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Background Paper

Education in Egypt: Key Challenges

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BACKGROUND PAPER

The original version of this paper was prepared for the Egypt Education roundtable event convened by the Middle East and North Africa Programme in partnership with the British Council Egypt and supporting partners the Egyptian-British Business Council, held at Chatham House on 19 January 2012. A companion paper ('The State of Education in Egypt') summarizes the outcome of those discussions, focusing on recommendations for policy-makers, civil society and the business community. This paper benefited from feedback from roundtable discussants.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing Egypt's education system in the post-Mubarak era are numerous and pressing. The demographics underscore the urgency of reform: 32 per cent of Egyptians are under the age of fifteen. A slow response to the large-scale shifts in society over the past year risks depriving another generation of an education that meets the needs of the changing labour market as well as responding to the evolving political system.

The mismatch between the outputs of the education system and the needs of the job market is one of the key reasons behind the persistently high level of unemployment in Egypt, which is officially estimated at 12 per cent but generally assumed to be significantly higher. Unemployment is particularly high among the under-25s and among university graduates, who, according to estimates from a regional NGO, Injaz Al Arab, typically take five years to find a job. Youth unemployment poses a number of social and political, as well as economic, risks. The poor quality of much of the state education system, and the widespread reliance on private tutoring to supplement it, also contribute to Egypt's high level of economic inequality, raising concerns about social justice.

Skills shortages remain a constraint on growth opportunities and on investment prospects. With greater investment in human capital, Egypt could take advantage of many more growth opportunities in high-skilled economic sectors. The UNDP's 2010 Egypt Human Development Report concluded: 'The market is currently incapable of offering sufficient opportunities catering to all job seekers, particularly those with an education. It is therefore time to turn to the alternative solution, shaping youth to suit market needs.' This background paper will attempt to clarify the challenges facing the Egyptian education system in 2012, identifying the most pressing areas for reform in the hope that constructive changes can be made to offer a new generation of students the opportunities they need to thrive in both the domestic and the global economy.

The paper will discuss the following seven challenges facing Egypt's education system today:

- Strains on infrastructure;
- Poor teaching quality and dependence on private tutors;
- Over-centralized control;
- A focus on rote learning for examinations;
- Negative attitudes towards vocational training;
- The entrenchment of social inequalities;
- Inadequate university access, funding and research capacity.

These challenges are by no means unique to Egypt, and comparative experiences from other countries may help shed light on possible solutions.

A brief history of Egypt's education system

The evolution of Egypt's education system has long been influenced by political developments. A European-style system was first introduced by Ottoman rulers in the early nineteenth century in order to nurture a class of well-educated, loyal administrators and army officers who would become the national army. Under the British occupation (1882–1922) investment in education was then curbed drastically, and secular public schools, which had been free up to this point, began to charge fees.[1] It has been suggested that this downscaling was partly designed to refashion graduates as administrators in the colonial bureaucracy and even to reduce the risk that potentially disruptive, educated, nationalist leaders might emerge to challenge the occupation.[2] Under the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, education became a central part of the modernizing project. In the 1950s, he phased in free education for all Egyptian citizens, starting with schools and later extending this to include higher education. The Egyptian curriculum became a model for the region, greatly influencing other Arab education systems, which often employed Egyptian-trained teachers. Nasser also offered guarantees that all university graduates would be able to find employment in the public sector, a promise that contributed to a rapid increase in university enrolment rates in the following decades.

Demand soon outstripped the level of available state resources, causing the quality of publicly provided education to deteriorate; rapid growth necessitated the hiring of insufficiently qualified teachers and placed immense strain on school facilities. Many schools started to operate in shifts, especially in densely populated urban areas. Today this trend in public-sector education has culminated in poor teacher–student ratios (often around one to fifty) and persistent gender inequality. Female enrolment ratios are typically around 20 per cent lower than those of males, drop-out ratios are higher, and although there have been substantial improvements in female literacy rates, there remains a sizeable gender gap in educational attainment.[3][4]

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[1] Hartmann (2008).
[2] Cochran (1986: 16).
[3] Osman (2011).
[4] World Economic Forum (2005).

There also exists a parallel private education sector that dates back to President Anwar Sadat's 'Open Door' policies of the 1970s. The quality of education provided by many of these schools is vastly superior to that on offer in the state system, and its beneficiaries often find themselves better equipped than their state-school counterparts for the labour market.

THE KEY CHALLENGES

1 Strains on infrastructure

Investment in school facilities has not kept pace with the rapid increase in the numbers of students, resulting from high rates of population growth and rising enrolment rates. Overcrowding – with classes regularly containing between forty and fifty children – and poor facilities[5] do not create an environment conducive to learning. To alleviate the pressures caused by both these factors, many schools operate in shifts, with most students only attending for part of the day. As Tarek Osman observes, 'playgrounds, let alone music, art rooms or laboratories, are a rarity.'[6] The quality of school facilities has been found to have clear effects on the daily performance of both the teachers and the students who use them.[7] As Sarah Hartmann noted during fieldwork in Cairo schools: 'Most students were quite aware of the fact that it is not just the teachers who are to blame for these deficits, but that structural constraints make it difficult for them to teach effectively during regular class hours.'[8]

It therefore seems likely that a well-targeted capital injection aimed at improving school facilities would positively affect educational outcomes within Egypt's state school system. However, state resources are limited as the government budget is already under strain; the 2011–12 budget envisages a deficit of 8.6 per cent of GDP.

2 Poor teaching quality and dependence on private tutors

In Egypt today, the teaching profession tends to be associated with a low social and economic status. This notion is reinforced by the meagre salaries – rarely amounting to more than than LE1,600 (US$281) a month – and the poor quality of training. Although the Ministry of Education cites the improvement of training as a major priority, there has been little progress on its achievement to date. In addition, unqualified teachers constitute a major problem, especially in technical and primary education.

The poor quality of state-provided schooling has led to the emergence of an educational 'informal sector' where private tutoring is used to fill the educational gaps left by the formal schooling system.[9] According to CAPMAS (Egypt's Central Statistics and Mobilisation Agency), over 60 per cent of

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[5] Hartmann (2008).
[6] Osman (2011).
[7] See, for instance, Schneider, Mark, 'Do School Facilities Affect Educational Outcomes?', National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, National Institute of Building Sciences, Washington DC, accessible at http://www.ncef.org/pubs/outcomes.pdf.
[8] Hartmann (2008).
[9] Hartmann (2008).

investments in education are spent on private tutoring.[10] It is prevalent in all types of school, and leaves those students whose parents cannot afford private lessons at a disadvantage relative to their classmates. In this respect it can be seen as another factor entrenching the social inequalities and stratification to which the formal educational sector is already contributing.

The prevalence of private tutoring also acts as a disincentive for teachers to complete their lesson plans. Many teachers double as private tutors in order to supplement their salaries. This creates a conflict of interest, as excelling in their state-funded lessons would reduce the incentives for students to pay them for additional support.

As one student recounted to Sarah Hartmann during her fieldwork examining the informal education sector: ‘The teacher doesn’t bother to teach the whole lesson. He might just explain the subject matter very superficially, without going into any details. He knows that we are all taking private lessons, so why should he bother?’ In addition, Hania Sobhy argues that the normalization of private tutoring has ‘emptied out and displaced’ public schooling in the technical schools that cater mainly to the working class. On one hand, Sobhy argues that the prevalence of private lessons has led to rampant absenteeism at public schools: ‘school, if actually attended by students, becomes an outlet for fun, play and socializing.’[11] On the other, she notes that beatings and humiliation are pervasive in public schools, and that teachers on below-subsistence wages use a combination of physical and verbal intimidation to pressure children into signing up for the private lessons that teachers need in order to earn a living wage.[12] Sobhy found that while data are very difficult to obtain, typical teaching salaries range between EGP105 and 360 (US$17.41-59.69) per month.

3 Over-centralized control

The Egyptian state has historically placed education at the heart of the country’s social and economic development. The right to education is even enshrined in the state constitution. As a result, control of the education system is heavily centralized. In 2003, the then Minister for Education Hussein Kamel Bahaeddin justified the state’s dominant role in the instruction of its citizens: ‘Education falls under the direct supervision of the state so that it would ensure the minimum common level of enculturation and socialization.’ This, he argued, would ‘enhance national unity and the cohesion of the social

[10] Osman (2011).
[11] Sobhy (2012).
[12] Ibid.

fabric'. This is to some extent borne out by the amount that Egypt spends on education. According to a World Bank Report published in 2002, the country's total education expenditures amounted to 8.8 per cent of GDP, a proportion far higher than the OECD average in education spending, which is 4.6 per cent of GDP.[13]

The Ministry for Education plays an important role in shaping the educational trajectory of millions of pupils, controlling the curriculum and issuing specific lesson plans. As a result of such tight central control, teachers have little freedom to structure the progress of their classes or to cover material that is not included in the day's lesson plan. Government inspectors frequently attend lessons, increasing pressure on teachers to adhere strictly to the given curriculum.

The ministry also provides special state-approved learning materials. Their content has tended to be heavily politicized, acting as tools with which to inculcate students with specific cultural values and understandings. This became particularly apparent as students returned to their studies following the fall of President Hosni Mubarak. In March, the Ministry of Education announced that it would have to cut out 'roughly twenty per cent of educational material' from the curriculum as these sections were concerned with the achievements and legacy of the National Democratic Party (NDP).[14]

In addition, all students have to pass centrally administered and standardized state examinations, the results of which are decisive for their further progress in the education system. The content of these exams can also become politicized. In the 2011 end-of-year examinations, students were faced with a compulsory question in which they were instructed to write a letter to the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, thanking it for its support of the January 25th uprising. In the medium to long term, consolidating a democratic transition in Egypt will also require far-reaching changes to the education system to favour critical thinking and freer expression.

A recent OECD report, 'Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Egypt 2010' identified the over-centralization of authority in Egypt's universities as one of the main obstacles to reform. This is also the case in secondary education. Its conclusions are relevant to the context of all levels of the education system: 'Egypt should take deliberate, gradual and transparent steps to achieve a more effective balance between institutional

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[13] OECD Education Database, 2010.
[14] 'Egypt removes NDP related content in education curricula', *Al Masry Al Youm*, 3 March 2011.

self-regulation and overall public control of the scale, structure, quality and cost of its higher education system.'[15]

4 A focus on rote learning for examinations

Pedagogical methods and approaches to teaching are also problematic. Rather than being encouraged to engage critically with the subject matter at hand, students are generally steered towards memorization and rote-learning. This over-concentration on passive learning is exacerbated by a lack of learning materials, library books, facilities and equipment. In many cases, students therefore have neither academic nor physical stimulus, and this lack of engagement has longer-term implications for their levels of concentration and attainment. Student testimonies are frequently critical of this approach.

When interviewed by filmmaker Noha El-Hennawy, one young student compared his experiences at his former (state-run) school with the pedagogical approaches adopted at his current international school:

> The curriculum here requires you to concentrate and revise. But in the national system, I just had to go home and memorise a lot of facts. In the government-set studies I have to know a lot of details that I would not normally need. I have to study lots of dates, lots of city names … But in the Canadian-set studies I learn stuff I can retain, benefit from and convey to others.[16]

Such anecdotal evidence is consistent with research suggesting that learning techniques involving simple memorization and cramming are impediments to long-term information retention.[17]

It seems that this style of teaching has largely developed in response to an intense focus on examinations, a focus that pervades the entire education system. In order to cover all the material in a fact-heavy syllabus – in accordance with the centrally devised curriculum – and not to lag behind classrooms across the country, teachers often have to rush through a great deal of content in each lesson. The same material then has to be memorized by students and reproduced in final exams that are administered simultaneously in all schools.

The value attributed to examination results has come to be decisive for a student's future opportunities. Throughout the education system, academic success is equated with an aptitude for the sciences. After the first year of

[15] OECD (2010), p. 25.
[16] Noha El-Hennawy, 'Quest for Global Identity': http://vimeo.com/34015830, posted January 2012.

general secondary school, students are channelled into a 'science' or a 'humanities' branch. The selection takes place according to their scores: only the best students are admitted into the science branch.[18] Moreover, top graduates are typically directed towards medicine and engineering, while other professional and business subjects are neglected. Mismatches with available jobs means Egypt ends up exporting doctors and engineers while importing senior managers for the business sector. This problem is related to the next key challenge.

5 Negative attitudes towards vocational training

A strong belief in the determinative nature of examination results has implications for the type of student who goes on to undertake vocational training. The majority of students attending Egypt's technical colleges are those who have failed to win a university place. There is an obvious correlation with the quality and capacity of those who pursue this track. The 2010 OECD report on Egypt's higher education system identified the transition of students from general and vocational tracks of secondary education to general higher education as one of the most significant challenges for education reform in Egypt.[19] The report argues that those who have pursued training through technical and vocational training are effectively 'tracked out', with limited opportunities for further learning.

However, students from wealthy families can avoid forced tracking, opting to continue their education in private schools and, later, universities (see next section). While the ability to pay can open doors to a university education, those who cannot afford such privileges are often forced to consider low-skilled labour or vocational education as a necessity, rather than a choice.

This creates a vicious circle whereby technical and vocational education and training suffer from low status, poor funding and poor quality.[20] According to the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, nearly as much funding is allocated to the one-third of secondary-school students who are in non-technical education as is provided to the two-thirds who are in technical education.

As the 2010 OECD report noted: 'It will be important for Egypt to reinvigorate rather than neglect technical and vocational education, to raise its status and quality, and to provide incentives for greater numbers of students to

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[17] Doug Rohrer and Harold Pashler, 'Increasing Retention Without Increasing Study Time', Current Directions In Psychological Science, UC San Diego Postprints, January 2007: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6061k9j5.
[18] Hartmann (2008).
[19] OECD (2010).
[20] Ibid., 'Executive Summary'.

participate.'[21] Since the main focus of those in middle- and upper-class schools has for decades tended to be university access, a short-term change in attitudes will be difficult to achieve.

However, employers are showing a clear appetite for improved levels of technical training among Egyptian youth. Marie-Therese Nagy, head of commercial training at Mobinil, one of Egypt's largest telecom providers, argues: 'Of course it is preferable to hire people with a vocational training background; it saves a lot of investment and time [rather] than developing [employees] who may be lacking these skills.'[22] Many employers complain of difficulties in finding recruits with adequate training both in sector-specific skills and in the 'soft skills' needed by business, ranging from problem-solving skills to time-management skills.

6 The entrenchment of social inequalities

Although the educational experiences on offer in the private sector are far from homogeneous – some of the lower-level private schools differ little from those in the public system – in most cases they come with obvious advantages for those who can afford them: since these schools are subject to fewer state-imposed constraints, teachers have greater autonomy to devise their own lesson plans in response to student needs. Smaller classes inevitably allow students to receive more individual attention, and the increased revenue from fees funds much better facilities.

The most popular form of schools among the affluent urban middle class is the private 'language school' which focuses on intensive language teaching, usually in English or French.[23] However, a number of other types of private school exist to cater for a wide variety of student needs. Crucially, these institutions tend to be better able to equip their students to meet the demands of the job market, offering a good level of language and IT training. This has the obvious effect of entrenching the existing social inequality across Egypt, as those able to afford a private education find themselves in an advantageous position in employment.

In addition, in state schools, students can sometimes make up for a low score by paying extra fees. During the course of her fieldwork interviews, Hartmann found that students with low scores were allowed to attend extra classes in the afternoon shift of a governmental school in return for an annual fee of between EGP400 and 800 (US$66–120).[24]

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[21] OECD (2010), p. 23.
[22] K. El Sawy et al. (2008).
[23] Hartmann (2008).
[24] Ibid.

7 Inadequate university access, funding and research capacity

Higher education faces additional specific challenges. These include attracting funding, strengthening research capacity and output, and addressing mismatches between education outputs and career opportunities, as well as issues of quality and access.

Egypt has 18 state-run and 17 private universities. As with primary and secondary educational establishments, nationally owned institutions are also subject to heavily centralized authority, deriving all funding from the state. The OECD argues it is highly unlikely that Egypt can achieve its ambitious enrolment expansion and quality improvement goals using this traditional mode of funding public higher education institutions predominantly from the government budget. It has called for a new funding strategy to guide decisions 'about the desirable level of public funding, possible avenues for resource diversification, increased cost-sharing in an equitable way, and more efficient ways to distribute public resources among institutions and students'[25] Yet any moves to withdraw the right to free university education are likely to be strongly resisted by many Egyptians for whom this has been a part of the implicit social contract since Nasser.

The funding challenges facing Egypt's universities have grown more acute in the wake of Egypt's January revolution. 'It's a difficult transition time and even though funds are available, the terrain in Egypt is not clear to anyone, which creates uncertainty,' says Shahinaz Ahmed, chief executive of the Egypt arm of the non-profit Education for Employment Foundation. 'It took us six months to get back on track and raise funds again, but donors realize that education is a long-term investment that ultimately has high return on investment.'[26] The issue of who funds Egypt's universities – both in the state and in the private sector – deserves increased attention. As the post-revolutionary experience reveals, state, private and international funding are all problematic in different ways.

In recent decades, the Egyptian state has channelled very low levels of funding into university research, limiting the ability of academic institutions to play an important role in the generation and dissemination of knowledge within Egypt and further afield. As a result, levels of expertise tend to be highly concentrated in a few centres of excellence. In 2010, over 50 per cent of all university research output in Egypt emanated from just three universities. As in most of the Arab world, levels of investment in research

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[25] OECD (2010), p. 40.

[26] Hamdan (2011).

and development (R&D) are very low, at less than 1 per cent of GDP, and there are few linkages between higher education and business.

Higher education is also failing to provide the majority of students with improved job prospects. Unemployment is actually higher among graduates than among non-graduates. The expectations that graduates have about their future careers and wages are badly out of sync with the available opportunities.

Despite this, a university education is still perceived as highly desirable in Egypt.[27] Another concern is that the systemic inequalities that permeate Egypt's education system (as detailed above) culminate in narrow access to universities – especially the better-quality courses – for students from poorer backgrounds. Despite significant progress in the past decade, gender and regional inequities still require special efforts.

The 2010 OECD report on higher education in Egypt included a number of suggestions for improving this state of affairs. Key recommendations included providing incentives for research collaboration involving universities, research institutes and enterprises in Egypt; and allocating funding to research teams and projects on a competitive basis, with independent peer reviewing of research proposals. Former Prime Minister Essam Sharaf has lent weight to the cause, stressing that developing the research system should be a top priority.

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[27] Hartmann (2008).

CONCLUSION

The long-term economic, political and social gains from education reform are abundantly clear. Yet progress in implementing education policy reforms has been limited in practice, partly because of a lack of political will. This could reflect a lack of long-term vision; it may also reflect the gap between the elite that influences and executes policy, and the majority of Egyptians whose children are educated in the poorly funded technical schools. New political parties, the business community and an Egyptian civil society that is now experiencing somewhat greater freedom could all have a role to play in encouraging a greater and more effective policy focus on the education sector. A number of specific suggestions for these stakeholders can be found in a workshop summary, 'The State of Education in Egypt', also published by Chatham House in March 2012.

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