

**Views of Library Instruction in Morocco:
A snapshot from a 2008-2009 Fulbright Senior Scholar grant experience**

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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 sacred works, but these special libraries and even archives are limited in the scope of their collections and the public that they serve. “Libraries” in the Western tradition were brought to Morocco during the time of the French Protectorate (1912-1956). These libraries supported education and were associated with an elite French-speaking class. Morocco remains, however, 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.

Specifically, we can identify at least three factors contributing to the disconnect between Moroccan libraries and their users: the collectivist nature of the culture; the developing status of the country; and the extremely complex language situation. First, the library metaphor and the library institution itself may be difficult to appreciate and intimidating to exploit for less-educated Moroccans. Moroccans tend to be social and spontaneous, but libraries are traditionally 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. Furthermore, text-based library collections will not appeal to illiterate users in a developing nation; when asked about this, one of my contacts gingerly pointed out that the poor in Morocco are struggling for day-to-day survival and that libraries, reading, and even education are not a priority when faced with the possibility of starving.

Another element linked to the developing status of Morocco is the lack of available resources. Though some publishing takes place, for example, overall publishing in Morocco is not robust enough to support libraries on its own. Collections must therefore be supplemented by foreign acquisitions. Foreign acquisitions, however, are hindered by the country’s soft currency, the Moroccan dirham, and Moroccan collections suffer for the inability to purchase materials from abroad. Finally, the question of language is also an important one. Moroccan Arabic as spoken by many of Morocco’s citizens is called *Derija* and is not a written language. Therefore, all education in Morocco takes place in a “foreign” language. Many Moroccans who learn to read one of the commonly used languages in government (Standard Arabic and French) are not competent in the other. English is increasingly common, but is not a traditional language of education or of the government. Library staff and users must both be at ease in the language of the documents for the information to be stored and made accessible. For these reasons and many others, the challenge to the librarian is great in Morocco.

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This workshop is particularly concerned with digital libraries, so it is worthwhile to consider briefly the technological landscape in Moroccan libraries. Compared to modern libraries in the West, computers are exceedingly rare in Moroccan libraries. As of the end of 2009, there were exactly three integrated library systems (ILS) in the country, meaning that only three libraries (University Library in Al-Akhawayn, (Saudi-Moroccan); Fondation Al Saoud (Saudi); and the National Library of Morocco (BNRM)) would in a best-case scenario offer Western-style OPACs for use. The BNRM's OPAC was not operational by the time I left, but the other two were and had been for quite a while. In fact, the two Saudi-sponsored ILS-owning libraries are also OCLC member libraries. The country's Centre National de Documentation (Moroccan) and the Ecole des sciences de l'information (Moroccan) are OCLC member libraries as well, bringing the total number of OCLC member libraries in the country to four.

In the next few pages, I will briefly describe the history of library science education in Morocco and will give an overview of its status and practice when I was there in 2008-2009. In particular, this white paper 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 documented herein.

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 begun 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 were trained in Montreal at the Université de Montréal and are still teaching in ESI 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. Most of the students in the undergraduate program are recent high school graduates, but some are working professionals returning to receive a degree to better their situation. A small subset of students is from French speaking countries in sub-Saharan 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

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Statistique et d'Economie Appliquée (INSEA). Students are in classes all day other schools of higher education in the French “*école*” system. Classes begin for all the students at 8:30 am and end at either 4:00 or 6:00 pm every day of the week except Friday, when afternoons are often free in accordance with Muslim tradition.

Background to instruction

Instruction at ESI is carried out in French. As do the French, ESI divides students into librarians (who work with books) and documentalists (who work with documents as special librarians, archivists, etc.). The Anglo-American tradition at one point made the same distinction, but stopped making it in the 1950s when documentalism transformed to become “information science”. For this reason, I will describe the curriculum as being one of “library science” even though graduates may find themselves working in libraries (as librarians), in corporate libraries (as documentalists), or in archives (as archivists); graduates do not find themselves working in information science environments. In an attempt to be neutral in face of these two main foci of documentalism and librarianship, ESI calls its graduates “informatists” – a name a founding member of the school made up and that is meaningless in the wider international LIS community. Because the term is unknown outside of the Moroccan library community, the school is often mistaken for being one of journalism, media studies, or other similar “information-rich” fields.

Although some other soft sciences in Morocco may use Arabic as a language of instruction, library science can involve a 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, while both English and Spanish are. 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 information centers that use French systems and house French documents. Further, even if some professors uses Derija 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 deliver lectures in French.

Evaluation is also tied to culture and language. ESI uses the “French system” for grading, where having 10 out of 20 is a passing grade. Grade inflation, however, has turned the system into something almost akin to the American percentage-based grading system. Professors seem to assume that only the best students have gained entrance, and that for an assignment 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; this is interesting, since the revenues do not come from tuition because students attend classes for free; funding is from the parent organization and the government. Classrooms at ESI

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are equipped with computers, projectors, and Internet jacks. The main auditorium has wifi. A special LIS library is located in a wing of the building, and students are free to use it on their breaks or at lunch. The library is not open after their classes let out in the evening, however, so the library is often very crowded at peak times. The library also has wifi for student use. Several computer classrooms are available for use as well, but must be reserved.

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 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 in comparison to Western institutes of higher education. For example, there are no email accounts for students, making it hard to contact them individually or as a group. Students have limited access to computers, and no course management system is 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. The school's website does not 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 does not post hours, names, expertise, or functions anywhere, including their office doors. There is no phone list, and it is unclear to outsiders who does what and when.

Observations about professors

ESI is lucky to have a core faculty of professors who are known and respected in the field. Many hold doctorates and are active internationally in professional organizations (namely IFLA). 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. This program has been described at conferences held by IFLA and the Association Internationale Francophone des Bibliothécaires et Documentalistes (AIFBD). As an aside, the school sponsors a journal which is published annually, promoting the school's mission of research.

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 Morocco. 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 of the class's papers 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

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faculty have PhDs. Given that there is no program in LIS at the PhD level in Morocco, it is necessary for students to leave the country if they want to earn a doctorate in LIS; some receive a doctorate in a related field so that a doctorate can be earned in-country. It could also be noted that some members of the core faculty without a PhD 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 (*Le point sur l'ESI*). 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 they organize and host a professional Forum in May where they secure sponsorship, invite lecturers, and put on a three-day symposium.

Challenges pertaining to students

Competition among members in the cohort is strong. 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 others. 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 social lives and future professional careers.

Students are somewhat limited in the work they produce. Many are not really fluent in French across the board, and problems of expression can limit their ability to make themselves understood. Perhaps the main limitation 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 instructors. In this way, students are intellectually immature and unable to adapt, despite their young age. Furthermore, they do not purchase textbooks, and are limited to the resources held in the library at ESI. For the reasons described in the first section, new acquisitions tend to be three to five years old, meaning that students are unable to consult the most current works on a topic. The students are somewhat overworked given the demanding class schedule and the structure of their days. I have also routinely heard students (and instructor) say that they live in the “third world” and that there is no need to attempt to better the situation.

Conclusions

Though some detracting elements were mentioned, Morocco boasts a healthy library school with a fine reputation and a solid curriculum. Indeed, Morocco is lucky to have such a good school in which 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

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element, as they are the ones who will be on the front lines of Morocco's libraries and information centers in the future. Because of the issues mentioned in the introduction, including problems stemming from society's mindset, the frustrations of living in a developing country, and the limitations brought about by the language issue, it is indeed surprising that morale is as high as it is and that ESI is able to accomplish as much as it does. As I mentioned in the introduction, the graduates of ESI have a daunting task in connecting Moroccans with information, and I wish them all the best.