

**The "International" Experience:  
A Discourse Analysis of Egypt's Emergent Private Higher Education  
(Outline of a Research Project, July 2010)**

**Yasmine Moataz Ahmed**

**The American University in Cairo**

February 2015

Throughout the last decade, international private universities, often in partnership with colleges in Europe, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, have proliferated in the suburbs of Cairo, adding a new dimension to the discourse on private education in Egypt. Often developed by former deans and heads of departments in public universities and/or by principles of international schools, these new universities have *sui generis* missions that follow a neoliberal logic, trying to reach “international” standards of university education. They appeal to a student body that belongs to an aspiring upper-middle class. The concentration of private higher educational institutions in Cairo’s suburbs went hand in hand with the emergence of new upscale gated communities, which quickly spread on the outskirts of the city around the same time (De Koning 2009; Ghannam 2014; Mitchell 2002).

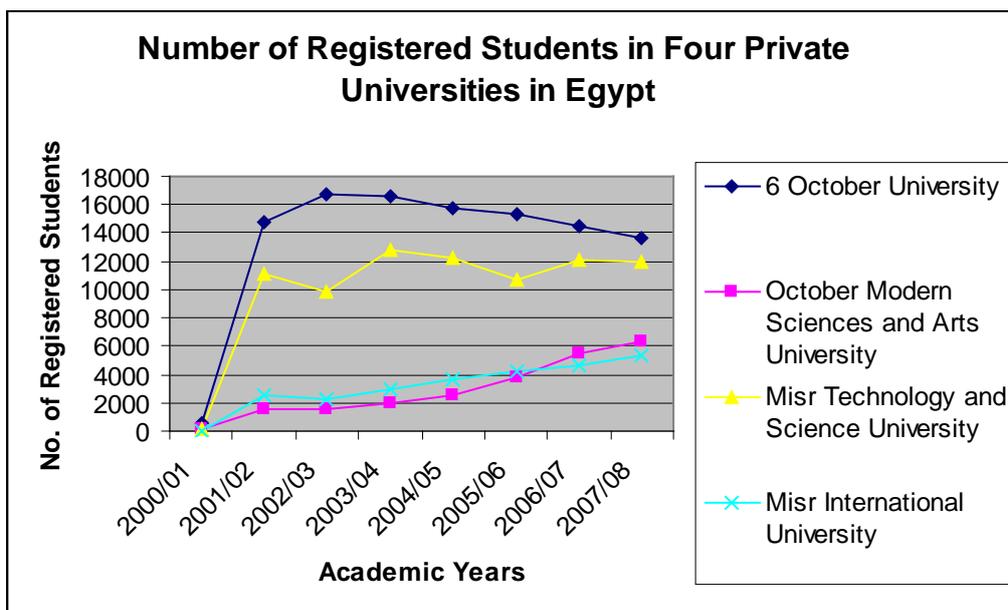
This research will explore the current trends characterizing international higher education institutions in Egypt. Similarly to the case of India (Seth 2007), the history of private Western education in Egypt dates back to the colonial period and the work of missionaries (Salama 1960). However, this research will demonstrate that the emergent private international universities (German, French, British, and Canadian) are of a different nature in that they bring a new, "internationally based," distinction to the Egyptian upper- and upper-middle classes and, like Cairo’s new gated communities, create desiring subjects (Ghannam 2014). This distinction is urban as well as suburban, Western, “clean,” scientific,<sup>1</sup> technologically well-equipped, isolated from the masses, and linked to the multinational business sector.

The “international experience” implied by a degree from these universities is regarded as a valorized capital (in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms) in the Egyptian labor market; graduates of international schools and universities are thought to occupy the best positions in multinational companies and international organizations regardless of their specialization or training in a certain discipline. Speaking foreign languages, demonstrating presentation and problem-solving skills and techniques are now indispensable assets for job seekers in the primary

sector of the current Egyptian labor market. Furthermore, international schools and universities, despite their recent establishment, have become significant markers of class position in today's Egypt. As a result, and as the fieldwork for this research reveals, international universities are increasingly attracting aspiring students who, on the one hand, cannot afford to enroll in the American University in Cairo or in institutions abroad due to high tuition fees, and on the other hand, do not wish to attend Egypt's poor public universities where they have to join the "masses."

Statistics reveal an exponential increase in the number of international universities in Cairo and a growing interest among students to attend them. For instance, the number of registered students in the October 6 University has increased from few hundreds (568 in 2000/2001) to few thousands (4,228 in 2007/2008) over the span of eight academic years. The following table shows the increasing numbers of students in private universities:

**Table 1. Number of Students Registered in Four Private Universities in Cairo, 2000-2007.**



Source: CAPMAS, *Statistical Yearbook*, 2009.

Students in private universities constitute 2.5% of the total student body in the country (CAPMAS 2009). Yet, as this research will show, enormous private resources are allocated to serve this small student population, whereas public universities are left at the mercy of the state in the context of an increasingly shrinking public education sector.<sup>2</sup>

## **Research Themes and Questions**

My chief goal in this research is to examine how emergent private universities in Egypt contribute to the formation of an aspiring professional middle class that conceptualizes and enacts key neoliberal precepts as embedded in the universities' characteristics identified below. In contrast with deteriorating public universities, international private universities share common overarching missions, which emphasize scientific education, leadership, entrepreneurship, sports, and bilingualism, and which often have a regional focus. They stress the provision of "highest quality of education...to feed and stimulate the wealth-creating industries and commercial activities of the Middle East" (BUE, "BUE at a Glance") and to prepare "market-responsive modern-minded graduates" (al-Ahram Canadian University, "About").

This study is three-fold. First, it will examine the mission and vision statements of six private international universities that are part of this educational scene, and how these missions are put in practice through the universities' activities. Then, it will examine whether and how students who attend these universities, as well as their parents, grapple with some of the key concepts embedded in these statements, and how they contribute to the students' and graduates' self-identification as different from what they call "the masses" studying in public universities. And third, it will examine in theory and practice the role of the Egyptian state in regulating private universities, particularly through Law 101/1992 and its executive regulations through Decree 355/1996.

In addition, the study's analysis will be attentive to three global aspects that also characterize this emerging scene: 1) neoliberal logic embedded in the universities' self-definition (exemplified through the use of such conceptual frameworks as individual choice, healthy bodies, market logic, achievement, scientific rationality); 2) urban reconfiguration as manifested in the location of university campuses in a (secure/clean) suburban periphery versus the (unsafe/dirty) urban centers where public universities have been traditionally located; and 3) the construction of "flexible subjects" (Ghannam 2014) through the configuration of global and local processes (partnerships with Western institutions, emphasis on Egyptian identity discourses, formation of new healthy bodies and educated minds). To that end, and using Egypt's private universities as case studies, this research aims to contribute to debates of class formation in Arab countries undergoing neoliberal urban reconfigurations.

## **Methodology**

This research will be based on a discourse analysis of the promotional material and websites of five international universities in Greater Cairo and on in-depth interviews with faculty members, parents, and students who are key actors in Egypt's international higher education scene. The universities chosen as case studies are: the British University in Egypt, al-Ahram Canadian University, the Future University in Egypt, the Modern Science and Arts University, and Misr International University.

Including the perspectives of university faculty and administrators, who are instrumental in implementing the institutions' missions, will enable me to uncover gaps between what students and teaching staff believe and practice and what was/is envisioned by the university founders. In a broader context, I hope to uncover ways in which private international universities contribute to the emergence of new subjects and new forms of individualized urban class distinction. This is particularly relevant during this time of deteriorating university public education and could potentially contribute to the body of literature that addresses the consequences of neoliberalism on education (e.g. Apple 2004) and on the formation of a new urban-suburban class in Egypt (De Koning 2009; Ghannam 2014; Singerman and Ammar 2006). While this study will be conducted primarily in Greater Cairo, it will have a broader significance in providing insight on the growing number of "branch universities" in the Arab world.

## **Notes**

1. Most new private universities focus on majors in sciences, information technology, and media studies; very few offer majors in economics and political science.

2. Public expenditure on education as a percentage to public expenditure has decreased by 4% from 2000/2001 to 2007/2008, whereas public expenditure on education to GDP has decreased by almost 1% (CAPMAS 2009).

## Bibliography

- al-Ahram Canadian University in Egypt. N.d. "About." *al-Ahram Canadian University*. Accessed February 15, 2015. [http://www.acu.edu.eg/index.php?option=com\\_innerContent&id=11&Itemid=3&lang=en](http://www.acu.edu.eg/index.php?option=com_innerContent&id=11&Itemid=3&lang=en).
- Amin, Galal. 2000. *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians? Changes in Egyptian Society from the 1950 to the Present*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Apple, Michael. 1995. *Education and Power* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- . 1996. *Cultural Politics and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- . 1999. *Power, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.
- . 2004. "Creating Difference: Neo-Liberalism, Neo-Conservatism and the Politics of Educational Reform." *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1: 12-44.
- Arab Republic of Egypt, Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics (CAPMAS). 2009. *Statistical Yearbook*. Cairo: CAPMAS.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology.
- British University in Egypt (BUE). N.d. "BUE at a Glance." *British University in Egypt: About BUE*. Accessed February 15, 2015. <http://www.bue.edu.eg/index.php/bue-at-a-glance>.
- De Koning, Anouk. 2009. *Global Dreams: Space, Class, and Gender in Middle-Class Cairo*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Denis, Eric. 2010. "Cairo as Neo-Liberal Capital: From Walled Cities to Gated Communities." In *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, edited by Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, 47-72. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Fawaz, Mona. 2009. "Neoliberal Urbanity and the Right to the City: A View from Beirut's Periphery." *Development and Change* 40, no. 5: 827-852.
- Ghannam, Farha. 2014. "The Promise of the Wall: Reflections on Desire and Gated Communities in Cairo." *Jadaliyya*, Jan. 3. Accessed February 10, 2015. [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15864/the-promise-of-the-wall\\_reflections-on-desire-and-#\\_ed](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15864/the-promise-of-the-wall_reflections-on-desire-and-#_ed).
- Herrera, Linda, and Carlos Torres. 2006. *Cultures of Arab Schooling: Critical Ethnographies from Egypt*. New York: State University of New York Press.

- Husayn, Taha. 1938. *Mustaqbal al-thaqaafah fi Misr*. Cairo: al-Mama'aref Press.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Salama, Guirguis. 1960. "Tareekh al-Ta'leem al-Ajnabi fi Misr." MA thesis, Cairo University.
- Seth, Sanjay. 2007. *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Singerman, Diana, and Paul Ammar. 2006. *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Middle East*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.