

EDUCATION IN NORTH AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

COUNTRY PROFILE: EGYPT

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BACKGROUND

The Egyptian education system, with all its virtues and its defects, has been something of a model for post-independence education systems in North Africa. This is largely due to the longstanding quality of its best parts, and the iconic status of Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and '60s, along with Nasser's populist principles of free access to education and more-or-less guaranteed public employment for graduates. Its assumptions and methodologies were also widely spread by Egyptian teachers working across the region to service education systems growing much faster than teacher supply; and to support the process of Arabization, particularly in the Maghreb where education in the colonial period had been in French and where trained teachers of, and in, Arabic were scarce. Education in Egypt's public system today is a constitutionally guaranteed right, effectively free to the user at all levels. Like so much of the educational rhetoric across the region, this statement masks a truth which is subversively different: some 60% of all educational investment in Egypt is actually in private tuition, though only 7.2% of Egyptian pupils are in private institutions.¹

Characteristic of Egypt, as of some of its North African neighbours, is a highly aspirational promise coupled with an inadequate delivery and a system that is terribly deformed by the urgent need of Egyptian parents to buy a better education than the state can provide for their children: private consumer expenditure on education in 2012 amounted to some \$7 billion. Egypt's economy in recent decades has not been able easily to provide for investment at the level demanded by population increase, and until the first years of the twenty-first century, the political will seems also to have been lacking. It spends on education, at 3.8%, the lowest, though still not an inconsiderable, proportion of GDP in North Africa.²

The urgent need for change is highlighted in the government's 2014 Education Strategic Plan, which stretches out to 2030, after a "Formative Phase" of three years, 2014–17. The Ministry notes, in describing the present situation: "Content is theoretical and abstract. Teacher is an expert and source of information assessment. Pupil a negative recipient. A poorly interactive learning environment that does not stimulate participation. Evaluation that measures the ability to remember information and relates to passing judgements." The plan, which in its fullest form would require (and may or may not get) investment of LE 298 billion over three years, addresses these issues impressively on paper, noting too that of Egyptians polled, 96% agree that there is an "urgent need to re-engineer the whole system".³

The plan notes that "the steady increase in population casts growing burdens on the demand for education. Consequently the state had to adopt the quantitative expansion approach at the expense of spending on the real elements of educational quality."⁴ This – the tale of the region as a whole, but here in its largest and most difficult manifestation – is not surprising. Egypt's population, currently recorded as 86.8 million, grew by 41% between 1990 and 2008, and is growing at a rate of 1.6–1.8% a year. 30% of Egyptians are under 15, 49.9% under 25.⁵ Egypt is one of the two North African countries with predicted youth population growth (of a further 10%) right up to 2050.⁶ Demand for education is therefore clearly very large, and growing fast, with estimates of up to 140 million Egyptians in total by 2050. The result is a huge, inflexible behemoth of an education system, struggling bravely to reform itself but mired in the sheer scale of the challenge and the escalating disparity between need and resource. A system premised upon open

and free access and dependent on relatively inflexible funding can prosper when take-up is low: success combined with population growth creates huge challenges of quality, training, funding, governance and pedagogy – and from all of these, Egypt suffers.

Like all the countries of North Africa, Egypt exhibits the inverted pyramid of employability that sees employment fall – and unemployment rise – with the level of educational qualification. Graduate unemployment runs at just under 40%, while unemployment for those with secondary certificates is about 25%, and those with primary education or less, 22%.⁷ The average Egyptian university graduate takes five years to find stable employment.⁸

Having said this, there have been very significant achievements in terms of raising primary school enrolment (to 97.8%⁹) that are highly creditable; and the headline literacy rate of 73.9%,¹⁰ for all the reservations that need to be applied to concepts of literacy, is high. Many challenges remain, and there are ambitious projects of change in hand. A new Quality Assurance Agency has been established (2006), a Professional Academy of Teachers (2007) and decentralization of schools administration has been piloted since 2007/8 under a major reform programme initiated in 2000 and relaunched in 2004. Most recently, as noted, the 2014–30 Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education sets out the intention to tackle, along lines that grow out of the World Bank and EU supported Basic Education Improvement Plan (1993–2003), all of the identified problems.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The state school education system, which serves 82.5% of children in education (a total of 16.6 million students in the most recently available figures, to which must be added 1.7 million in the private sector) is fairly standard for the region: six years of primary, three of preparatory and three of secondary, before the transition to university. Technical and Vocational Education creates slight wrinkles in this symmetry, with longer and shorter options, particularly at secondary level. And alongside the state system there is a second, religious, schools system run under state supervision by Al-Azhar which feeds through all levels of education into Al-Azhar University, and serves 10.3% of children in education). Whether state or Al-Azhar, the system is characterized by a very traditional pedagogy, with much emphasis on rote learning and either public or private exams at the end of every school year. Promotion from level to level depends on success at key transitions – the Basic Education Completion Certificate, taken at the end of year 9; and the General Certificate of Secondary Education, at the end of year 12. Equivalents are the Al-Azhar Secondary School Certificate and the Secondary School Technical Diploma (the latter awarded after five years).

The rates for unschooled children are significant. At primary 2.9% of all eligible children are outside the system (2.8% of boys and 3.1% of girls); by the preparatory stage this figure has risen to 6.6% on the basis of Ministry figures; but it must be said that very different – and higher – figures are found in other sources.

The sheer scale of the sector is astonishing. In 2008/09 there were 43,000 government schools, 1.6 million personnel and 16 million schoolchildren.¹¹ By 2012 the total number of schoolchildren had reached 18.6 million (with another 3.4 million in pre-primary education, and 7.7 million in tertiary.¹² To put this in perspective, if Egypt's school system was a country, it would rank ninth in population amongst Arab states, with a population double that of Tunisia. If we include tertiary

students, the total is 29.7 million, making it larger than Syria and around 90% of the size of Morocco. The strategy for reform, noted above, is ambitious, comprehensive and absolutely vital. It is noteworthy, and very positive, that the great bulk of expenditure programmed under the plan is at the basic level of education..

THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The university system is also generally free to students who have passed their secondary school leaving exam, of whom however only some 71% take up university places. Despite attempts to delink university admission from the exam in favour of broader selection criteria, choice of faculty remains largely dependent on the marks achieved, making these exams highly competitive, and some form of paid tuition for them (from extra courses of private lessons – often with the child’s own teacher – to private schooling) as universal as parental means allow.

The format is a standard four-year bachelor’s degree, with some variations for specialist courses like medicine, engineering and vet. There is an equivalent four-year diploma at Higher Education Institutes. University study is very much skewed to the humanities and social sciences, with 64%¹³ of all students on HSS courses (against 17.6% on STEM courses). Graduate unemployment rates mirror this preference with the highest (34.7%) in commerce graduates, followed by 15.3% in the arts and archaeology – and the lowest (3.8%) in engineering.¹⁴

There are 24 state universities, of which 11 have been founded since 2000, as well as 51 state non-university institutions focused on technical education; and there are 105 private HE institutions, 16 of which have university status. The public sector as a whole is very large, with 2.45 million undergraduates and 0.68 million postgraduates.¹⁵ Individual public institutions in turn are very large indeed, creating their own problems of governance (and public order): Cairo University has 200,000 students; Alexandria University 175,000; and Ain Shams (also in Cairo), 171,000. Pupil-teacher ratios are very strained, and the quality of teaching suffers. As the World Bank puts it: “While accessibility to Higher Education was one of the main principles guiding the expansion of public universities in the post-revolutionary period, the policy of free public education has in many ways compromised the quality of education.”¹⁶

Current reform plans envisage significant funding increases over the next six years (2014–20): HE sector funding will – if the plan is implemented as proposed – grow from 1.5% to 4% of GDP, and research funding from 0.2% to 1% of GDP. At the same time the number of PhDs will be increased to represent 12% of postgraduate students (against a current 8%). This will be accompanied by new legislation to govern the sector, a new strategic plan and a major push for internationalization, which is symbolized by the fact that 2015 is billed as the Year of Egypt -UK Higher Education Collaboration.¹⁷

Alongside the public universities is Al-Azhar, the oldest and greatest Islamic university in the world, founded in about 970 CE and incorporated as a recognizably modern university by legislation in 1961 which established “modern” faculties alongside the traditional course of learning. Shortly afterwards Al-Azhar admitted the first women to its new women’s college. As noted above it sits at the pinnacle of a very large system of schools education across Egypt, and accounts for some 322,000 students.

PRIVATE SECTOR

Egypt has a flourishing private sector in education, with a full spectrum of quality from the excellent to the barely adequate, and beyond. 7.2% of Egyptian schoolchildren are in private schools (7.8% of primary enrolments and 5.5% of secondary).¹⁸ Despite this relatively small proportion, spending on private education exceeds public education expenditure, and is seriously corrosive of quality in the public system. Apart from the private institutions themselves, low-paid government teachers moonlight in private schools and give private lessons to their public pupils, all too frequently focusing their efforts on remunerated work at the expense of their public duties. Parents scrimp to give their children relative advantage in crucial “high-stake” public exams, either with additional coaching or by putting them into private schools. The total investment in private education, including tutoring, is reckoned to be an extraordinary 60% of the country’s total educational expenditure.¹⁹ As noted above, it is estimated at \$7 billion for 2012.

Private universities, of which there are 16 (as well as 89 non-university institutions) are regulated by Supreme Council of Private Universities. Clearly the private sector has an important part to play, and there are instances of high quality; but as the World Bank puts it baldly, at present private HEIs “do not contribute to the improvement of the quality of graduates that are demanded by the labour market”.²⁰ They need to.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

TVET is delivered in technical secondary schools (of which there are 1,801, teaching 1.3 million students) and vocational institutes. It suffers from a perceived low status that is common across the region, and the result of a historical role as a safety net for children who do not make it through the more selective exam-based academic school and university progression, who may opt for vocational school, making it a clear second best in terms of esteem. Secondary TVET institutes are regularly undersubscribed, and the proportion of students in the TVET system fell from 30% to just over 20% between 1999 and 2009. The vast majority of the 20% or so of all students it attracts have not scored high enough in the secondary-school exam to reach university. The children of poorer, and rural, homes are greatly over-represented in TVET both at secondary and tertiary levels, and investment is relatively low. This status deficit is very damaging: Egyptian employers record by far the highest scores in North Africa in identifying lack of available skills as barriers to growth (50%).²¹ Commenting on the Don Bosco Institute, a private TVET institute run by Italian Salesian Brothers, the World Bank remarks drily that it “offers three and five year diplomas that provide a path to employment, decent pay, and career progression – the very elements lacking in most public TVET institutions”.²²

However ambitious planning is currently in progress to centralize the TVET college system – at present under a wide variety of ministries according to the speciality in which students are trained – under a single ministry for coherent management, development and reform. This can only be positive.

ENGAGEMENT AND PROGRESSION^a

Nine years of education have been compulsory since 1999, and it is the government's intention to extend this in due course. Median education expectations are 13.5 years (13.8 male; 13.3 female).²³ However there is a real shortfall: 8.1% of Egyptian children – about 1.8 million – have never registered at school at all, or dropped out during the basic stage, and the majority of these are female and poor. There has nonetheless been a very real achievement here, since the corresponding figure for the 18–29 age group is 27%,²⁴ and on current Ministry of Education figures, only 2.8% of Egyptian children today are wholly outside the basic education system.²⁵

Gross enrolment in primary is 111.1% for girls and 115.7% for boys. Of these starters, 96.1% (95.6% of boys and 96.6% of girls) survive to the last grade of primary (grade 6). And 93.6% make the transition to secondary, according to UNESCO looking at 2012, 2009 and 2003 respectively.²⁶



- a. All figures in this and the following paragraph from UNESCO except for those identified as coming from HDR. The apparently contradictory figures of – on the one hand – 10% (or 6%) of children not enrolling at school at all, and 17% not completing basic education; and – on the other – the primary GER of 113.4%, the primary survival rate to last grade of 96.1% and the primary to secondary transition rate of 93.6%, can only be logically explained by the use of differently defined population groups as the basis for calculation.

Progress is graphically illustrated by the Egypt Human Development Report (2010), looking at the 18–22 generation: of this cohort 27% had not completed basic education (10 % never having enrolled and 17% dropping out).²⁷ Tertiary, with a gross enrolment ratio of 30.1% in 2012, thus sees under a third of the total age group.

Worth noting is a bald statement from the Ministry of Education that “secondary schools fail to prepare their students to pursue their university education”, a problem that relates in part to the strong preference shown at secondary by students choosing literary (71%) over science (28%) streams.²⁸

OUTPUTS AND MEASURES

It is difficult to measure educational outputs directly. The headline literacy rate is one measure, at 72.2% (80.3% male, 63.5% female), and comparison with the youth literacy figures of 92.3% male, and 86.1% female, suggests steady progress over the generations (however exaggerated the notion of literacy involved).²⁹ The EEP study conducted between 1997 and 2001 identified “few improvements”, according to the World Bank. And Egypt’s engagement with TIMSS in 2003 and 2007 actually recorded an across-the-board decline over the period, measured both by gender and by subject: in 2007 53% of students tested did not reach the Low International Benchmark in maths and 45% didn’t reach it in science. On the other hand, students at the government’s experimental language schools scored “above international averages”, suggesting that a solution in this area, as in other areas, is at least conceptually within the government’s grasp.

The Ministry of Education records that 35% of preparatory level students “do not master reading and writing”, (which casts some light on the extraordinary variation – and questionable significance – of stated literacy levels – what can UNESCO actually mean by 92/86% for youth literacy?); and that in SATS 2010 “the apprehension level of the sample schools was less than 50% in Arabic, science and mathematics”.³⁰

EMPLOYABILITY

Arguably a better measure of output is employability, and here the story is not yet a good one either, though there are interesting initiatives in play. Against a national unemployment rate given as (but not always accepted as) 12%, youth (18–29) unemployment stands at about 17% (12% male, 33% female), and graduate unemployment at 19%.³¹ Looked at from the other end of the telescope, 24.8% of unemployed adults in Egypt hold a tertiary degree, against their 6.7% representation in the population as a whole.³² It seems true that, as one writer comments, “An educated young person is at no advantage when it comes to finding his/her way in the job market. In fact the opposite seems to be true.”³³

The mechanics of this are clear enough. With huge numbers of graduates entering the employment market each year, their preferred destination – the public service – is unable to absorb them. Polled in 2010, 60% of the 24–34 age bracket preferred the idea of public to private sector employment.³⁴ Whereas in Nasser’s day there was a guarantee of employment in the public sector to all graduates,

that is now a distant memory. Of Egyptians aged 20–35, who make up 48% of the population, only 18% are in the public service at any level,³⁵ and while 20% of men and 50% of women born in 1978 could expect to find their first job in the public sector, those figures are now only 5% and 25%.³⁶

The private sector should be taking up the slack, but isn't: formally waged private sector employment dropped from 20% of those with secondary school completion entering the labour market in 1970, to 18% of those doing so in 2000. Public sector employment dropped from 67% to 19% over the same period. The real growth over this time was in "informal sector" employment, up from 5% to 40% of the same cohorts, and unwaged family employment, which rose from 5% to 18%.³⁷

And the perceived skills deficit in young graduates is the highest in the region, with 50% of firms surveyed citing inadequate workforce skills as a major constraint on growth.³⁸

DIFFERENTIALS OF GENDER AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Effective education should level access to opportunities, bringing them to women, the poor and the rural. But at every level major differentiations between men and women are observable. The proportion of woman to men in literacy is 80.5%. 82% of the 1.8 million children who do not attend primary school are female (16% of all Egyptian girls have not attended school³⁹). The mismatch in primary enrolment is 94.3%, in secondary enrolment 96.2%.⁴⁰ At university the proportions switch, with 53% of students female, but it seems that young women make up a higher proportion of the lower-cost, lower-status and higher-unemployment humanities and social science courses. Of young people (18–29) "out of the labour force" for whatever reason, women make up 83%. As for socio-economic background, it is a strong determinant of educational outcomes. The poorest 20% of Egyptians provide 5.3% of "high achievers" (those scoring over 90%) at primary school, 3% at preparatory school and 0.5% at the General Certificate. Only 4.3% of university students come from this group, whereas 73.6% are from the richest 40%.

NOTES

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 10. Ibid.
 11. *Egypt Human Development Report 2010*, UNDP, p. 45.
 12. “Egypt Country Profile”, UNESCO Institute for Statistics <<http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/country-profile.aspx?code=EGY®ioncode=40525>> [accessed 29 October 2014].
 13. This figure is also found as 76.2%, in the World Bank’s *The Road Not Travelled*, 2008. The difference may be partly accounted for by the inclusion of students of education.
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 21. World Bank, *Breaking Even or Breaking Through*, p. 5.
 22. *Jobs for Shared Prosperity*, p. 260.
 23. “Egypt Country Profile”, UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
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 32. World Bank, *Breaking Even or Breaking Through*, p. 3.
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