Major Issues in Egyptian Higher Education:
Reflections of an Egyptian Student

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Although Egypt has one of the largest university systems in Africa (Atteh 1996), and the developing world (Salmi 1992), higher education in Egypt currently suffers from a decline in the quality of education (Reading between the 'Red Lines' 2005; Shann 1992). This decline is a result of many challenges that the Egyptian system faces. This reflection paper will discuss three issues that affect the quality of education in Egypt: inadequate academic resources, constrained curricula, and limited academic freedom.

This has not always been the case. When Egypt's first non-religious university was established in the early twentieth century, it started out as a liberal arts university that encouraged the pursuit of knowledge. This university has typically graduated Egypt's politicians, intellectuals, and professionals. In 1962, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came into power as the president of Egypt after the fall of the monarchy, made education free at all levels and expanded the focus to include sciences and technology. He believed that education should be provided free for all people (Reading between the 'Red Lines' 2005). As a result there were targeted efforts to increase student enrollment rates, leading to a focus on quantity rather than quality. This, in turn, caused a decline in the quality of education (Shann 1992), as the number of students grew at a much faster rate than the growth in university resources (Salmi 1992). This decline in the quality of education continues to the present day due to the challenges already mentioned.

In many Western universities, basic academic needs are taken for granted; however, they are considered a privilege in most of the Egyptian universities. Computer labs, scientific equipment, and library books are benefits that not all universities enjoy (Salmi 1992; Shann 1992). Even when resources are available they are spread so thin that they have little impact. Open access computer labs and the availability of computer stations with online access in libraries is a feature only found in some private universities in Egypt. Typically, most public universities would have very few computer labs, if any. In addition, more emphasis is placed on the physical resources and almost none on digital, human or social resources (Warschauer 2001). Even when made available, these labs have to be reserved by faculty members in order to provide access to students. Scientific laboratories are not in a much better state. Most Egyptian universities and higher institutions are underequipped; they do not have the necessary scientific equipment or materials for experiments (Shann 1992).

Libraries in Egyptian universities are also in very poor condition. According to Mary Shann (1992), in the early 1990s, some universities had books that were 15 and 20 years old. The libraries in most public universities do not have the necessary funds to update their collections or provide online resources for their students. This is very paradoxical when you consider the fact that Egypt was home to the famous Library of Alexandria between the third and first centuries B.C. Sadly, the current Bibliotheca Alexandrina has a limited collection of books that mostly cannot be borrowed. Thus, both the professors and the students do not have access to the basic sources of knowledge presented in books or recent research. These limited academic resources could be considered one of the reasons behind the declining standards of instruction and poor quality of curricula in most Egyptian universities.

Another challenge is the students' limited familiarity with topics outside of their disciplines. College stu-

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dents in Egypt select their specialization in their first year. Their choice is based on the students' scores on the General Secondary Education Certificate (*Thanaweya a'Amma*). Thus they get limited exposure to anything but their field of study. Another factor that limits the scope further is that the course professor is considered as the sole source of knowledge. A typical course in any Egyptian higher education institution is highly centralized on the instructor or professor for input. Classes typically take the form of lectures that do not allow for class discussions and do not encourage critical thinking or student reflections. Despite studying in one of the very selective public universities in Egypt as an undergraduate, I was allowed only one interpretation of any text: that of the professor. This was not just a random case restricted to my university, but a generic theme that extended to other universities, majors, courses, and the following cohorts.

Assessment is another factor behind the limited scope of students' knowledge. In most western universities course assessment is varied and would incorporate multiple instruments such as quizzes, assignments, midterms, and presentations. In Egyptian public universities, on the other hand, assessment usually takes the form of an end of semester exam that represents 100 percent of the final grade depending on faculty policies, except for faculties of medicine which have practical, oral, and written exams. On the test, students are expected to reproduce the content presented by the instructor. Students depend mainly on rote memorization to pass their exams. As a result, they graduate with minimal knowledge of their field of study and almost no skills that would provide them qualifications to compete in the current job market.

This dependence on the professor for knowledge and of passing exams only through *voicing* the professor's ideas represents one example of lack of academic freedom within the higher education system in Egypt. Academic freedom in Egypt is a major concern in the current higher education system. This debate of academic freedom affects both the students and the faculty in public and private universities alike (Reading Between the 'Red Lines' 2005). Enforced by different entities, students, faculty members and institutions suf-

fer from the lack of academic freedom. Monitoring of student activities, control over course design and restrictions on course materials, censorship of library books and resources, and repression of researchers and research topics (Reading Between the 'Red Lines' 2005) are just a few examples of how academic freedom is only a concept many students and scholars read about in Egypt, but might never experience.

In most Egyptian educational institutions academic freedom is almost nonexistent. The government of Egypt has established a complete system to ensure full control on the academic environment, starting with the presence of university police, to exhaustive rules and regulations, to political appointment of university presidents and deans (Reading between the 'Red Lines' 2005). This control extends to student activities, represented in repression of student unions, student clubs, and student publications. The government, through the university president and faculty deans, reviews and controls all course objectives, materials and outcomes (Reading Between the 'Red Lines' 2005). They also control the research topics of its graduate students and faculty (Mills 2008).

The Egyptian government established the censoring committee which is responsible for reviewing and approving all the text books and reference materials that are published or imported by any private university in Egypt in order to have a level of control over private universities close to that of public universities (Reading between the 'Red Lines' 2005). In one instance, a book on the reading list of a professor at the American University in Cairo was banned because it was allegedly a threat to the wellbeing of the society (Watzman 2000). The book was a novel by a Moroccan author and contained a few sensual scenes. In extreme cases, university professors were accused of apostasy and blasphemy or treason (Mahmoud 1995; Del Castillo 2001) leading to trial and imprisonment.

The role of universities, in its basic form of promoting knowledge and providing countries with their leaders and serving the local population, needs to be revived. The quality of education is a key factor in the development of any country and its people. However, in order for us to begin improving quality, we need to set

the grounds for it. The limited academic freedom that Egypt lives under at the moment, has developed a body of students and faculty that are vulnerable both professionally and personally. Most faculty members and students alike are either "too fearful or apathetic to challenge the status quo" (Reading between the 'Red Lines' 2005, p. 103). Even after the January revolution and the protests of faculty and staff, little is known about the actual changes that took place.

The issues tackled in this report, as well as many others, need serious attention from the policy makers. Examples of issues that were not covered in this paper and that the Egyptian higher education system faces include overreliance on private tutoring (Shann 1992), facilities and classroom size, policy and governance, overlap of roles and uncoordinated activities between different government authorities (Simpson 2008).

The academic society is inspired by the January 25, 2011 revolution; they are hoping for a radical reform. Some positive steps have taken place such as free elections of student unions, and electing, for the first time, the universities' presidents. How and whether or not change will continue is still a question that only time can provide an answer for.

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