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### MOROCCO

## Broader horizons – Universities switch to bachelor degree

Wagdy Sawahel 13 January 2020

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In the upcoming academic year Morocco is switching from the *Licence, Master, Doctorat* (LMD) system, mainly used in Francophone countries, to the bachelor degree system used in the Anglophone world, signaling the country’s intention to broaden its horizons beyond Western Europe, particularly France, and prepare its young people for a world where English “holds high capital”, according to experts.

The move was announced on 7 January by Moroccan Minister of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research Said Amzazi at the opening of the Moroccan-American conference held in Marrakech under the theme: “National pedagogical reform of higher education: Preparation for the implementation of the Bachelor”, according to *Morocco World News*.

The Moroccan-American conference was organised by Morocco’s ministry of education, in collaboration with the embassy of the United States in Morocco and the Moroccan-American Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange.

### LMD vs bachelor degree system

The LMD system has in the past increased the attractiveness of Moroccan universities, where more than 1.1 million students are enrolled. However, the bachelor degree system is expected to facilitate the mobility of Moroccan students to international institutions, Amzazi was quoted as saying.

The new system, he said, will allow Morocco to open up to international education systems, especially those in Anglophone countries that have demonstrated their efficiency and quality. Using United States universities as examples, the minister said nearly 50 US institutions are ranked by *Times Higher Education* among the top 100 universities in the world.

Amzazi said the new four-year bachelor degree system is expected to provide students with soft skills and strengthen their learning of foreign languages and information technology.

The new system will be introduced to first-year university students in September 2020 while those who are in their second year or higher will continue their studies according to the current LMD system. The National Agency for Higher Education and Scientific Research Quality Evaluation will evaluate the universities’ proposals before the launch of any registration campaigns.

Rosemary Salomone, professor of law at St John’s University in New York in the United States, told *University World News* the move was “not surprising”.

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## ‘No surprise’

“The recent appointment of a new delegate minister of higher education and scientific research, Driss Ouaouicha, who was the former president of Al Akhawayn University [in Ifrane] with a PhD from the University of Texas, in September 2019 was a signal that Morocco is broadening its horizons beyond Western Europe, and particularly France, and preparing its young people for a world where English holds high capital,” said Salomone.

The author of an upcoming book on global English, identity and linguistic justice, which looks at the situation in Morocco, Salomone said Morocco had been veering towards English and the Anglophone sphere for decades despite its French and Arabic ties.

“While France is Morocco’s largest foreign direct investor, the wounds of French colonisation still run deep,” Salomone said.

Debates last year over switching the teaching of secondary school science, mathematics and technical subjects from Arabic to foreign languages (presumably French) unleashed a torrent of support for English, even among some conservative pro-Arabic forces that considered the plan “neo-colonialist”, said Salomone.

“The underlying question was how best to remedy the **high rates of university dropouts and youth unemployment**,” she said.

“Meanwhile, the government suggested a shift to English over a 10-year period to develop the human capital in teachers.

“The Moroccan government also sees the need to position the country within the larger African continent and in the global economy.

“Aligning itself with the Anglophone world educationally could open more opportunities for cross-national exchanges of students, faculty and research,” she said.

## **Bold plan**

The move was welcomed by Amy Fishburn, senior director for internationalisation and partnerships in the Office of International Programs at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI).

“This is a very bold plan by Moroccan authorities and will be very challenging to implement but will be worth the effort,” Fishburn said.

“Morocco has been thinking about the effectiveness of its educational system for some time and this is one of the reasons why my own university AUI was launched in 1995,” she said.

According to Salomone, the prestigious university opened in 1995 using an American model of education and paved the way for teaching in English. In 2014, the government announced that students applying to scientific, technical and economic universities had to demonstrate a mastery of English. A special council appointed by King Mohammed VI that year to address the failing state of education recommended, although to no avail, adopting English in all Moroccan schools.

Fishburn said delegate minister Ouaouicha had been a “champion of the liberal arts education that has been the hallmark of AUI”.

“The move [to the bachelor degree system] follows several curriculum reforms of the past 20 years for more relevant programmes.

“We at AUI are proud that we have built on AUI’s mission to lead the advancement of higher education in Morocco.”

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Fishburn said a four-year bachelor degree would build soft skills along with the hard skills that would provide young people with a well-rounded education so they are better prepared to meet the workforce needs of Morocco and the evolving economy.

### **Correcting weaknesses**

Ahmed Chouari, associate professor in the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Moulay Ismail in Morocco, told *University World News* the new bachelor degree system in Morocco could address some of the weaknesses of the LMD system, including limited international opportunity for students and lack of preparedness among graduates for local and international job markets.

He also said it offered a system which had proved its efficiency in other countries (like the United States) and would improve English language proficiency.

Chouari also said the four-year bachelor degree would give students a better educational foundation and possibly curb **high university dropout rates**.

“Under the LMD system, a lot of students were unable to get their degrees and three years was not enough for students to acquire a strong educational background at different levels,” said Chouari, who is the author of a 2016 **journal article** on teaching critical thinking skills in Moroccan universities.

However, he also said a number of “practical questions” remained unanswered. These included “the roles of the teachers and students in the whole teaching-learning operation”.

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