

**Equity and Decision Making in the Transition to University Education in Egypt**  
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This paper explores young people's transitions through primary and secondary school and into higher education in Egypt, and the decision-making process that influences these transitions. Using the frameworks of both cultural and rational choice theorists, the paper demonstrates that decisions about education in Egyptian households are not clear-cut and not solely based on the results from exams at the end of preparatory and secondary schools. Often they are governed on by practical reasoning and based on the family's available financial resources. Furthermore, not all decisions are guided by strategy or the desire to achieve advantage; rather, many are conditioned by "inertial forces" that internalize class position within the family. Thus, in considering educational decisions, one should consider how rational choices are shaped by the cultural milieu that people are a part of.

Over the last sixty years, substantial changes have taken place in the Egyptian secondary and postsecondary school systems. Following the principles of equity and equal opportunity in education codified in the country's 1971 constitution, the Egyptian government designed policies to expand access to higher education, such as free postsecondary studies, an universal examination at the end of secondary school to level university admission criteria, a guarantee of employment in the civil service for all university graduates (this latter promise was abandoned in the early 1990s when the government downsized the public sector). The number of universities grew from three national institutions at the time of the 1952 Revolution to seventeen public universities and about fifty technical institutes in the mid-2000. Enrollment has also expanded significantly. Currently about 30% of Egyptians aged 18–23 are enrolled; the Ministry of Higher Education aims to raise this figure to 40% by 2022.

The Egyptian secondary school system consists of two tracks: general secondary, which prepares students for university education, and technical secondary, which for many students is a terminal degree. In Egypt, the type of secondary school attended largely determines a young person's chances of transitioning into university. In 2005/2006 school year, approximately 3.5 million students were enrolled in secondary schools; about 56% of them were in technical secondary. In previous decades, expansion of technical secondary, which disproportionately absorbed students from poor families, was meant to provide government employment opportunities and a chance for a middle-class life for those who could not qualify for general secondary and attend university. However, as opportunities for permanent, full-time government jobs evaporated, technical secondary no longer provides the prospects it once promised. Furthermore, since technical education virtually excludes students from the possibility of a university education, it works against the goal of greater equity.

This paper uses statistical data from the 2006 Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey focusing on age groups 15–19 and 19–23 to look at conditional transitions into and through secondary and higher education. It shows that the poor are much less likely to have completed preparatory school than the wealthy and that subsequent transitions through primary and into and through preparatory also favor the wealthy, although to a lesser degree. The paper argues that although wealth differential for the transition into secondary is small, inequality exists in precisely that turning point in schooling. Inequality is maintained by tracking poorer students into technical secondary while wealthier students overwhelmingly go to general secondary.

Among graduates of a given secondary track significant wealth differences remain. Among technical students from the poorer 60% of families, 94% or more stop their education at

the end of secondary and almost none go to university. On the other hand, 9% of technical students from families in the richest quintile enrol in university and about 78% leave school after completing secondary. Students from richer families stand out again among general secondary students: 90% of them continue to university and fewer than 2% end their education after secondary schools. The data also shows that although the upper-intermediate higher education track is sometimes seen as an alternative for those who attend technical secondary, among students 19–23 years old who entered upper-intermediate, 64% come from general secondary. Wealth differentials in higher education dropout rates are small: those from poorer quintiles are slightly more likely to drop out, while, interestingly, among students in upper-intermediate, it is those from the wealthiest quintile who have a slightly higher likelihood of quitting.

The paper also asks: To what extent is the decision to attend technical education driven by exam results or is there also a component of habitus or of rational choice? To answer this question, the paper uses data gathered from interviews with 120 technical school graduates, primarily women from working-class background, aged between 20 and 60. Private tutoring, considered essential in preparing students for the exams at the end of secondary school, emerged as a central theme during the interviews; the respondents singled it out as a crucial factor in determining students' performance and their subsequent educational success. Tutoring has proliferated in recent years and now takes up to 28% of families' educational expenditures, the largest household education expense. This means that children of well-to-do families have greater opportunities for taking private lessons and greater chance of succeeding in education.

The main reasons for not attending general secondary can be summarized as follows: individual abilities, financial constraints, and school environment. Most technical secondary students effectively had no decision to make about the type of secondary school attended. Some of them performed poorly during the preparatory school exams and could therefore only follow the technical track; for others, general secondary was not a goal and they did not work toward admission there; still others had obtained the scores qualifying them for general secondary, but opted for the technical track instead.

For many of the respondents, family obligations were a key factor in deciding their secondary school path. The interviews revealed stories of young people who wanted to complete their schooling as quickly as possible in order to start working and help their families financially. In the group of respondents who had the choice to go to general secondary, but decided not to, many based their decisions on the moral responsibility they felt toward their families, especially as they went through difficult times. In such situations, pursuing education or other individual projects seemed to students selfish and ungrateful. The experience of older siblings was also a deciding factor. Many pointed out that they had been influenced in their decision to choose the easier technical secondary track after witnessing the hard work required to prepare for the exams or the fact that the prospects of finding a job after university have become uncertain. Some interviewees blamed circumstances "beyond their control" for their poor performance or to incidents related to private tutoring. Still others felt that general secondary and university education were not "for people like them."

The current Egyptian education policy is to push toward a balance between technical and general secondary enrollments and to expand the proportion of young people who attend university. But a policy that seeks greater equity in university access will have to address not only the number of seats available, but also the financial and social reasons that cause poor students to shun general secondary and university education. It would also be necessary to provide better quality general secondary education for students from poorer backgrounds.