

Revolutions, Transformations, and Higher Education: Changing Conceptualizations of the Role of the University

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This concept paper examines the changing role and significance of universities in the Middle East, using Egypt and Tunisia as case studies. Specifically, it considers questions of equity, governance, autonomy, and academic freedom in the period leading to the uprisings of 2011 and asks what transformations have occurred within the postsecondary education sector since that time. It also offers an agenda for future research trajectories, which will help to better understand the changes taking shape in the field of higher education in the region.

Historically, universities in the Arab world have been important centers of political and social life. They constituted vital spaces for anticolonial movements and arenas for debates concerning the political and ideological character of newly emerging states. Students have been at the heart of such activities and student activism has been a central part of political life since the early 1900s. Before the 1950s, students focused primarily on broader political issues. In the 1930s, for instance, they formed parties espousing Arab nationalist ideas. After the 1950s, they began voicing campus demands as well, but their activism remained highly politicized and dominated by leftists and nationalist sentiments and affiliations. In the 1970s and 1980s, Islamist student groups became a growing and powerful presence on campuses. Despite regular efforts by governments and university administrators to curtail or eliminate non-sanctioned political activities on campuses, and to “train” students to be loyal citizens, student activism has been a critical dimension of oppositional politics for over a century.

Universities and other higher education institutions have also been essential to the state-building efforts and economic development of countries in the region. The exponential growth of universities in the postcolonial era was primarily state-led, in line with the goal of educating skilled professionals who would lead the new states into modernization. In many countries in the region, governments promised jobs in the public sector to graduating students, thus also promising them upward social mobility. At the same time, state officials closely monitored and directly controlled public universities.

This model became untenable in the 1980s. With increasing debt levels and an economic downturn throughout the region, states were forced to implement structural adjustment policies, which placed limits on public sector growth and salaries. In addition, with the expansion of education, more young people were clamoring to enter universities leading to overcrowding and a strain on resources. Since that time, the region has witnessed increased privatization of the higher education sector. Regulations of private universities have been relaxed and new institutions have been founded. Another approach to financing higher education has been described by some as “backdoor privatization.” It entails the introduction of parallel admission policies and programs, such as admitting students who don’t have the necessary grades, but are able to pay higher tuition or introducing foreign-language tracks with smaller classes, better resources, and higher fees.

Two major consequences of such policies have been an increased inequality of access to higher education, privileging students with the financial means to buy their way into universities, and a decreased quality of teaching and learning. A discourse of a “skills mismatch” has accompanied these changes, characterizing universities in the region as having failed to produce graduates with the skills necessary to get jobs in a global economy.

Against this historical backdrop, what was the role of the university in the events of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia?

In both countries, universities did not have a direct role during the revolutions and university administrations did not take a public stand or call for meetings or discussions on campus during the uprisings, even though faculty and students took part in the historical events. Most often, faculty and students engaged in protests, meetings, and advocacy as individuals or as members of unions or political parties (and in the case of Egyptian faculty, as members of the March 9th movement), separate from any formal university affiliation.

In the year after the revolutions, Tunisia and Egypt saw important political openings—less interference from the security forces, greater representation in university governance, and an overall environment of greater freedom of expression on campuses. However, in Tunisia this opening created new challenges to academic freedom as previously silenced religious groups tried to police activities on campus. In Egypt, students struggled to remove cadres of the Mubarak regime from the positions they were still occupying.

Both countries faced major national crises as the newfound freedom of the transition led to political polarization and conflict. In the Egyptian case, what was in part a popular movement to force Morsi to step down, led to a military coup, the arrest, and killing of hundreds if not thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, and increasingly severe repression of any criticism of the military regime. In Tunisia, public anger at increasing violence and intimidation of Salafi groups led to major protests and a major political crisis. The ruling Ennahda party agreed to step down and hand power to a caretaker government, thus defusing the crisis. The image of violence in Egypt surely helped to inspire such a compromise. In January 2014, Tunisia passed a much-heralded new constitution with an overwhelming majority of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly. In contrast, the ongoing crisis and violence in Egypt has led to distinct losses of academic freedom on university campuses.

In an unstable period of political transition, it has been difficult to implement or maintain reforms. Time will tell if any significant changes will result in day-to-day management of universities, policy reforms, and resource issues. Some of the reform issues that have yet to be addressed include: financial transparency in universities across the region, ministries of education, and the public sector more broadly; shortages of resources; pedagogical reforms and improving the quality of education; university autonomy from state interests and political interference.

In a context of a global discourse about higher education in crisis, the nature of the university in the Arab world has changed as well, a process that has been underway for at least two decades now. The questions then become: Given the increasing privatization of higher education in the Middle East and persistent economic challenges, are states merely educating their people to increase economic outcomes? Or do educators and educational policymakers still envision a university that will produce critical thinkers who might challenge economic policies and systems? These questions are of particular relevance in the context of the current political upheavals in the region.

A few broader trends in higher education demand further research and analysis to better understand the changes taking shape in this sector. Of concern here are: labor rights, job security, and adequate wages of academic and non-academic workers on university campuses; growing inequality of access to higher education, also strongly linked to inequality in secondary schooling; unemployment and social mobility of university graduates in the regions (with more qualitative studies needed in this area); academic freedom, university governance and autonomy, and the future import of universities as institutions in light of the recent political events in the region.