

October 6 University—The First Egyptian Private University
Daniele Cantini
January 2015

October 6 University (O6U) was established in 1999 in the 6th of October City, in the outskirts of Cairo. It has the largest student population of all private universities in the country—around 12,000 were enrolled in 2009/2010 academic year in O6U's fourteen faculties in the fields of medicine, science, and the humanities and social sciences. The university boasts a hospital for the Faculty of Medicine, a hotel for the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism, and a library—all three facilities also serve the needs of the people of the 6th of October City thus solidifying the university's relations to the local community.

Some of the programs that O6U offers, such as economics, social science, education, and languages, are unique among private universities in Egypt. These disciplines are underrepresented elsewhere because they are not considered very practical and helpful in finding future employment. Finding more easily a job after graduation is considered one of the main advantages of a private university education. Others include the freedom to choose one's program of study (unlike in public universities where admission quotas for the different programs are imposed), less bureaucracy, small class sizes, good relations between professors and students, and better interfaculty communication.

O6U is governed by a Board of Trustees whose members are usually representatives of banks and private firms. The governor of the 6th of October City also sits on the Board. The Board deals with matters of university finances and government relations. Another governing body for matters concerning university life is the University Council; it is headed by the O6U president and its membership consists of faculty deans and vice-presidents. Representatives of student, faculty, and staff do not take part in university governance. Almost no single important decision is made on a faculty level, thus making the O6U's governing structure centralized and hierarchical. Furthermore, the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education, which has jurisdiction over private universities, regulates almost every aspect of O6U's internal organization such as the number of admitted students, changes in the curriculum, and availability of postgraduate studies (the latter issue is a major one for private universities as they are not allowed to offer postgraduate programs). One could argue that this hierarchical structure encourages practices of control in the university organization and governance.

The workload of O6U faculty members is considerably greater than in public universities because there are fewer staff members at O6U and the courses are proportionately more, but this is compensated with less working hours and higher salaries. There are few full professors at O6U and the greatest share of teaching is carried out by lecturers and assistant lecturers who work on contract basis, renewed every year. Teaching evaluations are one of the main criteria for renewal. Some of the evaluation procedures are internal to O6U, but others are designed to respond to more general reforms aiming to improve the quality of post-secondary educational institutions in the country. Quality commissions, headed by senior professors, have been created in each of the faculties. The main criteria for good evaluations are being cooperative, achieving success in teaching, and increasing student participation both in and outside of the classroom. Issues of censorship at O6U are recurrent and almost everyone who works there practices, consciously or not, a high degree of self-censorship in order to avoid problems with students, colleagues, or the administration.

O6U students come from diverse social and national backgrounds. Sometimes relations between Egyptian and foreign students can cause tensions and confrontations. Campus space is structured rigidly—guards patrol the university grounds as well as inside the buildings and the university closes at 4 pm thus preventing students from gathering on campus. In general, any form of political activity on campus is formally banned. Some see this as a way to prevent conflict between the different student communities.

As an institution, O6U did not participate in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, but many students and junior faculty took part in the uprisings on an individual basis. After the Revolution (and during the second phase of research for this study), it was business as usual on campus with no visible signs that the Revolution had happened. Some changes were, however, made on the level of student representation—students still cannot form political parties and cannot take part in university governance, but they can elect representatives of each faculty to act as mediators between students and the dean regarding student grievances or proposals for cultural and social activities. But overall, the Revolution did not cause any major changes or reforms at O6U.

The university's primary source of funding are tuition fees and profits generated from additional activities such as artistic projects created for the 6th of October City by students in the faculty of applied arts. The central government does not finance the university and is actually raising taxes from the different economic activities that O6U generates; it also limits admission in some faculties, such as medicine. O6U's high enrollment figures can be explained with the university's relatively inexpensive tuition fees. However, enrollment has been declining since its peak in 2002/2003 academic year, while at the same time there has been a tremendous rise in numbers of private universities in Egypt and elsewhere in the region and intense competition exists among them on both local and regional level. O6U administration feels an increased pressure to keep the university profitable without severely cutting services and losing students.

To stay competitive, some faculties are lowering their tuition fees. O6U is also forging collaborations with universities in East Asia, Europe, and the United States in order to attract more students by offering them "international experience." Another way for the university to solidify its position as an important local institution are its social and economic ties to the city community and municipal government. In addition to the connections established through its hospital, hotel, and library, mentioned above, the university is keen on portraying itself as the biggest firm in the city employing more than a thousand people. The area where O6U is located is meant to become a luxurious residential community, aimed at the Cairene elite. Thus, O6U is part of a developing project, designed at reshaping Cairo and its surroundings over the next decades.

Thus, one can argue that O6U is essentially a business enterprise whose focus is on gaining ground in the competition with other private universities. It is a telling example of the shift toward a corporate model for universities—a phenomenon that is not limited to Egypt, but should be analyzed in the context of globalization and neoliberal economic policies. Furthermore, the O6U's private character should also be understood in the context of its locality and in its relation to the Egyptian state. The university is at the same time a private, profit-oriented organization in the field of higher education and an instrument of state planning in the new areas to be built around the overcrowded Cairo City. These new areas are to acquire new meanings according to the paradigm of "gated communities" where everything—knowledge included—is for profit.