
Views of Youth Non-Formal Education in Tunisia

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A view of Tunis; credit Amy Keus



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Overview

Tunisians harbor significant concern about the formal educational system in the country, but they are relatively satisfied with the government's ongoing efforts to address educational needs based on results from the Arab Barometer survey.¹ Since the vast majority of Tunisians express concern that they are unable to provide their children with a good education, supplementary education programs outside the formal system offer a unique opportunity to more quickly address critical shortcomings in the existing system and provide students with the necessary skills to succeed in today's economy.

If such programs were more widely available, it is likely that many Tunisians would participate. Broadly speaking, although few Tunisians live in a family with a member who has directly participated in a non-formal education (NFE) program, the reputation of such programs is positive. Perhaps it is related to the perception that such programs can prepare Tunisians for employment, as this is the key consideration that Tunisians believe would lead youth to participate in such programs.

Yet, Tunisians also make clear that receiving a tangible skill is not the only reason to participate in youth NFE programs program. In fact, there is a strong preference for educational modules that emphasize a number of skills that are often lacking in Tunisian classroom, including programs that seek to improve critical thinking and emotional intelligence. Tunisians across nearly all demographic backgrounds prefer programs that stress critical thinking over rote memorization and those that teach emotional intelligence and understanding the perspectives of others.

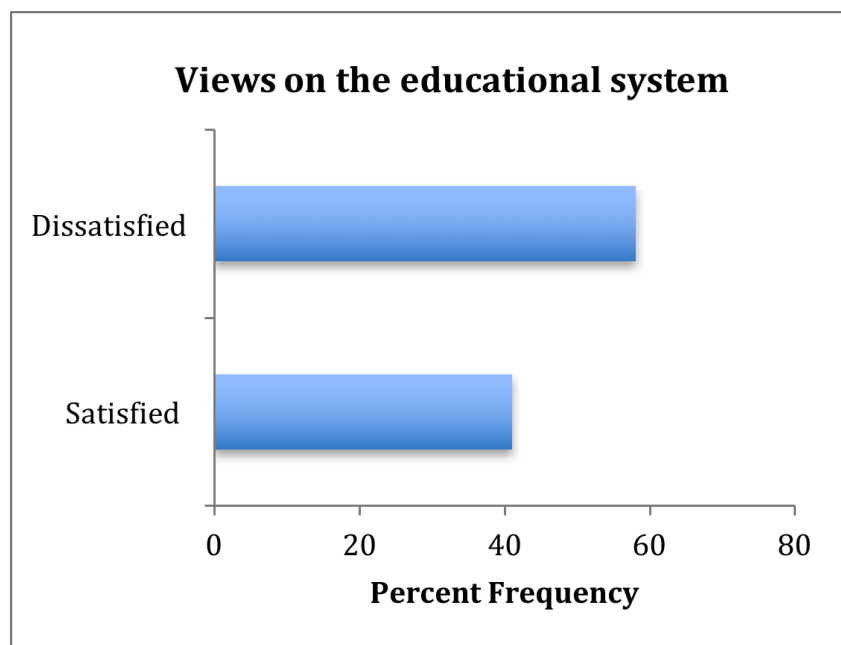
Yet, there remain a number of important barriers to consider in designing non-formal programs focused on these skills. Most importantly, the cost of such programs represents a significant obstacle for many Tunisians. Ensuring that such programs are affordable is a key step, especially to encourage participation among Tunisians from a poorer background.

Views on Government and the Education System

The vast majority of Tunisians (97 percent) are worried (6 percent) or very worried (91 percent) about the ability to give their children a good education. In part, this can be attributed to their concerns about the public school system. Only a minority of the population is satisfied with the public education system in Tunisia. Overall, 41 percent say they are satisfied or very satisfied, compared with 58 percent who say they are not. Further, we see a small difference in level of satisfaction among rural versus urban dwelling Tunisians. Those living in urban areas are dissatisfied at a higher rate than their rural

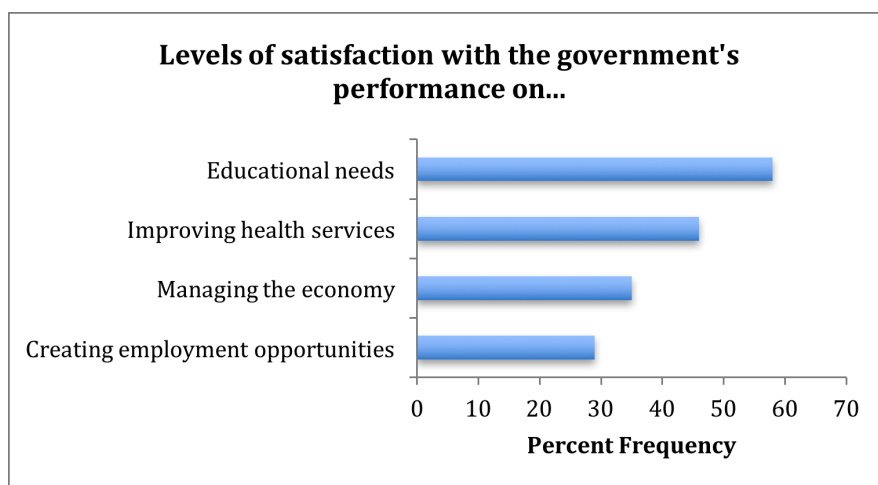
¹ Arab Barometer data. 2016. "Tunisia. Wave 4." Available at <http://www.arabbarometer.org>.

counterparts. While 61 percent of urban Tunisians are dissatisfied with the educational system, 51 percent of rural Tunisians say the same. This pattern extends even to the country's capital where 64 percent are dissatisfied with the educational system.



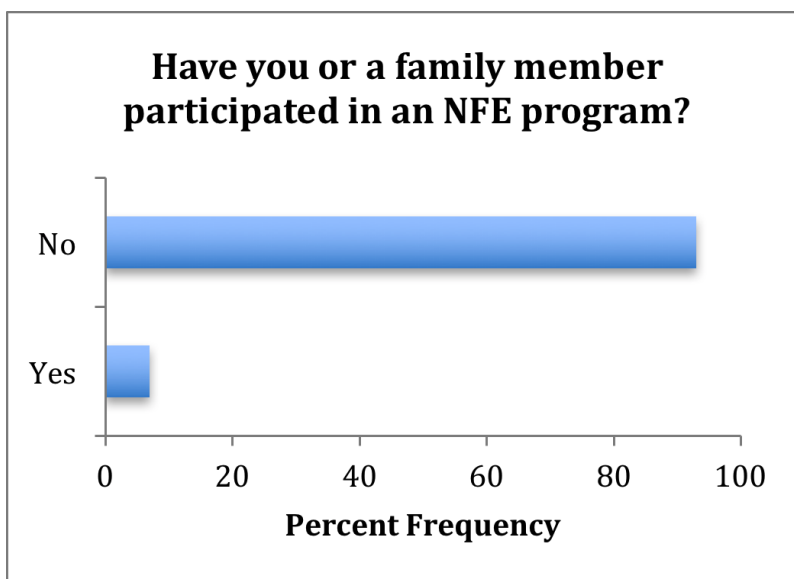
Yet, although Tunisians are generally dissatisfied with the education system, they are relatively pleased with the government's performance in addressing educational needs. Over half rate the government's efforts to address educational needs positively (58 percent). There is no significant geographic variation in these attitudes with 55 percent of rural-dwelling Tunisians rating the government's efforts as good or very good compared to 59 percent of those living in urban areas. Further, those from the country's capital have a similar level of satisfaction (61 percent).

By comparison, Tunisians believe that the government's performance on educational needs exceeds its performance in other areas. For example, only 45 percent of Tunisians are satisfied with the government's performance improving basic health services. Meanwhile, Tunisians' satisfaction with the government's performance on the economy (34 percent) and creating job opportunities (28 percent) is even lower.

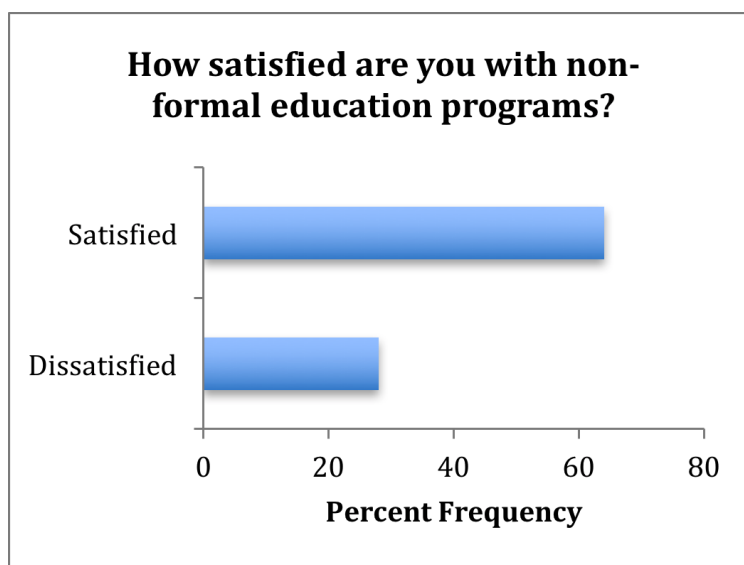


Attitudes toward Non-Formal Education and Reasons for Attending

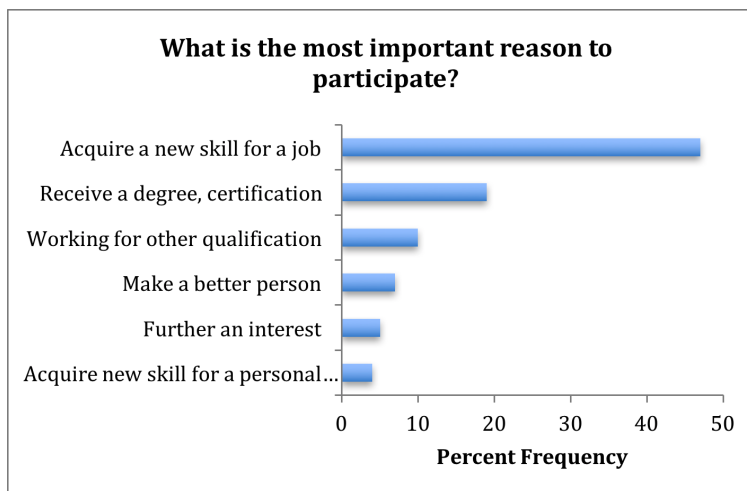
Rates of participation in youth non-formal education programs are low. Only 7 percent of respondents say they themselves or a family member participated in such programs in the last five years. Limited participation in non-formal education programs is found across all incomes.



Tunisians earning above the median monthly income as well as those earning below participate at similar rates (8 percent vs. 6 percent). Furthermore, Tunisians who say that their household income not only covers their expenses but allows them to save participate roughly at the same rate as Tunisians who say that they face significant difficulties in meeting even basic needs (7 percent vs. 6 percent).

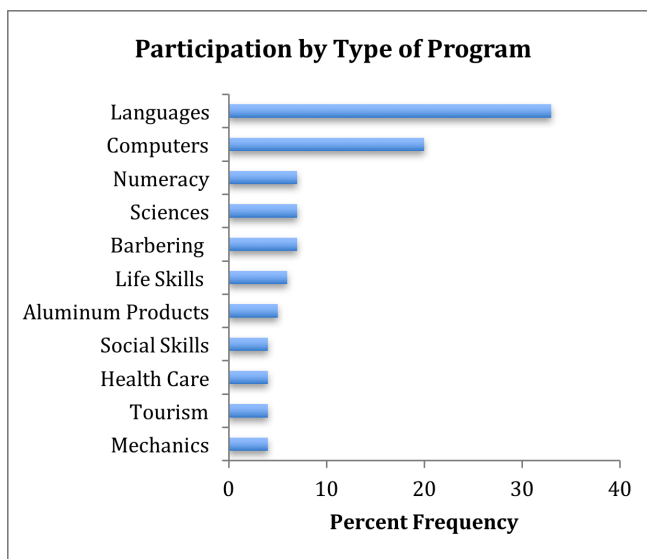


Overall, although a majority of Tunisians indicate that they are satisfied with the non-formal education program (64 percent), a sizable minority indicates they are not satisfied (28 percent). The results are a bit different however when only examining those Tunisians who either participated themselves or had a family member participate. In this case, 83 percent are satisfied with the experience, while less than a fifth are not (17 percent). Meanwhile, among those who neither participated themselves nor had family members participate, the reputation of NFE programs is relatively high with 63 percent viewing the programs favorably and 8 percent saying they have no opinion. This finding makes clear that educational programs outside the formal system enjoy a positive reputation among Tunisians, especially after having a member of the household take part in such a program.



When asked about the most important reasons for attending a non-formal education program, nearly half of Tunisians (47 percent) say it is to acquire a new skill for a job.

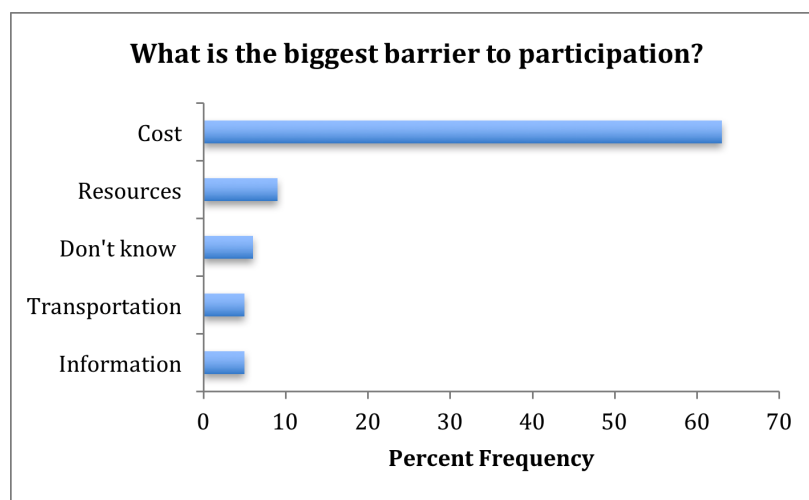
Meanwhile, a fifth (19 percent) say it is to get a degree or certificate (19 percent), followed by 10 percent saying it is to work for other qualifications and 7 percent saying it is to make oneself a better person. When asked about the second most important reason for attending a non-formal education program, Tunisians cite the similar reasons in roughly the same order, albeit at lower rates. The most commonly cited reason is still to acquire a new skill for a job (28 percent), followed by getting a degree or certificate (25 percent) and working for other qualifications (14 percent).



In terms of the types of NFE programs that Tunisians most commonly participate in, the most popular programs are those focusing on languages (33 percent) and computers (20 percent). Other programs that respondents or their family members participate in include ones teaching practical skills such as barbering (7 percent), use of aluminum products (5 percent), mechanics (4 percent) or plumbing (2 percent). Programs focusing on service industries, such as health care or tourism (each 4 percent), also see some participation, albeit infrequently.

Barriers to Attending Non-Formal Education Programs

Private institutions organize over three-quarters of the youth non-formal education programs Tunisians have attended (78 percent) and, unsurprisingly, Tunisians name cost as by far the largest barrier to participation in such programs (63 percent). Other barriers listed include limited resources (9 percent), a lack of information on programs (5 percent) and transportation (5 percent). When asked about the second biggest barrier to participation, over a fifth of Tunisians cite transportation (23 percent), followed by cost (11 percent), information (9 percent), time (7 percent) and a lack of resources (5 percent).



A more detailed analysis of these barriers reveals that cost is seen as the biggest barrier to participation across all incomes. For example, 63 percent of households earning 500DT or more each month, which is roughly the median household income in Tunisia, say cost is a barrier, as do 64 percent of those earning less than 500DT each month. The second biggest barrier to participation, transportation, is also cited at equal rates among both lower income and higher income Tunisians (21 percent of those earning 500DT or more monthly vs. 26 percent of those earning less than 500DT monthly). Thus, affordability is an issue that concerns both wealthier and poorer Tunisians.

By comparison, cultural barriers do not appear to be a significant issue. There is little evidence of widespread gender barriers to education, for example. Tunisians overwhelmingly say it is acceptable for male and female university students to attend classes together (86 percent), and 88 percent do not believe that university education for males is more important than university education for females. Further, when asked to cite the biggest and second biggest barriers to participation in non-formal education programs, only 3 percent of respondents said family disapproval was the biggest barrier, and only 8 percent said family disapproval was the second biggest barrier.

Views of Education

Despite concerns that Tunisians may prefer a system that emphasizes rote memorization to problem solving skills, the survey results call this assumption into question. When asked about the kind of education system they would like to see in the country, Tunisians very clearly prefer an education system that emphasizes scientific skills or emotional skills and critical thinking, as opposed to rote memorization. Overall, 80 percent of Tunisians prefer a system that teaches students how to recognize and express their own emotions and respond to others' emotions as opposed to a system that focuses primarily on developing

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Total
1	Statement 1: The education system should focus primarily on developing the scientific skills of pupils and students	14%	3%	17%
	Statement 2: Just as there are courses to teach scientific skills there must be courses to teach students how to recognize and express their own emotions and respond to others' emotions	62%	18%	80%
2	Statement 1: Giving the correct answer to a question remains the most important goal for pupils and students	6%	2%	8%
	Statement 2: It is not important for pupils and students to always reach the correct answer. What is most important is that they learn to think about how to answer the question	74%	16%	90%
3	Statement 1: A good education system is one that encourages the student to accept the answer offered by the teacher because it is the best answer, there is no need for alternatives.	10%	5%	15%
	Statement 2: A good education system is one that encourages students to think for themselves even when it	66%	17%	83%

	goes against what the teacher is saying.			
4	Statement 1: Examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what has been taught in class are the best test of learning.	7%	4%	11%
	Statement 2: Examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have made their own sense of what has been taught in class are the best test of learning.	70%	16%	86%
5	Statement 1: The education system should place primary importance on academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion.	17%	9%	26%
	Statement 2: The education system should place primary importance on learning social skills such as the ability to understand the perspectives and feelings of others.	51%	20%	71%

scientific skills (17 percent). When given a choice between an educational system that places primary importance on academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion to one that places primary importance on learning social skills such as understanding the perspectives of others, the majority of Tunisians prefer the latter (26 percent vs. 70 percent).

Similarly, Tunisians are also overwhelmingly in favor of an education system that emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills. Respondents were asked if it is more important for an education system to emphasize that students give the correct answer or if it is not important that students always reach the correct answer rather the emphasis should be on students learning how to answer the question. The vast majority of Tunisians place a clear emphasis on learning how to solve the problem (91 percent) over just getting

the correct answer (7 percent). Tunisians also favor an education system that encourages students to think for themselves even when it goes against what the teacher is saying compared with a system that encourages the student to accept the answer offered by the teacher (83 percent vs. 14 percent). Finally, most Tunisians agree (86 percent) that examinations allowing students to demonstrate how well they have made their own sense of what has been taught in class are better tests of learning than those that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what has been taught in class (11 percent). Interestingly, for all questions about their preferred type of education system, respondents primarily tended to “strongly agree”, rather than just “agree”, signaling a particularly strong level of support for teaching critical thinking skills as part of a student’s curriculum.


Perhaps surprisingly, Tunisians of all backgrounds are about equally likely to prefer an education system that emphasizes critical and analytical thinking to rote memorization. For example, Tunisians whose household income is more than 500DT per month are not significantly more likely to favor an education system that has courses teaching students how to recognize and express their emotions than those whose incomes are lower (83 percent vs. 80 percent). Similarly, wealthier Tunisians (72 percent) are about as likely as those with lower incomes (69 percent) to say an education system should place primary importance on learning social skills, such as understanding the perspectives of others, over academic achievement and certificates recognizing completion.

However, there are some demographic differences when examining views on critical thinking in education. While nearly one-fifth of lower income Tunisians prefer an educational system that encourages the student to accept the answer offered by the teacher because it is the best answer (17 percent), only 11 percent of higher income Tunisians hold this view. Additionally, nearly twice as many Tunisians earning below the approximate median income as opposed to those earning above the median income think examinations that allow students to demonstrate how well they have memorized what has been taught in class are the best test of learning (13 percent vs. 7 percent).

Although there are some differences in attitudes by income, overall the survey results make clear that overwhelming majorities of both higher and lower income Tunisians hold the view that an education system emphasizing critical and analytical thinking is preferable to one that stresses rote memorization. Thus, most Tunisians, regardless of background, would likely embrace NFE programs designed to teach children to both think critically and develop their emotional skills.

Conclusion

Although the majority of Tunisians are dissatisfied with the public educational system, relatively few have turned to educational programs outside the formal curriculum as an alternative. This is not to say that Tunisians are not concerned about education as there is



near universal concern about the inability to provide children good education. The favorable reputation of non-formal educational programs, among both those who have participated and those who have not, suggests that Tunisians would perhaps be willing to use these types of programs alleviate their apprehensions and to enhance children's education.

Importantly, there is a clear opportunity to use NFE programs to develop skills in critical thinking and emotional intelligence, especially if these programs could be promoted as programs that would make youth more likely to find employment. Given that cost is seen the greatest barrier to participation, a successful program would need to address affordability. Programs that are affordable, help participants acquire and improve skills and focus on critical and analytical thinking are likely to meet the needs of Tunisian citizens and improve the lives of the country's youth.