

**Equality for All? Egypt's Free Public Higher Education Policy Breeds Inequality of  
Opportunity**  
**Ragui Assaad**  
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This paper argues that the policy of free, or almost free, public higher education in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has generally failed to achieve its objective of ensuring equal access to postsecondary education for people from all social classes and backgrounds. The paper looks specifically at the case of Egypt and shows that the policy of free public education in the country has in fact created an utterly unequal system where scarce public resources are generously subsidizing the education of the well-to-do at the expense of the poor, who are virtually excluded from the higher education system. Furthermore, access is almost wholly determined by circumstances such as family background and wealth.

In Egypt, free higher education was instituted by presidential decree in 1962 and was later enshrined in the 1971 constitution. In 2010, the country's public expenditure on education was a modest 4.1% of the GDP, which is lower than the average in the other MENA countries (4.5%) and in OECD countries (4.7%), and slightly above average for the low-middle income countries (4%). However, Egypt clearly favors its higher education sector to which it dedicated 28% from its public education spending, and per-student spending in higher education amounted to 46% of per capita GDP between 2005 and 2008. This also means that the Egyptian government is underinvesting in pre-university education, making it necessary that parents supplement the inadequate public investments. Thus, the decks are stacked against those who cannot afford to significantly supplement public expenditures at that stage.

Based on statistical data from the Survey of Young People in Egypt carried out in 2009 by the Population Council and the Information and Decision Support Center of the Cabinet, the paper demonstrates that, without holding other variables constant, individuals from the highest wealth quintile are 80% likely to go to university, while the figure for individuals from the lowest quintile is just 9%. The net effect of wealth on educational attainment can be estimated by holding the other variables constant and using the available data to predict an individual's chances of going to university. In this case, the prediction is for a reference individual who is male, 29 years-old, living in urban governorates, and whose parents are both illiterate. In the prediction model, the chances of a wealthy individual to obtain university education are still more than 6 times higher than someone from the bottom wealth quintile.

Parental education is another factor that powerfully affects access to higher education. Keeping all other factors constant, an individual whose father has a university degree is nearly 1.5 times as likely to go to university as one whose father has completed secondary education, and 4 times as likely as one with an illiterate father. Mother's education has an even stronger effect. An individual whose mother went to university is 2.5 times as likely to also go for a postsecondary education as one whose mother has only completed secondary, and 7 times as likely as one with an illiterate mother. A possible explanation for the importance of parental education is the help and encouragement that students receive from their parents, especially when the quality of education is low—more educated parents are more successful at providing such assistance than uneducated ones.

The data also shows that region of residence does not have an important net effect on attainment once other background variables have been taken into account. When everything else is held constant, data shows that people in Lower Egypt do better in terms of access to both

secondary and postsecondary education than those in the urban governorates. Those living in Upper Egypt perform as well as residents in urban governorates, but those living in the border governorates do worse. These results suggest that the geographical availability of higher education institutions is no longer a problem in terms of access to higher education except for people in the border governorates. When data is disaggregated by gender, it shows that women from poorer and rural backgrounds do experience geographical barriers to access to higher education.

The statistical model used to analyze the findings allows for the definition of two profiles—those of the most and least privileged individuals in terms of access to higher education. The most privileged is from the top wealth quintile, lives in the urban governorates and has parents who are both university graduates. The least privileged individual is from the bottom wealth quintile, lives in rural Upper Egypt and his parents are both illiterate. Inequality of opportunity is even more extreme for girls: the most privileged girl has nearly a 100% probability of going to university compared to just 2% for the least privileged.

How can such inequitable access be explained? The paper argues that the answer lies in the workings of the pre-university system, which is not only underfunded, as mentioned above, but it also filters students in university-bound (general secondary) and non-university-bound (technical secondary) tracks. What factors explain this tracking? Findings indicate that the social background variables have a powerful effect on the selection. The largest net effect comes from mother's education and wealth. Students from well-to-do families with mothers who have obtained university degrees are much more likely to pursue the general secondary track than students from the poorest quintiles whose parents are illiterate and who are more likely to go into the technical track. In terms of gender, girls are more likely to continue in general secondary.

The effect of these background variables remains even when the results from the preparatory exam for secondary school are taken into account. Data also shows that many children who qualify to enrol in general secondary on the basis of their exam results choose not to do so for a variety of reasons, associated with social background. The findings suggest that parents of modest means make a calculated decision to enroll or not their children in general secondary, based on such considerations as: the need to invest some family income in private tutoring, the probability that their child will need help with his/her studies at home, the need to commute in cases where there are no general secondary schools nearby, the wish not to let daughters leave their hometowns to pursue higher education.

Rectifying the highly inequitable situation in Egypt's higher education, requires fundamental changes throughout the education system. Correcting the severe misallocation of public resources can be achieved by abandoning the principle of free higher education for all, in favor of a policy framework that allows public universities to charge tuition and fees and that uses available public resources to provide subsidies to the most deserving social groups, helping them to defray these costs. A limited number of merit-based scholarships for the best performing students can be granted irrespective of need. The Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity is developing a system for identifying which individuals are in need of social assistance; that system can also be used in higher education to identify the more deserving groups for targeted scholarships and subsidized loans for education.