Aligning Education and Opportunity: Towards Sustainable Employment in Tunisia

On May 26, 2018, Afkar gathered 30 key stakeholders on the topic "Aligning Education and Opportunity: Towards Sustainable Employment in Tunisia." The conversation was directed by Naceur Ammar, President and Cofounder of ESPRIT, as rapporteur, and Haythem El Mekki, journalist, as moderator.

Stakeholders represented over 20 entities from the Tunisian government, civil society, the private sector, international organizations, professional associations and educational institutions.

This special Ramadan edition of Afkar began with four speakers who presented specific initiatives addressing the mismatch between the learning outcomes acquired in the Tunisian education system and the competencies demanded by the Tunisian and global job market. During their presentations, the four speakers highlighted the following challenges:

● High numbers of unemployed university graduates in Tunisia and a low economic growth rate which cannot absorb the current number of Tunisian university graduates.
● An educational system which is not giving Tunisian students the appropriate skills for the current job market, or for the projected needs of the Tunisian and international job market in the next 10 to 20 years.
● Innovative sectors struggling to find appropriate candidates for open positions.
● Significant brain drain of Tunisian talent and obstacles for Tunisians in the diaspora to invest or create employment back in Tunisia.
● University graduates struggling with "triple illiteracy" in language proficiency, hard skills, and soft skills.
● A lack of knowledge among students regarding the labor market and employment opportunities, especially those living outside major economic centers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Afkar gathers a critical mass of empowered stakeholders around a defined problem to develop solutions and make commitments within their spheres of influence. This year, Afkar is organizing six editions to address economic challenges in Tunisia.

Over the course of the discussion, participants were invited to propose specific, actionable solutions to the challenges delineated above. Through this discussion, the following solutions were proposed:

1)   Revitalize the ISET institutes in the interior regions: Some ISET campuses lack the necessary equipment to train students in technological fields, including basic amenities such as computers or wifi. Participants suggested that the ISET facilities be furnished with the necessary equipment for students to learn, and to use these spaces for additional trainings and opportunities to connect with businesses and the private sector. Universities should also become 24-hour learning centers and facilitate learning outside the classroom, rather than students just attending class and then going home to study.

2)   Shift pedagogical methods: Educators need to shift their pedagogical methods to developing a growth mindset among students, and to help students curate their search of knowledge, rather than seeing themselves as the sole source of information and authority. Participants also suggested that Tunisian universities start seeking accreditations and developing quality assurance policies to improve their performance.

Moreover, participants suggested creating a university evaluation website with statistics from each university and evaluations from students to create a greater system of accountability and professor responsiveness to students.

3)   Revise curriculum and graduation requirements: Many Tunisian students are not professionally proficient in any language and lack the general knowledge and soft skills to succeed in the workplace. Universities should provide more balanced educational offerings, including humanities and languages, to combat students' "triple illiteracy" (language, hard skills and soft skills). Universities should also shift away from simply testing students on memorized material and provide them with opportunities to become more autonomous and develop a "can do" mindset.

By providing more diverse offerings, students can also explore their passions and be empowered to choose subjects and career paths that are interesting to them. Many students are not happy in their particular areas of studies, and parents do not know how to help them navigate the educational system.

Universities should review the departments which are producing high numbers of unemployed graduates, and determine whether or not these departments should continue operating.

4) Incorporate soft skills throughout students' education:
Educational institutions need to inculcate the soft skills, emotional intelligence, and flexibility required for the next generation of graduates to succeed on the job market. This process needs to start in high school or earlier, long before students enter the university.

Educational institutions can also provide opportunities for students to develop soft skills by creating a richer campus life. This includes offering more extracurricular activities such as clubs or associations where they can develop strong communities, develop an ethical grounding, and practice skills such as communication and teamwork.

5) Greater communication and collaboration between the private sectors and universities in developing curriculum and orienting students toward future career opportunities: The private sector can communicate their skill and research needs to the education system, and the education system can collaborate with the private sector to provide students with internships, market exposure, and mentors. Universities should alternate between theoretical and practical training, and work to include the private sector's knowledge or insights within their curriculum, and not just host a career day or visiting lecturer once or twice a semester. While the private sector should not replace the university for students' education, the two can work hand-in-hand to meet shared objectives and goals.

Moreover, educational institutions should work to raise awareness amongst their students about future career options and opportunities, starting in high school or even earlier. Many students (and their families) have little to no idea about current job market needs and thus do not have sufficient direction or guidance when choosing a course of study in high school, at university, or in technical programs.

6) Democratize access to education, networks, and opportunities between economically privileged and marginalized regions: The Tunisian state can revitalize existing nationwide institutions, such as the ISET, cyberparcs and technopoles, to better educate students, offer professional conversion programs, retrain educators, and create opportunities for remote or distance work. Within these institutions, sporadic interventions such as visiting lecturers from the private sector or career days can be transformed into structural reforms.

To assist, participants proposed establishing partnerships between initiatives working to bridge the disparities between regions and cooperating with

dedicated local actors operating in these locations.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of broadening the mindsets of students living in socially, economically, or geographically marginalized regions.

7)   Look beyond Tunisia to create job opportunities in Tunisia: While many Tunisian graduates look abroad for career opportunities, Tunisia can also become a hiring destination for companies looking for tech talent. Participants emphasized the need to adopt an international mindset and promote a culture of remote work. Educational institutions, companies, and support organizations should reach out to companies interested in hiring Tunisians to work remotely. Technopoles and cyberparcs could also be utilized as remote work locations, especially in marginalized regions or outside big cities.

8)   A renewed focus on sectors with high employability: As part of the discussions with the European Union on the ALECA free-trade agreement, and in order to minimize the impact of brain drain to Europe, participants proposed the creation of a fund for the recertification of graduates and for a training of trainers in sectors with high employability.

White paper

April, 4 2017

White paper

April, 4 2017