How Erasmus+ Capacity-Building Projects Have Impacted the Governance and Management of Higher Education in Morocco?

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Abstract. Capacity-building is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is the transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes. The Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (Erasmus+ CBHE) projects are intended to have a short and long-term impact on the higher education system by supporting the undertaken reform efforts, a direct effect on the institutions through their modernization, and ultimately on the individuals such as students and graduates. These projects, through different addressed issues, are also expected to contribute to meeting major societal challenges at national, regional, and global levels such as youth employability, inclusion, climate change, sustainable development, innovation, intercultural dialogue, etc. Governance of the Higher Education system and institutions is one of those focuses. It is relevant to see and clarify the role of these projects in driving higher education reform, to see to what extent they have induced significant change von governance and management of HE in Morocco. We point out in this paper that CBHE projects have influenced the legal framework and inspired the measures taken in the new framework law and the revision of fundamental law instituting the Higher education in Morocco in terms of inclusion, professionalization, remote education and digitalization, national framework of reference for certification and validation of professional experience, Human Resources management, etc. They have also driven changes at the pedagogical level such as the introduction of the credit system, e-learning, mobility and the diploma supplement in the new national pedagogical standards and the national framework for entrepreneurship.

Research Contribution: The paper intends to contribute to the literature of the impact assessment of capacity-building projects by focusing on governance as one of the major objectives of development and cooperation projects and aids.

Keywords: Capacity building (CB) · Higher Education (HE) · impact · reform · governance

1 Introduction: Erasmus+ Capacity Building Projects

Capacity building as a concept has various meanings, models, modalities, and methods [1]. Capacity-building is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes, and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is the transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes. UNESCO [2] considers that capacity building is understood not only as human resource development but also as organizational and institutional development Support organizations can help local organizations in different areas, including: building technical, financial, business, and political skills, building social and institutional capital, upward influence and government capacity-building, facilitating finance, increasing equity and transparency and building linkages and networks [3].

Capacity Building in Higher Education (CB-HE) projects is a flagship activity within Erasmus+, the EU program for education, training, youth, and sport. The objective of this action is the modernization of higher education and the improvement of its quality through the exchange of expertise between European institutions and their Moroccan counterparts, capacity building, and technical support for the improvement of resources. They are expected to have a short- and long-term impact on the higher education system by supporting ongoing reform efforts, a direct effect on institutions through their modernization and international openness, and ultimately on individuals, academic and administrative staff, and students. These projects, through different issues addressed, are also expected to contribute to addressing major societal challenges at national, regional, and global levels such as youth employability, inclusion, climate change, sustainable development, innovation, intercultural dialogue, internationalization, etc. The capacity-building projects also aim at building bridges between the Moroccan, European and international higher education systems to be aligned with international standards.

The implementation of these projects is done through two types of projects [6]:

- *Joint projects*: whose impact is mainly expected at the institutional level.
- *Structural projects:* these must have an impact on the higher education system as a whole and support reforms. The Ministry of higher education should be a full partner in these projects.

These projects cover three main areas:

- Curriculum development.
- Modernization of governance and management.
- Strengthening the relationship between higher education and the economic and social environment.

For the period lasting from 2003 to 2014, the capacity building program for higher education was called TEMPUS, Trans European Mobility Program for University Studies [7], with the same objectives and almost the same functioning and management. We

do believe that there is a connection and continuity of effect and impact between the two programs.

The purpose of this paper is to verify the role of these projects in driving higher education reform and to see to what extent they have induced significant change and what was their real impact on governance and management of HE system and institution.

2 Capacity-Building Projects: A Matter of Impact

In international cooperation, it seems everyone is looking to achieve and demonstrate impact. Private foundations, international organizations and donors talk of 'impact investing', social change actors talk about 'collective impact' and 'social impact', and academics are being asked about their '*research impact*'. Since the early 2000s, the terms 'impact' and 'impact evaluation' have skyrocketed in use and have become common parlance among development practitioners and agencies [4].

The European Commission definition of impact describes all the changes which are expected to happen due to the implementation and application of a given project. Such impacts may occur over different time scales, affect different actors and be relevant at different scales (local, regional, national and EU). In an evaluation context, impact refers to the changes associated with a particular intervention which occur over the longer term [6].

For project coordinators and beneficiaries, we observed from our interviews that the impact is interpreted on out-comes and project results.

The Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) defines impacts as "long-term, positive, and directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally.

For our paper, we will use the definition of impact as " *a short, medium and long term effect of the CB project induced by activities and results, making possible a durable change*".

Impact evaluations provide information on the effects induced by an intervention. It is possible to impact evaluation of a program, policy, or work that can be done upstream, such as capacity building, policy advocacy, and the creation of an enabling environment. This goes beyond a simple review of goals and objectives to look at unintended impacts as well. An impact' evaluation should be based on a combination of facts and values: principles, attributes or qualities considered intrinsically positive, desirable, important and of general interest in order to assess the value of a project or program. In the context of our study, four categories of criteria were decided upon:

- The levels of impact: institutions and system.
- The axes of activity according to the general objectives of the program: here the modernization of governance and management.
- Generic criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the project.
- Criteria related to specific themes, including legal framework, financial, administrative, pedagogical, organizational, Human Resources and digitalization.

Each category was broken down into items and themes, and then into questions in our interview guide.

3   Moroccan Higher Education Reform Context

Higher education in Morocco is under the responsibility of the government and the Ministry of Higher education, scientific research, and innovation, which ensures its planning, organization, and regulation. Moroccan higher education includes public, public-private (called PPP universities, created within a special partnership between private and public sectors), and private institutions. Public higher education is provided in universities and non-university higher education institutions. Morocco has 12 public universities and a total of 424 institutions, 50% of which are public. These institutions count 34000 administrative and academic staff for more than one million students of which an average of 200000 are graduated. The current organization of Moroccan higher education was developed on the basis of the guidelines of the National Charter of Education and Training (1999) and governed by Law 01–00 promulgated in 2000.

In 2015, the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research (CSE-FRS) developed a "Strategic Vision of the Reform: 2015–2020". A framework law N°51.17 on the system of education, teaching, training, and scientific research, which stems from the Strategic Vision of the reform, was published in 2020. This framework law provides in particular for provisions relating to inclusion, governance, decentralization, autonomy, and contractualization, student mobility, international cooperation, openness to their economic, social and cultural environment, distance learning, the national framework of certification, validation of professional experience, lifelong learning, etc.). In addition, Law 01–00 was being revised; the planned improvements concern pedagogical aspects, governance, and regulation.

Concerning the pedagogical organization, since 2003, Morocco has moved to the Bologna process by adopting the LMD system (Bachelor-Master-doctorate), the competencies-based and student-centered approaches. Education is organized in cycles, courses, and modules. The module is the fundamental unit of the training system, it is capitalizable and transferable. The module can be taught in one or more languages. The academic year is composed of two semesters, each of which includes 16 weeks of teaching and evaluation. A system of bridges allows mobility between programs and cycles of training.

The universities have pedagogical autonomy and develop their own training programs adapted to their needs. The training courses can be conducted in partnership with national or foreign institutions as well as in partnership with the socio-economic and professional sectors. Before being offered, the training courses must comply with national pedagogical standards and be accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Executive Training. In order to be accredited, the projects of the training courses are submitted for evaluation by the experts of the ANEAQ (National Agency of Evaluation and Quality Assurance) and then submitted to the consultation of the National Commission of Coordination of Higher Education (CNACES).

Morocco has undertaken important reforms of the higher education system since the 2000s. The chronic dysfunctions from which Moroccan higher education suffers have been raised by the Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research (HCETSR). It is in this context that the Council has developed a new "Strategic Vision of Reform: 2015–2030". This new vision is in line with the interaction with international changes, especially in the fields of training, scientific research, innovation, governance,

and the evolution of technologies, in compliance with international standards in these areas. In this respect, the strategic vision of the reform places governance as a lever for more innovation and for the achievement of the strategic objectives of the reform in relation to the country's sectoral projects. Universities are called upon to develop structures and strategies to improve their international positioning and competitiveness, which makes it an essential economic, cultural, and social issue.

Therefore, the success of the reform depends on the modernization of governance, which is one of the cross-cutting issues to gain in effectiveness and efficiency.

4   Methods

Our study comes at the crossroads between two programs and after the finalization of the first generation of Erasmus+ projects (after a program of funding spread over 6 years from 2014 to 2020, a new program has been launched by the EU that will cover the period from 2021 to 2027). It is important to understand which activities and which contextual factors allowed these impacts, in order to reproduce the positive effects of their success. We are trying over our work to see if the Erasmus+ capacity-building projects contributed to the modernization of the governance and management of the higher education system in Morocco? and how? Our study aims to:

- Measure the impact of Erasmus+ CBHE projects of 9 projects finalized in 2019 which had as objective the modernization of governance and management of the HEI system and institutions. 6 of them are structural projects where the impact is intended for the whole system and where the ministry of higher education is fully involved (A description of this sample in appendix 1).
- Identify the role of projects in driving higher education reform.
- Identify challenges, and propose recommendations.

Based on the defined evaluation criteria, reading and analysis matrices, an interview guide, and a questionnaire, data collection tools, were developed to collect data. Data collection was conducted by combining:

- A review of project websites, project descriptions, and logical framework matrices to identify target groups and expected impacts.
- Analysis of monitoring reports held by the Erasmus+ National Office, statistics, and project evaluations.
- Participation in project closing conferences.
- Data collection through 15 formal semi-directive individual interviews (an average of 50 min by interview), 10 informal individual interviews, and a confirmation questionnaire sent to 30 persons not interviewed but identified as participants or beneficiaries of these projects.

"Resource persons" were identified by a snowballing effect among:

- People directly involved in the projects: coordinators, staff, and students involved;

- The beneficiaries of the projects: students, faculty, ministries and others.
- The leadership: coordinators, vice-presidents and presidents, directors and vice-directors;
- The Ministry of Higher Education, scientific research and innovation;
- Non-academic partners.

In our interviews and exchange we also had a look at some TEMPUS projects as our interviewees spontaneously talked about these projects. We assume that the impact of projects and programs is cumulative and it is an aggregation of results that sustain and enlarge a benefit and induce a real change.

5   Main Findings and Discussion

5.1   Impact at the System Level

The reforms undertaken in the higher education system since the 2000s, were accompanied by cooperation projects, in particular those of the European Tempus program (the program funded the EU for capacity building in Higher education from 2003 to 2014). After 14 years of implementation of the reform, the higher education sector has made achievements that need to be consolidated and developed. We can mention, in particular, the revision of the legal and institutional framework, the relative autonomy of universities, the implementation of contractualization, the LMD reform and the revision of curricula, the implementation of a quality assurance system crowned by the creation of the National Agency for Quality Assurance (ANEAQ) and the practice of self-evaluation, the expansion of the capacity of educational institutions to cope with the significant increase in the number of students and the promotion of academic, social and cultural activities for students for more equity and inclusion.

However, Moroccan higher education has faced the following challenges:

- Consolidation of the convergence to the Bologna process;
- The development of employability and entrepreneurship;
- Promotion of relations with the socio-economic and cultural environment
- The digitalization;
- Modernization of governance and management (Training, Research - Innovation, Human and Financial Resources);
- Internationalization;
- The development of accessibility for students with disabilities.

It is in the context of these challenges that the CBHE projects of the Erasmus+ program (2015–2020) in which Moroccan institutions are involved and which inspired the new framework law 51–17 (published in 2020) and the provisions of the new ongoing reform of higher education by highlighting: inclusion, principles and rules of governance, the continuation of the policy of decentralization, the consecration of autonomy and contractualization, the enhancement of student mobility, the realization of joint programs to strengthen university structures, support their activities, extend their influence and promote their openness to their economic, social and cultural environment, the

institutionalization of remote learning, the institutionalization of the credit system, the establishment of a national framework of reference for certification and validation of professional experience, etc.

Given the extent of the impact when it comes to the system like new national frameworks and arrangements, reform, legislation, etc., the impact can only be long term *"TEMPUS has had a significant impact on the HE system (…) we see it now (…) on the system it is a delayed impact!"* (Verbatim-interview). The system machinery requires more time to combine results with immediate impact and drive the desired change. Therefore, we have examined some TEMPUS projects that are also related to Morocco's priorities and we have coupled them with the Erasmus+ projects that are the subject of our study.

Relating to the legal framework: The specific needs that appear in the projects have made it possible to challenge the system on certain issues and to make the legal frameworks evolve. For example, the mobility of students and professors has led to the modification of the pedagogical standards, which now provide for the translation of teaching modules into credits similar to ECTS, the diploma supplement, and the formal capitalization of mobility achievements. A direct impact of Moroccan participation in the reinforcement projects is the institutionalization of e-learning and mobility in the new framework law 51–17 and in the national pedagogical standards booklet.

Relating to the financial and administrative management framework: The capacity-building projects have made it possible to become aware of the difficulties faced by universities and higher education institutions. These constraints do not allow for the effective deployment of projects, do not allow for the speed and agility required, and therefore limit the dissemination and diffusion of project results and ultimately the expected impact and sustainability. Through participation in projects, the system is put to the test. The pressure to change has been applied. New provisions are foreseen in the current revision of the law 01–00 on the organization of higher education and scientific research.

Renewed governance: The projects have undeniably contributed to the modernization of governance through:

- The establishment and operationalization of quality assurance and its tools. The creation of the National Agency for Evaluation and Quality Assurance (NAEQA), its harmonization with European standards, and the support of its missions and activities through specific tools (reference systems, evaluation guides, etc.).
- Strengthening the managerial capacities of the Agency's staff and experts capable of leading change. Nevertheless, the skills acquired in the projects have not been sufficiently valued in other works.
- Indirectly, the Erasmus+ projects have inspired the implementation of the contractualization process between the Ministry and the universities. Participation in projects requires the use of indicators, a culture of results, and the implementation of quality assurance.
- The consecration of the practice of "calls for projects", is increasingly used by the Ministry to solicit universities in certain themes and priorities.

The projects have helped to open up departments, services and directorates. Bridges have been created between institutions, public and private universities and non-university institutions. The projects have created another space for coordination, cooperation and work between the Ministry and the higher education institutions and other partners such as associations, foundations, professional associations and other Ministries and to a lesser extent companies.

On the pedagogical level: the adoption of the LMD model remains to be completed by the tools of the Bologna process, such as the ECTS system and the National Qualification Framework. The LMD reform has certainly allowed for the development of professionalization, but it must be noted that unemployment continues to affect young people and women in particular, and a gap between offer and demand is evident. The development of entrepreneurship has been a lever for the promotion of employment and economic growth. Structures for innovation, entrepreneurship and interface with the socio-economic world have been set up in higher education institutions, but they deserve to be structured and professionalized.

In terms of the use of ICT in higher education, and although Morocco has been on the path of digital transformation since the 2000s, the higher education sector is very little affected by digitalization, both in terms of teaching as well as governance and management.

5.2   Impact at the Institution Level

"Without these projects, we cannot move forward (…) it allows for self-evaluation", this statement summarizes the impact of Erasmus+ projects on governance and institutional management (leadership interviewed). Governance is one of the major challenges of the Moroccan university. The Erasmus+ dynamic has made it possible to consolidate the achievements of TEMPUS projects with:

- The reorganization of institutions in terms of clusters, centers, and structures, inspired by European organizational models. The design of the organizational chart of public universities is an example of these inspirations resulting from the projects.
- The creation or reinforcement of governance and management structures, professional insertion centers, career centers, innovation centers for open education, research and innovation offices, and technology transfer offices.
- The improvement of human resources management through its digitalization; a direct result of one of the funded projects.
- Capacity building of academic, technical and administrative staff has greatly contributed to the development of the institutions' capacities to modernize their tools, procedures and daily work practices in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The projects have also accompanied the priorities of the HEIs in terms of structuring innovation, research and scientific development through the creation and support of structures supporting the innovation cities, for example.

6   Conclusion

The actors agree on the contribution of the projects (TEMPUS and Erasmus+) in the initiation of new reflections, the setting up of mechanisms, the impetus of reforms or the inspiration of laws. However, certain factors hinder the dynamics of capitalization and the interaction between projects for a broad impact on the institutions and at the system level:

- In some cases, the legal framework does not allow the results of the projects to be valorized.
- The eclecticism of the projects does not allow for the valorization of skills and their contribution to the reflections and reforms underway.
- The use of the tools developed by the different projects remains limited (low dissemination).
- Lack of human resources and regularity in monitoring and management, frequent change of people involved.
- The lack of synergy between projects and their articulation with other initiatives and strategies.
- Sustainability remains insufficient in the absence of financial means and a structure dedicated to this purpose.

Finally, the notion of impact also deserves a better understanding on the part of project beneficiaries at the time of application for better project design.

APPENDIX: Description of our sample

- 9 projects of modernization of governance and management.
- 6 structural projects have been financed by the program.
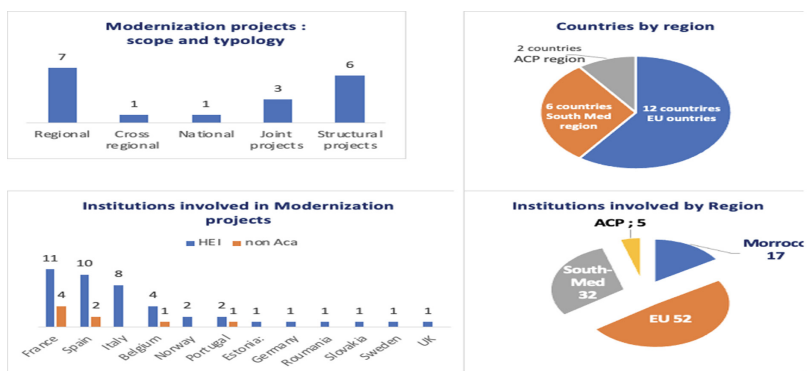
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