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Michele Dunne, Editor

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Morocco/Egypt: Educational Reform's Selective Benefits

Florian Kohstall

On January 22, Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif officially launched *Nile University*. Located in the high-tech development zone *Smart Village*, 20 km northwest of Cairo, it is the first Egyptian private university focusing on post-graduate studies and research. Since 1996, more than ten private universities have been established. Four Egyptian private universities tested the terrain first; in 2002 French and German universities followed. Now, they are not only competing with the prestigious American University in Cairo (AUC) founded in 1919 but also with British and Canadian Universities. A Russian and a Chinese university are in the making.

The boom of private universities in Egypt is only one of several aspects of internationalization affecting higher education in the Arab world. Many countries in the region—often considered resistant to trends of international homogenization—are drawing upon foreign expertise to build new universities as well as to modernize their public higher education systems. Since 2002, Egypt has implemented a World Bank-sponsored Higher Education Enhancement Program for its fifteen public universities and fifty-one technical colleges. A National Agency for Accreditation and Assessment, built on the Anglo-Saxon model, is one of the program's core projects. Morocco launched a reform of its public universities in the 2003-2004 academic year by introducing the European LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorate) degree system. With the support of the French government and the World Bank, Morocco aims to adapt its universities to international standards.

These efforts to modernize universities through international cooperation are not only an academic and economic endeavor; they also have at least an ostensible political dimension. Higher education ranks at the top of the agenda for the reform of authoritarian regimes in the region. Organizations including the European Union, UNESCO, and the World Bank promote decentralized universities, open to the international environment and able to train graduates for the job market. Donors ask governments to integrate stakeholders in the decision-making process in order to encourage the participation of faculty members and ease the state's grip on universities. In Morocco and Egypt, commissions of experts have been created to build consensus on sensitive reform issues. While donors' motivation in promoting development of universities may be primarily to encourage

economic development—and thereby discourage migration to Europe —the declared objectives are often democratization and improved governance.

In contrast to political and economic reforms, which sometimes are demanded by the international community, in educational reform it is often Arab leaders who are reaching out for foreign expertise to help them implement unpopular reforms and overcome domestic resistance. In 1995, King Hassan II of Morocco asked the World Bank to provide him with a report on social reform issues. He later used this report to circumvent the Parliament's position on free education and impose a decision for the eventual introduction of enrolment fees. Egyptian Minister of Higher Education Moufid Shehab organised a national conference to build support for a reform program to be financed by the World Bank. The program shifts the focus in higher education reform from expanding access towards improving quality.

While international organizations keep pressing for a comprehensive strategy to reform education, so far Egypt and Morocco are adopting selective approaches that add new layers to the educational system rather than overhauling it. In addition, reform efforts are taking place in authoritarian settings that create severe distortion in the transfer of foreign models. While Moroccan and Egyptian policymakers use cooperation with the Bank and other donors to break with certain old patterns such as free university education, other patterns, such as centralized university administration and lack of autonomy for universities, remain untouched. Some reform steps, such as depoliticizing the selection of university presidents, are implemented partially. Morocco's new process for such selections introduces a measure of competition while leaving the ultimate choice to the king. Efforts to increase teaching quality favor those faculties (such as pharmacy, medicine, science, and engineering) that already suffer less than others from the structural crisis of overcrowding. Law and commerce faculties, which carry the major burden of students, so far have not been allocated resources in the reform process.

In addition to the selective approach to reforms, beneficiaries of reform and international cooperation also come from a select stratum of society. The current boom of private universities in Egypt, for example, creates opportunities for Egyptian philanthropists to invest in the business of education and come across as promoters of the “knowledge society” called for in UNDP's Arab Human Development Reports. And the results of such investments are only accessible to a small number of students who can afford private education. Elite politicians also benefit, as the countless committees, workshops, travel tours, and conferences organised by international organizations provide an important platform from which to present themselves as the true vanguard of reform.

Florian Kohstall is Research Fellow at the Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Economiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) in Cairo.