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## **Views of Library Instruction in Morocco**

by

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### **Introduction: Challenges to librarianship in Morocco**

Libraries as we think of them in the West are not part of the traditional cultural fabric of Morocco.

Certainly, what we call “special libraries” have been around for as long as mosques have been collecting specialized religious works, but special libraries are limited in the scope of their collections and the public that they serve. “Libraries” more broadly defined were brought to Morocco during the time of the French Protectorate. They supported education and were associated with an elite class. Morocco is a country with a high illiteracy rate and a strong oral tradition. We can expect that the average Moroccan will not appreciate a library in the same way an educated Western reader will, and this appears to be the case.

Beyond the books and materials housed in modern libraries, the library metaphor and the institution itself may be difficult to appreciate and intimidating to exploit. Moroccans are social and spontaneous, but libraries are silent places of solitary work that is both sober and planned. Barriers to use of libraries can be high, and there is little incentive for Moroccans to use the few libraries that exist.

Text-based library collections will not appeal to illiterate users, and the question of language is also a difficult one. Materials must be collected, organized, and made available in one of the written languages used in the country. Library staff and users must both be at ease in the language of the documents for the information to be stored and made accessible. Materials that are incorrectly stored or incorrectly searched will remain unfound and unused. For these reasons, the task of the librarian is great in Morocco.

In the next few pages, I will describe briefly the history of library science education in Morocco and will give an overview of its status and practice today. In particular, this report focuses on observations about the facilities and human resources available to students and instructors, the professors, and the students themselves. While this report highlights the positive aspects of these three elements contributing to LIS education in Morocco, some of the less positive and indeed challenging elements are also mentioned

### **ESI: brief history and background**

Training librarians and information specialists in Morocco only began in the second half of the twentieth century. Rabat's Ecole des Sciences de l'Information (ESI) was officially created in 1974. Funding originally came from UNESCO. Dr. Sharify, a Middle-Eastern professor teaching at the library school at Pratt in the state of New York, was instrumental in its founding. A cohort of promising Moroccan students was sent abroad to earn PhDs so that they could return to form the backbone of the school's "corps enseignant". Many are still teaching today.

Despite a stated interest in research, student learning is the main goal of ESI. Two diplomas are offered: a 4-year undergraduate degree and a 2-year master's degree. Higher education reforms are going to require the number of years for the undergraduate degree to diminish to three and will lighten the load for master's students. Competitive exams are the criteria for entry to both programs. Only a

certain number of students are accepted into the school each year. The program is competitive because graduates are almost always assured of finding work after graduation. Most of the accepted students are recent high school graduates, and some are working professionals who are returning to receive a degree to better their situation. Even fewer of the students are from French speaking countries in Africa.

Today, ESI remains the only Library and Information Science (LIS) school in Morocco, sharing some features with other local institutions. Like the other “schools”, ESI is under a Moroccan governmental ministry, the Haut Commissariat au Plan. ESI is the sister institution to the Centre National de Documentation (CND) and the Institut National de Statistique et d'Economie Appliquée (INSEA). Like other schools of higher education in the French system, students are in classes all day. Classes begin for all the students at 8:30 and end at either 4:00 or 6:00.

#### *Background to Instruction*

Instruction at ESI is carried out in French. In many ways, ESI's system is similar to the French LIS system, despite the international roots of ESI. ESI divides students into librarians (who work with books) and documentalists (who work with documents). The Anglo-American tradition stopped making the distinction in the 1950s. There is a strong tradition of preparing students for archival work, as well. In an attempt to be neutral, ESI calls its graduates “informatists” – a name the school made up from the beginning and that is meaningless in the wider international LIS community. The term informatist is also, unfortunately, unknown outside of the Moroccan library community, and the school is often mistaken for being one of Journalism, Media Studies, or other similar “information-rich” fields. It is difficult, therefore, to build a reputation for the school when its graduates earn a degree that is misunderstood.

Although some other soft sciences in Morocco may use Arabic as a language of instruction, library science can involve a significant discussion of computer technology and technical elements of providing access. Perhaps it is for this reason, or perhaps it is because of the strong French tradition in

the school, but Arabic is not the language of instruction and is not even taught in the school as a foreign language. The issue of language also comes into play in the instruction. Because Arabic is not taught at all, graduates can really only work in libraries or centers that use French systems and house French documents. Further, even if some professors use Darija for informal joking or for quick explanations, the fact that non-Arab speakers from Francophone countries in Africa are in the classes makes it essential that professors continue speaking French, at least during their lectures.

Evaluation is also tied to culture and language. ESI may be using the “French system” for grading, where having 10 out of 20 is a passing grade. Grade inflation has turned the system into something almost akin to the American percentage grading system. Professors seem to assume that only the best students have gained entrance, and that for a project like an in-class presentation, the lowest possible grade should be a passing grade. In order to continue to the next year of studies, students have to have the “moyenne” of 10/20 in all of the modules. Because of the lenient grading compared to the French system, very few students are held back each year.

### **Observations about the facilities**

Moroccan schools appear to benefit from good stewardship and funding resources. Revenues do not come from tuition, as students attend classes for free. Classrooms at ESI are equipped with computers, projectors, and Internet jacks. The auditorium has wifi. A special LIS library is in the building, and students are free to use it on their breaks or at lunch. The library is not open after the classes let out for the day (it is only open the same hours as the secretariat, unlike school libraries in the U.S.), so the library is often very crowded at peak times when it is operating. The library also has wifi for student use.

Human resources are adequate, with entire offices supporting students, their internships, and their records of attendance. A guardian lives on the premises, and hired guards protect the entrances to

the two buildings in the compound and to the library. Three computer technicians and programmers work on hardware and software issues in the classrooms and the faculty offices.

#### *Challenges pertaining to the facilities*

Although the benefits are numerous, there are a few elements lacking compared to schools in the U.S. For example, there are no email accounts for students, making it hard to contact them. There is limited access to computers for students, and no course management systems available for professors to use. Most of the technology is very old and does not work well. Projectors have broken cables and are misaligned so that parts of PowerPoint slides hang off the screen in a way that makes the words illegible. There are no clocks in any of the classrooms. The school's website doesn't meet basic requirements for usability and access, and necessary information is not posted publicly. These problems make it difficult to get students to computers to teach them about new formats, technologies, etc. Another problem of note is the fact that support staff do not post hours, names, expertise, or functions anywhere, including their office doors. There is no phone list, and it's unclear to outsiders who does what and when.

#### **Observations about professors**

ESI is lucky to have a core faculty of professors who are highly respected in the field. Many are active internationally in professional organizations (namely IFLA) and who publish extensively in the field. New initiatives include a program to hire adjuncts who are recent graduates as a way of bringing excitement, newness, and a fresh perspective to the classroom. The school sponsors a journal which is published annually. New initiatives and renewed partnerships with institutions of higher education in France are providing interested professors the opportunity to teach abroad.

### *Challenges pertaining to professors*

It is difficult for the professors to stay up to date in their fields as there are limited continuing education opportunities. In terms of day to day teaching, there is little assistance for instructors. There are no TAs, for example, so assigning research projects means the professor will grade the whole class by himself. Grading 80 or so research projects is a daunting task, especially when students may not be all that fluent in French. Further, there is not much incentive for professors to do research despite the fact that ESI describes itself as a research institution. Not all core faculty have PhDs. Given that there is no program in LIS at the PhD level in Morocco, it's necessary for students to leave the country if they want to earn a doctorate in LIS. Having instructors without a doctorate may also problematic, as they may lack the rigor and methodology needed to carry out research and to keep up in their field of their own volition.

### **Observations about students**

The students at ESI are delightful. They are highly motivated and inquisitive. Many are self-starting, willing to go the extra mile to have an opportunity to learn. As a group, they are self-organizing, and have in the past had their own newsletter. There are many student associations that are very active. For example, the students have a tradition of organizing and sponsoring a cultural week in mid-March where they celebrate Moroccan culture and a professional Forum in May where they secure sponsorship, invite lecturers, and host a three-day symposium.

### *Challenges pertaining to students*

However, students are reportedly very competitive. Students suggest that friendships are difficult to form, and I have observed that some will keep "good information" to themselves instead of publicizing and sharing with the larger group. The fact that students are forced to live off campus does not help, as

they may have long commutes adding to their already busy schedules. They also do not have the time to form the friendships that would enhance their current social lives and future professional careers.

Students are somewhat limited in the work they produce or are willing to attempt. Many are not completely fluent in French, and problems of expression can limit their ability to make a point. Perhaps the main issue is that students are seemingly unable to synthesize information or to do any higher order thinking. This seems to be the case, even if they are given explicit instructions and time to ask questions of the instructor. In this way, students are intellectually immature and unable to adapt, despite their young age. The students are somewhat overworked, given the demanding class schedule and the structure of their days. I have also heard students say that they live in the third world and that there is no need to attempt change. From my point of view, a categorically fatalistic response to proposed change/progress is disheartening in general, but is especially so when it is presented by a third year student.

### **Conclusions**

Morocco is lucky to have such a good school to educate its future librarians. It is worth recognizing that many of the problems with the facilities could also be said to affect LIS schools in the United States. Although ESI's professors may be lacking in resources, they seem to make up for it in good will and hard work. The students, however, are the most important element, as they are the ones who will be on the front lines of Morocco's libraries and information centers in the future. As I mentioned in the introduction, they have a daunting task, and I wish them all the best.