

THE MAGHREB DIGITAL LEARNING AND EDUCATION INNOVATION CONFERENCE 2014

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ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

Why is digital learning important for the Maghreb countries? What are the obstacles that stand in the way of its development, and how can it help tackle some of the most pressing issues in the region such as employability and English skills?

These were some of the themes tackled at the Maghreb Digital Learning and Education Innovation Conference 2014.

We believe that bringing together education policy-makers, universities and academia, social entrepreneurs, business leaders, and international technology experts can offer new ways to exploit the possibilities offered by new education technologies and answer the issues listed above.

“Education Technology is particularly attractive given the large number of youth in the region and the need to scale sustainably and cheaply”.

Wamda Research Labs,
Octobre 2014.

The conference was the first event of its kind in bringing together e-learning experts, practitioners, ministerial authorities, digital entrepreneurs and young learners from across the Maghreb and further afield.

The event culminated in a lively debate both at the event and online, followed by a ‘dragons den’ in which the 9 Innovation Teams presented their innovative technology-based solutions to the challenges facing the Maghreb.

Across the three-day event in Tunis, over 120 speakers and conference delegates from the Maghreb countries, the UK and further afield gathered to present the latest know-how and innovative case studies. The two Tunisian ministers representing higher education, scientific research and ICT, as well as vocational training enthused the conference with passionate opening addresses.

After an overview on e-learning in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, expert speakers shared their expertise in mixing art and technology to stir innovation and creativity; making the right purchasing decisions for national e-learning programmes; developing digital skills among students; delivering and developing MOOCs; improving digital competencies in the Maghreb; solutions for growing teachers’ digital capability; and the global investment climate for education.

In workshops, participants collaborated in Innovation Teams to discover how digital learning technology can help answer the region’s urgent education needs from school level, to university and vocational education.

WHY DIGITAL LEARNING ?

Digital learning, also known as e-learning, is about supporting education through using information and communications technology (ICT). Around the world, digital learning tools are increasingly becoming integrated into academic and vocational education.

“Teachers should be trained to integrate new technologies and online resources into their approach”

Hammamet Conference 2013 Report, p22.

In the Maghreb region of North Africa, the Arab Spring has given new impetus to education reform in order to solve some of its most pressing problems. We believe that digital learning offers the potential to solve some of the region’s biggest education issues.

Youth unemployment rates in the region are some of the highest in the world, with up to %30 among young people unemployed. Governments are investing significant efforts into allowing youth to participate fully in economic growth. A major strand of this is education reform. The traditional means of education cannot keep with the growing demand for quality learning among students and employees, and private sector employers often lament poor employability skills including IT competency.

THE REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT

The British Council’s Revolutionary Promise research revealed that young people in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia feel they have become the ‘sacrificed generation’. Considering the hardships they face, from joblessness to political exclusion, delegates at the Hammamet Conference 2013 agreed that the present moment represents an historic opportunity to empower young people through education.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Following some of the recommendations of the Hammamet Conference 2013 Report, we believe a conversation needs to take place to fully explore the benefits of digital education tools for the Maghreb region. A diverse range of stakeholders are active in this space including;

- Government (Education Ministries)
- Teachers, professors and education leaders
- Students
- social entrepreneurs and digital entrepreneurs
- International education technology experts
- employers
- investors
- the media

We hope that gathering these key stakeholders has provided innovative insights into the needs of the region for moving forward with digital learning.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The Maghreb Digital Learning and Education Innovation Conference (Tunis, 10-8 December 2014) achieved a fairly comprehensive capture of the actual and potential digital learning field in the region:

- a) A wide conference mix of Maghreb and international delegates, with both state and commercial players represented, students, teachers, ministries, leaders, vendors, media partners, demonstrating potential for regional and international partnering and collaboration
- b) Quality and quantity of attendees from all sectors and geographies ensured dialogues, networks and projects were realistic, authorized, and driven by accurate knowledge of priorities and problems in each territory

The conference strongly confirmed the prior conjecture of a region ripe for a digital transformation of its education system, and added a new layer of granular detail and rich personal contact to the existing high-level knowledge and network.

The event proved that there is widespread enthusiasm for digital learning methods, supported by a body of informed practitioners, who demonstrate familiarity with the core conceptual and technical challenges, and can produce sensible general appraisals of costs, benefits and barriers.

At the pinnacles of the scene, the leaders of national institutions responsible for learning technology, and for advising ministers, are experts of global stature with mature and leading-edge knowledge

At institution director level we find a clear consensus for rapid adoption of digital learning as an essential transformation of

the education ecosystem. There is wide agreement on areas of focus being ELT and employability.

At lead practitioner level there is an informed appreciation that education innovation demands more than mere technology procurement, and encompasses skill development, institutional reform, curricular and cultural change.

Sceptics of digital learning technology were not present in the room but their positions and issues are known and reported (such as the older generation of teachers in all establishments)

Infrastructural arrangements (interconnectors, protocols etc) are in hand, known, and in most cases the products are satisfactory and credible, with further plans published or already coming in the pipeline.

Legal, administrative and financial requirements for accelerated transition to digital learning are broadly understood by ministries, are partly underway already, and coherent high-level plans for further changes are published or about to emerge.

While Libya faces particular problems that mean Government-led initiatives are currently unfeasible, the Libyan delegation nevertheless showed an appetite for contact, action, and reflection: they are determined not to be denied digital opportunities as a side-effect of their troubles.

The fit between UK as a global leader in education technology and a major education exporter, with the Maghreb situation, is excellent. UK experience of and attitudes to digital learning map directly

onto all the potential players in a regional education innovation drive – and do so much more directly than US or French or German offers, - the other potential suppliers of transformation, content and solutions.

This is a good foundation for growth. Building on these assets in rapid, scalable, sustainable and affordable ways, is the next priority for the all stakeholders.

Within this overall positive disposition, the conference contributions and the observations among local practitioners revealed some structural issues that will be challenges for the transition to scaled digital education delivery:

- Education in the region reflects cultures of state-led initiatives which depend on ministry bureaucracy to create conditions for policy, funding, delivery.
- There is a lack of specialized distance learning institutions (exception: Tunis) to provide baseline capacity for, and experience of, scaled digital learning operations.
- A lack of capacity from domestic solution suppliers – notably the immaturity of commercial providers of digital products and services, who have not ventured into the learning space
- “Pilotitis” – the Maghreb digital learning field is dominated by experimental projects, while massified and standardized digital delivery is rare or absent.
- An instructor-centered cultural paradigm – this means technology-enhanced learning is at risk of defaulting to teacher-led transmission

mechanisms which merely reduce cost and do not transform learning. The opportunities for greater enrichment, deeper learning through student-centered pedagogies will be hard to win against this cultural drag towards top-down transmission.

- International suppliers of education content, learning solutions and transformation support do not currently view the Maghreb as a priority activity region, in comparison to the rich export markets in the Arabian Gulf and China. This applies to UK and other mature market participants. Investigating and resolving such blockage points will be a priority for education and policy partners in this region. These are problems that have been overcome successfully elsewhere. None are show-stoppers, but failure to address them will limit speed, scale, and efficiency.
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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BRITISH COUNCIL'S DIGITAL LEARNING AND POLICY IN THE MAGHREB

The British Council, as a result of the conference, now sits inside a network of detailed and warm dialogue between educators at all levels across the Maghreb. Practitioners with core digital learning skills and passion for technology-based innovation have shown their work and findings to each other and to the British Council, and are enthusiastic about developing this relationship.

Examples (among many) of important digital learning initiatives surfaced in this dialogue are:

- Morocco's early steps in MOOCs (with EdX)
- Algeria's CERIST programme of HE interconnectors
- Tunisia's dynamic Tech Age Teachers (TAT) programme (with IREX)

The conversations now underway between partners, and with British Council participation, range from granular "geeky" content about digital learning practice, to high level policy dialogue at ministerial level. These conversation networks are valuable assets for local and international partners, which did not exist before, due to the fragmented nature of the digital learning scene in Maghreb. The limited nature of regional dialogue on education technology, and the recency of the field in Maghreb nations, means that the British Council may for the time being take a leadership role in this network.

The Maghreb learning partners encountered through the conference are, typically at a launch phase in the journey to becoming leading digital practitioners. British Council efforts should be directed at supporting them on their journeys.

Immediate actions regarding these partners should be:

- help the actors known to the British Council to deepen their skills, and achieve regional stature, and maturity in their projects
- identify other practitioners like them, to keep open lines to all Maghreb cells of IT teaching excellence, in order to sustain the British Council's credibility as a networked player in the Maghreb digital learning space.

To achieve these outcomes, the British Council's ongoing engagement with these early-stage technology-driven educators should start with the following easy wins:

- Support known good practice clusters to achieve breadth and depth, through offering them access to standard pre-existing programmes of exchange, networking and collaboration. Networking with UK leading digital learning practitioners has started and will be easy to build on.
- Offer a mildly packaged ELT offer (eg English for ed tech) to help them to develop a more global stance, and raise their game by referencing global practice through English-language content and peers

INNOVATION CHALLENGES

The conference format of 9 collaborative teams addressing digital learning challenges set by the British Council allowed a snapshot of creative thinking about solutions to known bottlenecks such as IT competency, slow adoption of digital techniques by teachers, and employability.

The response of teams to these challenges was much more impressive than anyone had expected, with all teams undertaking coherent problem analysis and original thinking about solutions, in a rapid and compressed space.

Crucially, the process modeled a new form of digital leadership – in which international teams whose members ranged from students to teachers to senior directors of prestigious institutes all collaborated in “flat” environments to solve problems.

Endorsing the effort and the approach, with a convincing and prompt execution of the follow-up offer, will be important in order to preserve the momentum and brand value of the British Council captured at the conference, of a dynamic and action-oriented player in the digital learning space.



RECOMMENDATIONS : UK STAKEHOLDERS AND POLICY

The British Council education innovation initiative in Maghreb is creating a foundation for UK stakeholders to make successful engagements in the Maghreb in areas such as policy, development, education services, publishing, partnership and technology

The impacts of the initiative on UK stakeholders will be:

- The emerging Maghreb digital learning sector, and its ultimate funders in NGOs and Ministries, will view UK as a source of inspiration, expertise, services and partnering in projects
- Close connections to leading Maghreb educators will allow the UK to be an influential voice on education reform at all levels from operational to policy/minister level within forums such as Going Global and the Maghreb ministerial dialogue process
- The new British Council-centered network of digital educators and stakeholders in the region is an asset that gives an advantage to BC partners in terms of better and swifter outcomes, higher quality networks etc
- Digital education in the Maghreb, as well as a theme of UK policy, also offers attractive opportunities for commercial activity by UK companies

a) Strongly growing market for online learning globally (research estimates forecast %23 CAGR for most online learning sectors 17-2014) will give dynamism to all education exporters – and UK has a globally significant profile.

b) Strong Maghreb education demand driven by population growth, rising expectations, and pressure for reform, with high acceptance among learners of digital and blended solutions

c) Strong demand for online ELT solutions in Maghreb as countries reorient from being francophone

d) Rise of private investment in Maghreb tertiary education will create institutions looking to digital technology to boost efficiency

UK stakeholders interested in turning these ingredients into projects are advised to focus on two catalytic zones which consistently emerge as priorities and areas where clear need is matched by obvious solutions. The conference clearly demonstrated these as the hottest areas for activity and demand. We discuss them below.

- Content topics: ELT and Employability.
- Action sectors: private / new universities

ELT AND EMPLOYABILITY

These two topic areas (which actually may best be packaged as a single theme e.g. English and job skills) were repeatedly demanded by practitioners and institutions.

- Algerian participants reported acute shortage of well trained teachers, overwhelming ELT demand at post16- level, need for syllabus/curriculum/materials overhaul at all levels, and a wish to reform ELT pedagogies to emphasize communicative and business English.
- Moroccan participants reported the same, and added that the requirement for all new University staff to have English, and the beginnings of HE course modules delivered in English, and the switch in some Secondary schools to IB in English, all presage a tipping point in the Anglicization of HE.

- Tunisian participants, further along the path from French to English as the medium of instruction and business, emphasized that the top element of any employability training is English language: it is what employers want.

- Curriculum reform projects to bring employability skills into public university curricula in Tunisia have begun. However, there is 5-3 year horizon for implementation. No alternative quick fixes are in sight. The Tunisian HE private sector already claims new approaches and progress on employability

The role of private institutions in meeting HE demand seems set to expand dramatically and imminently.

a) With Actis group announcing a major investment in Tunisian private HE on the eve of the conference, and several Moroccan delegates from private Universities in Rabat and Casablanca at the conference able to give direct information about their institutions, there seemed to be a tipping point.

b) The large, venerable and visible national state institutions suffer from overcrowded classes and low employability records. They are ceding leadership to a more dynamic private sector. Its themes are employability, work experience, education quality, technology and flexible learning.

- In Morocco, the legal and constitutional framework for approving private sector HE supplier degrees, and online degrees, is a work in progress and expected to deliver an accreditation mechanism external to the Ministry in 2015.

- A senior Moroccan ministry official confirmed that UK external branch campus operations, particularly those offering English language teaching and co-created syllabi, would be welcome and that the ministry would like to enter dialogue with UK partners.

- Algeria may not be such a distant prospect: the severe shortage of teachers, and the growing recognition of the need for pedagogic reform, coupled with a proven Government willingness to expand HE, may private provider create opportunities although we have no evidence that private-sector led model is sought as it is in Morocco.

- Tunisia's path to external HE supply looks now established with the Actis investment in a private chain.

Private sector players in the supply chains for digital learning also have started to appear, and gave a flavor of their offer at the conference. The Tunisian private company Digital Mania was widely praised for its presentation and caught the imagination of all delegates for its "serious games" based learning offer. The Algerian start-up incubator programme at Sidi Abdullah had made a huge effort to attend and although it is early days shows a sophisticated and best-practice understanding of the process of establishing private ventures in digital technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS : MAGHREB STAKEHOLDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The Maghreb education innovation community is – on the basis of this conference – at a promising early stage of its development, and feels enabled, with good reason, to develop further.

General observations made above state broad positive and restricting factors and priorities to address. Specific recommendations for the Maghreb digital learning community are;

- A widening of dialogue and participation, so that leadership and momentum rests not just with state “pinnacle” institutions and their senior officials, but is handed more to students, businesspeople, classroom teachers, citizen organizations including social entrepreneurs, commercial and non-national players. Every experience globally of digital expansions shows that breadth, and indeed some measure of competitive anarchy, drives success.
- Increased exposure to international best practice, both through observing global solutions, and by encouraging global players to enter the Maghreb education space on suitable terms. In learning, globalization is a potent force for innovation and change, which will help Maghreb youth to find jobs and support civic society.
- A shift of focus away from experimentation and piloting, towards scale and duration. The gains from digital learning need to spread widely in order to justify the investments. In this transition, projects will inevitably sacrifice novelty and originality, in order to gain replicability and robustness.

ACTIONS THAT COULDSUPPORT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS :

- 1) Programmes of regional dialogue between digital learning communities across Maghreb national borders, and of national dialogue aiming at involving multiple constituencies in leadership. The British Council and other potential supporters of such programmes will be supportive, but Maghreb stakeholders are ready to lead their own initiatives locally and regionally using other partners.
- 2) Invitations and open doors to the global education technology community, with creation of frameworks to encourage international players in partnering, investing, certifying, accrediting, training and localizing of existing assets. Visibility for Maghreb education sector in global digital learning forums (such as SXSWEd, Educause, Online Educa, BETT etc) is a quick route.
- 3) For increasing the scale and number of digital learning programmes, approaches such as the publication of standards and frameworks, creation of independent certification agencies, and the opening of supply to commercial consortia, have been effective in stimulating the massification of digital learning in emerging settings such as Brazil, India and China. These could become policy directions for Ministries and institutions.

REFLECTION : CONFERENCE DIRECTOR'S SUGGESTIONS AND THOUGHTS

Two themes of importance were absent from this conference. Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship.

- Leadership in digital transformations is not like leadership in other fields – and I perceive a need to change the style of leadership for those in positions of influence in this market. Progress will depend on flat working through “bottom-up” processes, and handing the initiative to partners, including to extra-territorial partners and across regions. “Flipped” processes, where leaders empower external communities to acquire and hold knowledge, will be more appropriate than directive leadership where senior post-holders set goals and exercise command. This agenda will require attention.

- Social entrepreneurship is an important business model for education innovation. In fast-developing digital learning markets such as Turkey, Kenya, Ghana, it has been an incubation space for talent and technology. As a result of a late cancellation by a speaker, social entrepreneurship was not addressed in the conference programme, and not explicitly identified as a force in education innovation. This force in digital learning does exist in the Maghreb, and needs to be harnessed into the conversation.

To this extent, the conference still has some unfinished business.

The enthusiastic response of participants suggests strongly that further editions of the conference – ideally delivered in custom formats by local partners in a cascade model at their own institutions – would be welcome and effective. If this can be launched, the task of the BC will eventually move towards programming content at a much higher level, aiming at inspiration and pump-priming for an established digital learning ecosystem, and to step aside from (as at present) delivering fully fledged curation of the community.

The strength and consistency and extent of the demand for UK-branded ELT and HE solutions in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia was very striking. I believe that UK education service providers have an exciting opportunity both to serve the eager and well-schooled learners of the Maghreb, and to establish significant overseas operations in an attractive emerging market. A programme to present this opportunity, and support those who express interest, would be timely and impactful.

Stephen Haggard, le 15 décembre 2014

APPENDIX - THE EDUCATION INNOVATION CHALLENGES TACKLED AT THE CONFERENCE

1- Accelerated adoption of blended learning in Higher Education

A planned mix of online and face-to-face learning (“blend”) balances benefits to learners with scale and effectiveness for institutions. However, the change to this mode brings costs and challenges. Write the plan to accelerate the adoption of blended learning across the Maghreb up to a threshold of %25. This is the level at which digital learning becomes “embedded” and each institution and faculty can develop its preferred model. What do you need from Ministers, from Institutions, from professors?

2- Quick fix to get Higher Education content online

Learners in Maghreb universities and colleges want their professors to post class notes online along with internet readings and lecture slides. However, it doesn't usually happen and most professors are unwilling to change their practice. Your team challenge: create an interim “quick fix” solution powered by students, which will ensure course content is findable and organised online even when professors are failing or refusing to help. Make sure you resolve copyright and permission problems.

3- Social support for learning

Parents wish to support their children in primary education, but often do not know how to do help them, especially where

the parents themselves have low educational attainment. Invent a phone-based solution for a Maghreb setting, involving appropriate technology, for enabling all parents to improve childrens' school performance.

4- Interactive online job matching platform

Transparency in the job-seeking market and easy access to job opportunities stimulates employees to understand skills required, gain relevant qualifications, and apply for appropriate positions. Design and plan to launch an interactive online job matching platform for employers and graduate jobseekers in one Maghreb country. The platform must be better than any existing job matching service in the region.

5- Online CPD from local suppliers

Maghreb employers say they wish to have better localised online and e-learning solutions for professional development for employees, both for in-service training (CPD- continual professional development) and job- readiness training for jobseekers. Understand why regional software and content companies are not making online CPD products to supply this need - and creating a scalable regional solution that stimulates an online CPD industry in the Maghreb.

6- Skills for the 21st Century

Employers in Maghreb, especially those in dynamic international sectors such as offshoring, energy, technology and tourism, say graduates in the Maghreb leave University and arrive at work without the skills for 21st Century workplaces. Develop an online tool called 'Skills for 21st century' which will offer a digital solution direct to students while at University, but will operate outside and beyond their university settings. What will this look like and how could it be used with students?

7- Roadmap for raising University Teachers' IT competency

University staff IT competency is an essential element of implementing digital learning reforms.

Devise a roadmap for raising the ICT competency of all university staff in the Maghreb to unesco ict competency for teachers framework : level – technology literacy by 2025. Get feedback on your proposal from partners who might help fund or deliver the goal.

8- Write a blueprint for education ministry reform

Detail a roadmap for reforming the education ministry in your country to better adopt education technologies

9- IT Competency of School Teachers

School teacher IT competency is an essential element of digital learning reforms.

Devise a roadmap for raising the ICT competency of all K12- teachers in the Maghreb to unesco ict competency for teachers framework : level – technology literacy by 2025. Get feedback on your proposal from partners who might help fund or deliver the goal.

FURTHER READING

EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA

A report entitled The Challenge of North Africa was published to coincide with the Hammamet Conference 2014. The chapter Education in North Africa is available here:

http://www.britishcouncil.tn/sites/britishcouncil.tn/files/education_in_north_africa_-_hammet_conference_2014.pdf

THE CHALLENGE OF NORTH AFRICA

Full report available here:

http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/media_wysiwyg/20141124ChallengeNorthAfricaSpencer.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Haggard is a consultant in education technology strategy. His clients are governments, publishers and universities seeking impact, profit or reach for elearning and digital content. Shaped by over a decade running the online portfolio of top knowledge-based brands, he operates with authority and sensitivity both as a domain expert, and as an assurer of quality projects. Based in London, and fluent in many cultures and languages, his networks and experience in EMEA and North America ensure a sophisticated and cutting-edge perspective on online learning – whether approached as a profession, as a business, or as tech frontier.

ABOUT THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations. We create international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries and build trust between them worldwide.

We work in more than 100 countries and our 7000 staff including 2000 teachers work with thousands of professionals and policy makers and millions of young people every year by teaching English, sharing the arts and delivering education and society programmes.

We are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter. A core publically-funded grant provides less than 25 per cent of our turnover which last year was 781 £m. The rest of our revenues are earned from services which customers around the world pay for, through education and development contracts and from partnerships with public and private organisations.

All our work is in pursuit of our charitable purpose and supports prosperity and security for the UK and globally.

For more information, please visit www.britishcouncil.org. You can also keep in touch with the British Council through twitter.com/britishcouncil and blog.britishcouncil.org

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