

Chapter 16

The Challenges and Future of the English Department in Neoliberal Morocco



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Abstract This chapter explores several challenges facing English studies at the Moroccan University with a focus on how the English department is affected by the neoliberal policymaking environment of successive Moroccan governments since the 1980s. The contribution provides a political economy analysis of the problems and challenges facing the English department. The chapter is based on empirical data gathered through and enriched by the author's first-hand experience as a professor in the English department at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Mohammed V University in Rabat. The analysis also builds on the existing literature, even though scanty, on the English department and the public university in Morocco. It places the crisis of the English department and the Moroccan university today within the specific context of Moroccan education and economic policy since the neoliberal market reforms in the 1980s. The first part of the chapter explores the evolution of the mission of the English studies department and some of the challenges it has faced since its inception in 1963. The following part puts these challenges in context by foregrounding the latent causes of the crisis of the English department and the Moroccan university in an era of neoliberal governmentality and private-sector competition. This contextual factor has hitherto been ignored in the literature even though it is a key aspect of the crisis of the English department in particular and the Moroccan university in general. Finally, the chapter provides a number of practical measures susceptible to taking the English department out of its current crisis in spite of the overwhelming pessimism among academic staff and policy observers in the Moroccan education sector.

Keywords English department · Neoliberalization · Overcrowding · Research output · Humanities matter

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16.1 The Beginnings

When the first English department at the Moroccan university was created in the 1960s, its main mission was the training of human resources for the newly independent nation. Morocco achieved its independence from France and Spain in 1956, and the shortage of Moroccan staff was one of the main challenges facing the nascent postcolonial nation. Two years after independence, the first Moroccan university was born in the capital Rabat. In fact, Mohammed V University was created and consisted only of one institution, namely the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences. The latter was born as an act of Moroccanizing the erstwhile colonial-era Institute of Advanced Moroccan Studies (est. 1920). The new university's mission was the training of Moroccan teachers through its sole faculty in order to replace foreign nationals in the Moroccan education system. An integral part of this mission was the provision of teachers capable of teaching Arabic and *in Arabic* in order to achieve the Arabization of an educational apparatus still dominated by French, the language of the colonizer. It is noteworthy how this ideological aspect of the university's mission was conceptualized and implemented by the postcolonial governments with the complete exclusion of Tamazight, the native language of most Moroccans at the time. The Faculty succeeded in the mission of teacher training, which it carried out almost single-handedly until the creation of extramural teacher training centres in Rabat and other Moroccan cities since 1978 when the first teacher training college, *École Normale Supérieure*, opened in the capital.

The English department at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of Mohammed V University in Rabat was the first of its kind in Morocco. It was created in 1963 as part of the Faculty's mission of producing Moroccan teachers and hopefully some future scholars and diplomats, too. The crucial role of the English department in Rabat, and other departments which soon came into existence in the following decades (Fez, Casablanca, Marrakech, and so on), reflected the pedagogical mission trusted upon them by the Moroccan government through the ministry of higher education. This mission has changed very little over time even though the graduates of English studies departments now find themselves working in other sectors beyond education. However, teaching remains the main work sector in demand of their skills. As Mohammed Dahbi (2003) writes,

Almost ever since the beginning in Rabat, Departments of English have offered courses in the English language, in English and American literature, in British and American civilization (life and institutions), in linguistics, and in translation. The main staple has been, by far, English language reading, writing, Grammar [sic], and literature. (p. 14)

It is evident from the English department curricula then and now that a lot of emphasis is placed on building and honing the students' language skills and proficiency. This is understandable given that the department's main mission has been the training of teachers of English for Moroccan schools and universities. There is another reason for this strong emphasis on language skills. English is not the first or even the second foreign language in Morocco. The country was colonized and

partitioned by France and Spain from 1912 to 1956. This left Morocco with a post-colonial language map whereby Spanish was the first foreign language in the North and Sahara regions formerly ruled by Spain, and French has remained the main foreign language and even the first language of commerce and scientific education in the rest of the country. In fact, French has gained the upper ground over Spanish by becoming the only language of instruction at the faculties of medicine, engineering, architecture, business, and the natural sciences in all Moroccan universities.

Outside the walls of the university, the progress of English in the Moroccan language landscape has been slow despite the long history of Moroccan–British and Moroccan–American relations (Ben-Srhir, 2005) and the status of English as a global language par excellence with the advent of globalization and the spread of American movies and culture all around the world. In recent years, however, the English language has made significant inroads in many areas of life in Morocco, and young people in particular are learning it in great numbers in the belief that it is the language of the future. This great appeal of the English language goes beyond the student population. Indeed,

Not only is English favoured by students, educationalists and policymakers, but it is also gradually becoming a serious rival of French in higher education. A good number of university students and researchers learn English to be able to read the English references relevant to their speciality. Additionally, more and more scientific research carried out by native Moroccan academics is nowadays published in English. (Ennaji, 2005, p. 114)

The growing influence of English in Morocco is likely to continue unabated. As the Moroccan linguist Moha Ennaji (2005) puts it,

In all likelihood, English will become more important in the future and may fiercely compete with French as a means of communication with the outside world and as a vehicle of Western values and norms. It is equally possible that globalisation, through international exchange via business life, satellite television and the internet, will make English both accessible and necessary for Moroccans (cf. Gill, 1999). (p. 114)

Ennaji's two statements above can give the impression that the current florescence of English as a foreign language in the country means that the English studies departments at the Moroccan university are or would be doing well in consequence. However, the reality is that the spread of English and the infatuation of young Moroccans with it have not translated into advanced levels of academic language skills, the staple of the English department, nor in more resources being allocated to these departments to adequately meet the needs of their growing student populations. In fact, the growing appeal and reach of the English language in Moroccan society has compounded the structural problems of the English department (more about this later). To better account for this problem, one must put things within the context of Moroccan educational and economic policies in the era of neoliberal globalization, the historical moment that has endeared English to Moroccans.

16.2 The English Department in Neoliberal Times

In the early 1980s, the Moroccan government embarked on the first wave of neoliberal market reforms as part of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). This radical turn away from the principles of the developmentalist state created upon independence was due to the soaring budget deficit and pressure from international lending agencies, mainly the two Bretton Woods institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Bahmad 2013). In the first years of its independence, Morocco elected to follow the dominant paradigm of economic and social development in postcolonial Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The state accordingly held itself responsible for the country's development and embarked on ambitious five-year strategic economic plans throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Cohen & Jaidi, 2014, p. 35). In the first Strategic Plan 1960–1964, the focus was on the modernization of the economy and the increase of agricultural production. This expanded to include tourism and industrial production in the 1970s with the 1973–1977 Strategic Plan. Aided by the high prices of the country's main export, phosphates, GDP growth averaged 7.3% in the 1970s (Cohen & Jaidi, 2014, p. 36). However, phosphate prices plummeted in the global markets in the last years of the same decade and the country found itself in the thrall of social uprisings in different parts of the country when the government planned to implement austerity measures to reduce the national budget deficit and gain credibility with international lending institutions (IMF and the World Bank). The largest of these upheavals took place in Casablanca in June 1981 when people answered the call of trade unions to strike. They took to the streets in peaceful protests. This came after the government decided to increase the prices of basic food staples such as sugar, cooking oil, and flour. The state reacted with brutality and deployed the army in the streets of Casablanca to crush the street uprising. Hundreds were killed, detained, or “disappeared” at the height of the Years of Lead, the era of human rights violations and political violence in the country from the first years of independence to the demise of King Hassan II in 1999. In addition to the soaring cost of living, the high rates of poverty, corruption, and social inequality were behind the street protests, which the police quelled with force (Zoubir & White, 2015, p. 102).

The government went ahead with its IMF market reforms in spite of popular protests in Casablanca and other cities in the 1980s (e.g., Hoceima, Tetouan and Nador in January 1984; Fez in December 1990). “As in many other countries engaged in market reform,” Cohen and Jaidi explain, “budget cuts, debt reimbursement, currency devaluation, and insufficient economic growth have negatively affected living conditions, particularly for the urban poor dependent on public services. Public sector expenditure decreased from 34.4 to 22.2% of GDP from 1982–1986” (p. 38). The university as a public service was drastically affected by the austerity measures, which were a key part of the market reforms. The other component of this neoliberal agenda was the privatization of public companies and services. The financial and hospitality industries were among the first state services to be affected by the transfer of ownership from public to private bodies (Saulniers, 2003, pp. 225–226). The second major sector to be affected was the telecommunications field where the

country's public telecom operator Maroc Telecom was gradually sold to international investors with the state holding part of the shares.

The education system was initially spared in this wave of privatization probably for two reasons: first, Moroccan education in the last century was not a lucrative business; secondly, it was important for the regime to preserve social peace in the last two decades of the Years of Lead characterized by social strife and political turbulence. At the turn of the new century, the Moroccan government intensified its licence granting for private schools up and down the country. The process had started in the 1990s but gained pace in the new millennium. The Moroccan middle classes joined the upper classes in sending their kids to private rather than public schools and universities. In addition, the austerity measures implemented since the 1980s meant both budget freezes for public education and the inability of the state to provide jobs for university graduates. In real terms, as Sa'ïd El-Naggar (1987) notes, state expenditure on education declined "by 25–30% between 1985 and 1990" (p. 63). The phenomenon of the *diplômés chômeurs* (unemployed graduates) was born in the late 1980s when for the first time in Morocco's postcolonial history the government was no longer willing or able to employ all the graduates of its different academic institutions (Badimon Emperor, 2007, pp. 297–298). The market reforms had put the brakes on the state's investment in this regard, and young Moroccans were left to fend for themselves with unstable or low paying jobs in the private sectors. Larger numbers remained unemployed. As Montserrat Badimon Emperor (2007) points out,

Following the introduction of macroeconomic adjustment measures since the 1980s, the recruitment policy in the Moroccan civil service has become much more restrictive. For some categories of graduates, this change in policy has meant the loss of employability prospects. (p. 2; my translation)

From an annual public employment figure of 50,000 in 1983, only around 10,000 public sector employees were recruited every year after (Akesbi cited in Badimon Emperor, 2007, p. 10). The state thus absolved itself of one of the fundamental policies of developmentalism: public employment as a means of social mobility and equality. As part of the new market reforms, the neoliberal state is no longer responsible for providing jobs or creating a middle class capable of ushering in social justice and democracy.

The budget cuts in the public sector drastically affected Moroccan universities. The academic institutions found themselves with increasing numbers of students and very limited means to offer a quality education that would allow them to get jobs upon graduation. What has made things even worse is the state's decision to no longer provide jobs for university graduates since the 1980s. The unemployment rate in Morocco therefore went from 9% in the early 1970s to 16% in the late 1980s (Bureš, 2008, p. 19). Even though acclaimed by the IMF and the World Bank and their subservient Moroccan governments as the engine of job creation and social development, the private sector has not been able to replace the state as the provider of job security, decent pay, and guarantor of social mobility and peace. Thus was born authoritarian neoliberalism whereby the state has turned a blind eye and deaf

ear to the real needs of people for jobs and decent living conditions. The different popular uprisings from Casablanca in 1981 to the Democratic Spring of 2011 have not been strong enough to thwart the neoliberal governmentality of the Moroccan state. Government policies in all areas, including education, are no longer based on *vox populi* but rather on the dictates of the Bretton Wood institutions. It is no wonder that people, especially the young and students, are today alienated from politics and any belief that the state can do good. The state has betrayed them by refraining from playing its crucial role as the protector of the public good from what Harvey (2009) refers to as capitalism's logic of "accumulation by dispossession." The more neoliberal policies have been adopted in Morocco, the more the size of dispossessed classes of people has grown.

The neoliberal condition led to one of the first challenges that have faced the English department since the 1980s. While the population of Morocco was soaring and the demand for higher education growing, the state left the universities stranded without the necessary budgets to upgrade their infrastructure, create new campuses, and improve the quality of their educational offer. Overcrowding in classrooms became a routine scene across all universities. This led to the deterioration of working conditions for teachers and learning conditions for the students. Tertiary education has been further harmed by the spectre of unemployment awaiting its graduates. It has led to low morale, lower motivation among students, and high dropout rates. In the English department, where a variety of courses such as Composition I & II and Listening and Speaking necessitate small classrooms and lab equipment, the situation has been even more catastrophic. As Mohamed Dellal also points out in this volume (see Chap. 15), a lot of English studies departments across Morocco simply do not have the required equipment. Teachers are forced to teach such subjects to the best of their means, often by giving lectures instead of leading workshops or teaching small seminars. Despite this alarming situation, the state has maintained an open door policy in the area of student enrolment at the public university. The state is more interested in staving off student protests than reforming the system. Students are free to enrol in any department after obtaining their baccalaureate (high school) degree. This has compounded the problem of overcrowded classrooms year after year. Due to the growing appeal of English in Morocco, the departments devoted to teaching this language and its literature have found themselves overwhelmed by student numbers. The ratio of students per teacher is very high. The rate starts from 34 students per instructor at our department in the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Rabat, which has the highest number of academic staff (31) and lowest number of first-year students (560) as of the academic year 2018/2019. However, the picture is gloomier outside of Rabat. For example, at the English department of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at Ibn Zohr University in Agadir, the ratio has reached 587 students per teacher during the same period. With 4,783 students in the first year alone, the 27 faculty members in Agadir are beyond overwhelmed. Although still outnumbered by their students, the academic staff in Rabat are lucky to be the only English department in Morocco allowed to administer an entrance exam for its incoming students. Only a minority of the applicants pass the test, but the faculty administration allows a few hundred students who did not pass the test to enrol in

the department because of the high demand on English studies. That is how we had 560 new students in 2018/2019 although only 140 (out of 778 candidates) passed the test with a grade of or higher than 10/20.

The second consequence of the neoliberal fallout for the English department is a perennial staff shortage. The universities have never been able to recruit enough lecturers because of the small hiring budget allocated by the Moroccan ministry of higher education. The government has played by the IMF book of public sector cuts even at the expense of the future of generations of young Moroccans. This has inevitably created an almost barren research landscape where active researchers are frustrated by heavy teaching loads, the lack of research equipment, grants, and other incentives to sustain a consistent research output. Brain drain has become a natural situation with frustrated Moroccan researchers opting to stay abroad after the completion of their doctoral studies, and those educated in part or in full in Morocco take the route of overseas migration to fulfil their research potential (Rhissassi, 2003, p. 83). The low wages have also played a role in the inability of the Moroccan universities to recruit or retain world-class researchers.

The English department's academic staff have found themselves with considerable amounts of weekly teaching to do in difficult conditions characterized by the lack of basic teaching equipment (e.g., spoken English classes), sky-high class sizes, and unforgiving marking duties. Under these working conditions, it should not come as a surprise that research production is the last item on the agenda of most professors. At the institutional level, there is hardly any research infrastructure for those willing to produce scholarly outputs. There is no grant system at the level of the university or even nationally. The few available grants administered by the National Centre for Scientific and Technical Research (CNRST) are allocated to the disciplines of engineering, computer science, medicine, and the natural sciences. The humanities and social sciences are often discounted from such funding competitions because they are not considered a priority area by the Moroccan government. Another plausible explanation would be that the political regime is still not at ease with the kind of scholarship produced by humanities and social science scholars, many of whom were prosecuted during the Years of Lead. As the historian Pierre Vermeren (2010) reveals: "Already in 1968, the Institute of Sociology run by Abdelkébir Khatibi and Paul Pascon had been dismantled in Rabat. At [Mohammed V] University, Professor Abdelaziz Lahbabi, Dean of your Faculty of Letters in Rabat, had the French section of philosophy closed there" (p. 64; my translation). To remedy the situation, CNRST launched a special grant programme called Ibn Khaldun in 2018. Launched amid much fanfare at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Rabat, the programme targeted researchers in the hitherto ignored social science and the humanities fields. However, the grants were miniscule, and there has been no second launch of the grant programme at the time of writing this chapter.

The neoliberalization of the Moroccan university through budget cuts, open-door student recruitment policies, and the shortage of research funding has been accompanied by a change in the perception of academia in society. Due to the media war on intellectuals and the difficult living conditions of the majority of Moroccans due to market reforms over the last four decades, views about the role of the university

in society have changed considerably. The main function of the university under the development state from independence to the 1980s was not only the training of teachers, but also the formation of an intellectual class capable of scrutinizing and understanding its society and the wider world. People believed in the power of ideas and informed debates during and after their academic years. The university was an engine of social debate and a supplier of progressive intellectuals. This was seen by the regime of Hassan II as providing fodder to the Moroccan left, which opposed the monopoly of political and economic power by the monarchy (Vermeren, 2010, p. 64). The state closed sociology and philosophy departments and opened Islamic Studies ones at the university in the early 1980s in order to remain in control of a changing and secularizing society. With the spread of neoliberal values and social and economic precarity after the market reforms, the public university has been reduced to a shadow of its former self. In Moroccan public and media discourse, the university is now derided as a factory for the production of unemployable and low skilled graduates. Although there is some truth to their attacks, the holders of this anti-university discourse elect not to foreground the aforementioned political economy of weakening the Moroccan university. Within this discourse, the university is called upon to teach practical subjects and train students to join the workforce in the country's lower-middle-income economy. The teaching of literature, history and philosophy is singled out as futile and a money-wasting pursuit in this plebeian discourse propagated by the government and the mass media. This neoliberal discourse is sometimes espoused by unsuspecting academics and students.

In the neoliberal era, the Moroccan government has allowed private schools and universities to open and flourish with state help. Investors in this lucrative business area benefit from tax breaks, low-quality assurance control, and the equivalence of their degrees to those delivered by state institutions. These neoliberal measures have led to a steady growth in the private education sector, which has reached 25% as a share of the number of all students. In higher education, the country boasts 22 private universities and 163 private tertiary education schools as of the academic year 2017/2018 (Ministry, 2018, p. 116). These numbers are likely to continue rocketing while the number of public universities has stagnated at 12. The private higher education institutions are proliferating with the help of the government and banking sector. Their students, who made up 10% of the national university student population in 2017/2018, benefit from small class sizes, excellent equipment, and dedicated teachers, whether they are permanent staff or hourly paid, moonlighting teachers from the public university. Unlike public universities, private institutions have not invested in research production because their primary concern is profit through high tuition fees and tax breaks. Still, the spread and appeal of these private providers have been lauded by the media and the government. The public universities are called upon to follow their model, but the callers stop short of discussing the public university budget and gargantuan student populations in a country where only 0.8% of GDP is allocated to research and development (Ouadghiri, 2019).

16.3 The Oak Tree and the Reeds: Survival Strategies

In *Aesop's Fables* (2003), there is a fairytale about a tall and strong oak tree that stood close to a thicket of reeds on the bank of a river. The oak tree boasted of his size and strength and laughed off the slender and weak reeds. One day, a severe windstorm blew on the forest and uprooted the oak tree, which fell into the river. The oak, who had never thought such a fate would befall him on account of his strength, was all the more surprised to see that the reeds had survived the storm unharmed. He asked them why the storm did not break them too. They told the fallen oak that they know how to kneel when a storm is blowing, which is something the oak is incapable of. Today a similar storm is blowing in Moroccan academia and society, and the English department's fate depends on whether it behaves like the oak tree or rather like the savvy slender reeds in the face of the winds of change.

Against the odds of a neoliberal environment with its austerity measures and government hostility to public services, the English department needs to question its role while maintaining its distinct identity. Now that the teaching of English is carried out across dozens of institutions in the private and public sectors, the English studies departments must foreground what is unique about them. What they have and can do better than all the other English teaching providers is their humanities origins and mission. Our core identity is that we belong to the humanities as a universal tradition of knowledge and a set of ways of seeing the world. In these neoliberal times when the value of the humanities and the university is questioned, the English department needs to preserve its humanities core because it is what makes it distinct from all the other providers of English language instruction. In recent years and under the influence of government discourse and policies, some English departments have deviated from their core mission by closing down their literature streams and replacing them with communication or cultural studies ones. While the English department has never been closed to society and its needs, the loss of literature as an area of student training and staff recruitment will only hasten the demise of the English department. Deactivating the literature stream in the curriculum, as has been the case of the department at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Rabat since the academic year 2014/2015, has hollowed out the humanities identity of the English department. Literature and its study build the students' critical thinking skills, improve their vocabulary and writing skills, expose them in great depth to cultures and worldviews different from their own, and endow them with empathy and other soft skills which they need to exist and act as *human* beings.

Another area where the English department can excel and promote its role in the Moroccan university is research production. Faculty members must step up their research productivity in order to enhance the image of their departments because teaching alone is no longer enough. Private institutions do it sometimes even better than their public counterparts because they are better equipped to deliver good teaching. In this situation, English departments at the public universities need to capitalize on what would make them unique, namely advanced academic research. In addition to producing quality research outputs, this would help the faculty members develop

cutting-edge research programmes at the MA and doctoral levels. This would over time restore public trust in the university. To carry out advanced research, the faculty would need to seek funding from abroad and hopefully force the Moroccan government to allocate more resources for national research. Science is a vocation, as Max Weber (1958) famously put it, and English department researchers should stop at nothing to exercise this vocation.

The next stage in the research vocation of the English department is impactful outreach. While impact is often used by the government to undermine universities and divert attention from structural issues such as budget freezes or cuts, English studies academics at the Moroccan university need to do more to share their research and informed opinions with the rest of society. This potential is abundant not only in the natural and social sciences but also in the humanities. In fact, as a recent study (Anders, 2017) found out, the humanities and the skills they provide are the most needed in our digital age. In his book *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education* (2017), George Anders celebrates the values that students of the humanities are endowed with because of their education.

Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren't unruly traits that must be reined into ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. You don't have to mask your true identity to get paid for your strengths. You don't need to apologize for the supposedly impractical classes you took in college or the so-called soft skills you have acquired. The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist's grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future. [...] The more we automate the routine stuff, the more we create a constant low-level hum of digital connectivity, the more we get tangled up in the vastness and blind spots of big data, the more essential it is to bring human judgment into the junctions of our digital lives. (pp. 4–5)

The English department professors need to valorize their work and the values that only a humanities education can provide. We are training not only employable graduates, but unique human subjects capable of navigating the complexities of modern life. The value of the humanities is timeless, but it needs to be promoted not just in literature classes. Professors of the humanities must shed their classical reticence and reach out to society by being involved in theatre and film events (literary scholars) and education policy (linguists), among other arenas for the promotion of the humanities and human values against the destructive logic of consumer capitalism and the dictatorship of the market.

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