

Constructing “Forced into Unemployment Doctors” and “Excluded from Work Doctors” Claims: Reflections from Tunisia

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, graduate unemployment in Tunisia has reached levels unmatched by countries at comparable stages of development.¹ This paradox, often described as an “overproduction” of graduates, results from the interaction of multiple factors, starting with the shortcomings of two national education reforms initiated in the late 1980s. The first reform, introduced in 1989 and enshrined in the law of July 19, 1991, aims, among other objectives, to prepare young people to face the future by training them, across various cycles of education, in self-learning, so that upon leaving the education system they are able to keep pace with the rapid changes of the modern age and contribute positively to them (Art.10). The second reform was the Education and Schooling Orientation Act of July 23, 2002, which paved the way for the implementation of the “School of Tomorrow” project (2002-2007), intended to establish a knowledge-based society.

The “right to success for all” mantra promoted at the time, resonated with the leitmotif of the “New Era”² – *Toûnes baled el-farah ed-daim* (Tunisia, land of permanent joy) – a slogan coined in the 1990s to distinguish itself from the Bourguiba-era motto *farhat el-hayat* (the joy of living). This politicized approach to reform, with effectively privileged quantity over quality, led to the under-qualification of degree holders from so-called “barracks faculties” (Vermeren, 2003, p. 444) and widened the gap between “elite streams” (notably the *grandes écoles* and medical schools) and the “relegation streams” (master’s and/or bachelors-masters-doctorate pathways). Compounding these dynamics was the gradual disengagement of the state from the productive system – and consequently from its role as a major employer in the public and para-public sectors – following the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986. This occurred at a time marked by the acceleration of the demographic transition, one of whose major consequences was a significant influx of young people onto the labour market. Indeed, the highest average annual demographic growth in absolute terms was recorded between 1984 and 1994, signifying 181,900 more individuals (per year) compared to 112,600 between 1994 to 2004 and 107,200 between 2004 to 2014 (INS, 2016; Blavier, 2016, p. 58-59). Meanwhile, economic growth remained insufficient to ensure full employment.

1 This article was originally written in French. The author manually double checked the translation from French to English using DeepL. Arabic words, except personal names, are written using the Arabica transliteration system.

2 The “New Era” is the expression used in official media to refer to the regime of President Ben Ali (installed after the coup d’état of November 7, 1987). He was overthrown on January 14, 2011, in the first act in what has come to be known as the Arab Spring.

As a result, unemployment among graduates – affecting higher education degree holders more severely than non-graduates from the 2000s onward³ – became a central focus of popular protest during the events of December 2010 to January 2011. These events, often described as the “Youth Revolt” expressed aspirations for freedom and dignity while advancing demands for employment, conceived as both fundamental and a merit (*istehqāq*). This youths’ yearning for work was subsequently appropriated by emerging political forces (*En-Nahḍa*, *Nida Toūnes*, and various left and centre-left political parties, for instance) to fuel their electoral bids, multiplying unfulfilled promises. Henceforth, youth unemployment – and particularly graduate unemployment – has increasingly become seen as a trapped object, a politically risky subject, likely to compromise the credibility of political actors and harm their future, and which is therefore best avoided. Unemployed graduates have thus been, in a sense, abandoned to their fate, with responsibility effectively shifted back onto them.

Building on this last observation, this study adopts an empirical approach to examine what may be termed virtual communicational action (that is, the exchange of information and ideas through digital platforms) as a key mechanism for the mobilization of a specific social group – unemployed *docteurs* – whose numbers have grown exponentially since 2012.⁴ The object is to analyse the “symbolic construction” (Neveu, 2015, p. 99) of the social movement in question. As Neveu argues, “collective action presupposes [above all] work on representations,” involving a designation and problematization of the contested reality.

The analysis draws on a corpus composed of material from Arabic-language online forums advocating for unemployed graduates: the *Groupe National des Docteurs sans Emploi* (GNDSE)⁵ and the *Mouvement des Doctorants Tunisiens Exclus du Travail* (MDTET),⁶ supplemented by speeches from political leaders and various forms of grey literature. The aim is to identify the underlying logic – or more precisely the “poetics of action,” understood as the creative and imaginative dimensions – of the discourses calling for action produced by this networked community of unemployed Doctors. To this end, the study first examines the construction of the dual category of “forced into unemployment” and “excluded from work” Doctors, understood as a cognitive process through which individuals adapt to an undesired situation. It then analyses the forms of claims associated with these categories, raising the question of the extent the claim is capable, as a semantic form, of accomplishing tangible results.

3 Between 2005 and 2011, the average annual growth rate of the unemployed working population (all levels of education combined) was 7.23%; that of university graduates was 19.58% (Ben Amor, 2012, p. 9-10).

4 In the Tunisian context, a *docteur* refers to a holder of a doctorate degree, not just medical doctors. To distinguish between the group of doctors we are interested in for this study from medical doctors (also known *docteurs*), we write “Doctor” with a capital letter when addressing the former.

5 This French translation used in the Tunisian media – which can be translated into English as “National Group of Unemployed Doctors” – betrays the original formulation in Arabic, which can be translated as “Union of Tunisian Doctors Forced into Unemployment.” Note that some Arabic and French-speaking media used to refer to this group as “Coordination Tunisienne des Docteurs et Doctorants Chercheurs” (“Tunisian Coordination of Doctors and Research Doctoral Students” in English).

6 The forum name is translated in English as Movement of Tunisian Doctoral Students Excluded from Work. However, note that the term “doctorants” (research doctoral students) used in the French-speaking Tunisian media is misleading. The MDTET group embodies – first and foremost – those who have obtained their doctorate.

Methodology

The methodology required to reconstruct the representations and action strategies developed by unemployed Doctors is particularly complex as it would require extensive anthropological fieldwork. Such an undertaking demands a level of time investment that exceeds the scope of this chapter. This constraint explains – if not fully justifies – the methodological approach adopted, namely an indirect and systematic observation of posts (and the comments they generate), as well as various forms of multimedia content published and – particularly in 2023 and 2024 – on the GNDSE and the MDTET online forums accessible (in Arabic) on Facebook.⁷ The selection of these forums is justified by their embodiment of what Howard Rheingold (2000, p. 110-120) describes as “many-to-many communication” a format that enables multiple voices to be heard indirectly around a shared issue. Moreover, archived discussions allow for asynchronous communication and observation: participants can contribute at their convenience, while the researcher can revisit the material repeatedly. Such an approach requires the researcher to move beyond first-degree discourse, in which those concerned express accumulated frustration and despair about the future. Nevertheless, these expressed feelings – understood here as experiences of distress or discomfort – must be taken seriously, as they form the basis of how actors (in this case, unemployed Doctors) perceive and represent the problem, as well as themselves.

The analysis of the observed arena of action is structured around two poles: the actor and the concrete action system (CAS). As Crozier & Friedberg (1977) argue, the actor – whether individual or collective, public or private – “does not exist outside the system that defines his freedom and the rationality he can use in his action. But the system exists only through the actor, who alone can carry it and give it life, and who alone can change it” (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977, p. 11). Within this framework, the CAS, a contingent construct, serves as an analytical model for understanding the challenges of collective action, notably those related to “interdependence, cooperation and conflict” (ibid, p. 286). Accordingly, the analysis does not rely solely on the words of unemployed Doctors, but also incorporates the perspectives of political actors, researchers and other experts.

This approach was further informed by a constructivist epistemology, which posits that the realities of “society and the existence of individuals” cannot be apprehended exclusively through so-called objective observation. As emphasized by Lévy & Lussault (2003), such realities do not exist independently of the grasp made of them from those who intend to make the world intelligible. The researcher thus assumes the role of observer and a modeler who enunciates “models of knowable reality” that are not so much “duplicates of reality as circumstantial representations of it” (ibid, p. 200).

At a conceptual level, the poetics of action of unemployed Doctors is analysed from the lens of tactical practices (*arts de faire*) and a polemological approach, as theorized by M. de Certeau (1990a). In this framework, tactics refer to the “skill/ruse” of investing the terrain of the other without his knowledge or in spite of him, in order to escape from the posture of consumer; they correspond to. As Certeau

⁷ The online forums are open to the public. According to data available in October 2024, there were 6,600 members on the MDTET forum (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/766421001447752>) and a further 21,800 on the GNDSE site (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/400713963970006/>).

EDITOR’S note: Although these sources in Arabic translated into English constitute certain methodological challenges, AI-assisted translation has allowed a larger scope of scholars to access this material.

writes, tactics involve a “calculation that cannot rely on its own, nor therefore on a boundary that distinguishes the other as a visible totality. Tactics are not limited to the other's place; they can be understood as a creative activity that seizes opportunities in the force of order: a kind of poaching” (de Certeau, 1990a, p. XLVI). The polemological approach, for its part, views conflict to be “the father of all things”. It takes the dual form of conflict served by discourse. From this point of view, antagonism can be seen as a scene that can lead to the advent of a new order, a kind of “instituting rupture”.

The construction of the “forced into unemployment Doctors” and “excluded from work Doctors” categories

I conceptualise the construction of the categories “forced into unemployment Doctors” and excluded from work Doctors” as a cognitive process of adaptation to an undesirable situation, operating through the double mechanisms of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1967, p. 48). This process gives rise to the production of a discourse that takes the form of a “pathos,” (that is, a pathetic discourse) as defined by Aristotle: a form of language-action aimed at persuading audiences by moving them (Rinn et al., 2016, p. 49-58). In this perspective, I pay particular attention to the representations that actors construct around two nominal syntagmas (“forced into unemployment Doctors” and “excluded from work Doctors”), as well as the themes generated by these speech acts around the qualifiers “forced into unemployment” and “excluded from work”.

Unemployment from the viewpoint of those concerned

A careful – though non-exhaustive – analysis of the discursive elements produced by unemployed Doctors shows that users (forum administrators, moderators and commentators) employ one or both two nominal syntagmas “forced into unemployment Doctors” and “excluded from work Doctors,” rather than the neutral expressions “unemployed Doctors” or “unemployed researchers,” which have traditionally been used in official discourse and the press. At first glance, the preference for these formulations suggests the speakers’ adoption of a militant, and, potentially, performative posture, aimed at mobilizing affected individuals and persuading the public of the legitimacy of their claims. Indeed, these actors describe themselves as *mou’atalin ‘an al-‘amal* (forced into unemployment) or *maqšiina ‘an al-‘amal* ([deliberately] excluded from work). The tragic tone of these expressions reflects a deliberate effort to frame unemployment as a societal problem and, by extension, a political matter.

As Montserrat Emperador (2020) observes in the Moroccan case, the label “unemployed graduate” merely denotes a condition and does not distinguish between those engaged in protest and those who are not. A central challenge for mobilized actors, she argues, is to achieve recognition as political subjects. Self-designation as “forced into unemployment” contributes to this process, insofar as it entails “presenting themselves publicly as people forced into unemployment against their will and/or forced to develop an economic activity below their level of qualification validated by a diploma” (Montserrat Emperador, 2020, p. 68). This issue also carries significant implication for public authori-

ties in Tunisia, particularly the Ministries of Finance and Higher Education and Scientific Research, given the economic downturn that has affected the country since 2011.

The stakes involved thus generate tension and conflict, creating contexts in which actors’ strategies become more visible, discourses of justification multiply, and the balance of power become more evident, and so on. The increasingly publicized controversy surrounding the unemployment of Doctors – an issue examined further below – reflects precisely such a conflictual situation. The task, therefore, is to decode the discursive strategies deployed by the different sides involved in resolving this real social challenge.

From this perspective, the themes constructed through speech acts around the two qualifiers rely on the use and management of emotions (Rinn et al., 2016, p. 13), particularly within exchanges among fellow combatants. In articulating years of frustration and despair, unemployed Doctors adopt tragic tones, eliciting aversion to a glaring, inescapable injustice. Illustrative examples include the following comments:

I’m here today to demand my right to employment during the demonstration [organized on September 8, 2021], as demanded by all my comrades mobilized on site. For the past two months, successive governments have promised to unblock the situation but have made no positive progress. The former head of government’s [Mechichi] promise of a three-year recruitment plan has fallen by the wayside, as the year draws to a close. Making the right decisions for scientific research is a national duty, especially since July 25.

We intend to send to the President of the Republic, Kais Saied. Hope remains, even if it is reduced and dwindling at a time when we were expecting courageous post-July 25 decisions and notable improvements. It’s unfortunate that Tunisian citizens are paying through the nose for their children’s schooling all the way to university, while they are condemned to be future unemployed. (Bachar interview in Kechiche, 2021).

In Tunisia, the more you study, the less likely you are to get a job. That’s why we say we’re excluded from work (Sakhraoui, 2024a).

Unemployed Doctors also mobilize irony in their discursive practices. In some cases, they go so far as to implicitly invoke what has been described as the syndrome of the colonised “inferiorised and animalised (...) [who] is ashamed of himself” (Boucaud-Victoire, 2023). This is illustrated when Sakhraoui (2024b) commented that after all he had seen and experienced, he thanked God that the era of colonization had ended.

The exchange below between an MDTET leader, Hatem Ben Jemia and a well-known academic (Brahim Jadla) highlights a disabling representation of unemployed Doctors, who are implicitly portrayed as responsible for their condition and the lacking intellectual capacity to escape it (Ben Jemia, 2024a)⁸:

⁸ This exchange took place on Hatem Zitouni’s Facebook wall, in response to the following post: “The university’s task is not to find jobs for its students, but to train them.” The exchange was then reproduced by Hatem Ben Jemia on the MDTET

You have the right to organize sit-ins and, above all, to demand the implementation of a fair and transparent recruitment procedure [in higher education] or any other formula enabling you to work and continue your research. To prevent the crisis from worsening, I think we also need to reform the training and ‘graduation’ courses at university, which produce little more than unemployed people and [individuals] incapable of thinking! (Brahim Jadla).

In fact, it’s a case of ‘forced into unemployment’, insofar as we’re talking about Doctor-researchers. Dozens of scientific research and training structures, set up within the various ministries and other public establishments, are run by technicians and administrators who have nothing to do with scientific research and training. This inertia of thought is due to the very logic of how the State operates. It calls on technicians and administrators to supervise research missions with which they have no connection.” (Hatem Ben Jemia).

An analysis of the chronological order and frequency of the two nominal syntagmas reveals two distinct phases. Prior to October 8, 2022 – the date marking the creation of MDTET – the dominant expression was “forced into unemployment Doctors,” a formulation also adopted by the GNDSE in its Arabic designation. The constitution of this group reflects, as observed the Moroccan case (Montserrat Emperador, 2009, p. 34), the desire of holders of master’s degrees and doctorates to organize themselves as a distinct collective, separate from the broader category of *aṣḥab ach-chahaed al-mou’atalin ‘an al-amal* (“unemployed graduates”). This position clearly emanates from an assumed esprit de corps.

At first glance, the shift from the nominal syntagma “forced into unemployment Doctors” to “excluded from work Doctors” suggests a diversification of the assessment of the situation within the protest movement. However, a closer examination points to an underlying conflict within the GNDSE, understood as “the expression of antagonisms, controversies or opposition of divergent, competitive interests between social groups” (Melé, Larrue, & Rosemberg, 2003, p. 15). This conflict appears to have erupted during the sit-in held in the lobby of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR), which began on June 29, 2020, and lasted over eighteen months. The antagonism reportedly stemmed from a disagreement over the composition of the delegation responsible for negotiations with the Ministry (echoed in the Minister’s statements on Elhiwar Ettounsi); and more fundamentally in relation to the “waiting horizon”⁹ for the negotiations, between proponents of partial solutions – roughly GNDSE’s position¹⁰ – and advocates of a *taswiya šamila* (blanket regularization)¹¹ to which we return to below.

The adoption of the expression “excluded from work” thus signals a process of radicalization within the protest movement, driven, in particular, by MDTET coordinators. The shift from “forced into

forum. It should be noted that the exchange in question has since been deleted from Zitouni’s wall. Here is the link to the original post: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/IDwAXQdkqF/>.

9 This refers to what the actors are expecting to encounter or obtain when acting. This situation influences how they interpret events and make decisions.

10 The GNDSE forum charter states that the collective is exclusively intended for the exchange of views concerning their future objectives visions regarding the major problem (*al-mo’qila*) of unemployment, as well as the ways through which they will secure their right to work.” In classical Arabic, the term *al-mo’qila* literally denotes “a path with very narrow exits.”

11 As opposed to translation of the English translation “global settlement” from Arabic, I have chosen to adopt “blanket regularization,” which perfectly matches the described conflictual context, given that the adjective “blanket” portends means the regularization for all unemployed Doctors, without exception.

unemployment” to “excluded from work” occurred in two stages. Initially, formulations such as “forced into unemployment Doctors or rather excluded from work” appeared on online discourse. The adverb “rather” indicates a gradual preference for the latter expression. This phase of what Paul Siblot (2001) terms “terminological awkwardness” was short lived; within a few weeks, the ambiguity was resolved in favour of the more assertive formulation. Thereafter, MDTET actors consistently adopted the expression “[deliberately] excluded from work.” This position was explicitly affirmed by Meriem (an MDTET forum administrator) during a radio appearance where she emphasized that the issue concerned excluded from work Doctors and not “forced into unemployment Doctors (Radio Monastir, 2024).

From this perspective, the transition to the expression “Doctors excluded from work” can be understood as a “contextualized act of naming, grasped in the dynamics of actualization” (Siblot, 2001, p. 189). Within this framework, the concept of *praxeme* – a linguistic term that designates an object of knowledge whose meaning is inseparable from cultural practices – allows us to identify “the significance of the name the effects of the dialectical relation of the subject to the real, and those of dialogism. It also makes it possible to interpret the ‘predicate of [lived] reality’ in terms of reference (...)” (ibid, p. 189.). Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, this interaction takes place between the speech of the main narrator (in this case, the speaker) and the speeches of other characters, or between two internal speeches of a character. The dialogism is observed in the interaction between the proponents of the two nominal syntagmas (GNDSE versus MDTET), on the one hand and the interaction between these two nominal syntagmas in the mind of the same person hitherto adopting the mixed expression of “forced into unemployment or rather excluded from work.”

This development is analytically significant on several levels. First, it is the expression of this “enunciative competence,” which represents a constitutive element of the social actor.¹² Second, it illustrates the transcendence of individual actors (the unemployed Doctors in their “I”) by a collective actor (MDTET), through a process of “intersubjective transcendence” (Husserl, 2001, p. 135). In this sense, intersubjectivity refers to the establishment of a reciprocal relationship, implicit or explicit, between a group of individuals, leading to the elaboration of a common vision and the production of a collective discourse. This process also raises important questions regarding leadership and the know-how inherent it entails. Finally, the transformation described is akin to “territorial competence,” as evoked by Hervé Gumichian et al. (2003, p. 33-34). Here, the actor is “territorialized” from the moment he finds himself in a situation of action – a spatial and temporal framework for the accomplishment of ontological freedom, negotiating his place through power games. In the end, it is this “power games” dimension, which indicates the establishment of relations of domination in order to obtain something from one’s opponent, against his or her will, that explains, in the author’s view, the shift from “forced into unemployment” to the slightly more forceful “excluded from work.”

Indeed, while both expressions articulate a shared desire for recognition of Doctors’ unemployment as a political issue, the expression “excluded from work” emerged as a direct consequence of a stalemate in the situation (at the time, the sit-in in the Ministry lobby had not yet been lifted) and of the

12 Enunciative competence is the ability to produce personal or autonomous discourse, is one of the fundamental attributes of a social actor. It involves not only mastery of linguistic resources, but also the ability to mobilize social, cultural, and interactional knowledge to take a position, construct meaning, and act through language.

appropriation of the expression “forced into unemployment” by Hichem Mechichi (Arabesque, 2021), head of government from September 2, 2020, to July 25, 2021. In this context, the adoption of the phrase “excluded from work” would appear to be a form of “enunciative one-upmanship” aimed at countering Mechichi’s “poaching” tactics pending the development of a new mobilizing leitmotif: the blanket regularization.

Unemployment from the viewpoint of political discourse

An examination of the discourses produced by political leaders during the Elyes Fakhfakh and Hichem Mechichi administrations – marked by the removal of the former and the appointment of the latter – must be situated within a broader context of political conflict. This period was characterized by tensions between President Kais Saied and the parliamentary majority emerging from the 2019 elections, led by the Islamist party *En-Nahda* Movement. Substantively, the analysis seeks to assess whether a shift in political discourse occurred in light of this turning point and, more importantly, to evaluate the degree of compatibility between official discourse and that of unemployed Doctors, as outlined above. To this end, a comparative reading is conducted of three key texts of discourse (all translated from Arabic): an announcement by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR), (July 30, 2020); a press release issued by the Prime Minister’s Office on February 11, 2021 (Arabesque, 2021)¹³; and a televised interview on Elhiwar Ettounsi’s “Tunis Today” programme with Olfa Ben Ouda¹⁴ on March 29, 2021.

A first observation is that, when confronted with this structural problem, political actors adopt a discourse oscillating between “measured voluntarism” and what may be termed “intellect.” In political theory, voluntarism emphasizes the primacy of will, choice, and agency over intellect or predetermined structural constraints. This voluntarist dimension is reflected in expressions such as: “since she [Lobna Jeribi] took up her post in the Ministry” (MHESR, 2020) – despite the fact that she had assumed her interim position as acting Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research only days earlier on July 15, 2020; “the Government has been working since its investiture to resolve the problem,” (Arabesque, 2021); “the Head of Government has set up a committee...; we also needed a counterpart for dialogue” (Elhiwar Ettounsi, 2021). Within this context, the adoption of the expression “forced into unemployment” by Jeribi and Mechichi is understandable. Indeed, unlike the expression “unemployed Doctors,” which merely describes a situation, “forced into unemployment,” assumes a performative vocabulary.

The “intellect” dimension, for its part, is evident in the articulation of policy proposals aimed at mitigating the problem, including the presentation of reform measures (MHESR, 2020), and the formulation of an “action plan” (Arabesque, 2021; Elhiwar Ettounsi, 2021), as well as in the stated intention to move away from populist rhetoric and manners (Elhiwar Ettounsi, 2021). Nevertheless, the measures ultimately proposed – particularly the recruitment of 2,400 unemployed Doctors as

¹³ See Appendix I.

¹⁴ Ben Ouda served as Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research from September 2, 2020, to October 11, 2021

assistant professors¹⁵ and the creation of research units in several sectoral ministries – fell short of the expectations of those concerned. From the protesters’ perspective, these initiatives were “too little, too late.”

Drawing on Michael L. Poirier Elliot’s simplified interpretation of conflict and comparing the proposals of the political leaders with those of the protesters mentioned above, the situation can be characterized as a multifaceted conflict. First, the disagreement is substantive, stemming from the government’s decision to recruit a limited number of doctorate holders (2,400 over three years). Here, the conflict reflects divergent perceptions of the risks and consequences associated with the decision. More precisely, it is thus the disagreement over the very content of the decision to be made (Dziedzicki, 2004, p. 44) that unites the protesting Doctors, who would like to see a radical, rather than partial, solution. Second, the antagonism reflects a conflict rooted in uncertainty and perceived injustice linked to an inequitable distribution of the benefits (access to assistant professor posts obtained through competitive examinations deemed eliminatory and unfair) and disadvantages associated with public policy.

More fundamentally, the conflict reveals the coexistence of two competing worldviews. On the one hand, unemployed Doctors articulate a demand steeped in a Fordist conception of the employment contract, oriented towards full employment. On the other hand, political discourse – particularly as expressed by Ben Ouda – reflects a neoliberal logic with a Darwinian understanding of the struggle of all against all and its mode of production (and recruitment of personnel) which claims to be flexible. This orientation is clearly evident in her televised interview on Elhiwar Ettounsi (2021), which aligns with the broader liberal ideology supported by the parliamentary majority backing the Mechichi government prior to the political rupture of July 25, 2021. A close reading of Ben Ouda’s discourse shows a strong assertion of agency, as she positions herself not merely as an institutional agent but as an autonomous actor mobilizing personal resources and expertise. This is notably reflected in her use of the first-person singular.

Her professional trajectory – holding a doctorate in management, serving as a professor of finance, presiding over the University of Carthage, and participating in corporate governance – further informs her discourse, which is closely aligned with the norms and values of the financial and managerial sphere. The Minister’s privileged relationship with the world of finance, as well as her neoliberal approach, was already apparent in her speech delivered on National Knowledge Day (September 6, 2020), in which she emphasizes the need to transition from a research system centred on training to one focused on valorisation, employability, and integration with the economic environment (WMC, 2020, September).

This neoliberal framing is also evident in her televised interview on March 29, 2021. For instance, she emphasizes the “free” nature of higher education (in contrast to fee-based systems elsewhere) and the high cost of public recruitment programs. Furthermore, she claims a departure from populist discourse when she states: “In truth, I don’t use populist manners.” The adoption of the constative expression unemployed Doctors moreover, goes in this direction (the expression forced into unem-

15 Assistant professors are an intermediate level found between assistants, on the one hand, and lecturers and higher education professors (“A” corps), on the other. They are responsible for assisting the teacher-researchers in “A” corps in organizing teaching and examinations as well as in the supervision of assistants and students.

ployment is then considered populist). A neo-liberal vision is even more apparent in her statements on equal opportunities, governance and quality assurance. Her expression: “and may the best man win,” appears in the circumstances as the icing on the cake.

At the same time, her discourse includes attempts to discredit the leadership of the protest movement through statements such as “We found 2,000; they’re talking about 4,000” references to internal conflicts (“there was violence between them”), and accusations that the protestors seek privileges for themselves alone or reject competitive procedures. With these statements, the Minister alludes to the “closed-shop” system, one which assumes that the right to benefit from the fruits of collective action is conditional on membership and effective mobilization for the common cause.

At the time, the situation appeared to have reached a point of significant deadlock, as reflected in the title of a press article translated in English as “The blues of unemployed graduates in Tunisia” (Bahri, 2024). In it, the writer questions the likelihood of their demands being met. Such perspectives align with those of Ben Hadj, head of the doctoral school in electronic engineering at the University of Sousse, who, in the context of a survey on the professionalization of PhDs (Calmand et al., 2019, p. 7) highlighted the structural constraints of the labour market. He noted that young people in his field pursue a doctorate as a strategy to avoid unemployment, given the limited employability even of engineering graduates. He also emphasized that recruitment capacities in higher education remain severely constrained by budgetary limitations. For this academic the situation resembles a “bottleneck,” making it unrealistic to expect that universities could absorb all graduates with doctorates.

Claims in action: the logic of *hic et nunc* (here and now)

The examination of the forms of demand considered here follows from the antagonism previously noted after the stalemate during the sit-in at the Ministry of Higher Education.¹⁶ It should be added that, from that point onward, the effective leadership of the protest became, in practice, the prerogative of MDTET actors.¹⁷ With this in mind, the author examines the extent to which MDTET’s calls to action – understood not as a series of disjointed proposals, but as “an itinerary [or dynamic] of semantic forms” (Rastier, 2006, p. 106) – can produce tangible effects. The horizon of expectation envisaged is thus the implementation of the new leitmotif unifying the large majority of protesters. To this end, I first analyse the interplay between discourse and action, and then the concrete proposals for a possible a blanket regularization of the problem.

16 In a sense, this phase represents Act II of the protest movement. Act I unfolded between the 2013-2014 academic year and the end of 2022, when the MDTET was established. During this initial phase, the Doctors demanded the right to recruitment and called for practical long-term solutions to the problem of unemployment, which had steadily worsened throughout the 2010s. This phase reached its climax during the sit-in launched in June 2020 – dubbed the “sit-in for a change of destiny” – and the “march of anger and spite” held on September 8, 2021. The ensuing stalemate helps explain the transition to Act II.

17 The GNDSE forum now functions primarily as a platform for discussion and the provision of personalized advice, serving above all as a channel for disseminating information on research grants, contractual opportunities, registrations for webinars and training seminars, calls for papers to journals, private sector recruitment opportunities, legal advice, welcome and information sessions for doctoral students, among other resources.

Combining speech and action

The claim, understood as an investment in the public arena – both online and offline – constitutes a second analytical focus, one that may reveal the poetics of action of these unemployed Doctors. To this end, I distinguish between two forms of discourse-action: on the one hand, communicative acts as a means of mobilizing young people to take their place on the public stage; and on the other, approaches directed toward political bodies are likely to take up the cause of these unemployed graduates.

Regarding communication as a means of mobilization, in addition to the “collective representation” component, I observe in the identified communicative acts a strong emphasis on mobilizing unemployed Doctors to achieve the goal of blanket regularization. This is evident in the publication of numerous hashtags and multimedia content on the MDTET forum, and the increased presence of the movement’s leaders on the radio programs. These communicative acts both precede and accompany the actions organized in the field (see table 1).

Table 8.1. *Main events in Act II of the protest movement*

Date	Event	Observation
November 10, 2023	first day of protest regarding the sit-in in front of the seat of government (Kasbah)	redirection to the presidential palace
November 25-27, 2023	barefoot walking	from the Faculty of Law in Sousse to the Government square (at the Kasbah) in Tunis (140 km); “a symbolic message to the President to rehabilitate Doctors and do them justice” (Meriem)
January 13, 2024	sit-in in front of the MHESR	Doctors demand a blanket regularization for doctors excluded from work
May 8, 2024	sit-in in front of the MHESR	under the sign “ <i>winou haqi</i> ” (I want my right)
May 30, 2024	sit-in in front of the MHESR	under the sign “ <i>a’tini haqi</i> ” (give me back my due)
July 17, 2024	a march in the capital	dubbed Walk of Merit
August 14, 2024	sit-in in front of the MHESR	request for the urgent intervention of the President of the Republic to resolve their situation, which has been pending for years.

Source: personal survey based on the MDTET forum and the national press

Two observations can be drawn from Table 1. The first concerns the locations most frequently occupied by demonstrators and sit-in participants, namely the Ministry of Higher Education and the Kasbah, which refers both to the Government Palace and the square in front of it (officially named Government Square). I argue that these are highly symbolic sites, given the repeatedly expressed preference of unemployed Doctors for recruitment in higher education, as well as the image acquired by the Kasbah as a veritable “social capital.” Since the sit-ins known as Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2 – organized in the aftermath of the “Revolution” – were the largest and longest-running popular

occupation of public space in Tunisia's history, this public space has contributed to “staging society in all its diversity, or theatricalizing it” (Ghorra-Gobin, 2001, p. 9).

The second observation concerns the diversification of forms of engagement in public space, particularly between marches and sit-ins. As MDTET spokeswoman Meriem rightly points out, barefoot marching is highly symbolic: walking barefoot symbolizes poverty. The image of the barefoot individual, and others stripped naked by misery, is associated in Arab culture with the wretched and rejected of society (*al-houfat*, *al-bourat*). Unemployed Doctors thus perceive themselves as those left behind; hence their direct appeal to the President to come to their aid.

Mobilization speeches take many forms and constitute a coherent whole. They include oral speeches during online meetings (held at least once a week) and the tour of universities conducted in the first half of 2024, repeated appearances on national and regional radio stations (such as Radio Nationale, Radio Jeunes, Shems FM, Mosaïques FM, Radio Monastir, Jawhara FM, Radio Express FM, and Karama FM), participation in the press conference held on April 18, 2024, at the headquarters of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, and engagements with organizations such as the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the National Union of Tunisian Women. They also encompass textual speeches (hashtags and slogans used during demonstrations and sit-ins); and iconographic discourse (see Images 8.1 and 8.2).



Image 8.1. (a & b) Examples of iconographic discourse during the May 8, 2024, sit-in
Source: Ouhibi (2024a; 2024b)



Image 8.2. (a & b) Examples of iconographic discourse during the July 17, 2024, march
Source: Ouhibi (2024c); Ben Jeddo (2024)

The slogans used during sit-ins and demonstrations, as well as social media hashtags, are very often written in Tunisian Arabic and, at sometimes, in Modern Standard Arabic or English. Among the most recurrent hashtags are those calling for a blanket regularization of the issue, framing it as a

right or a national duty, as well as those declaring: “Let’s set course for [the palace of] Carthage” and “Présidence Tunisie” (Tunisia Presidency), which accompany many posts published on the MDTET forum. Slogans, for their part, mobilize a range of argumentative registers that recall key moments in the national struggle against foreign occupation, certain precepts of Islam, the Youth Revolution of December 2010 to January 2011, or Kaies Saïed’s election campaign slogan for the 2019 elections.¹⁸ These examples are illustrative. First, the slogan, “We asked for the sciences and reached the summit; life [dignified] or death,” referenced the patriotic song composed on the occasion of the 1961 Bizerte crisis, with a refrain that proclaims: “life [dignity] or death.” The second slogan, “When the quest for knowledge [literally the demand for science] turns to disaster and misfortune,” alluded to a hadith of the Prophet: “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.” Finally, “The Doctor wants” slogan parodies the well-known slogan “The people want the regime to fall” widely chanted during the Revolution. Kaies Saïed assumed the original formulation during his 2019 presidential campaign in the shortened form “The people want” (Directinfo, 2019).

In addition to calls to action, mobilization discourse is often accompanied by comments denouncing the perceived pragmatism of some protesters, as well as a certain indifference. This is reflected in comments that challenge the “being” of refractory and/or opportunistic Doctors:

One week before the July 17 march, Hatem (one of MDTET’s key figures), thus, delivered the following speech, justifying actions against those who blamed them.

We have twice contacted the Prime Minister’s office, but without success. Our requests for meetings, made at the end of November and then at the end of April, have gone unanswered, despite coinciding with the sit-ins organized by doctoral students in Kasbah Square. We were indirectly advised to contact the supervisory authority, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, so that it could forward our demands to the Prime Minister’s office.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, in turn, ignored our request for a meeting, submitted on May 17. We have therefore concluded that neither the Prime Minister’s office nor the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is concerned about the situation of unemployed doctoral students, victims of job insecurity in universities. Consequently, we will appeal to the President of the Republic (Ben Jemia, 2024c).

Hatem was supported by another participant, who remarked:

According to this post, perseverance is essential, more than essential. Why? You’ve knocked on every door without getting any help, and you have the proof. It’s your perseverance that will force the authorities to listen to you, to take your actions and your problems into account. As for protests and about-faces, the result will be the same as before... Frankly, and this is my personal opinion, anyone who protests and wants to back down betrays the cause, regardless of their identity or the circumstances. They have nothing to offer the struggle but illusions, and seek to bury the cause. Thank you (Chokri, 2024).

18 Having conducted his 2019 election campaign in an atypical manner – without a website or headquarters, favouring direct contact with the population – the slogan “the People want,” used by the future president, only appears in press articles.

Recourse to the President of the Republic in the post-July 25, 2021, context

Hatem's posts on the MDTET forum provide insight into both the attitude of political leaders in the post-July 25, 2021, context and the action strategy adopted by the MDTET players. At the first level, we can observe that the new political actors (ministers and deputies) have, for the most part, adopted the same stance of "mistrust" as their predecessors regarding the entrenched issue of unemployment among doctorate holders, a phenomenon that has, in the meantime, become more widespread (due to the recruitment freeze between 2015 and 2019). Responding to MPs' questions about the employment of unemployed Doctors, the new Minister of Higher Education, Moncef Boukthir, declared: "It pains me to see my students out of work" (Dhaouadi, 2023, p. 3).

Against this backdrop, MDTET leaders ultimately placed their hopes in lobbying efforts directed at the Presidency – despite an initial "disappointment" expressed by Bachar Bouklime, an unemployed doctor who spoke to a reporter during the sit-in of September 8, 2021 (Kechiche, 2021). This shift is evidenced by the open letter addressed to President Kaies Saied on the MDTET forum (Ben Jemia, 2023). The open letter clarifies that, in their conflict with the government, the bureaucracy and "university potentates,"¹⁹ unemployed Doctors were betting on a major alliance – namely, the one they seek to forge with the president. This strategy involved investing in the President's image as an opponent of his own government.²⁰ This conflictual configuration once again highlights the protestors' discursive skills: they demonstrate an ability to mobilize speech and construct arguments likely to persuade the President to act as their intercessor with the government.

First, we note the use of a federating nominal syntagma, coined for the occasion: "Doctor-researchers forced into unemployment," which brings together multiple perspectives – those of the MDTET, the GNDSE and, more broadly, the National Association of Tunisian Doctoral Students and Research Doctors or l'Association nationale des doctorants et docteurs chercheurs tunisiens (ANDDOCT). The *Revue du Chercheur Tunisien*, ANDDOCT's fortnightly electronic publication launched in November 2023, indicates that the collective aims to "publicize the efforts made by Tunisian doctoral students and doctoral researchers, their successes and discoveries, and to give a voice to all official and unofficial viewpoints relating to scientific research," while remaining "far from any desire to make demands" (ANDDOCT, 2026).

Second, we observe the use of a form of appealing discourse directed at the President. This is reflected in references to respect the (new) Constitution drafted by Kaies Saied himself, as well as in the adoption of terminology characteristic of his usual discourse, concerning "national security in its global sense"; "patriotic policies"; "public schools"; the multiple "challenges" facing the country; and "solid political will."

Finally, it is worth noting how, in an admittedly classic process, the authors of the letter succeed in translating their objectives into broader terms. Beginning with the defense of their peculiar interests

19 The expression "university potentate" is a critical term used to designate a form of informal power exercised within the university institution. In the Tunisian context, it refers more specifically to the "A" corps. These teachers are the highest-ranking members of the academic hierarchy.

20 This stance is exemplified in President Kaies Saied's position during negotiations with the IMF, which began at the end of 2022 and continued throughout 2023. After months of protracted negotiations, the President ultimately rejected the measures proposed by his own government.

– namely, recruitment into the civil service – they expand their argument towards the defence of a common principle of a higher order: the safeguarding of “the country’s true wealth.” At the same time, it is notable that the editors chose to downplay an issue frequently raised in MDTET forum discussions – namely, the alleged “connivance” of certain recruitment commissions²¹ with preselected candidates in mind – by referring instead, in more general terms, to “systematic exclusion and expulsion mechanisms.” In this respect, a more direct approach would have been more in line with the President’s denunciations of the manoeuvres of “tentacular networks of lobbies” that have infiltrated the functioning of the administration.

Concrete proposals: measures prior to a blanket regularization

The blanket regularization formula has been chanted by MDTET players since the end of 2022. According to its creators, its aim is purely and simply to eradicate unemployment among Doctors is by integrating them preferentially into the State apparatus: public universities, research and training structures under the various ministries, public and semi-public companies, etc.; and secondarily into the private sector: universities, design offices and industrial companies. It should be noted in passing that this is an immediate proposal aimed at finding a solution for already unemployed Doctors; it would be a “disposable” formula, once implemented. This alternative, which is attractive to the majority – the great mass of “uncompetitive” Doctors who would not meet the “may the best man win” rule – is presented as a response to Minister Ben Ouda’s allegation about the “closed-shop” system; it also ignores the diversity of Doctors’ own assessments of the unemployment problem, and the notable differences in the seriousness of the issue depending on the discipline. For instance, unemployment mainly affects Doctors in chemistry, biology and humanities. These LMD profiles are mainly destined for the teaching profession. To meet these expectations, MDTET players proposed a series of concrete proposals to move closer to their ultimate goal and produced a body of expertise which, in their view, could facilitate political decision-making.

A blanket regularization within reach of the public purse

Hatem Ben Jemia’s discourse on a blanket regularization (Ben Jemia, 2024b)²², together with the demands articulated during the sit-ins of May 8 and May 30, 2024,²³ indicates that the action strategy pursued by the MDTET actors follows two intertwined logics. On the one hand, the objective is to circumscribe the problem in order to limit, as much as possible, the budgetary cost of any eventual

21 In Tunisia, university teacher recruitment committees are official academic bodies responsible for selecting and appointing faculty members in public higher education institutions.

22 See Appendix 2.

23 The demands expressed on the MDTET forum included an immediate increase in contract remuneration and the guarantee of regular monthly salary payments; the implementation of the decision to recruit 600 PhDs into research structures within ministries and in the parapublic sector, along with the creation of an additional of 400 extra positions for the year 2024; and the granting of a research, training, or teaching contract – of 24 consecutive months – to each Doctor-researcher who had not previously benefited from such a contract or who had not yet exhausted their entitlement (in principle limited to three contracts).

blanket regularization. This objective is expressed explicitly in Hatem's speech and implicitly in the demands raised during the sit-ins. The aim is to "free up space" in the universities by calling for the dismissal of seconded secondary school lecturers, a halt to the recruitment of holders of the aggregation diploma in higher education, the conversion of overtime and vacation hours into contractual arrangements (and possibly into permanent positions), and the restriction of opportunities for higher education lecturers belonging to the "A" corps (that is, the most senior academic staff) to remain in service beyond the age of 65 – a derogatory measure.

On the other hand, there is an emphasis on adopting a phased approach to intervention, with a view to achieving a final, blanket regularization. This is reflected in recurring demands to end the policy of limiting the number of contracts (currently restricted to two years for doctoral students and three years for Doctors), by abolishing, among other things, the overtime granted to permanent lecturers and the vacations benefiting both permanent staff and unemployed Doctors. In latter case, remuneration is paid very late and is derisory as it is lower than allowances paid to low-income households. To date, Doctors and PhD students have accepted such positions primarily to enhance their academic CVs through teaching experience. Unemployed PhD holders frequently invoke presidential statements on job insecurity and the need to eliminate so-called "subcontracting" of labour in the public and private sectors.

Expert appraisal of measures to facilitate the implementation of the blanket regularization

In pursuit of their objective of addressing unemployment among PhD holders, MDTET actors have mobilized specific forms of expertise to help achieve the desired outcomes within a defined timeframe. These include, on the one hand, use of legal arguments, and, on the other, the demand for the establishment of an electronic platform designed to create a reliable database on the state of Doctors' unemployment.

Regarding the mobilization of legal arguments, MDTET actors have drawn on a range of legislative and regulatory texts to support their claims. Among these is the *Loi organique n° 2016-22 du 24 mars 2016, relative au droit d'accès à l'information* [Organic Law no. 2016-22 of March 24, 2016, on the right of access to information].²⁴ This law has been invoked to document what MDTET actors describe as the "alarming" number of vacancies in higher education institutions and in research and training structures estimated at approximately 110 establishments, as well as data on annual retirements among teacher-researchers, the number of seconded secondary school teachers, the distribution of PhDs recruited during the 2019 session (between permanent and non-permanent positions), and the number of PhD holders recruited by state and parastatal institutions. A second legal text used is Decree no. 2009-2139 of July 8, 2009, which established the national classification of qualifications. This decree places PhD holders at the apex of seven qualification levels, based on six descriptors formulated in terms of learning outcomes, including autonomy, responsibility, and know-how. MDTET actors

²⁴ Legal texts in Tunisia are published in Arabic and then translated in French.

mobilize this classification as a legal argument in support of their demand for the integration of PhD holders across various ministerial sectors.

Article 29 of Decree no. 2013-4259 of October 7, 2013, which defines the specific status of researchers in public scientific research institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Scientific Research, is also cited. This provision stipulates that researchers are to be recruited through competitive examinations based either on tests or on the evaluation of applications submitted by candidates holding a doctorate or equivalent qualification. Invoking the principle of continuity of the state, the Tunisian protesters have identified this text as a potential alternative to recruitment sessions for lecturers, which many unsuccessful candidates consider unfairly exclusionary. MDTET actors further highlight that fourteen researchers who had been hired by Centre d'Études et de Recherches Économiques et Sociales – a leading public research institution established in Tunis in 1962 – were initially recruited on a contractual basis before being integrated through this regulatory instrument.

Finally, MDTET actors reference Law No. 2020-38 of August 13, 2020, which stipulated exceptional provisions for recruitment in the public sector. This law stipulates that external competitive examination based on records and tests does not apply to direct recruitment, in successive annual tranches, of holders of higher education diplomas who have been unemployed for ten years or more and are registered with public employment services. These candidates are to be ranked according to merit, based on age year of graduation. Although not explicitly stated, the proposed blanket regularization formula appears to advocate similar exceptional provisions in favour of unemployed PhD holders.

Regarding the establishment of an electronic platform, the announcement made by the Ministry of Higher Education on September 19, 2024 – stating that, “following presidential directives, the Ministry was preparing an electronic platform containing an updated database relating to [unemployed] Doctors” constitutes an initial success for the MDTET after two years of sustained advocacy and lobbying directed at the Presidency of the Republic. However, delays in implementing this initiative have placed the Minister under pressure, particularly in light of ongoing scrutiny from the Presidency. For several years, unemployed Doctors had called for this measure in order to create a dashboard for accurately measuring the number of unemployed Doctors, as well as Doctors working in higher education employed under non-permanent arrangement (excluding those recruited as Teaching assistants or assistant professors), those recruited as secondary school teachers by the Ministry of Education, and Doctors recruited in the public and private sectors or working abroad.

According to the latest update announced by the Minister of Higher Education on December 15, 2024, a total of 7,000 PhD holders that met the aforementioned criteria registered between October 25 and the deadline of November 30, 2024 (FM Jawhara, 2024). MDTET actors view this platform as an alternative to the recruitment commissions and as a mechanism that could facilitate the implementation of a procedure analogous to that established under Law no. 2020-38. In this context, they announced their intention to maintain the pressure on the Assembly by organizing a sixth sit-in on November 20, 2024, using such slogans as “I want my share of the [state] budget”; “Global regulations: passage of the regulatory decree²⁵ is an obligation; and “It’s a recruitment platform we want.”

25 In Tunisia, a decree is said to be regulatory when it lays down a general rule and applies to an indeterminate number of people.

Conclusion

This research has explored, through the case of unemployed Doctors, a specific dimension of the problem of graduate employability in Tunisia. In doing so, an effort was made to maintain critical distance, insofar as the Doctors' discourses are often framed in terms of self-justification and victimhood. While such positioning is understandable, given that these individuals are indeed affected by systemic dysfunctions, it remains insufficient as an explanatory framework. They may also be shaped by broader culture factors (such as the devaluation of handwork and hierarchical structures), and, albeit more controversial, by individual limitations, in addition to the shortcomings of the education and training system.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this empirical investigation. First, the study highlights the capacity of protest movement leaders – namely five or six “national coordinators” based primarily in Tunis, and secondarily in Sousse – alongside regional representatives (approximately twenty unemployed Doctors) and a core group of twenty highly active online activists on the MDTET forum, to construct a collective or intersubjective discourse. These actors have demonstrated a consistent ability to mobilize several hundred unemployed Doctors each time – during sit-ins and marches – in support of a shared cause. This observation raises some ontological questions: why do only a minority of unemployed Doctors engage in MDTET activities? What motivates these Doctors to mobilize despite the uncertainty surrounding the achievement of a blanket regularization? Budgetary constraints, combined with the impracticality of large-scale recruitment in higher education, restrict available solutions. Moreover, the professional qualifications of a significant proportion of these unemployed Doctors do not align with the needs of economic enterprises, thereby limiting their employability outside academia.

At another level, the findings underscore the capacity of MDTET protesters to act as strategic agents. They mobilize diverse skills, produce multifaceted discourses, and formulate concrete proposals that, while not without limitations, display a certain degree of relevance. If the shift to the “excluded from work Doctors” formula was the manifestation of a radicalization (and a certain fragmentation) of the protest movement, the prospect of a blanket regularization was an opportunity for MDTET militants to produce a discourse of reconciliation aimed at rebuilding the field of protest. However, the claim that integrating unemployed PhDs could be achieved without additional public expenditure – through measures such as revoking seconded secondary school teachers, discontinuing expert contracts, and eliminating overtime for permanent university staff – is akin to de Certeau's (1990a) conception of a poaching tactic: the opportunistic appropriation of resources within an existing system of constraints.

Furthermore, the demand for a blanket regularization may appear excessive. As suggested by a study conducted by the Tunisian Institute of Competitiveness and Quantitative Studies, prioritizing graduate unemployment – in this case that of PhD holders – risks undermining several principles of rights and equality by disadvantaging the unskilled, or even excluding them from the labour market (ITCEQ, 2012, p. 6). This means that solving the problem of Doctors' unemployment in Tunisia cannot be considered in isolation from graduate unemployment and, more generally, youth unemployment. Indeed, the less state policy has meant for certain categories of graduates “the loss of prospects for professional integration” (Montserrat Emperador, 2007, p. 36). In the case of both engineering training courses and those leading to employment in secondary education (the former master's degrees, now

bachelor’s degrees), enrolment for a doctorate would, under the circumstances, have served as a form of refuge, with student status perceived as better than unemployment. However, this dynamic gives rise to a paradox aptly captured by an unemployed Doctor: “the more you study, the less likely you are to find a job” thereby transforming higher education into a potentially counterproductive investment.

Unemployment among Doctors in particular and graduates more generally, is accentuated by two major challenges. The first concerns the mismatch between the skills of young people and those demanded by employers (ITCEQ, 2012, p. 6), and it is practically among the most highly qualified – Doctors – that unemployment is highest, the same study notes. In other words, the university system produces graduates who do not have the skills required by the labour market. Addressing this issue requires a paradigm shift grounded in a long-term strategy, including: (1) a genuine reform of the university access and progression systems to overcome the noble streams/relegation streams duality (opting for a genuine career path for pupils and students); (2) improved alignment between education and labour market needs (without reducing education to a mere instrument of employer (or entrepreneur) demand; (3) a reassessment of recruitment and remuneration practices, implying a readjustment of the terms of exchange within society.

The second issue relates to the structural limitations of the Tunisian economy in generating sufficient employment opportunities. Despite a sustained economic growth of 5% during the 2000s, employment growth rate did not exceed 2%, with annual job creation limited to around 50,000 positions, of which only a very small proportion are reserved for higher education graduates (ITCEQ, 2012, p. 5). Addressing this imbalance requires a transition towards high value-added activities, enabling increased capital per worker, a stronger industrial integration rate (ibid, p. 7), and ultimately a more qualified and better-regulated workforce.

Finally, the necessary paradigm shifts cannot be confined to macro-economic reforms alone. They must also encompass the construction of a new social project grounded in meritocracy, the redefinition of societal norms regarding work and status, and the revaluation of vocational training and non-academic professions.²⁶ The solution to graduate unemployment is therefore not merely a technical issue but also a societal one. It entails overcoming a two-tier system that has been growing steadily since the adoption of structural adjustment policies in 1986. The right to a decent job for all cannot be dissociated from the right to housing, health or a good education for one’s children.

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26 Breaking, in a way, with this mentality which considers that it would be a disgrace, even in working-class circles, not to have access to a job as a civil servant or an executive in a private company!

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Press release issued by the Presidency of the Government on February 11, 2021

The Government has been working since its investiture to solve the problem of forced into unemployment Doctors, far from the populist rhetoric that does not provide serious solutions and does not respect the intelligence of this elite (...). We have arrived at a practical and achievable solution, through the development of a three-year action plan aimed at recruiting 2,400 doctoral researchers in higher education, the civil service and the public sector, starting this year with the recruitment of 800 researchers, to be followed by 800 more in 2022 and 800 [more] in 2023; an action plan that will be incorporated into the 2021 complementary finance law.

Appendix 2: A blanket regularization within reach of the public purse!

For a member of the Assembly of people's representatives to say that the recruitment of university graduates depends on the state of public finances... and that this is not the responsibility of the Assembly... is to shirk his responsibilities.

At least as far as I'm concerned, the MDTET's demands do not – for some of them – entail additional financial burdens. For example, the introduction of a professional equivalence [in terms of salary received] between PhDs recruited from universities and private industrial companies, and [the salary] of a lecturer [recruited from public higher education] (...). What would this have to do with the state budget?

And then, what are the financial repercussions of the legislative act that consists of creating the professional category “researcher” in official papers (...); a process that would facilitate mobility [of PhDs] to improve their scientific record or to embark on an international professional experience?

The same applies to the call for a legal instrument to fund development projects in the fields of training and research...

The demand for recruitment in scientific research and training structures within ministries and public companies, meanwhile, will put an end to the waste of public money released for structures occupied by professional categories that have nothing to do with scientific research and training.

