increase the number of UK students studying or working abroad as part of their UK degree, and supporting the Tunisian

Government's development objectives. It is also a comparatively stable destination in the region.

Most opportunities for mobility were taken up via Erasmus+/International Credit Mobility (ICM). Tunisia is within the south Mediterranean funding envelope and funding for the region is not always spent. Proposals have therefore a high chance of success. In 2017, Tunisia received 21.7% of the ICM regional budget. The estimated budget for 2019 for Tunisia will be around €3 million, that is 2% of the overall Erasmus+/ICM budget.

### **Transnational Education (TNE)**

Despite the generally low engagement, about 100 students are enrolled in UK transnational education (TNE) in Tunisia. The vast majority (about 85%) are enrolled in a form of distance, flexible or online learning.

To improve the quality of teaching and research, Tunisia is investing in digital technology to support higher education and made increased ICT usage a key goal of the current reform process.<sup>14</sup> While there is still a significant need for improved quality assurance and accreditation processes, there may be some opportunity to boost UK TNE in Tunisia in the form of distance, online and flexible learning. Other forms of TNE may become more viable in the future, once national reforms are implemented.

### **Barriers to Collaborative Relationships**

A primary obstacle to increased collaboration and mobility between the two countries is the lack of funding sources.

There is also a limited understanding on both sides of respective higher education systems and partnership priorities. This also affects mobility – for example, Tunisian students who typically do two-year masters programmes are not aware that one-year UK degrees are equally valid.

On the Tunisian side, the cost and administrative burden of the UK sector acts as

### **Note**

<sup>13</sup> Higher Education Student Data 2016/2017 (HESA: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>)

<sup>14</sup> <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/track-series-reforms-are-set-overhaul-sector>

deterrent for staff and students, as do the level of tuition fees and high living costs, compared to other European countries.

Finally, the low levels of English language proficiency remain an obstacle to research collaborations in research, mobility and TNE.

# TUNISIA-UK HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

Due to mutual governmental interest in strengthening the UK-Tunisia relationship in higher education, the UK-Tunisia Higher Education Commission was formed in spring 2018, and UK members met with their Tunisian counterparts for the first time in June as part of a delegation led by the British Embassy Tunis. Since the inaugural meeting, a virtual meeting was held in October 2018 and a second face-to-face meeting was held in January 2019 in London to determine the commission's objectives and to develop a three-year action plan to structure collaborative activities until 2021.

## Objectives

The Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission was established to structure, supervise and steer higher education and scientific research links between Tunisia and the UK for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021. The aim is to build up to a bilateral memorandum of understanding in 2021. The HEC has identified five pillars for collaboration:

- Mutual understanding of the respective higher education systems
- Mobility and access
- Governance and quality assurance
- Employability
- Applied research.

Specifically, the commission created three sub-groups to develop a three-year action plan that addresses the main pillars:

1. Governance of higher education and scientific research, including capacity building, research and innovation partnerships, cooperation on quality assurance and label procedures. The MESRS has emphasized that the UK HE sector's

expertise would be particularly valuable to modernize Tunisian HE institutions' management and governance as well as to enhance their autonomy to allow better responsiveness to industry. Moreover, Tunisian HEIs would benefit from the UK's expertise to develop their quality assurance and accreditation processes to ensure compliance with international quality standards.

2. Mobility of students, faculty and staff. To improve graduates' employability by enhancing English language skill, and soft skills, the Tunisian government is keen to send more students to the UK and to use UK HEIs English Language Teaching programmes.
3. Employability and innovation, including training and capacity building, pedagogy and transverse governance. Both the UK and Tunisia would benefit from the development of careers centres and virtual exchange platforms as well as UK university incubators and Tunisia start-ups ecosystem linkages to improve their R&D as well as their graduates' employability.

## Key Players

The Tunisia-UK HEC has 14 Tunisian members representing the following institutions:

- Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie (BIAT)
- Carthage University
- Erasmus+ National Agency
- Mediterranean School of Business
- Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS)
- National Agency for Evaluation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation
- Tunis El-Manar University
- Tunisian British Chamber of Commerce
- Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA).

On the UK side, eight members represent the following institutions:

- British Council Tunisia and British Council UK
- English UK
- University of Oxford
- University of Salford
- University of Sussex
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- Universities UK International.

### **UUKi Engagement with Tunisia**

UUKi has been supporting engagement with Tunisia since 2016: Two inbound delegations visited UUKi in 2016 and 2017 and expressed interest for increased UK-Tunisia HE collaboration, however due to FCO travel advice advising against all but essential travel to the country only limited follow-up was possible. In March 2018, UUKi was invited to be a member of the subsequently formed Tunisia-UK Higher Education Commission.

As a member of the Tunisia-UK HEC, UUKi has been working closely with UK HE sector representatives and Tunisian and UK government stakeholders to shape the objectives and activities of the joint commission which shall ultimately facilitate a sustainable framework for collaboration between the two countries in higher education and scientific research.

Specifically, UUKi provides input and represents UK HE sector interests in two of the HEC's sub-groups:  
Jamie Arrowsmith

([Jamie.Arrowsmith@international.ac.uk](mailto:Jamie.Arrowsmith@international.ac.uk)), Assistant Director Policy, participates in the governance group, while Joana Westphal, Policy Officer MENA, is an observer in the mobility group. The process of developing an action plan for the commission is underway; please contact [Joana.Westphal@international.ac.uk](mailto:Joana.Westphal@international.ac.uk) for further information and to discuss how the commission could best be used to overcome barriers to collaboration.

# CONTACT DETAILS

Please find below the contact details for the British Embassy in Tunis as well as British Council Tunisia. Their teams are happy to provide you with more information about the operating environment and opportunities for collaborating with Tunisia in higher education.

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