

## HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOROCCO, A NEW GENERATION OF STUDENTS WITH NO MORE FINAL YEAR PROJECT: EXPECTATIONS AND IMPACT POST COVID-19

*ENSINO SUPERIOR EM MARROCOS, UMA NOVA GERAÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES SEM PROJETO DE CONCLUSÃO DE CURSO: EXPECTATIVAS E IMPACTO PÓS COVID-19*

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### ABSTRACT

A new pedagogical engineering plan is being implemented in universities by Morocco's Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, by the start of the next academic year 2023-2024 in line with ESRI PACT 2030. The Final Year Project, a common practice in Moroccan higher education, has so far allowed students to apply their knowledge and skills in scientific research, promoting more equitable outcomes. However, the National Committee for Coordination of Higher Education has approved the plan to cancel it from bachelor degree programs in Morocco, which will be carried out by the next university year, raising new questions and concerns amongst the students. This paper aims to investigate the perceived importance of Final Year Projects for Moroccan students, measure their readiness to graduate with a bachelor degree without it and study the expected impact this would have on future generations' education journey.

**Keywords:** Higher Education. Undergraduate Students, Final Year Project, Pact ESRI 2030, Covid 19.

## RESUMO

O Ministério do Ensino Superior, da Investigação Científica e da Inovação de Marrocos está a implementar um novo plano de engenharia pedagógica nas universidades, até ao início do próximo ano letivo de 2023-2024, em conformidade com o PACT 2030 da ESRI. O Projeto de Fim de Ano, uma prática comum no ensino superior marroquino, tem permitido até agora que os estudantes apliquem os seus conhecimentos e competências na investigação científica, promovendo resultados mais equitativos. No entanto, o Comité Nacional para a Coordenação do Ensino Superior aprovou o plano para o cancelamento dos programas de licenciatura em Marrocos, o que será levado a cabo no próximo ano universitário, levantando novas questões e preocupações entre os estudantes. Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar a perceção da importância dos Projectos de Fim de Curso para os estudantes marroquinos, medir a sua disponibilidade para se licenciarem sem este tipo de projeto e estudar o impacto esperado que isto teria no percurso educativo das gerações futuras.

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino superior. Estudantes de licenciatura, Projeto de fim de curso, Pacto ESRI 2030, Covid 19.

### **1. Introduction**

In line with the efforts poured into activating the pedagogical reform for undergraduate and doctoral programs in Morocco, and conforming the directions of the national plan for Accelerating the Transformation of the Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation Ecosystem (ESRI 2030 PACT) post Covid19, sources within the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation revealed a new pedagogical engineering in Moroccan universities, currently in the stage of opinion expressing with the General Secretariat of the Government.

As of the start of the academic year 2023/2024, a new era is set to be unfolding within the higher education system in Morocco triggered by the cancellation of the final graduation project module, so far nationally referred to among Moroccan students by: PFE, the french acronym for Projet de Fin d'Etudes, translating into: FYP, acronym for Final Year Project.

Having been so far a common practice in Moroccan higher education, The Final Year Project was defined by the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) as an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline (CUR, 2017). It gives the student an opportunity to use and implement methods, techniques and tools that he or she studied during the entire course of studies (Vitner, 2009) and it benefits them in ways that promote more equitable outcomes in higher education by providing

greater benefits to students with lower academic achievement than for those with higher grades (Parker, 2018).

In the face of previous research findings confirming benefits of the Final Year Project, and whilst the plan to cancel the Final Year Project module has been approved by the National Committee for Coordination of Higher Education and circulated to all Moroccan universities set to be implemented by the next university year, the students have many questions yet to be answered.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the perceived importance of Final Year Projects for Moroccan students, to measure their readiness to graduate bachelor programs without it, and ideally, to study the expected impact the cancellation of Final Year Projects will have on the next generations of students' education journey.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### ***2.1 Participants***

Our study involved a diverse sample of baccalaureate students who graduated in 2023 and are preparing to enter their first university year on the journey to graduate with a bachelor degree in Morocco this academic year, 2023/2024. From various Moroccan cities across 8 multiple universities in Morocco, a total of 239 students have participated by answering the entirety of questions we have selected for this survey. To ensure a full understanding of the questionnaire, the online survey was disseminated in French language. The results were later translated in English language to be included in this paper.

### ***2.2 Data Collection***

To gather data, and in order to ensure a diverse representation of students, our questionnaire survey was distributed online, across private platforms and sites and answered by a total of 239 Moroccan students. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions, designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

### 2.3 Survey Questionnaire

We designed a structured survey questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data. The questionnaire primarily assessed students' perceptions of the final year project, their readiness to graduate a degree without it, and the impact they expect it would have on the future generations' education.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Age and Gender Distribution of Survey Participants:

Age	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
18	67	96
19	19	24
20	12	13
21	6	2
Total	104	135

56% of respondents participating in our study were of female gender, opposed to 44% males, all ranging between the ages of 18 to 21.

### 3.2 Perceived Importance of FYPs:

Perceptions	Number of Responses
<i>How important are FYPs for academic and professional development?</i>	
- Essential	148
- Very important	56
- Neutral	14
- Not really important	16
- Not important at all	5
<i>FYPs help apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems</i>	
- Strongly Agree	86
- Agree	118
- Neutral	19
- Disagree	8
- Strongly Disagree	8

The survey revealed that a significant portion (62%) of the participants had a positive perception of the final year project. They considered it a valuable opportunity for practical application of their knowledge and skills, and also a chance to balance their grades up, especially when it comes to students with lower grades. However, 38% expressed mixed or negative views, citing reasons such as high stress levels, time-consuming nature, and limited practical relevance.

### 3.3 Readiness to Graduate without FYPs

Perceptions	Number of Responses
<i>How familiar are you with the recent decision to cancel the FYP for bachelor degree programs in Morocco?</i>	
- Very Familiar	36
- Somewhat Familiar	43
- Not Familiar at All	160
<i>Have you received adequate information about the reasons for canceling the final year project?</i>	
- Very Informed	38
- Somewhat Informed	63
- Not Informed at All	138
<i>Do you feel adequately prepared to graduate without completing a FYP?</i>	
- Very Well Prepared	164
- Somewhat Prepared	33
- Not Prepared at All	42

67% of participants have expressed they are not familiar at all about the recent plan to be implemented this academic year, canceling the FYP module from bachelor degree programs in Morocco, whilst 58% did not have adequate information about the reasons behind it. Following this question, we wanted to add an informative paragraph explaining the aforementioned plan before carrying on with the remaining questions in our survey.

When asked about their readiness to graduate without the final year project, 69% of the respondents felt adequately prepared, while 31% expressed concerns about their readiness. Those who felt prepared emphasized their confidence in their coursework and overall academic performance, but also relief that they will no longer have to conduct a research project prior to graduating.

### 3.4 Expected Impact on Future Generations

Perceptions	Number of Responses
<i>How do you think this decision will affect your overall academic performance and your future career prospects?</i>	
Positively	18
Negatively	210
No Impact	11
<i>Are you concerned it might discourage students from pursuing research-based careers?</i>	
Yes	151
No	34
I don't know	54
<i>What are your plans after graduating with a bachelor's degree? Please select the option that best represents your future plans</i>	
Pursue Further Education (e.g., Master's, PhD)	51
Enter the Workforce	32
Start a Business	133
Other	23

88% of respondents believed that the cancellation of FYPs would negatively affect their academic performance as well as their future career prospects. 63% were concerned that it could discourage students from pursuing research-based careers.

56% are planning to start their own businesses after graduating with a bachelor degree, without conducting a FYP.

This last percentage rather confirms the previously found number of students concerned that future generations would be discouraged to pursue further research. In that regard, only 21% of the participants expressed their willingness to do so.

#### 4. Research Limitations:

a. Sampling Bias: The survey sample may not be entirely representative of all Moroccan baccalaureate students, or future college students, due to potential biases in the online distribution method.

b. Self-Reporting: Findings rely on self-reported data, which might be subject to social desirability bias.

c. Generalizability: The study focused on current students' perceptions and may not accurately predict the actual impact of the FYP cancellation on future generations.

d. Lack of previous studies: To the best of our knowledge, our research is the first of its kind to study the importance of the FYP in Moroccan bachelor degrees after the recent plan implemented to cancel it.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

The findings of our study provide valuable insights into the readiness of baccalaureate students to study for a bachelor's degree and graduate without having to complete a Final Year Project. While a majority of students expressed confidence in their academic skills, concerns persist regarding their readiness to graduate with no FYP and their willingness to pursue further research after completing a bachelor's degree.

The cancellation of the final year project may necessitate a reevaluation of curriculum and pedagogical approaches in Moroccan universities. To bridge the gap within navigating the evolving landscape of Moroccan higher education, institutions and policymakers could consider incorporating more hands-on experiences, internships, or practical courses throughout the undergraduate curriculum which should, ideally, include research based skills.

Further monitoring and research would be essential in helping Moroccan graduates transition smoothly into the workforce, or into advanced research-based

studies and careers if they so choose, and by far assessing the long-term impact of this policy change on their academic and professional development.

## 6. Conclusion

The decision to eliminate the final year project requirement for bachelor's degree programs in Morocco has sparked discussions about the readiness of baccalaureate students to graduate without this thus-far vital component. Our study sheds light on the perspectives, skills, and concerns of undergraduate students in 2023, as well as their expectations of the impact it is to have on their future.

Our findings helped us form a much clearer overview on how the current generation of undergraduate students in Morocco perceive the final year project and how ready they are to submit to the newly approved plan. One that would hold no place for what has been so far the one opportunity they had to acquire and apply their research skills and complete a work of research before graduating their degree, which could be their debut project onto a path of further research.

In turn, the growing concerns found through the participants' answers have led us to raise the questions: Will eliminating the FYP be the one challenge today's students needed to withhold from pursuing their master's and PhD degrees? Is Morocco set to be raising a new generation of bachelors holders with no willingness to seek further research studies and careers? Is academic research condemned to be left behind with the past generations?

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