Research

Recent Developments in Egyptian Education

by Ulla Maija Salmi

Schools and institutions of higher learning have existed in Egypt since ancient times. In the days of the Pharaohs, adult education was largely conducted in temples where astronomy, medicine, geometry and physics, among other subjects, were taught.

When the Greek-speaking Ptolemies ruled Egypt (323-300), Alexandria University and the famed Library of Alexandria served as the two main pillars of higher education.

In the middle of the seventh century, Islamic education was established throughout Egypt, giving rise to two distinct institutions: the *kuttab* (Koranic schools for children) and the *madrasah*, which became centers of learning for older students and scholars.

Al-Azhar University, the world's oldest continuously functioning university founded in A.D. 970, constituted the core of this educational system until the 19th century.

Muhammad Ali, who ruled from 1805 to 1849, is largely credited with modernizing Egyptian education. He hired experts and technicians from Europe and founded a number of secular schools and military training academies based on Western models.

During his reign, the most promising Egyptian students were sent to Europe to study on government scholarships. In 1908, the Egyptian University (later Cairo University) was founded as the country's first secular institution of higher education.

The tradition of overseas study continues to this day. In 1997, for instance, about 500 students were sent abroad on government stipends to pursue doctoral studies.

Egypt's educational system grew exponentially following the revolution of 1952. The ruling junta, led by Gamal Abdul Nasser, envisioned a country where every Egyptian citizen had access to schools and universities. Unfortunately, the system was unable to keep up with the rising demand for education, resulting in the chronic overcrowding of classrooms and lecture halls.

When oil prices collapsed in the early 1980s, the Egyptian economy took a turn for the worse. At the same time, the population growth rate continued to soar. Egypt's population is currently 67,273,906, with an annual growth rate of 1.82 percent.

In 1996, more than 24 million Egyptians were between the ages of six and 24, a figure that has impacted dramatically on the country's education system.

In the mid-1980s, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published a critical report on Egypt's system of education, and by the early part of the 1990s, the Egyptian government moved towards educational reform. Most of the reforms have received substantial financial backing from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations and, more recently, the European Union.

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Structure and Administration of Education in Egypt

There are two parallel educational systems in Egypt: the religious Al-Azhar system and the secular system. Both the Al-Azhar institutes and Al-Azhar University operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Al-Azhar Affairs.

The Ministry of Education supervises the secular schools while higher education falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Al-Azhar University and its satellite schools are not discussed in this article because there is no current data to suggest the religious educational system has undergone the same kinds of changes as its secular counterpart.

Basic Education

By the mid-1980s, Egyptian schools were suffering from an acute shortage of classroom space. The overcrowding was so bad, in fact, that students had to attend school in shifts, with some schools operating on as many as four shifts a day. Many parents sent their children off to work full-time when it became clear that a few hours of schooling each day wasn't going to help them learn a profession or trade.

One of the proposals set forth in the UNESCO report was to shorten the length of basic education. Prior to 1988, basic education consisted of six years of primary school and three years of preparatory education. After that year, primary education was shortened to five years, while prepara-

tory education remained at three years.

The educational reforms also prolonged the school year from 32 weeks to 38-40 weeks, depending on Ramadan. As the number of years spent at school diminished, the real amount of study hours increased.

Prior to 1988, students attended school for 288 weeks over a period of nine years. After that year, however, they spent 304 weeks at school over eight years.

In 1994, a completely new curriculum was introduced that added more study hours per week during the five years of basic education (for the new primary- and preparatory-school curricula, see appendix on page 12).

The objective here was to have students spend one year less at school in order to better utilize classroom space.

Between 1991 and 1996, government funding for basic education increased by about 45 percent. During that time, student enrollments rose by around 12 percent. In the last decade, more than 6,000 new schools have been built. New textbooks and teachers' manuals have also been published and are currently used in schools all over Egypt.

A technological development program, launched a few years ago, aimed at distributing multimedia instructional material to schools undergoing computerization. At the end of 1997, approximately 4,000 schools all over the country were connected to the Internet.

Measures have also been taken to increase the number of qualified teachers and to improve the teaching methods of current classroom instructors through new training programs. At present, about 1,000 Egyptian teachers take part in international in-service teacher training programs each year.

Secondary Education

1) General Secondary Education

General secondary education in Egypt consists of three years of study following eight years of basic education. There are two main tracks of general secondary education: arts and science.

Since 1988, the first two years of secondary school are common to both tracks and consist of the following subjects: Arabic, religious studies, two foreign languages, math, science, civics, physical education, one elective in art/music and one in the technological subjects.

During the third year, students in both tracks continue to study Arabic, two foreign languages, religious education, civics, physical education and one elective in arts/music and technical studies. However, students who choose the arts track study arts subjects, such as philosophy, logic, statistics and economics while science students, in contrast, take subjects like math and physics.

In addition, students from the arts track have to choose one science subject, and students from the science track must choose one arts subject (for the new secondary school curriculum, see appendix on page 12).

"Classes of excellence" or honors classes have also been established for exceptionally gifted pupils and are conducted separately at regular schools. Students who wish to enroll in these classes must pass aptitude and creative thinking tests. To take these tests, students must obtain a score of at least 238 out of a possible 280 in the basic education examination.

Students graduate from secondary school by passing the *thanawaya amma* (general secondary school final examination). Starting in 1995/96, the *thanawaya amma* examinations have been taken during the last two years of secondary education. Students are also allowed to retake any part of the examination they did not pass the first time around. Additional changes may be forthcoming because the examination is frequently reviewed (see Regional News section).

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2) Technical Secondary Education

Technical secondary education offers three- and five-year programs in commerce, agriculture and industry. Students who successfully complete these courses and pass the national examination are awarded the Technical Secondary School Certificate, which makes them eligible for higher education.

Higher Education

Higher education is offered primarily at universities and higher institutes. The higher institutes often operate under the auspices of ministries other than the Ministry of Education and offer programs in the applied fields.

All universities require a passing grade on the *thanawaya amma* exam for admission into an undergraduate program. However, some institutions restrict the number of

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applicants they accept each year and administer their own entrance exams in addition to the *thanawaya amma* requirement.

1) University Education

Egyptian university programs are four years in length and lead to a *baccalaureos* degree in the sciences and to the *licence* in law and arts.

The *magistr* requires two to three years of study beyond the *baccalaureos* and usually requires a thesis.

The highest degree is the *doktora*. It requires at least two years of research beyond the *magistr* and a dissertation. In medicine, a *doktora* in medical sciences may be prepared concurrently with the professional doctor of medicine degree.

University facilities have improved significantly in the last few years. Because most university instructors hold doctorates — often earned from abroad — there is no shortage of qualified professors. A few years ago, a number of surveys reported that university libraries in Egypt suffered from a dearth of up-to-date scientific literature.

While this still holds true today, research facilities are improving thanks to the implementation of new technology. Many university libraries are now linked to the Internet, which is becoming increasingly accessible to a wide range of students.

2) Non-University Higher Education

Industrial and commercial technical institutes often provide two-year courses leading to a diploma in a variety of professions, including accountancy, secretarial work, insurance, computer science and electronics.

Several new engineering and technological institutes have been established in recent years: the Higher Institute of Technology in Benha, the Industrial Institute of Cairo, the Industrial Institute of Beni Seouif and the Computer Institute of Port Said.

3) Private Universities

The government has also encouraged the establishment of private institutes and universities. Until 1996, the American University of Cairo was the only private university in Egypt. In October 1996, however, four new private universities were opened:

- Egyptian International University in Ismailiya
- Egypt University for Science and Technology
- Sixth of October University
- October University for Modern Letters and Sciences in Sixth of October City

These four schools were established under the indirect supervision of the Supreme Council for Universities, which is responsible for monitoring standards to ensure graduation certificates from state and private universities represent an equal educational level. They have been authorized by the government to provide instruction and to collect tuition fees.

Private universities are free to implement their own criteria for admission, and to set fees without intervention from the Ministry of Education.

Teacher Education

1) Primary

New primary school teachers are now required to hold a degree from a university faculty of education. Those who do not have the proper qualifications must enroll in retraining programs at education faculties. Courses for these programs (four years in length) are held in the evening and lead to a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree.

Ain Shams University has also started a distance-learning program to upgrade teaching qualifications leading to a BEd in primary education.

2) Secondary

Holders of the General Certificate of Secondary Education are eligible to enter four-year secondary school teacher-training courses offered at university faculties of education.

Those who hold a four-year university degree are also eligible to teach at the secondary level, provided they have completed one year of postgraduate training at a university faculty of education and earned a General Diploma. However, university graduates who specialized in certain "shortage" subjects can begin teaching without teaching qualifications.

Useful Addresses

Further information about educational reform in Egypt and the technological development program can be found on the home page of the Egyptian Ministry of Education: **http://home.moe.edu/english**.

A current list of Egyptian universities and their addresses can be found on the home page of the Supreme Council of Universities: **http://www.frcu.eun.eg**.

Sources

1) *World Guide to Higher Education*
2) *Handbook of World Education*
3) *The International Guide to Qualifications in Education*

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See the appendix to this article on page 12.

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The Primary School Curriculum 1994/95 (38 week school year)

Subject	Grades 1	2	3	4	5
Religious Education	3	3	3	3	3
Arabic Language	12	12	12	11	8
Arabic Handwriting	2	2	2	1	1
English Language	-	-	-	3	3
Mathematics	6	6	6	6	6
Social Studies	-	-	-	2	3
Science and Health	-	-	-	2	4
Educational Activities & Practical Skills	10	10	10	-	-
Technical Education	-	-	-	2	2
Physical Education	-	-	-	3	2
Music	-	-	-	2	1
Practical/Technical Training	-	-	-	3	2
Library	1	1	1	1	-
Total	**34**	**34**	**34**	**39**	**35**

Source: National Center for Educational Research and Development, Ministry of Education, Cairo

Preparatory School Curriculum 1994/95 (38 week school year)

Subject	Grades 6	7	8
Religious Education	2	2	2
Arabic Language	6	6	6
Foreign Language	5	5	5
Mathematics	5	5	5
Social Studies	3	3	3
Science & Health	4	4	4
Technical Education	2	2	2
Physical Education	2	2	2
Music	1	1	1
Practical Training	4	4	4
Total	**34**	**34**	**34**

Source: National Center for Educational Research and Development, Ministry of Education, Cairo

General Secondary School Curriculum 1994/95 (38 week school year)

Subject	Grade 9	10	11
Religious Education	2	2	2
Arabic Language	6	6	6
First Foreign Language	6	6	6
Second Foreign Language	3	6	-
Mathematics	4	5	5
Chemistry	2	5	-
Physics	2	-	5
Biology	2	5	-
History	2	-	5
Geography	2	5	-
Civics	1	-	1
Music/Art	2	-	2/2*
Technological Subjects**	2	-	2
Physical Education	2	1	2
Psychology & Sociology	-	5	-
Geology & Environmental Sciences	-	5	-
Philosophy & Logic	-	-	5
Statistics & Economy	-	-	5
Total	**38**	**36**	**31**

** Student chooses one subject.*

*** Technological Subjects include: Home economics, Commercial, Agricultural or Industrial field, and Computers. Student chooses one subject Source: National Center for Educational Research and Development, Ministry of Education, Cairo*

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