

EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

COUNTRY PROFILE: LIBYA

Martin Rose

www.britishcouncil.org

Commissioned for the



HAMMAMET
CONFERENCE



MARTIN ROSE

Martin Rose is currently working as a consultant to the British Council's MENA Region. He has worked for the British Council since 1988, serving in Baghdad, Rome, Brussels, Ottawa and – until August 2014 – Rabat, as well as on London postings. The latter included the establishment, as founding Director, of Counterpoint, the Council's think tank on Cultural Relations. He has taken a youth expedition by sea to Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, founded the Pontignano Conference in Italy and run the Our Shared Europe project looking at the predicament and contribution of Muslim Europeans. Martin was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, in Modern History and at St Antony's in Modern Middle Eastern Studies (M Phil). He was the 2009 Sheikh Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecturer, and is a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and a Visiting Fellow at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies at Cambridge. He is a member of the Advisory Board of London University's Centre for Post-Colonial Studies, and is the Chair of Trustees at BAX (British-Arab Exchanges). He has co-edited with Andrew Hussey the collection *The Challenge of North Africa*, in which his essay *Bavures and Shibboleths: The Changing Ecology of Culture and Language in Morocco*, appears.

BACKGROUND

Libya, in a state of civil war four years after the revolution, does not have the data available to write an education profile comparable to those of the other North African countries. Data collection has been at best spasmodic both during and after the Gaddafi era – and more often non-existent (“No figures found for government expenditure on education”, as one commentator writes drily); and it has at times been misleading. Most international NGO tables of comparison show blank or almost blank columns for Libya. Spending levels on education are said to have been very high under Gaddafi (one set of UN figures is reported as suggesting 7–10% of GDP) and although levels may have been relatively high during the 1970s, it appears that much of the data since then is suspect: 3–4% seems more probable for the period 2002–08. “The validity and quality of such educational claims have been severely doubted”, states one researcher.¹

However in some areas (and these are areas in which figures are happily provided) Libya has achieved remarkable results. Literacy, at 89.5% is very high indeed, and the identical male and female youth literacy figures of 99.9% are very impressive. By the same token, its secondary school gross enrolment ratio of 110.3% would place it 11th in the world, and its tertiary enrolment of 54.4% would put it in 46th place globally. These achievements – with all necessary reservations for the present state of the country – contribute to Libya’s presence amongst the highest-placed countries in the world Human Development Index (55th in 2014, 50th in 2012). However, that these figures, even if correct, are to be taken with some qualification, is suggested by the fact that the *WEF Africa Competitiveness Report 2013* places Libya’s education system as a whole, for quality, 142nd out of 144 countries ranked globally,² and as Dr M Taghavi comments, “Years of under-resourcing and poor management have now left the Libyan education sector in a dire position. Coupled with corruption and injustice, the overall quality of education provision is now severely questioned.”³

This is not surprising. Education was highly politicized under Gaddafi becoming, as it expanded from its relatively undeveloped (though vigorous) pre-1969 state, a vehicle for ideological indoctrination. Assertive, if whimsical, actions were taken to distance the country’s system from the West: there was for example a ban on the use of international symbols for weights and measures, and after the bombing of Tripoli in 1986, English and French were banned from the syllabus for a decade, before being reintroduced as relations with the West thawed. In other words, the Libyan education system was largely cut off from Western influence, and the country’s massive oil wealth was applied at best capriciously to education investment. Real fixed capital formation in education is estimated at 1% per annum against a MENA average of 2.5%; and the expenditure per employee in education, at LYD 6,800 per annum, is less than half the public sector average of LYD 14,600 – despite, or because of, the fact that education, with about 485,000 women and men on the payroll, is by far Libya’s largest public sector employer (though perhaps half these “teachers” don’t actually teach at all).⁴

Since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 there has been a purge of the ideologized curriculum, with the beginnings of a complete rewriting. Ubiquitous Green Book Studies have been unceremoniously dumped. International reference – symbols again – has been reinstated. History teaching has been entirely suspended pending a new curriculum, and while the government syllabus as a whole has

not explicitly been Islamicized, a specific pathway through school for Islamic Consciousness has been established in parallel to the technical and general paths. Even figures for the number of students in the system are questionable. Figures compiled for the Library of Congress in 2000 indicate some 767,000 children in primary, 717,000 in secondary and 287,000 students in tertiary education. This total of 1.77 million is still widely quoted as current, though cited growth rates of 2.5% per annum overall, and 3% at tertiary are puzzling in this context.⁵ But the mere fact that most of the data still available dates from before the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 makes statistical work unreliable.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Libyan school system is very similar in its architecture to the Egyptian, with a nine-year basic stage, followed by a three-year secondary, all of which are entirely state-funded. Promotion is determined by exams. English is taught from Grade 5. After the preparatory phase (the last three years of basic education), pupils proceed either to general secondary school (70%), or into Institutes of Vocational Education (30%). The academic stream leads to university or Higher Institute; the vocational to Higher Institute or employment in the craft or trade in which the student has been trained.

At secondary school the division of specialities was (in 2008–09) 29% in language (of whom 71% chose English), 62% in science, and 9% in the humanities and social sciences. Gross enrolment, as noted, is very high at 110.3% (secondary) and 54.4% (tertiary)

Ranked by WEF 142nd in the world (out of 144) for general quality of its education system, Libya also scores low in maths and science education (135th out of 144), staff training (144th) and – perhaps most remarkably given the oil-wealth available for equipment procurement (and presumably a matter of political control), 134th for Internet access in schools.⁶



THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

“The departing Italians left a traumatized and uneducated colony,” wrote Hisham Matar in early 2015, “yet to discover oil. Libya’s first university was founded in Benghazi in 1955 by King Idris, four years after Independence. There were enough resources for only one department. The Faculty of Literature was selected to be that first academy, presumably because of its association with literacy. Even such a modest start had to rely on foreign donations. Egypt contributed four lecturers and paid their salaries for four years; the United States covered the wages of the Iraqi scholar Majid Khadduri, who eventually became Dean. A year later, in 1956, the faculty of Science was established; Economics in 1957; Law in 1962; agriculture in 1966; and Medicine in 1970.

“Between 1969 and 2011, Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime made several violent incursions into the university, arresting pupils and faculty members and, most infamously, in the 1970s, hanging students, who were campaigning for academic freedom, from the gates of the university and in the gardens of Benghazi cathedral ... The situation today is hardly more promising. Rockets fired by militias warring over Benghazi have recently landed in that inaugural university campus. Fires are burning, black smoke where windows used to be. It is not clear when lectures can resume.”⁷

Libya has 12 public universities (10 general, two of “special nature”) and 7 accredited private universities. Currently quoted, but undocumented figures for student population are c. 300,000 students in the country’s universities, and a further c. 71,000 at 107 higher technical institutes. A recent EC report gives a total for the system as a whole in 2010–11 of 341,841 students, 90% of them in public universities and 59% of them female.⁸ Most are studying for four-year degrees, and are paid for by the government (tertiary education is free, and postgraduate education subsidised by up to 75%). The Libyan Open University was set up in Tripoli in 1996, and now has 16 branch campuses and 65,000 students enrolled. Research, though officially integral to the university system, is not prominent, and the WEF ranking of 143rd out of 144 countries for the availability of research and training services, though not of course referring to university research per se, is illustrative.⁹

STUDYING ABROAD

The main route to achieving quick results in Higher Education reform is seen as sending students abroad. This is not new, having begun in 2007 with a programme under the Libyan Committee for Higher Education: UNESCO notes 7,009 Libyans studying abroad in 2010, and WENR suggests that there were some 12,500 even before the 2013 initiative kicked in. In May 2013 funds were allocated to send 31,000 students for tertiary education abroad, commencing with intensive language study to compensate for the 10-year ban on language teaching, and the generally poor quality of language teaching available since the end of the ban. The UK is the leading destination (the same UNESCO figures record 2,827 – 40% – of Libyans studying abroad as being in the UK, followed by Malaysia at 21%). Expectations are of rapid growth, however this is not uncontroversial: the same WENR report notes that “the state of Higher Education in Libya has received such harsh criticism since the revolution thanks to overcrowding and poor faculty standards that the decision to send students abroad hasn’t been well accepted by everyone. Many see it as a lost opportunity to invest in building local colleges and institutes.”¹⁰

LANGUAGE

The 10-year hiatus in foreign language teaching after 1986 was very damaging to Libyan language (and language-teaching) competence and created significant barriers between Libyans and international contacts and opportunities. English teaching resumed in the mid-1990s, and led to a new secondary English curriculum in 2000. In English the LETUP (Libyan English Teaching in Universities Project) was a landmark co-operation between the British Council and the Ministry of Higher Education, founded in 2006. It led to a network of ten university-based collaborative language centres which trained, over the 2006–11 lifespan of the original project, more than 8,000 Libyans for postgraduate study abroad, and ultimately at home too. It also, and vitally, trained Libyan teaching assistants through remote and face-to-face study, to form the nucleus of the new English-teaching profession. Although the programme was forced to retrench by the revolution in 2011, it restarted in 2012 and the centres were handed over to their host universities in 2013. The ten centres are now supported by the National Centre for Modern Languages at Tripoli University that functions as a centre of excellence supporting the teaching of modern languages. Further British Council work has taken place in researching language competence in the TVET and university systems.





VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The TVET system has suffered historically from low prestige, as a second-class education for academic “failures”. This reflects the fact that most of the work that trainees from this sector would undertake in another country is actually performed in Libya by foreign labourers. It has not succeeded materially in upgrading the quality of the workforce, which in terms of competitiveness has historically mattered little, since 80% (this figure is also found as 66%) of all Libyans in work are employed by the state. In 2013 an agreement was signed between TVET UK and the National Board for Technical and Vocational Education (NBTVE), under which TVET UK and British TVET providers will work to upgrade the Libyan system. Under a second, national scheme, \$2.6 billion was allocated in 2013 for scholarships to enable Libyans to study abroad; about a quarter of the beneficiaries (10,000 out of 41,000) will be studying technical subjects; and state employers too, like the National Oil Company are allocating funds for this purpose. Also in 2013, the EC signed a €6.5m agreement with the British Council to work with the NBTVE and Ministry of Labour to realign Libya’s TVET system, especially training provision, with the needs of the labour market and support the reintegration of Libya’s unemployed with a focus on the agro-food, construction and tourism sectors.

OUTPUTS AND MEASURES

Libya's literacy is recorded as the highest in North Africa, at 89.5% (with youth literacy for both sexes at 99.9%). Libya has never engaged with TIMSS or PIRLS. It appears that the efficacy of its education system has been exaggerated, but exact measurement will probably remain challenging for some years to come.

EMPLOYABILITY

Official figures show falling unemployment, with a downward trend from 20.7% in January 2010 to 19.5% in January 2012 and 15% in September 2013. The World Bank is highly sceptical of these percentages, noting that real figures are believed to be around 30%, with youth figures much higher: "World Bank estimates show that youth unemployment has remained at about 50 percent with the majority of unemployed holding university degrees."¹¹ It is to be noted that 80% (or 66%) of those in employment are in the public sector, with expectations of high wages. But by the same token – and this is particularly relevant to education – there is significant over-employment: it is reckoned that half of all teachers have no actual teaching duties but are nonetheless paid to stand idle. This is not positive for morale, though it is no doubt excellent for unemployment figures.

DIFFERENTIALS OF GENDER AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

In 2001 16% of women had a degree and 48% a secondary school certificate. Youth literacy for young women (as for young men) is 99.9%. Women currently take up 59% of places in further education, and make up 80% of schoolteachers. Data is so thin that Libya is not scored at all in the UNICEF Gender Gap Index for 2010, and most key indicators are blank. Estimates are however given for workforce participation: 19% at age 15–24 (male 53%) and 25% at 15+ (male 79%). There are indications of Libya's performance in broader gender issues in the newly introduced Gender-related Development Index, which in 2014 formed part of the UNDP Human Development Index (and is simply a comparison of the HDI figures for male and female) for the first time: here Libya ranked 93rd, well below its 55th place in the composite HDI, but well above Tunisia (116th), Algeria (129rd), Egypt (125th) and Morocco (132nd).¹² On the other hand in the GII, the Gender Inequality Index (a more complex assessment of women's position in society based on reproductive health, empowerment – including education and political participation – and economic activity), Libya ranks 40th, against Tunisia (48th), Algeria (81st), Morocco (92nd) and Egypt (130th).¹³



NOTES

1. Dr M. Taghavi, *A Critical Analysis of Higher Education Sector in Libya: A Socio-Economic Analysis*, 2013 <http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=mr_farzanegan> [accessed 29 September 2014].
2. *The Africa Competitiveness Report 2013* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2013) <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Africa_Competitiveness_Report_2013.pdf> [accessed 23 October 2014].
3. Taghavi, *A Critical Analysis of Higher Education in Libya*.
4. Ibid.
5. Both figures quoted by Dr Taghavi, *A Critical Analysis of Higher Education in Libya*.
6. *The Africa Competitiveness Report 2013*, WEF.
7. Hisham Matar, "A Tree that Scarcely Fruits", *Times Literary Supplement* (16 January 2015).
8. European Commission, *Higher Education in Libya*, 2012 <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/participating_countries/overview/libya_overview_of_hes_final.pdf> [accessed 29 September 2014].
9. *The Africa Competitiveness Report 2013*, WEF.
10. Nick Clark, "Educational in a Transitional Libya", *World Education News and Reviews* (1 July 2013) <<http://wenr.wes.org/2013/07/education-in-a-transitional-libya/>> [accessed 29 September 2014].
11. *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief*, Issue 2 (January 2014) <<http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/QEBissue2January2014FINAL.pdf>> [accessed 29 September 2014].
12. Human Development Reports <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-5-gender-related-development-index-gdi>> [accessed 30 September 2014].
13. Human Development Reports <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-4-gender-inequality-index>> [accessed 30 September 2014].



ALGERIA

40 Rue des Frères Benali Abdellah,
Ex Parmentier 16035 Algiers, Algeria
www.britishcouncil.dz

EGYPT

192 El Nil Street, Agouza, Cairo, Egypt
www.britishcouncil.org.eg

LIBYA

Casablanca Street, Hey El Wihda El Arabia Siyahia,
PO Box 6797, Tripoli, Libya
www.britishcouncil.ly

MOROCCO

11 Avenue Allal Ben Abdellah, 5eme etage
Rabat, Morocco
www.britishcouncil.ma

TUNISIA

87 Avenue Mohamed V, 1002 Tunis
Belvedere, Tunisia
www.britishcouncil.tn

Images by, **Mat Wright and British Council**