HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT

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ABSTRACT
As higher education can play an important role in developing the underdeveloped countries, this paper highlights some of the aspects related to the influence of higher education on development in Egypt. A social and economic profile of Egypt is included in the paper, with a focus on some of the transformations that happened after the 2011 revolution. Other aspects like the history and composition of higher education in Egypt, accessibility to higher education there, and social justice in higher education in Egypt are also discussed.

Keywords: Higher education, International development, Globalization, Global education

Introduction
Development has been always something that countries in the underdeveloped world wanted to pursue. In the era of globalization, where the world became a small village, competition prevails, and for countries to be able to compete, they have to be developed enough. Many methods, approaches, plans, and models have been suggested and implemented, yet there have been only a few successful examples. One tool that could help underdeveloped countries to pursue a successful path of development is higher education. The World Bank is one of the most important organizations concerned with the issue. In its Education Strategy 2020, it strongly recommends investing in people’s knowledge and skills so they may be able to participate effectively in their local economies, and then integrating with the greater global economy (Spring, 2009).

Egypt is a developing country that has gone through tremendous political changes during the last five years. Because of the political unrest, the economic situation is worsening day after day. Egypt had developmental plans at many levels, but they were interrupted by the 2011 revolution. However, development in Egypt is more important today than ever, and higher education is believed to be capable of playing a major role in achieving the required developmental goals in underdeveloped countries, including Egypt.

The Impact of Higher Education on Development
Human capital is one of the most important factors in achieving a successful model for development (Milutinović & Nikolić, 2014). An indispensable tool in preparing the human capital to play an active role in development is education. As Bown (2002) explains, a lot of universities in developing countries were committed to development, and they were founded or reshaped to respond to the political demands related to developmental goals.
To achieve such goals, it is important to make knowledge a basis for economy. Kruss et al. (2015) indicated that there is a demand in today’s world economy based on knowledge for quality graduates. They introduced a technological capabilities approach to how post-secondary education can support national education goals. In this approach, capabilities need to be built inside educational organization themselves, while focusing on linking them to the economic sector. Universities need to understand the change in the technological needs of firms, and how these universities’ professional and occupational programs can be related to these needs.

There were some countries that could be considered as good examples for achieving developmental goals. Singh (1991) listed the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia as examples for countries that presented significant industrial achievement. He explained that these four countries had limited natural resources, but they worked on promoting the knowledge and skills of their labor force while also working on transforming their agricultural economies to become industrial export economies. There were many factors behind their success, but two of these related to their higher education institutions: “(a) the quantity and quality of scientific and technological manpower, and (b) the research and development environment which enables the achievement and sustainability of indigenous industrial development” (Singh, 1991, p. 386).

Another important reason for the developmental success in these countries was that they observed the international dimension of development, and acknowledged it by using English as an international language in their education and research (Singh, 1991). In Singapore, English was the primary medium of instruction. In Malaysia, it was a second language. In the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, it was the language of scientific research and publication.

In addition to scientific research and English, many scholars highlight the necessity of learning soft skills as well. Zhao (2009) confirmed that in today’s globalized world, diverse talents and creative individuals are required more than standardized workers. Thus, reform of education should focus on enhancing creativity, and critical thinking (Milutinović & Nikolić, 2014). Wagner (2008) also listed critical thinking and problem solving at the top of the most important abilities for surviving in today’s globalized world.

Critical thinking was vital in the case of the aforementioned Asian countries. As Singh (1991) noted, an essential prerequisite for industrial development in these countries was fulfilled, in that “the specialized research institutions and universities had been able to adopt, adapt and improve the technology that has been imported.” (p. 395).

At the same time, higher education institutions should not be isolated from their local and societal context and environment. Universities need to interact with other societal actors to transfer their societies towards development. Mader et al. (2013) indicated that universities are significant societal actors as they shape their local, regional, and national environments. Singh (1991) stated with respect to the successful models that they used technology for local development, and that they also transferred and adapted it to the local community needs. Also, academic research needs to understand the global and local challenges, as well as those who can have an influence on them. Zhao (2009) recommended considering schools as global enterprises that prepare students for the global economy and market. As students, we should learn what kinds of products we can make and compete with, while, at the same time, discover how to make use of both natural and human global resources.
Profile of Social and Economic Development in Egypt

Egypt is a country with a history that goes back thousands of years. Abou-Zeid (2016) highlights its unique position, demographics, and economic activity. It is a country that has a unique geographical location at northern gate of Africa. It lies at the center of the Middle East and the “old world” around the Mediterranean Sea, and possesses a land area of around 1 million square kilometer (385,000 square miles). About 95% of its landscape is desert, and this causes 93% of its 90 million population to be concentrated around the narrow Nile River Valley (Abou-Zeid, 2016).

The Egyptian population is the largest among the Arab countries and the third highest in Africa after Nigeria and Ethiopia (Abou-Zeid, 2016). Abou-Zeid indicated also that the demographics of the Egyptian population is skewed towards an average age that is younger than Europe and North America, with about 63% of the population under the age of 30. About 22% of this category is between 15 and 25 years of age.

Concerning economic activities, agriculture has dominated until the mid-twentieth century (Abou-Zeid, 2016). Today, as Abou-Zeid explains, it involves only 11% of the human workforce. About 9 to 11% of Egypt’s population works in activities that include commerce, tourism, construction, and education. The workforce is estimated today to be 25 million workers, but about half of these are involved in informal economic activities, and the majority of that segment is illiterate or has had no basic education. This resonates to an unfortunate fact about the high illiteracy rate in Egypt, estimated at 28% of the total population.

However, Egypt has been for decades “a major cultural and educational hub in the Middle East and Africa and has been the pioneering nation in higher education on various fronts” (Abou-Zeid, 2016, p. 138). At the same time, it is a fundamental constitutional right of its citizens to receive free education at all stages.

On another level, spending on education has increased. In 2007-2008 the total government expenditure on education at all levels in Egypt was around 4% of the GDP (Fahim & Sami, 2011). This was estimated at that time to be 10.4% of the governmental expenditure (The World Bank, 2016). However, the targeted spending on education has been reduced, and is now, in 2016-2017, 6% of the GDP (Aggour, 2016).

Egypt and the Arab Spring

Egypt has witnessed tremendous changes when it comes to political power in the last 5 years, and specifically since January, 2011. In this context, it might be beneficial to go back a few years to Egypt’s very recent history. The Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program (ERSAP) that began in the 1990s features an important phase of the economic reform and development in Egypt. Selim (2015) explains that this program, imposed by the international financial institutions, made the Egyptian state abandon its traditional role in the country’s economic development. It also raised the cost of living for all Egyptians, as implementing the program reduced the governmental subsidies. The unemployment rate increased gradually to reach 29% in 2006, compared to 26% in 1998 (Selim, 2016).

In such an atmosphere, social protests started to happen from time to time and became a general phenomenon. As Selim (2016) elaborates, these protests had no overt political demands and never went beyond asking for financial rights and improved work conditions. “They focused on micro-economic and
social demands that never went beyond financial rights and the improvement of work conditions. In addition, they did not seek to change the overall political equation in the country. Rather, their main strategy was to pressure the government to achieve economic demands, without opposing its overall political or economic policy direction” (Selim, 2016, p. 62). These protests included university professors, tax collectors, lawyers, and others. This did not mean, as Selim explains, that there were no movements that had political demands, but they failed in attracting these groups because they were elitist in nature.

However, the period from 2008 to 2011 witnessed the beginning of new opposition movements that began to deal with shared injustices including corruption, poverty, and unemployment (Selim, 2016). The basic actors of these movements were activist groups who used the Internet, blogs, and social media, and were able to capitalize in social protest movements and connect to labor unions (Selim, 2016). Selim explained that the first political Facebook group was initiated under the name of April 6 Youth movement, and it intended to support a workers’ strike in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra on April 8, 2006. The regime succeeded in suppressing the strike, but other groups were inspired.

These movements and activism in the cyberspace constituted a momentum that set the stage for a bigger act. The Tunisian revolution ignited the one in Egypt. It started on January 25, 2011, and ended up with Mubarak, who had been the president of Egypt for almost 30 years, stepping down on February 11. Looking at the political, social, and economic scene in Egypt today, explaining what happened might become complicated. Rougier and Lacroix (2016) indicated that “we no longer understand what is going on in the biggest Arab country in the Muslim world—with a population of over 90 million—as if everyone had the vague feeling that they had been misled by the spinning wheels of image and commentary.” (p. 1).

In less than a year after the 2011 revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, the two main strands for political Islam in the region, won the first free parliamentary elections in more than 60 years (Rougier and Lacroix, 2016). In June 2012, Mohammed Morsi, who was a bureaucrat from the governing body of the Muslim Brotherhood, was the first civilian to be elected as the president of Egypt. As Rougier and Lacroix (2016) explain,

In the year of the Morsi presidency, the Brotherhood would face a wall of opposition from an Egyptian state whose structures as well as its staff were handed down from the Mubarak era. In its ambition to take control of state institutions, the MB made a series of errors, uniting against it a large segment of the political spectrum, including its former allies, the Salafis in the Nour party. Mobilization came to a head when millions of Egyptians occupied Cairo’s streets on June 30, 2013. The following July 3, army commander-in-chief General Al-Sisi, claiming to heed the people’s will, removed the elected president from office (p. 2).

After being elected in June 2014, Morsi’s Defense Minister, Abdul-Fattah Al-Sisi, is now the head of a new regime dominated by the military. Abou-Zeid (2016) indicated that the recent political developments in Egypt resulted in the slowdown of the economy and a substantial increase in unemployment. Surprisingly, the highest rates of unemployment were not for the illiterate nor for the “only read and write,” it was for the graduates or recipients of medium and high levels of education.
Egypt today is facing a tough economic situation that has influenced all Egyptians. One of the biggest challenges that Egypt faces currently is the lack of a clear vision for the future, and a clear economic development plan. The regime always calls on the Egyptian people to be patient, and promises them that economic conditions will be better soon. In fact, as Amin (2016) states, state politics rest on a comfortable social bloc that gives legitimacy to the regime, makes it possible to construct a coherent project, and permits the existence of the inward-looking national productive system necessary for countries like Egypt to emerge and develop. However, when looking at these conditions on the ground, the only one that was relatively applicable was the existence of the comfortable social bloc. The other conditions were absent, and the comfortable social bloc is also vanishing because of the fast-deteriorating economic situation.

**History and Composition of Higher Education in Egypt**

Kamel (2014) states that Fouad I University, now Cairo University, was the first Egyptian university to be established. It was established in 1908, and was followed by the American University in Cairo (AUC) in 1919. Kamel confirmed also that during the first few decades of the 20th century, Egypt had three national universities and one private university. These were Cairo, Alexandria, and Ain Shams University, and the American University in Cairo. The total number of students enrolled was around 50,000, and the total number of enrollments today exceeds two million.

The public education system in Egypt has gone through many changes, depending on the goals of the governing regime. As Kandil (2011) explains, the educational system was developed to value quality over accessibility under the monarchy, which continued for three centuries. This meant that only specific groups, including foreigners and the members of the upper class, had access to education. When the monarch was overthrown in 1952, about 75% of the Egyptian population above ten years of age was illiterate. The new regime expanded the opportunities to access education, but this happened at the expense of quality. Kandil (2011) continues to elaborate that many of the problems witnessed within the Egyptian education system today date to policies developed and implemented under the 1952 Revolution government. It aimed at achieving three goals: social equality, citizens’ loyalty to the new government, and national security.

In fact, social equality was one of the most important motives behind making education available and free for everyone, after it had been restricted to the elite. “To realize social equality, the new government had to expand educational opportunities for all citizens by financially sponsoring pre-school to universities and higher education levels, without considering the limited resources available to the country at the time.” (Kandil, 2011, p. 59).

**Structure of Higher Education Today**

Today, for students to join higher (tertiary) education in Egypt, they have to pass a National General final examination or its equivalent, after completing 12 years of formal school education. Students have the option to join public or private education. The Ministry of Higher Education, which is the main regulatory body for higher education, supervises both of these. A third option is to join Azhar University, which is also a public university, but with its own governing system. Besides Al-Azhar University, students can either join one of the 23 public universities located in main cities across the
country or continue into vocational training institutes (two to four years of study). The study period in universities is standardized in all universities: four years for most disciplines, five years for engineering, and six years for medicine. The Supreme Council of Universities (SCU), headed by the Minister of Higher Education, is composed of public university presidents and up to five members from civil society. This council is responsible for supervising, as well as setting out general policy and regulations for public higher education.

To elaborate more on the composition of higher education in Egypt today, OECD (2010) stated that higher education in Egypt includes public and private technological colleges and universities. As explained in a report issued by EP-Nuffic (2015), students can attend universities to get either a bachelor of arts or a bachelor of science, depending on the field they wish to pursue. Most programs have a nominal duration of four years to grant the bachelor degree, and some of them, like dentistry and pharmacy, grant the degrees to their students in five years. The vast majority of the subjects and courses that students take are already determined for the period of four years. In a few occasions in a very few facilities, students might be allowed to take elective courses. A bachelor’s degree or license is considered the qualification that enables students to join the labor market. Those who want to pursue further education can either obtain a diploma of higher studies in one to two years, or pursue a master's degree, which usually takes from three to six years. A bachelor’s in the same specialization is required (EP-Nuffic, 2015).

Developing education in Egypt

Since 2000, the Egyptian government has been putting plans in place to develop higher education in Egypt. As Radwan (2016) states, a national conference was held in 2000 to search for ways of developing higher education in Egypt. It produced a national strategic vision, “Program for Continuous Improvement and Qualifying for Accreditation (PCIQA).” Twenty-five projects for development emerged, to be carried out in phases until 2017. Radwan divided these into three phases: The Quality phase (2002-2007), the Accreditation phase (2007-2012), and the Excellence and Internationalization phase (2012-2017). Each of these phases contained its own steps and details. The revolution erupted in 2011, however, and the implementation of these projects was interrupted. It is not clear today how much is completed and how much is still under progress.

The Official Bodies Organizing Higher Education in Egypt

As Radwan (2016) explains, the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education, with the help of three supreme councils under its supervision—the Supreme Council of Universities, the Supreme Council of Private Universities, and the Supreme Council of Technical Institute—is responsible for setting the policies, monitoring implementation, and supervising all tertiary education. To explain further, the Ministry of Higher Education is the main regulatory body for higher education in Egypt. The ministry sets policies, oversees implementation, and supervises and coordinates all tertiary education. There are also three supreme councils, headed by the Minister of Higher Education, that help the ministry. These councils are the Supreme Council of Universities, the Supreme Council of Private Universities and the
Supreme Council of Technical Institutes. The Central Administration of Al-Azhar Institutes governs Al-Azhar University (Radwan, 2016).

These councils are responsible for making sure that the degrees offered by different universities and institutes are consistent and in harmony (Radwan, 2016). Among these councils, the Supreme Council of Universities is the highest body that governs public universities. It sets the general policy for higher education in Egypt and links it to the needs of Egypt. It also implements a general coordination policy for universities regarding attendance periods, the academic year, and examinations (Radwan, 2016). Radwan (2016) explains that, furthermore, it coordinates between equivalent faculties and departments at different universities, sets frameworks for internal by-laws of the universities and their faculties, and approves them.

Radwan (2016) also notes that the system for public universities is highly centralized, especially when it comes to finance. Universities are, however, independent when it comes to other aspects, like administrative regulations, scientific research, and community service. Although public education in Egypt is free at all stages, the system has allowed universities to offer fee-based programs in recent years (Radwan, 2016).

Access to Higher Education

The essential determining criterion for admission to public universities in Egypt is the score achieved in the national examinations of the secondary score (“Thanawya A’amma”). When the scores are released, all students submit their applications to the Coordination Office (“Maktab Ettansiq”). Among other official personal documents, the students submit their secondary school examinations transcripts, and their preferences for colleges and locations, in order. The Coordination Office gives the highest scores priority in fulfilling students’ desires. Typically, a 100% score would get the student the college and location he/she applied for. Lower scores would get what would fit their score, in a process that looks exactly like “supply and demand.” For example, an 80% score student might put the Faculty of Medicine in Cairo University as his/her first choice, but might end up at the Faculty of Science in Sohag University (in southern Egypt), which might be his/her option number 30. Private universities play a role in fulfilling the desires of those who did not get the required scores, but have the ability to pay their expensive fees. For example, while it is impossible for students with a score of 80% to join the faculty of medicine in a public university, they can join the same faculty in a private university if they have the required fund.

Accessibility to higher education is not tied to gender. Radwan (2016) states that higher education in Egypt has no problem with gender disparity. As he elaborates, however, there is a very slight disparity in favor of males in enrollment, and a slight disparity in favor of females upon graduation. Females, according to Radwan, have also achieved better graduation grades and occupied more advanced graduation ranks, as can be recognized by the higher number of female teaching assistants when compared to males. In Egypt, students who get the highest grades are automatically hired as teaching assistants if their departments announce they need teaching assistants.

Fahim and Sami (2011) elaborate further, as they state that during the past 20 years, the number of female students enrolled in Egyptian universities has been increasing continuously. They also describe how the average literacy rate among females has increased from about 30% to 59%. Furthermore, the proportion of female university graduates has come close to that of males. This progress can be
recognized clearly in urban areas, where the proportion of female university graduates actually surpassed that of male graduates in 2006 (Fahim & Sami, 2011).

Social Justice and Higher Education in Egypt

“After the revolution in 1952, the Egyptian government pledged to eliminate elitism in the higher education system which had existed as a result of the deliberate policies of the previous administrations. The government achieved its objective by making education free at all levels as well as introducing an 'open door' policy in higher education so that all who desired to study beyond secondary school could do so” (Arabsheibani, 1988, p. 637). Kamel (2014) also stated that extending higher education to everyone was codified as a policy in the 1971 constitution, as it stated that “education is the birthright of every Egyptian child.” The intention was for all Egyptians to benefit from two basic principles, equity and equal opportunity for all.

In Egypt, there are a lot of students who belong to a low socio-economic status. This means that a lot of their time that should be dedicated to learning and education will be directed to working to support themselves and their families. At the same time, finding enough time might not be the only problem. Quality education through private schools and colleges requires financial resources that the vast majority of Egyptians cannot afford. Emira (2014) indicated that the privatization of education was the policy adopted in the era of former Egyptian president Mubarak (1981-2011). Money spent on the pre-university education was less than that spent on the university education. This meant that many students of low socio-economic background did not have enough financial support to have access to higher education. At the same time, the opening of private schools marked this as an era allowing the “elite” who can pay to do well in the pre-university education to then have access to the “elite” colleges. Public universities do provide quality education, but in a few colleges that required students to earn the highest scores in the secondary school leaving exams.

Loveluck (2012) identified one of the challenges that students face when she clarified that there are systematic inequalities that help prevent the poorer students from accessing the better-quality courses. Instead of working to bridge the gaps that might cause inequality, decisions are made that deepen the gap. One strong example of this was when the Supreme Council of Universities denied the students from provincial areas access to specific faculties at Cairo University like Media and Political Science, claiming that they have equivalent faculties in their governorates (Nidal, 2015). This decision ignored how the different quality of teaching, and the facilities available to students at Cairo University, could give students with access to these an advantage over those attending a provincial university. To deepen the gap more and more, another decision was taken by the Minister of Higher Education and approved by the Supreme Council of Universities to exempt the sons of judges and police officers from this limitation on geographical distribution, for national security reasons related the nature of their parents’ jobs (Ruba’ei, 2015).

In the same context, Fahim and Sami (2011) also expressed their concern that higher education attracts students from wealthier backgrounds, who tend to enter higher education in larger numbers than those from poorer backgrounds. They also indicated that financing of higher education in Egypt is biased against the poor, since most of the public spending on higher education goes to students in the richest quintiles, while few university students come from the lowest income brackets. “This occurs because
entrance to universities is constrained by very restrictive grade requirements and students from wealthier families have a better chance to of earning good grades because they are able to afford better quality secondary education as well as private tutoring” (Fahim & Sami, 2016, p. 53).

Social inequality prevails also in opportunities to join specific colleges. Being a police or army officer guarantees prestige and welfare that is supported by the government for one’s whole life. However, joining the Police Academy for example, or any of the five military colleges in Egypt, is restricted to those who have influential relatives or acquaintances. Although no one can prove this officially, there are hundreds of stories of those who passed all necessary tests and then failed the final interview after being asked about what their parents did for a living. Those with parents in the corp will not be asked that question in the first place. The same thing happens after graduation when applying to joining the judiciary or the diplomatic corps. Although almost all applicants for such jobs can attest that such a situation is common, it is hard to resist because the final decision about approving an applicant is always taken by a group of seniors in the authority. These seniors were usually appointed in similar ways, and they work at keeping the jobs for their relatives and acquaintances. Unfortunately, this might be hard to reform as Megahed (2008) indicated that “reform is undertaken in order to protect or increase the educational, political, and economic benefits that certain groups enjoy at the expense of other groups.” (p.142).

Conclusion

As of this moment, the future of Egypt’s economic and developmental situation is still vague. There is still no clear political and economic vision for the country. Social injustices are more prevalent than ever. The government became incapable of providing the subsidies that helped stabilize the life conditions of a large segment of Egyptians. Education and higher education, in particular, still remains a catalyst for a bright future for Egyptians. What is needed is a political will and desire, armed with a clear and ambitious vision that the Egyptian people can trust and count on.

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