

**Submission to the
Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights
Council
4th Cycle – 41st Session
Country Review: Tunisia
March 2022
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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 and focused on raising awareness and minimizing human rights violations in the educational field.

Together with our international sponsors and partners, we encourage and support the following activities/projects: removing obstacles in education; contributing to the achievement of peace and tranquility in the society through adaptation studies in an environment of intercultural tolerance; preventing radicalism and polarization; and eliminating the opportunity gap in education for all. Our goal is to work together with global partners to remove barriers to access to education and to take concrete steps to ensure universal access to education.

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0. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk is a non-profit organisation that focuses on developing each country's educational system to improve the level of human rights on the global level. Therefore, this report will focus on education. By drafting this report, Broken Chalk intends to assist with Tunisia's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR). First, the report will analyse the most important issues that Tunisia faces regarding the Right to Education. Then, it will shed light on some issues that should be solved through the Tunisian Ministry of Education. And finally, Broken Chalk will provide a few recommendations to Tunisia to further ameliorate in the field of education.
2. In the last review of Tunisia of 2017, the Republic of Tunisia received 78 recommendations. Nearly 25% of them focused on education and other issues such as the gender gap, discrimination, and human trafficking, which affect education's access, outputs, and outcomes.
3. Since its independence in 1956, Tunisia has invested significantly in its human capital development. Indeed, the right to education is a constitutional right, and education is free of charge for all in Tunisia. Moreover, the gender gap within the Tunisian education system is relatively good, with equal access to education for both genders. Nevertheless, Tunisia still needs to improve its educational system, especially after the 2011 revolution that created political and economic instability.

I. Analysis of Educational Issues to be Resolved

The Quality, Access, and Outcomes from Tunisia's Educational System

4. Public spending on education has been and remains high. It accounted for 6.1% of GDP in 2017, or 21.1% of total public expenditure, relatively above the European Union and OECD averages. The Tunisian education system, including VET, is predominantly public and non-fee paying and grants equal access at all levels. In recent years, private education provision has been developing, especially at the university level, and is marketed as offering better employment opportunities. Private VET centres have a long tradition and mainly provide courses in business-related fields.
5. Tunisia has made considerable improvements in literacy and schooling rates over the years: the overall illiteracy rate fell to 19.0% in 2015 (down from 31.7% in 1994), while youth literacy rates (15–24 age group) increased to 96.8%. The overall educational attainment rates of the active population also show a positive trend. The share of low-educated individuals decreased to 63% in 2019 (66.0% in 2010). Higher education levels improved, going from 12.6% in 2010 to 16.4% in 2019, while medium level education, including VET, remained stable at

around 20.5% (21.5% in 2010).

6. Tunisia ranked 91st out of 189 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) 2019 (up from 162nd in 2010). However, 3.8% of the Tunisian population are in extreme poverty, with significant social gaps between rural regions and the north of the country and along the coast. Additionally, Tunisian women continue to suffer from social and economic discrimination, especially in employment and labour-market participation.
7. Tunisia has developed positively in literacy and schooling rates over the years. The overall education attainment rates of the active population also show a positive direction. The share of low-educated citizens decreased to 63% in 2019, while medium-level education, including VET, remained stable at around 20.5% (21.5% in 2010). High education levels improved, increasing from 12.6% in 2010 to 16.4% in 2019, while medium-level education, including VET, remained stable at around 20.5% (21.5% in 2010).
8. The Covid-19 Pandemic demanded that the Tunisian Ministry of Education organise digital and online learning education. The complexity around work-based learning prevented the Ministry to offer quality online training during the Covid-19 lockdown of schools. Therefore, this period has delayed the academic knowledge growth of students and put considerable pressure on the Ministry of Education in terms of catching up on lost school time.
9. With the deteriorating quality standards and high unemployment rates among young graduates, the Tunisian government focused on reforming the education and vocational training system in the coming years. The governance of Tunisia's education and training system is shared among three different ministries. It is implemented by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Employability (MJSIP), the Ministry of Education, and Higher Education and Scientific Research. Each entity tackles the main problems in education and receives a specific state budget to implement actions within the National Development Plan 2016-2020.
10. At the higher educational level, Tunisia has set five objectives: improving the quality of teaching and, thus, the employability of new graduates; promoting research and innovation; fostering good governance and optimising resource management; reviewing university planning to ensure regional balance, and developing teacher training.

II. Discrimination & Exclusion

11. Schools were closed in Tunisia in mid-March due to the Covid-19 pandemic and began re-opening in mid-September. Many children in public schools could not access education during the closures. In May, a National Statistical Institute survey of parents found that 66% of school-age children had engaged in no learning activities during the previous weeks, often due to a lack of remote learning options, study materials, or communication with teachers.

- 12.** Beyond the lack of accessibility, difficulties faced by students and teachers stem from poor infrastructure and inadequate essential services, especially in rural areas like Kasserine, Qairouan, and Sidi Bouzid. Tunisian President Qais Saeed marked the opening of the school year this past September with a visit to a school in Franana where, a year ago, 11-year-old Maha Gadhgadhi was swept away by rainwater due to the public school's dilapidated infrastructure. Her death catalysed a demonstration whereby civil society activists in Jendouba took to the streets to protest the deterioration of school infrastructure, the lack of opportunities for young people, and the marginalisation of populations along the Tunisian-Algerian border.
- 13.** Tunisia faces additional educational challenges. Brain drain is accelerating, and drop-out rates continue to climb. Tunisian students receive only an average of 7.1 years of schooling. Much of Tunisia's current problems stem from Ben Ali's populist reforms to an educational system under his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, which set Tunisia apart for the quality and selectivity of its citizens' education.
- 14.** In January 2017, primary and secondary school teachers, with the support of their trade unions, notably the Syndicat général de l'enseignement de base (SGEB-UGTT) and the Syndicat général de l'enseignement secondaire (SGES-UGTT), both members of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), came together from across the country protesting for the government to secure a quality education for every student and to demand the resignation of the Minister of Education Neji Jalloul. Jalloul was dismissed a few months later, on April 30, 2017, but the real challenges remained. The school management was not improved, and school infrastructure was not upgraded; schoolteachers continued to protest, claiming that teaching was jeopardised by the precariousness and lack of basic safety due to the infrastructure, especially in the rural areas.
- 15.** In July 2018, thirty-two Tunisian higher-education institutions supported by the Syndicate of Tunisian University Professors protested, demanding reform of the higher education system. Two-thousand university professors went on strike and refrained from holding exams, asking for better salaries to halt the "brain drain" of professors and highly skilled university graduates leaving the country. However, these actions failed to meet any of their demands, and new protests erupted shortly afterwards in December, with the same claims followed by the same outcome. Although the secondary education unions supported the initiative by seeking a dialogue with the government, negotiations between the two sides did not bring about any improvement.
- 16.** The profound transformation best explains the limited role of trade unions in the current educational debate the unions have undergone since the post-revolutionary period. This transformation has made dialogue increasingly ineffective and challenging with the current political order.

- 17.** After the revolution, the legal framework governing civil society replaced the old restrictive rules and created a “very liberal founding criteria to promote political pluralism.” These changes additionally impacted the structure of trade unions. New trade organisations were established separately from the UGTT, as was the case for the Confederation Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT), the Organisation Tunisienne du Travail (OTT), and The Union des travailleurs (UTT). Their memberships increased quickly, adding thousands of members and hundreds of representatives just a few years after their formation. The same happened with the number of social categories (teachers, doctors, civil servants, etc.) and sectors (education, health, agriculture, technology, etc.) within these new organisations, posing challenges to internal coordination. The proliferation of actors on both the trade union and employers’ sides created tension regarding how the two sides traditionally solved problems. Furthermore, as far as the legal framework is concerned, while the law provides the possibility of sector-level bargaining (and practice), there seem to be no permanent negotiation bodies, nor a specific structure, legally in place to enhance sector-level dialogue or negotiations. The number of irregular strikes seems to confirm a lack of discipline within the trade unions, making it challenging to adhere to the central guidelines and undermining the central leaderships’ bargaining power in these organisations.
- 18.** Despite the limited achievements of their unions, civil society has not given up on voicing its needs in the education sector and has found other parallel channels, such as NGOs, to advocate on its behalf. However, like trade unions, NGOs have also experienced a profound transformation during the post-revolutionary period.
- 19.** The 2011 legal framework governing civil society led to an overwhelming number of new and small organisations with different programmes and orientations, resulting in polarisation between secular and religious organisations. By September 19, 2021, there were 23,569 NGOs registered in the National Register of Associations, including many political, economic, religious, social, cultural, and good governance organisations. The education agendas of these new organisations are diverse, ranging from the inclusion of the most vulnerable students in the school system; seeking public investment in education, reducing differences in the educational sector between urban and rural areas, promoting the educational debate and greater awareness of the needs of reform.

III. Recommendations & Conclusions

- 20.** Broken Chalk recommends that the government of Tunisia address the high rate of school dropout, including its second opportunity education programme. It remains concerned about the high rates of repetition and school dropout and disparities in access to, retention in, and the quality of schools.
- 21.** Considering targets 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.a of the Sustainable Development Goals, Broken Chalk recommends that Tunisia:
- 22.** Take urgent measures to provide free and compulsory primary education to all children and improve access to and retention in secondary education, paying particular attention

- to children living in poverty, children in rural areas, and children with disabilities;
23. Allocate the resources necessary to ensure the high quality and accessibility of public education and regulate and monitor private schools to address inequality in the education system;
 24. Strengthen the quality of education, including by reforming its school curricula, ensuring the availability of qualified teachers, providing high-quality pre-service and in-service training and ensuring that schools are thoroughly and safely accessible to all and equipped with adequate infrastructure and educational technologies;
 25. Develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools, which includes public awareness-raising activities and the monitoring of the implementation of the national standards on water and sanitation facilities, and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated for the implementation of the strategy;
 26. Strengthen programmes and awareness-raising activities against violence, abuse and bullying in schools;
 27. Strengthen its efforts to address the high rates of repetition and school dropout, in particular in secondary education, including by rolling out its second opportunity education programme at the national level in collaboration with both public and private partners;
 28. Develop and promote high-quality vocational training to enhance the skills of children, especially those who drop out of school, with a particular emphasis on those in rural areas.

IV. References

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