

# The Digitalization of Higher Education in Morocco, Limits, Challenges and Perspectives: Case Study of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences University of Ibn Zohr Agadir

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**Abstract:** This article's interest is to approach the impact and changes occurred by integrating digital pedagogical practices in the Moroccan higher educational system. The paper emphasizes the use of digital technology in the university curriculum, and how the latter shaped students' behavior as well as learning development. Our research methodology is based on observation sessions in which we measured and accessed students' knowledge acquisition, and how the use this digital learning in their research and study process. We also worked on focus groups with students of French department in the faculty of letters and human sciences of Agadir to measure how the digital learning process could increase student's creativity and critical thinking. This methodology is adopted in order to present an overview of the educational context and the appearing challenges in order to propose innovative work perspectives and to design a model of digital learning strategy enhancing student's analysis and interpretation competencies. The main concern of our paper is how can we integrate an innovative impactful digital strategy in the process of learning and teaching in higher education, knowing that this system remains somehow resilient?

**Keywords:** Digitalization, Pedagogical Practices, Resilience, Educational System, Learning Development

**Citation:** Ben Attou, A. (2022). The Digitalization of Higher Education in Morocco, Limits, Challenges and Perspectives: Case Study of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences University of Ibn Zohr Agadir. In A. Ben Attou, M. L. Ciddi, & M. Unal (Eds.), *Proceedings of ICSES 2022-- International Conference on Studies in Education and Social Sciences* (pp.65-76), Antalya, Türkiye. ISTES Organization.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously shaped our habits and practices in all life aspects including the Moroccan educational and training system. Higher education is ipso facto the driving force behind this so-called 4.0 revolution. In fact, this sector has for some years been anticipating ICTs as an innovative science capable of articulating the aim of education and training with the demand of the labor market. Coronavirus played the role of a driving factor that contributes to the virtual management of the rapid transformations undergone in a context of contradictions and constraints, generating both frustrations and enthusiasm. How can we describe the relationship between society and the pandemic on the one hand and that of ICT higher education on the other

hand?

The main merit of the digital resources, whether rediscovered or reinvented, is that today it is not only revolutionizing the educational system but also societal practices and the socio-economic and cultural contexts. Can we consider then that the digitalization is a desire for computing or a tool for demarcation and differentiation? Scientific use and learning are now the results of a clear and structured emergence and instrumentalization of these digital tools. Opening up higher education to the new principle of digital intelligence and modernizing its research structures and training practices will make it possible to gradually apprehend the risks of a galloping globalization requiring adequate training, but before that, should we not reconcile the higher education system with itself?

The Moroccan university, although any innovative revolution encounters resistance especially in times of crisis, the flexibility, the exchange, the continuity and the digital intelligence system will be accepted and appropriate by the users. It is not because they have a proven track record in the areas of management, extended business management, and many others that they will be appropriate. Users will adopt these tools differently and perceive them as a fact of resilience able to avoid chaos through recovery, reaction and appropriation. Of course, this is a process that still needs to be adapted to a multitude of challenges that must be faced: the massive number of students, university loss, lack of resources, the involvement of own or external actors, synergies, university designs. In short, the social context must involve a revolution in the systems of educational strategies with a view to the empowerment of governance, scientific profitability and openness to a labor market characterized regionally and horizontally. What practices have been adopted to make the digitalization of teaching more effective and, above all, more human in order to provide more appropriate access to an inclusive learning and training framework with regard to opportunities? How to make the digital tool at the service of education and not a segregating element acting as an expelling factor?

### **Contextual Development: Society and ICT**

Acting in a globalized society, shaped according to the needs, temporality and practices of today, does not mean that it is a levelled society. The substantial general interest gives way every day to the procedural general interest which is interested in how to do, behind a computer, more than result (Acher F., 2010). That's what Bourdieu calls theory of habitus that has often led society from a context of commitment to science to that of science to commitment (Bourdieu, 2008). This orientation appears very clearly when Bourdieu evokes the theory of the most particular distinction as regards his social criticism of the judgment between taste and cultural practices. This is to say that a new society is emerging. The theme of the GEF, held in Davos, Switzerland in January 2019, was "Globalization 4.0: Designing a New Global Architecture in the Age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution". Globalization 4.0 is now a key concept. This is a new era characterized by a change in the geopolitical landscape, the regular appearance of new technologies and the emergence of major ecological challenges. The Executive Chairman of the GEF, believes that we are golden and already in a new

phase of globalization «4.0». It is not an abstract conflict of Web generation, but in a real technological revolution in the broadest sense of the term with its hours and its misfortunes. Two current parallel worlds and the one advocated for the future are jostling. On either side, the changes that do not cross are rapid and do not result only from a cultural revolution of its own. It is often the CEOs of the multinationals who really govern the world and chart its future. It is in this context that Moroccan society, higher education and ICTs evolve between appropriation, acceptance, termination or refusal. The contemporary individual, is the product of a new way of making society, related to the assertion of self and his own social practices. It turns out that in the ICT boom, the extension and even the trivialization of the internet use, the multiplication of «benign and clever» social networks, the individual finds himself sharing or even disorienting. The COVID-19 pandemic has awakened the collective awareness ICT's use of in everyday life, as much as it has disoriented public opinion through the condensation and sharing of true and false information. What is the relationship between higher education and the use of ICTs, the ethics of information and communication techniques and the credibility of information and communication media?

### **When the Pandemic awakens the Collective Consciousness for Change**

Moroccan society is no longer a clan society as it used to be. The transition from rural to urban, the projected urbanization rate for 2030 exceeds the 70% mark in the strategic research of the metropolitan city as a pivot of economic and social development. These facts are important, it is being accompanied by profound changes. The Moroccan individual living the «second modernity» now continues his own process of identity building independently of his clan, soon if he is not already independent of his family, or even of his spouse (Singly and Chaland, 2001). Obviously, each individual learns to live this duplication of private life which, even if it has a psychological cost, offers the possibility of preserving a certain freedom of action, of pursuing his own construction of identity. The use of the mobile phone to establish an authority remotely or in contrast to strengthen autonomy and personal independence in relation to the family, the spouse or to stay in contact with work, to acquire goods or services, further strengthens the search for a personal territory more than it needs a space of physical connection. The COVID-19 pandemic is timely to hit hard at the growth drivers of the 2030 strategy that are no other than metropolitan cities (Ben Attou, 2021). It is precisely individual behavior in the margins and pockets of peri-central poverty and vulnerability that constitute risk factors for the spread of the virus in Casablanca-Settat, Tangier-Tetouan, Rabat-Salé-Kenitra, Fez and Marrakech. Individualism thus takes precedence in metropolitan cities which are also tourist centers that follow the pandemic worldwide through the mobile phone, the interpretation of social networks. As a result, they will adopt an attitude in terms of protection and social distancing, not voluntarily according to official security measures, but rather according to their own individual second-hand interpretation. It is in this context of pressure, lack of individual visibility, lack of material resources and generalized computer culture that higher education programs, teachers and research structures and students will have to face. What reaction will they develop? Can they react in a context of pressure and instability of university reforms? It is more than a challenge of know-how or mastery of the use of virtual communication, it is a fundamental structural challenge related to beliefs and values. The pandemic has taught us a lot. The higher education system is just one sector. Thus, what is valid for the professionals is valid

for academics in terms of administrative decisions, and human resources management. A small survey conducted by the HCP “Higher Commissariat of Planification : The Office of the High Commissioner for Planning is responsible for the production, analysis and publication of official statistics in Morocco.” in the midst of a pandemic on telework is a good example of what has happened in all jurisdictions and academic institutions. Thus, despite the enviable effort made by Moroccan decision-makers in a key time, the survey that targeted the productivity of public servants through telework makes it possible to situate fairly accurately, the relationship between society and pandemic ICT. According to the survey, 56% had a positive reaction in terms of working time, reduced travel and flexibility. Admittedly, but there are others, a large proportion saying that they have encountered functional difficulties in teleworking. Of these, 43% experience some genes performing tasks outside the office; 18% have difficulty following additional confidentiality and data security requirements due to lack of adequate resources and equipment. They also find it difficult to reconcile telework and household tasks (43%) when non-compliance with work schedules is felt (39%) “ *Survey on the coronavirus impact April 2020 HCP*” In any case, for both of them, the reaction regarding the return to work at the office is mixed, even if their hierarchy has taken all the necessary measures for their safety. 58% believe they are concerned about the health risk with the return to work in person. 24% are also concerned about child care provisions (HCP, 2020). From the results of this survey, we can already sketch the fact that society in the face of adversity is no longer «society as a system». Rather, it is in «the theory of communicational action» in a differentiated society (Habermas, 1985) subject to a few aspects.

### **Higher Education is also a Differentiated Target Area in a Context of Pandemic**

The context of COVID-19, which is going through individual and differentiated society, has led to the need to open up to a different model of teaching and pedagogy that we know. Here again, we are not given enough to make the right choice unanimously. Each educational institution, while remaining consistent with the official slogan about safe absenteeism and safe face-to-face, manages its crisis as much as possible. Some schools, institutions and training bodies have had to manage with agility a continuity of activity while trying to guarantee the promise of value of their education and training. But this is not the case for all institutions. Between ensuring a unanimous transition to the internet, the initiation of digitization processes and improvisation, a slope remains to be overcome. A forced shift towards digital is it really able to boost the digitalization of higher education, although it seems uniform, is deeply in transhumance from one reform to another. If we consider the ability of students to make use of digitalization other than zapping on the mobile phone or the teaching staff under an intergenerational dimension, its transnational or national training, its computer skills and its reference scientific curriculum, we realize the diversity of the profiles, the complexity of the educational field. Switching to digitalization is not a vertical decision, nor a change in behavior and use of tools, but a process of evolution that is being prepared in a context of societal and cultural revolution. Higher education under the pandemic is a mirror on which the image of a differentiated individual society is reflected, hesitant about the perception of the future. Whatever innovative, resilient or passive pedagogy, the result is almost the same as long as the pandemic remains, as long as the blur is established. The evaluation of pedagogical innovation and of the transition even partially to digitalization, is seen and perceived by the whole

of society (teachers, students, parents of students, civil society, media...) on social networks as being insufficient, unable to replace the face-to-face or provide good training.

### *Unfinished Reforms in Higher Education*

Many voices are raised and agree that the policy pursued in the higher education sector has led to a deadlock that will result in binding emergency reforms by the end of the 1990s (Nabil, 2015). This is a fact, the Human Development Index ranks between 1995 and 2005 at 26 and 177th places because of illiteracy, regional disparities, and social inequalities in access to education and education (UNDP, 2007). Much has changed since then, but the proliferation of urgent reforms has made the field of higher education resistant to any profound change in the system, not only from the point of view of education, but education in its entirety.

#### *Insufficient Reform in 1997*

The 1997 reform is a timely conclusion to the classic reform cycle that began in 1992. It establishes training in UFR and organization in DESA and DESS. However, until 2000, the twinning between higher education and research was only superficially carried out. This reform, although it tried to structure scientific research into UFR, clusters of competence and thematic national networks, its objective was to promote the research-enterprise link. The failure of this reform is due, among other things, to its inadequacy and its financial requirements and the resistance of the opposition to the privatization of education (Nabil, 2015).

#### *The 2003 Reform: A Forced Reform and an Urgent Course*

This reform may be attributed to an LMD system at first sight seemed to be a complete and comprehensive vision of the educational system pivotal around improving the conditions of research and researchers. However, the fact that the organization of Master's and Doctorate's degrees has remained optional, and the fact that their opening is strictly speaking granted to research units still in gestation and under-equipped, changes the situation. A certain degree of discrimination divides forever the teaching staff qualified as structured for research teams and unstructured for teachers not adhering to one of the research structures. As a result, the Bachelor's thesis was set up as an exhibition and access to the Master's in pedagogical terms. Both cannot promote basic research or the professionalizing option. The 2003 reform made accreditation of research channels compulsory. However, the re-accreditation for four years at the level of the Masters and Doctorate cycles while the registration is done annually is, in a way, only a form of contractualization. A doctoral training cycle in reality exceeds an interval of 4 years. Hence improvisation, management on sight and the risk of dropping out of school. In short, the contribution of the reform remains unsuited to the lived experience. Another no less important problem is the introduction of teacher assessment-research through the promotion grid. Other than that; it poses a credibility problem that will further divide the evaluator- faculty within a research structure. Other than the problem of neutrality and scientific objectivity, the grid adopts a progression that is made at three

speeds (exceptional, fast and normal) respectively over 6, 7 and 8 years. The search for promotion by all means ends up making the teaching staff fibril and induces research in decline.

*The 2003 Reform: A Forced Reform and an Urgent Course*

The role of the internet in popularizing scientific knowledge and opening up innovative perspective (virtual classes, videoconferences, digital platforms: the MOOC model, the Moodle- open- source learning platform, canvas, Ms Teams, google classroom, flipgird ...) is a real fact, however, two things need to be clarified. One is that cutting-edge research remains high-paying and inaccessible to students and even isolated researchers without sufficient resources. The other is that the digital tools deployed have varied greatly depending on the institutions' digital maturity. But beyond the technological aspect, the experience clearly shows that it is not enough to connect a webcam to ensure pedagogical continuity.

We have analyzed the context of higher education, so while the tools have enabled the rapid transition to digitalization, they are only the apparent part of the iceberg. Once again, this is not a teaching problem, it is an educational and educational challenge. The whole system has to adapt to this new learning environment. The investigations conducted on the subject, tend to show that the timing did not always allow an optimal adaptation. This is an important focus for the future. Of course, the opening up of ICT research is not entirely new. Since 2005, a number of initiatives including the creation of the Marwan computer network (8 megabits), the Moroccan Virtual Campus, the MacGrid project, the launch of the Engineering Program.

However, the withdrawal of the State from teaching and research to the private sector has not helped to support the initiative of digitalization in higher education. Results remained limited, especially in provincial universities and peripheral university nuclei. If we add to this the digital bill still inaccessible because of the lack of infrastructure and equipment for both learners and teachers, the scale of the problem can be seen in being able to establish a university level of both quality and use of ICT. Another difference is that metropolitan universities have benefited from cooperation projects in the field of ICT. Is it fair to say that more than 30 years of research on online education would not have been enough to convince universities to take the digital shift seriously and to anticipate the arrival of such environmental uncertainty (Tamir, 2019).

In addition, it is commonly accepted that the digitalization of universities requires a radical transformation of premises and equipment adapted to digital developments for each university (Clardy, 1994 and 2009, Harasim, 2000, Mason, 2000, Taylor, 2001). Instead, the bottom-up privatization of the university and the collaborating with laboratories and research teams will give the teacher-researcher a status of employee as promulgated in law 01.00. The revision of the 2014-215 reform, has only accelerated the process of privatization the least one can say complicated: 13 public universities, one with public-private management, 5 privates. The merger further complicated the university field. The establishment of the university centers provided for by Law 01.00 will become a reality. These clusters will integrate engineering schools and businesses from other departments.

### *Change by Computer Shock: Two Centrifugal Speeds*

As a result of the pandemic, Morocco has been inspired by the dominant international models to address the COVIDe-19 pandemic in an urgent manner. As a result, the transition to a competitive digital university was not a global project on the scale of all university wirelines. The brand image, the race for differentiation and individualism in university management that has become plural will make digitization, even partial, a political slogan, a media image and a positioning of the institution. Thus, we move at once, from a 0 digitization to a use (and non-development) of the most recent digital. MOOCs and SPOC are emerging as the latest generation of academic digital.

### *ICT: Use and Resistance*

With a continuing pandemic and the increasingly advanced involvement of foreign institutions in behavioral changes and ICT integration, some Moroccan universities have found themselves in the movement of foreign partners. The MOOCs rather similar to traditional university courses will be assimilated as a method of distance education and as a platform for exchange, learning and dissemination. As a result, the use of ICTs begins to expand with the individual involvement of the teacher and the institution. It is true that many schools have realized the financial and educational value of the development of education and training technologies as a driving force for educational strategies which can solve the problem of distance education and the institution of the necessary equipment and the layout of the ICT rooms adapted to the educational need, security measures and the image of institutions, particularly those with open polarization. However, the experience and philosophical and epistemological debate on the desire for computing in the American and European academic milieu is an old debate of more than three decades already about the use of ICT as a desire for a tool (Mooc) capable of transforming and to disrupt the methods of education (Blin & Munro, 2008). This view is not shared by others who assimilate different technologies and educational media as mere vehicles through education without influencing the performance of users (Clark, 1983). When we consider another parameter in the education system: the student “*We made a survey for 1500 student at the French department of the faculty of letters and human sciences of Agadir , asking them about their experience of digital learning during the pandemic, we concluded to the results*” and his ability to finance the use of ICT in a plural university context, put into streams, public and private, and contractual, we easily understand the resistance developed. Resistance can come from the teacher himself on another register. Already energized and weakened as a contract (reforms) then as an employee (Law 01.00), the teacher finds himself compressing as and when the use of ICT (good or bad, whatever) expands, he is dispossessed of the appropriation of knowledge, supposed to be now, the property of all. Simply click on the cursor to replace it or to provoke it, to adapt and comply with the requirements of the apprentice and the agenda of the management platforms of the education system. In short, he is no longer an authority, notoriety or scientific guarantee. ICTs play an important role in improving the university’s brand image in its competitive process without academics and in an environment of crisis communication. Is this the basic problem of higher education?

*ICT between University Use and the University's Overall Strategy*

ICT is a central tool in improving the quality of education and training. Nevertheless, this can be done in a project of society, skills enhancement and university regulation by evolutionary process where the trilogy University, Teacher, Student is the basis of the learning and training system. Urgency, competitiveness, the search for distinction, equipment acquisition strategies, scientific marketing are not able to reconcile pandemic quality and sustainability. There is a big difference between appropriating ICT as a fashion, dominance tool and marketing product and adopting it as a way of life, organization and development. The pandemic has taught us the need to change our behavior towards the use of space we have, the way we think, the mechanisms of expanded consumption (supply, lifestyle, travel...). Higher education is only one important link in a global, listed and identified whole. ICTs are a way of life, a way of consumption and a way of learning. It is the whole of society, in its being, that is concerned and that must adapt to the globalized risk environment. ICTs are therefore not just tools for individual motivation to seek to combine the richness and interactivity of other ICTs in real or virtual ways. The whole of Europe in the middle of a pandemic crisis has begun to think of the absurdity of globalized economic models. It is in the face of adversity that we must show the qualities of inhabitants-users-citizens unsuspected in the face of the crisis. This is to say that we must first react containing content. That is to say, to start by establishing a process of regulation of the education system in order to reduce the gap of the malfunctions analyzed above. ICT is a social project in response to the pandemic. Then find the link between the university as a locomotive for equitable change and the simplified popularization of the use of ICT in all aspects of daily life. This is how ICT can be used to achieve the desired results. Good results evoke the availability of ICT. At the moment, under the pandemic, it is not a question of treating one's self-determination as a hypothetical degree of freedom perceived by an individual in the choice and execution of one's actions. It is the return to the integration of the power of the plural society as an open system on ICTs and evolutionary (Dortier, 2013), around social action, norms and values, but also as an actor where the human being can seize himself-and to build oneself at the same time as a singular individual and as a social actor inseparable from the historicity and social relations in which it is inscribed (Lebel, 2013).

*The Bachelor: An Adaptive Digital Reform*

Still in a direction towards the digitalization of higher education, the pandemic comes at the right time to activate the ICT implementation process of the Moroccan university. The need for this is significant and the impact of the coronavirus on the learning process, the university assessment and the triogical university-teacher-student relationship are considered insufficient, the aim of the project is to provide the Moroccan University with emergency solutions to a fundamental problem affecting its most elementary functioning. Despite efforts to save in-extremist the year 2020 and to prepare even more against a pandemic in which the virus is rampant and even becomes mutant (use of ICT platforms, educational TV, YouTube, Creation of Kolliya TV Channel at the FLSH, Ibn Zohr University of Agadir), the assessment of results struggles to come out in the image of the efforts made. This should not be attributed, automatically and exclusively, to the only problem of the pandemic or the way in which it is dealt with. It is the environment of pressure and succession of quasi-vertical reforms

that makes the university field contracted and rather tense. It is in this environment that the Bachelor arrives as a school at the same time fundamental, of engineers and computer science. Its designers estimate IT security... information technologies under the domain close to IT and network management and architecture.

Adapting training to the labor market requires, it is the result of a training in three years of study, but it remains open on parallel admissions (diploma Bac+2) in a single year. Its curriculum takes place in fundamental and alternating (Web and software development, network architecture, computer languages, programming, robotics, project management, the Bachelor is assimilated, in times of pandemic, as a digital medium that has already revolutionized the world and that will further impact the transformations and the daily lives of people. Virtually and through de facto transposition and model importation, the Bachelor already sees himself, according to the Vaud perception (Swiss industrial groups), propelled in the world of HEIG-VD, which is distinguished by a unique ecosystem with the direct proximity of the Y-Parc innovation park and the density of links with Vaud and national companies, which gives a professionalizing dimension to the training, with lessons close to industrial needs and willing to operate within the a tri-national curriculum (France-Germany-Switzerland), to cushion the impact in other words, it is a curriculum designed for a constantly evolving field, the Informatics and Communication Systems (ISC) stream trains engineers specialized in software computing, data engineering and development of embedded computer systems.

On the one hand, excessive privatization, the importation of advanced ICT models and high-tech channels responding to the specific needs of industrial societies, the pandemic; on the other, a university environment under pressure, a succession of vertical reforms, a system of education and training in gestation. Is all-out privatization with all that it entails as a societal issue the most suitable solution? This, knowing the real limits of society's access to ICT in its entirety. Are we not in a context of contradictions when the new model of development recently undertaken by a Morocco that wants to be strong, competitive and strongly attached to its identity base through public school?

## **Method**

Our research method aims to cross the perceptions toward the challenges, difficulties, resistance regarding the management of the educational system in a new era either by students, professors or administration. We also worked on a developmental research strategy focusing on educational innovation techniques. For this purpose, we adopted two methodological approaches:

### **Empirical Field Work**

To approach the cleavage between the reality of the educational system and the digitalization philosophy imposed vertically and to understand the mechanisms of the system, to figure out where and how to deal with the anomaly of digitalization.

## Experimental Groups

Two experimental groups with 150 students each with two different strategies. To see how the *creactical* “combination of creative and critical proposed by Jason Ohler - *Reinventing Education*” approach can lead to educational innovation, in order to propose new digital pedagogical philosophy with concrete results. Our application methods for the experimental groups were different. Figures bellow explain the different strategies:

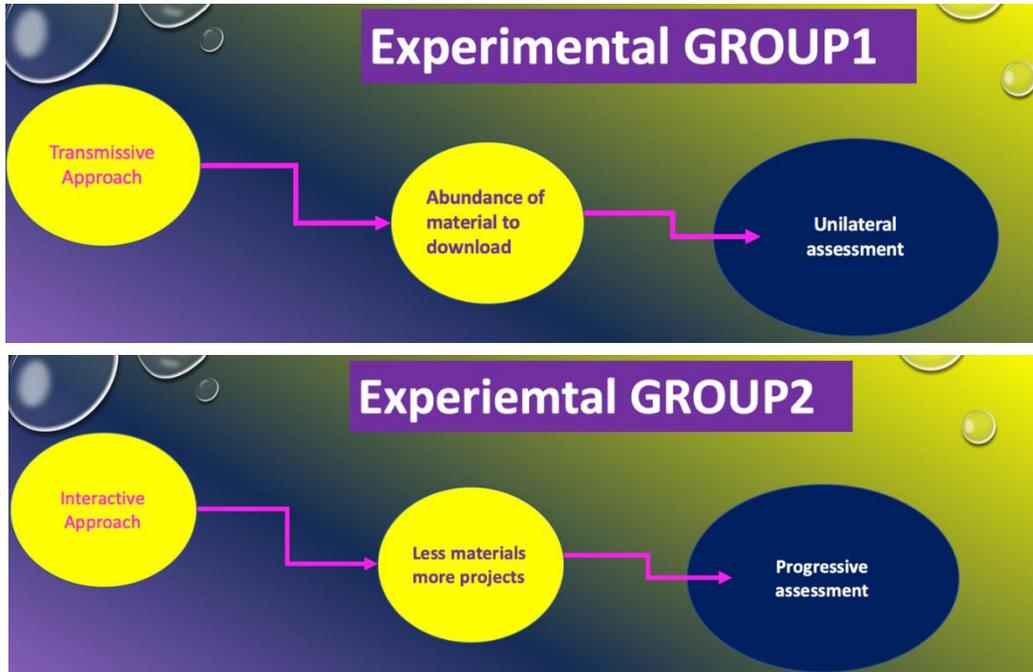


Figure.1. Transmissive Approach For 150 Students

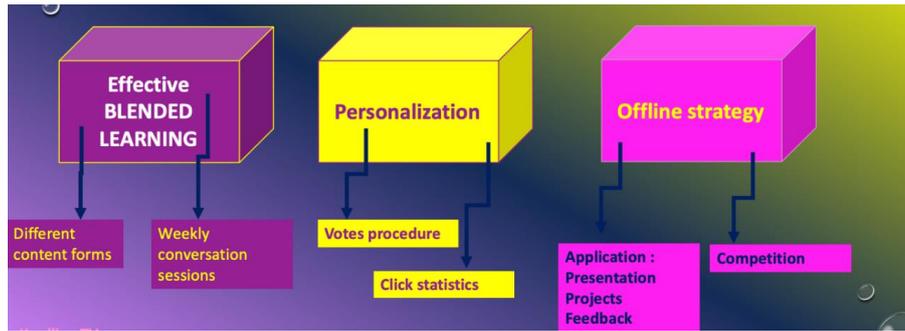
## Results

As a result, to the experimental groups strategies we came to the following results:

- a- For first group in which we implemented transmissive strategy: students’ assessment has shown random answers, lack of reflection and critical thinking and most importantly the resistance against this digitalization process.
- b- For the second group in which we based our teaching on interactive approach: Students’ manifested engagement, expressed ambition and they also have been active in the course conception.

## Discussion

The culminate point of this experience is that we came out with an innovative hybrid educational pedagogy we called “Edu-Lab-classes”, based on collaborative perspective the following diagram explains our new educational strategy:



Our main concern was to provide adapted content for the different students' profile , based on the personalization technique as well as the effective blended learning.

## Conclusion

The digitalization of higher education is certainly, a project of society to modernize, to face the pandemic contexts that will still arise in a globalized world that manufactures its skills, its crises and its remedies. Throughout this article, we have tried to demonstrate the parameters of a profound crisis in higher education. A crisis that is mainly related to the gradual withdrawal of the State from the educational question not only for higher education, but for the whole educational sector. This withdrawal is not new. It is the result of a balance of power often decided on external proposals in favor of privatization and international partnership. These power relationships take many forms. Sometimes it's structural adjustment, often it's the privatization process, if not the voluntary departure.... The question of the use of ICTs in the modernization of society, of education, of virtual accompaniment of globalized lifestyles is inevitable. Just like mobile phone use, everyone automatically aligns themselves with technological innovation, but each one has its own speed, resources and know-how. Once again, the crisis in higher education is not to be decided on the basis of computer usage. It is more profound and is part of a real national debate about the future of a country as a whole.

The instrumentalization of the pandemic, the modernization of the university field is not only a question of access to ICTs, imported models, privatization in all directions, must not jeopardize our identity and civilizational achievements, on our ability to adapt, to contain adversities. We have lived through our history, pandemics and not a pandemic and naked have come out each time more powerful and enterprising. Today, the winners of the public school are true entrepreneurs around the world. Whether in the business, in finance, in the medical field, in IT ... This does not mean that ICT innovation and development opportunities should be ignored. However, a balance is needed. The State must continue to support public education in general and not only higher education, because it is a system of education from preschool to PhD. It is up to the Moroccan university to adapt to ICT, to the environment of digitalization on a more secure basis, with more social justice, more means and more autonomy of management, less reforms at each turn. Privatization policy as it is designed for higher education, with the many logics and strategies behind it, cannot pay off. The ICT issue is not a question of controlled use, but a question of the development of a differentiated society.

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