



PACTUM

Position Paper on policy reforms in social, political and behavioral sciences at the academic level

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Introduction

Since the Jasmine Revolution of 2010- 2011 Tunisia has witnessed great structural changes. The main challenges stem from an economic growth still unable to sufficiently tackle significant unemployment

rates (particularly among young people), regional disparities, and a worsening global economic scenario. Decades of authoritarianism have certainly limited the capacity of Tunisia to modernise and upload its higher education system. This is particularly true in the fields of humanities, in particular social, political and behavioural sciences are often seen as dangerous by autocrats and their inner circle. The view that sociology, political science and international relations might expose the blatant anti-democratic character of the regime, becoming therefore strongholds of anti-regime resistance, advised the Tunisian autocracy to undermine such disciplines. More than ten years after the fall of Ben Ali's regime, it is urgent to address and overcome such issues.

Within this context, it is important to notice that social sciences departments are, after all, present in almost all Tunisian universities. In many cases, it could be argued, there are thousands of students enrolled in courses offered by such departments. Curricula in social, political and behavioural sciences, however, tend to focus overwhelming on legal studies and history. During the PACTUM project lifetime, Tunisian university partners have underlined three important aspects: political science, international relations and administrative sciences are strongly underrepresented in social, political and behavioural sciences academic offer in Tunisia especially with regard to Master Degrees.

About PACTUM Project

PACTUM is a capacity-building project aiming to develop a high-quality, multi-disciplinary and stimulating program in social, political and behavioural sciences. The target country of this project is Tunisia, a key partner for European Union Higher Education Institutions. Tunisian universities have recently undergone a remarkable transformation, which is bound to, and complements, the processes of modernization and democratization of the political system. Academic cooperation in a delicate and rapidly evolving field like that of social sciences – and in





particular those disciplines which are central to the formation of future ruling classes and higher civil servants – is a crucial test for prospective cooperation among Tunisian HEIs and European HEIs engaging with capacity building activities.

The PACTUM project, aims at sharing best practices and knowledge in the field of social sciences, with a special focus on modernization, sustainability, and Internationalization of the Higher Education system in Tunisia. The goals of the project converge on the crucial need to boost positive impact on students and mutual enrichment between European and Tunisian academics.

PACTUM's main outcomes will be an integrating Master Program and a series of five summer schools dedicated to sustainability, good governance and public administration, democratic theories, and participation in the Mediterranean area. All these activities will be held at five Tunisian universities and will involve three European Universities (University of Siena, University of Montpellier, University of Granada and UNIMED).

The **specific objectives** of PACTUM are the following:

- The organization of a series of Summer School in synergy with the Master Course in order to set up teaching activities for students, public employees, institutions personnel, general public.
- The creation of a post-lauream master course in Social Political and behavioural sciences.
- Implement capacity building actions for teachers, researchers, technicians and administrative staff of HEIs Partners from Tunisia.
- Engage stakeholders for the enlargement of target groups and the improvement of employability opportunities for master students.

Project Partners

- University of Siena, Italy (coordinator)





- University of Carthage, Tunisia
- University of Sfax, Tunisia
- University of Sousse, Tunisia
- University of Tunis El Manar, Tunisia
- University of Kairouan, Tunisia
- University of Granada, Spain
- UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union, Italy
- University of Montpellier, France
- Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Tunisia

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Context and background

Despite the important progress made, Tunisia still faces considerable challenges related to weak job creation, high unemployment and macroeconomic financial conditions. Like most Maghreb countries,

Tunisia needs to create economic opportunities on a scale sufficient to absorb the growing number of young people. The high unemployment rate of graduates (reaching 16.2 percent in the first quarter

of 2023¹) should equally to be noted, indicating a mismatch in qualifications that do not correspond to the needs of enterprises and the weakness of the absorptive capacity of higher education and public sector.

¹ Belgacem, A., & Vacher, J. (2023). Why Is Tunisia's Unemployment So High? Evidence From Policy Factors, Working paper, International Monetary Fund



As underlined by the Union for Unemployed Graduates (UDC), the educational system in Tunisia “has geared towards students passing final examinations instead of centring on the skills and knowledge necessary for the job market”. By creating an innovative, highly-competitive and path-breaking master programme in social, political and behavioural sciences, the PACTUM project could contribute to better equip students with skills and competences by increasing their opportunities to find a decent job.

This is in turn an important element to booster the stability of the country and to pursue democracy in the wake of the 2010-11 Arab uprising. In fact, it is precisely the fact that the establishment of democracy did not go hand in hand with any real improvement of the conditions for hundreds of thousands of young Tunisians that has produced frustration, recurrent protests, and social disorders in the post Ben Ali’s period (Feltrin 2018). Furthermore, another major challenge that the North African country is the quality of bureaucracy. Once the indexes of “Bureaucracy Quality” and “Control of Corruption” are combined, Tunisia scores at the real bottom of the ranking among liberal democracies. According to the data provided by the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG), no fully liberal democratic systems do worse than Tunisia in such a regard. This is problematic for several reasons. In contrast to authoritarian systems, legitimacy plays a crucial role in democracies. As shown by Gilley (2006), legitimacy cannot be reduced to fixed socioeconomic conditions or democracy as a principle. Rather, good governance, democratic rights, and welfare gains provide the most robust determinants of legitimacy. Evidently, poor functioning or politicized bureaucracies risk to be a serious obstacle to the success of economic, political, and social reforms. Similarly, the delivering of public goods in such situations might become extremely opportunistic, favouring some specific sectors – in class, regional, religious, tribal, or ethnic terms – and discriminating other parts, impeding the tacit acceptance of the system by the latter (Cornell and Lapuente 2014). Legitimacy is strictly connected to democratic stability as well. As underlined by Andersen et al. (2014), the ability of implementing policies is what matters the most for democracies. Poor records of economic performance and wealth distribution can increase the instability of democratic regimes. Even more seriously, a politicized public administration rises the chances of an authoritarian resurgence in the medium to long-term. According to Cornell and Lapuente (2014), this is the product of an indirect polarization of society. It is indeed the presence of a direct chain of





accountability connecting the government with public employees that makes the latter partisan and the excluded sectors of society disgruntled. This can be particularly challenging for democratic stability in phases of serious economic crises and popular upheavals, leading in some cases to military coups. To conclude, a professional bureaucracy seems important to enhance legitimacy, especially in democratic contexts not yet fully consolidated, decrease the likelihood of democratic breakdown, and spur greater economic growth.

To address such compelling and pressing issues, the Tunisian state has to reform its bureaucracy. In the medium-long term, however, an important support in this regard can be certainly provided by the training of highly competent and professional state workers. A crucial step in this direction is the development of modern and internationalized social sciences curricula. White-collar workers employed in the bureaucracy tend to overwhelmingly come from the humanities. Therefore, improving the quality of Master Degrees in the Higher Education system in Tunisia in social, political and behavioural sciences is nowadays crucial to enhance the professionalization of state employees tomorrow.

Rationale of the position paper

This position paper is framed within the PACTUM project following the three years project activities and in particular the updated needs analysis of the Tunisian Higher Education System in the field of social, political and behavioural sciences carried out in the WP1. This has been carried out thanks to a comprehensive literature review aimed at identifying the existing governance frameworks and thanks to the development of a tailored analysis of key dimensions with the support and collaboration of the Tunisian universities, both partners and not partners of the PACTUM project. The study aimed at identifying the current situation of the universities involved in the project and enabled the identification of specific needs to address in the field of social, political and behavioural sciences through the D2.1.

The study has been carried out starting from desk research, consisting in reviewing relevant literature and collecting previous expertise in order to develop a baseline knowledge, and standardize the understanding of concepts and terminologies related to HE governance among the consortium institutions. Upon the desk research findings, the report has been informed by



the data from a survey submitted to all the 13 public Tunisian HEIs and the results of the focus groups that were conducted online by the UNIMED team, leader of WP1. As a further step, UNIMED mapped in this report all the relevant stakeholders (international and domestic actors) through a stakeholder map that allowed the PACTUM project partners, in particular the Tunisian HEIs to know the impact of each stakeholder at institutional and national level and to know how to involve them in the Master course design WP2. Due to some internal circumstances, the PACTUM Master did not obtain the accreditation from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Tunisia, however the PACTUM consortium reiterates the importance of the involvement of NGOs and other civil society associations, professional organisations, public authorities at regional and national level for a better policy reform in social, political and behavioural sciences at the academic level. In order to achieve this important objective, this position paper seeks to provide with some recommendations to address the issues.

Furthermore, in order to meet with all the relevant stakeholders already mapped and above mentioned and to further enrich the position paper on policy reform in social, political and behavioural sciences at the academic level, a consultative workshop will be organised in Tunisia by July 2024. Despite the official end of the PACTUM project, this willingness and interest by the PACTUM consortium highlights and reiterates the commitment of all the Partners, to keep alive the discussion and reflection on this relevant topic for the academic staff of the involved Tunisian HEIs, their students and young graduates, the administrative and public employees and the society at large.

To who the position paper is addressed:

This position paper is addressed to the following target groups:

1) Students, who are the main beneficiaries of the PACTUM project.

A number of factors continue to dominate the Tunisian political and social landscape, ranging from the illusion of genuine justice and high rates of unemployment to ideological polarization,





widespread corruption² and economical and social problems. These challenges are epitomized by the Tunisian youth, who are generally perceived as the major instigators of the Jasmine revolution³. Indeed, there is a wide consensus that the Arab Spring revolutions were triggered by the Arab youth who realized that ‘their generation was living in an undignified liminal state of pre-adulthood’⁴. After the Arab Spring, the Tunisian youth were initially optimistic about the future as they called for dignity, economic justice and political emancipation. But their aspirations turned to frustration as their hopes of socio-economic and political transformation began to fade. They have become increasingly sceptical about the capacity and willingness of the new political elites, in successive governments since 2011, to affect meaningful and sustainable social transformation⁵.

Students therefore should be at the core of the higher education reform, their needs, aspirations and desires should be taken into consideration in this reform process where higher education plays a pivotal role, where teaching and learning through new Master programme in social, political and behavioural sciences should form a new class of future leaders of the country. By providing the students and young generations with the tools to understand a complex world and become citizens aware of their rights and duties, this will also serve to train tomorrow’s public employees in Tunisia.

2) Teaching staff which represents the second target of the project.

Teachers, trainers, researchers, instructors would need to be continuously upskilled and trained in a multi-disciplinary environment and with an international perspective, thanks to peer training, exchanges of good practices and knowledge with the European peers. Through a continuous improvement and training teaching staff will acquire new competences and knowledge in fields

² Judith Butler, ‘“We, The People”: Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly’, in *What is a People*, ed. Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari and Jacques Rancière (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 49–64; and Mansouri, *Prospects for Democratization*.

³ Isabel Schafer, *Political Revolt and Youth Unemployment in Tunisia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); O. Somi, *Youth Policy in Tunisia: The Internationalization of Youth as a Public Policy Issue*, Power2Youth IRIS/CNRS, Working Paper No. 9, 2016; Alcinda M. Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*, (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd and International African Institute, Royal African Society, and World Peace Foundation, 2013).

⁴ Chloe Mulderig, *An Uncertain future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring*, (Boston: Boston University Press, 2013)

⁵ Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*.



and subjects that have been constantly overlooked during the long-lasting authoritarian period in Tunisia in the field of social, political and behavioural sciences.

3) Public employees.

In the outreach mission of the universities, it should be highlighted the importance to involve public employees and further local actors from public and local authorities in any training and teaching activities that universities may organise in the above-mentioned field, with the ultimate goal to generate new layers of well-prepared bureaucrats.

Therefore, this position paper is also addressed to this profile of beneficiaries who should be included in the teaching and academic offer in the HEIs in Tunisia, aiming at forming Tunisian public employees with the skills necessary to intervene in public policies and self-reform from within their own institution along the lines of transparency, accountability, and meritocracy.

4) Civil society at large.

In this framework of continuous efforts of improvement of the academic offer of the above-mentioned field, to equip students with necessary and appropriate skills to become future's leaders and to have better prepared public employees, it is deemed urgent to involve society at large, thus to establish further cooperation with some of those Tunisian associations and organizations in the field of political accountability and transparency. In such regard, Tunisian HEIs are invited to organise collateral and satellite activities open to the local community where to discuss and spread ideas about public policy, accountability, human rights, democracy, social values.

PACTUM project partners believe Universities in collaboration with civil society, local and public authorities could play a decisive role in promoting public policies and self-reform along the lines of transparency, accountability, and meritocracy in Tunisian society. However, they would like to shed light on certain issues they consider necessary to consider and provide recommendations in order to enhance the professionalization of the bureaucratic body and its capacity to formulate, implement, and evaluate public policies.





Recommendations

1) Need of increasing the independence of political science teaching

Teaching of political sciences in Tunisia is still part of the educational offers provided within the law faculties and that there are no faculties or institutes in Tunisia dedicated exclusively to the teaching of political sciences. The lack of a comprehensive educational offer in the field of political and educational sciences is determined by a still present resistance at institutional and university governance level and by the deep-rooted conviction that political science is a branch of law, and more specifically of public law. In the light of this, a further and improved coordination between universities, and in particular between the academic staff involved in the teaching of political sciences courses and modules is expected, in order to increase the synergies and to draw a defined plan for the construction of a bachelor's degree dedicated to teaching political science in Tunisia.

2) Modernization of teaching and learning practices

In the framework of the academic autonomy granted to universities, efforts should be made to advance in teaching and learning practices and raise the quality of education in the field of political and social sciences. Education techniques are required to be amended to meet the social and technological demands. Furthermore, a more practical and experienced approach should be promoted and adopted in teaching and training,

3) Increasing the multi-disciplinarity of the Tunisian education offer in political and social sciences

Along with the development suggested for modernising the teaching and learning methods, the need of increase the multi-disciplinarity of the educational offer in political and social sciences is crucial. In this direction, current syllabuses in political and social sciences should be more focused on international and diplomatic aspects or to the comprehension of the internal political mechanisms.





Increasing the multi-disciplinarity of the Tunisian education offer in political and social sciences, including in the future masters' degree, courses and modules taught directly by actors playing on the field of international relations, such as diplomats, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, representatives of NGOs, achieving a balance between theoretical training and more practical training and providing English-language trainings are all fundamental elements to make it possible to achieve not only a higher level of training but also a higher rate of employment immediately after completion of the master's degree courses.

4) Enhancing the civic role of Universities to support societies and economies to complete or improve a democratic transition or consolidation.

Third Mission of the universities in Tunisian Higher Education system needs of further attention. Universities in Tunisia have the potential of being the starting point for the future of the country, the bridge between education and the job market, contributing to local developments. Capacity building activities should strengthen the capacity of staff members to engage in fruitful relations with the private sector and local communities, by engaging external actors from the socio-economic field in order to meet the real needs of the job market and provide students with the necessary skills. A special attention should be dedicated to the mechanisms to follow-up students during their university career and after the graduation. A major focus on employability and placement is recommended, building on the work already in place and by strengthening the administrative staff skills in managing and offer services to the students. Contamination between Higher Education Institutions, the private sector, companies and research centres has the potential to increase graduates' employability and respond effectively to the socio-economic needs of the country.

5) Strengthening staff capacity to manage internationalization opportunities

A focus should be posed in the training on the management of international relations. Capacity building should be directed to train staff of the Department of Scholarships and Cultural Relations (those in charge for international relations) to fully exploit all the possibilities offered by international cooperation. Improving the capacity of universities to manage internationalization





opportunities may also result in the possibility to amplify and diversify the sources of revenue for HEIs. While strengthening staff capacities to manage international relations, a consequence would be to increase the degree of transparency and accountability in the management of international funds, which may in turn grant to the university a wider set of financial resources.

6) Encouraging cross cutting collaborations and partnership through tailored communication

Tailored information sharing should be provided in a timely and transparent manner to facilitate cross cutting collaborations and partnerships among universities, local and public actors, students, youth and civil society, and should be further explored through multi-stakeholder platforms. Indeed, a deep collaboration would create a synergy in promoting and implementing professionalization of the bureaucratic body and its capacity to formulate, implement, and evaluate public policies. Then, a contact point should be designated within each higher institution involved with the aim to provide detailed and customized information and to create synergies and collaborations among all these actors.

Finally, PACTUM partners urge higher education and university leaders, teaching staff, public employees, policymakers and stakeholders to take into account the above-mentioned considerations in doing so.

