

The sky's the limit

Under the government's Plan Emergence, Morocco's universities and companies are developing new technologies and going global.

The emergence of an aerospace sector in Morocco is a striking illustration of the extent to which the North African country's increasingly sophisticated economy is advancing.

More than 60 companies are active in the sector, including subsidiaries of global leaders such as Boeing, and France's EADS and Safran Group.

The ongoing transformation of the kingdom's economy from its traditional agricultural base to a technological one is a result of a blueprint, drafted by the Rabat government, dubbed Plan Emergence.

"Plan Emergence set new targets for various economic sectors," says Salaheddine Mezouar, the minister of

economy and finance. "Local companies are now going international. We are broadening the range of sectors that the economy relies upon and moving up the value chain."

Leading the way in this respect is Laprophan, a pioneer in the Moroccan pharmaceutical sector.

Created in 1949, the company focused on pursuing its own research and development. As a result, it owns four international patents, produces a million tablets every day and has a special expertise in effervescent medicines. It manufactures 15 products that are marketed in 14 countries, particularly in the Middle East and Africa.

In July, Laprophan was awarded the first R&D Prize Trophy by the Moroccan R&D Association and was selected to represent the country at an R&D symposium in Geneva.

Farid Bennis, the president of Laprophan and son of its founder, says the company was the first pharmaceutical-production concern in the developing world to win

the approval of the French agency that regulates the safety of health products.

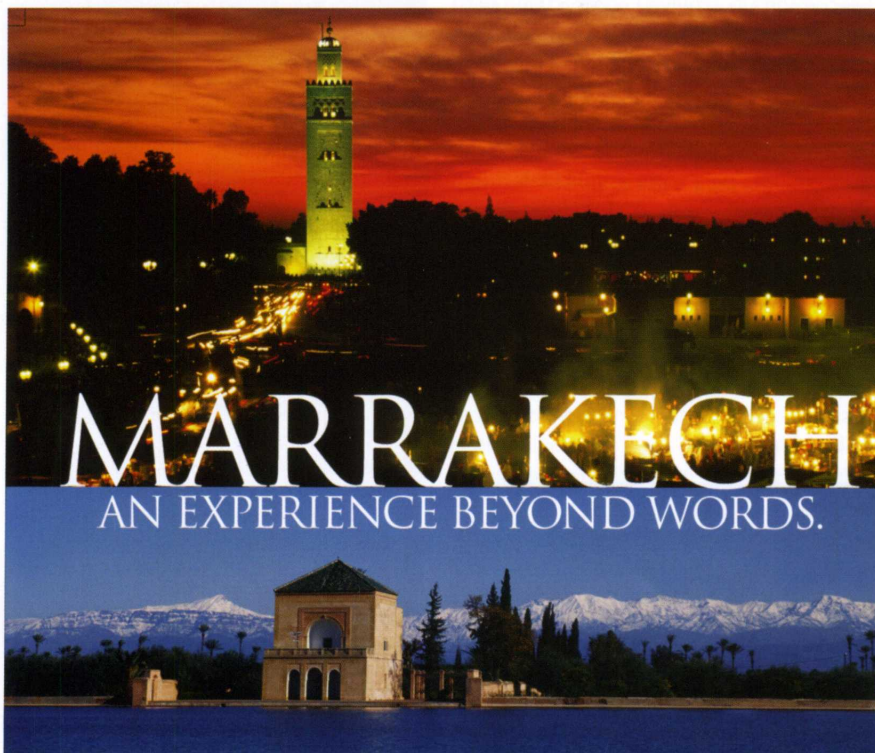
Laprophan intends to capitalize on this recognition by penetrating new markets. The company has reached a level of development and quality control, he says, that has enabled it to enter the international arena.

"We are working on partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, and as far as Europe and the U.S. are concerned, we are focusing on the four products for which we have patents, with the aim of developing partnerships there."

Morocco's pharmaceutical sector is now mature, he says. Its national standards are equivalent to international standards, and

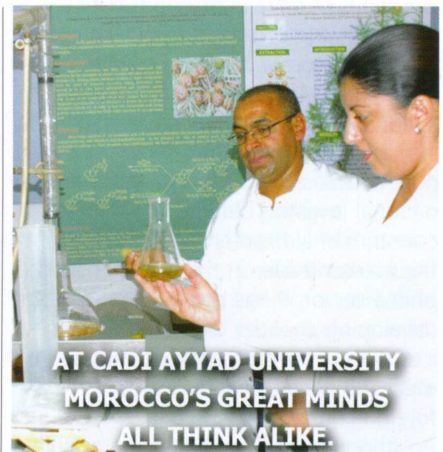


Courtesy of Cadi Ayyad University

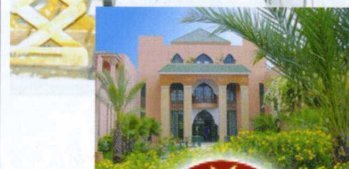


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for that reason it has been placed alongside the European zone in World Health Organization rankings.

Much of Laprophan's success can be attributed to the quality of its workforce, particularly its research and development staff. Education and training are at the very heart of Plan Emergence and the country's strategy to move up the value chain.

"The first free trade agreements we entered showed that many Moroccan companies were not sufficiently prepared for foreign competition," says Ali El Alaoui, director general of the Moroccan Center for Export Promotion. "Today, training is offered in order to take advantage of these agreements and of American opportunities in particular. Education is offered to give companies more information on how to make the most out of signed agreements and then to help them with international trade."

One of the measures adopted by the government in 2000 was to give the country's universities complete autonomy. Professor Taoufik Ouazzani Chahdi, the president of the Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, says the aim

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*Professor Taoufik Ouazzani Chahdi,
President, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University*

was to boost competition and encourage the universities to compete in terms of research on a global scale.

"For the first time, the state ordered universities to produce 10,000 qualified engineers by 2010. And I can tell you that the objective has been more than reached. We are now working towards the objective of producing 30,000 engineers by 2020."

This, he says, reflects the country's new policy of education and training. "We are training for precise economic and social needs with a contract framework, using existing means but also bringing additional human and financial resources to reach the objective."

When Chahdi was appointed, the university did not offer any engineering courses. "As we didn't have much in



Brownie Harris/COMBIS

the way of financial resources, I decided to innovate," he says. "We purchased a factory that was going bankrupt and transformed it into an engineering school."

The University of Fez is a public institution, but it has a special status that enables it to generate additional financial support from the private sector. "Funds are provided by national and internationally awarded research contracts and from partnerships with private companies," says Chahdi.

His actions are in line with government policy that universities should be run like businesses.

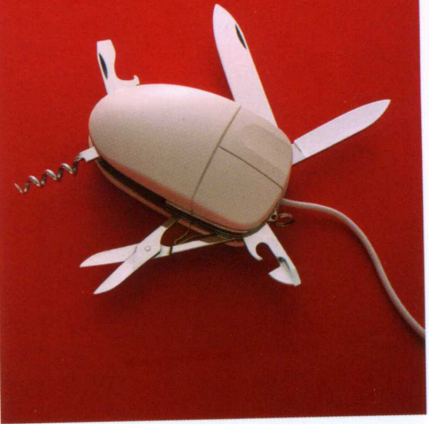
The strategy being adopted by the Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech is to establish itself as a technological and creative hub for the surrounding region, says Mohammed Marzak, the university president.

With no student fees and its state funding decreasing, the university now collects 10% of its annual budget from commercially sponsored research projects. Engineering programs were developed, and reforms in the mathematics department added options for higher degrees, fostered research and prepared students for further work in applied sciences.

"One of our goals is to widen the scope of students who are eager to develop their own ideas, through partnerships, technology transfers and incubators," says Marzak.

The key to Cadi Ayyad's future success, he says, lies in increasing cooperation with foreign institutions, adding to the number of laboratories and spinning off new commercially viable companies. "We have successfully launched three such companies, which is a brand-new trend in Morocco." ❖

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