

## TUNISIA: Five-year strategy for higher education

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Tunisia has announced a five year higher education, science and technology strategic plan aimed at promoting scientific research and technology-based industry. The plan covering 2009 to 2014 was presented on 11 October by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali at the launch of the campaign for presidential and legislative elections to be held later this month.

"Our education system, with all its components, is one of the decisive tools on which we rely to meet the challenges and win the stakes of the future. To that end, we have continuously reformed, modernised and developed this system," Ben Ali said.

The strategic plan aims to build a knowledge-based society by strengthening education and training, and thus human resource capacity. It calls for improved quality across higher education, to bring the system up to international standard.

"We will also intensify vocational training and integration programmes, so as to make sure no graduate will wait for more than two years to obtain a job or enter a vocational training or an internship programme, by the end of the 2014," Ben Ali indicated.

The strategic plan aims to boost research and innovation at science centers associated with universities in fields crucial to economic growth, such as alternative and renewable energies, agriculture, the environment, water and desalination techniques.

It also launches national efforts to protect the coastal littoral zone against marine erosion, to enhance the country's capacity to confront natural disasters and curb their impacts, and to improve efficiency in fighting erosion and desertification,

The share of Tunisia's gross domestic product spent on scientific research and technology will be increased from a current 1.25% to 1.5% in 2014.

Three regional nodes for scientific research and technological innovation will be established in the north, the centre and the south of the country, and efforts will be focused on enhancing the value of scientific research results to innovation and production development.

Funds devoted to scientific research for technological development will move closer to one-third of total funds, and specific measures will be implemented to encourage large enterprises to allocate 1% of their turnover to fund research and development.

Hilmi Salem, a higher education consultant at a Palestine-based sustainable development research institute, welcomed the new plan as a vital step that should impact not only on Tunisian higher education but also on Africa and the Arab world.

The Africa Competitiveness Report 2009 placed Tunisia at the top in Africa, followed by South Africa and Kenya, and on a par with such innovative countries as Brazil and India.

"The proven high scientific capacity of Tunisia will be the foundation on which to build the new strategic plan," Salem told *University World News*. "The Tunisian strategic plan could also be used as a regional model, especially for solving university graduate unemployment problems and establishing science-based business."