Private Higher Education in Egypt—From Necessary Evil to Celebrated Player

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Abstract
This article looks at the evolution of the role of private higher education institutions in Egypt, where the higher education landscape has been predominantly public. Until the early 1990s, private institutions had a very shy presence, primarily as a last resort for underachievers. They have shifted roles to become celebrated players tasked with the mission of improving the quality and competitiveness of the higher education system.

Egypt presents an interesting case of the changing role of private players in the provision of higher education. The higher education system has been, and continues to be, predominantly public. Private institutions enrolled 26 percent of Egypt's 2.9 million students in 2019, according to data from the ministry of higher education. This marks a significant growth of the size of the student body in these institutions.

Some history is always relevant when discussing Egypt. The first modern university in Egypt was established through philanthropic efforts by the Egyptian elite in 1908. This nascent experiment was later merged into a national public university project in 1923, to form the "Egyptian University"—now called Cairo University. The ensuing system expansion was solely reliant on public institutions, however. Higher education was conceptualized as a public good and was constitutionally promulgated as a free right in 1962. Private institutions remained at the periphery. This article aims to relate their increased role and the evolution of the discourse surrounding them.

The Early Experience of Private Institutions

Few private institutions coexisted within the predominantly public structure of the early years of the higher education system. The American University in Cairo was established in 1919 and attracted a relatively small and elite student body. In addition, a couple of private institutes were established in the 1950s by professional societies.

Private two-year and four-year nonuniversity institutes started to appear in the 1970s, with the country's adoption of economic liberalization policies. These fee-charging private institutes were established to ease the pressure on public universities. They were introduced into the system for students who could not achieve the required cut-off score of the secondary education completion examination and were, hence, not deemed worthy of the privilege of free higher education. This first generation of fee-charging private actors were low-prestige institutions of last resort. They continue to provide a significant proportion of private higher education in the country.

The legal framework governing these institutions, which was promulgated in 1970 (Law 52) and remains operative, closely ties these institutions to the public system. Fee structures, subjects, course content, student cohort size, and faculty hires all require approval from offices at the central ministry. I have documented a culture of mistrust toward these institutions in my research. In a sense, that generation of private higher education institutions was seen as a necessary evil that should be controlled and managed closely.

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The Shift

The 1990s heralded a serious paradigm shift in the role envisioned for nonstate private providers and the discourse surrounding them. In 1992, new legislation, further amended in 2009, granted the establishment of private elite and semielite universities. By 2019, the system included 23 private universities and 168 nonuniversity private institutions. The legal framework governing private universities shows much more flexibility compared to the earlier generation of private nonuniversity institutes. Improving education quality and advancing research are stipulated mandates for these new private players, as shown in the legal framework governing them (Law 12 issued 2009). Competitiveness, labor market relevance, and quality are the key words defining the parameters of the

debate around these nonstate players, also reflecting the role of international donors in developing the nomenclature of the debate.

More recently, international branch campuses (IBCs) started to be established in Egypt. This new generation of private players is envisioned to address more than access challenges. A focus on quality, internationalization, and the advancement of research in the country are central to the vision for introducing these new players, as stipulated in their governing legal framework. The discourse surrounding IBCs is celebratory, with endorsement and support from the country's leadership. Their legal framework also represents a breakthrough in its ostensible focus on issues of academic and procedural autonomy. (See also Jason E. Lane, Importing Branch Campuses to Advance Egypt's Development, in IHE # 95.)

"Privateness," to borrow a term that is now in wide circulation in the field of higher education, extended to existing public universities. While they continue to provide higher education at nominal fees, new programs (normally called "sections") are increasingly offered at much higher fees within the same public institution. These programs provide parallel degrees in foreign languages (primarily English or French), or offer fee-based education to students who slightly missed the required score to enroll in the regular system.

Higher education continues to be envisioned as a public good in Egypt. In fact, the government's Vision 2030 highlights the quest for increasing access to higher education beyond the current 31 percent to 45 percent by 2030. The vision also illustrates indicators for quality improvement, internationalization, and research productivity. The burden of increasing access and continued massification is still shared by segments of both public and nonstate providers. Private players, once a necessary evil, are increasingly central to the vision of improving the quality of higher education and its internationalization.

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