

The Future of Arab Education

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Education is the method by which societies try to transmit knowledge to new generations, preserve certain values and traditions, and introduce change; it is a process through which people modify old attitudes, acquire new ones, train their brains to be more useful and develop critical minds, and be more socially committed. Educational institutions tend to control the flow of scientific information into the society and determine the quantity and quality of knowledge it acquires. Through the many and diversified educational activities, educational institutions help develop national human resources and improve their capabilities to utilize the natural and financial resources at their disposal., while inducing students to acquire new values.

Though education is intended to improve the quality of life in general, educational activities tend to undermine the traditional value systems and weaken inefficient out-of-date social and economic institutions. It is through education that people become more politically and socially conscious and more motivated to participate actively in the social, economic and scientific development of their societies.

For the individual, education is the way to widen his intellectual horizon and increase his ability to make choices among alternative professions. Education expands an individual's range of possible life-styles and furthers his capabilities. And for society, education is the system through which change is introduced, knowledge is transmitted, and progress is made possible.

In this paper I will try to define the relationship between education and cultural change, analyze the shortcomings of the educational system in the Arab World, and provide some guidelines for improving the quality of education and the efficiency of the system.

Development, to be feasible, requires much more than an abundance of natural resources, a fairly developed infrastructure, and the availability of foreign financial and technical assistance. Human experience over the last three centuries has proven that social and cultural change no only accompanies development, but is an integral and necessary part of it. No nation

among the advanced countries has managed to industrialize without passing through a process of profound social and cultural change, and no culturally and socially developed nation has failed to enter the industrial revolution.

Social and cultural upheavals capable of changing the society's traditional values and its casual attitudes toward science and technology are major prerequisites for meaningful development. By helping to introduce new concepts of thought and behavior, they often produce a new climate conducive to change and a new institutional framework capable of dealing creatively with the society's socioeconomic and political challenges.

Development is a comprehensive societal process that covers all aspects of life and involves all players that affect life. For the individual, development means the ability to utilize all resources at one's disposal to improve the quality of life. For a nation, it means the ability to define its own problems and potentialities, and acquire the capability to mobilize available resources to achieve three main objectives:

1. Improve the quality of life for all its members;
2. Increase the stock of knowledge it already possesses;
3. Build a capacity to change institutions and attitudes as developmental needs change and diversify.

This implies that development must be pursued as a comprehensive process of sociocultural transformation that includes the economic, political, social, and traditional value systems. This change, being creative and positive and involving institutions as well as attitudes, will have to be led by the educational system; otherwise, it will not succeed. Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions receive the right and necessary support and be fully integrated with the communities and societies they serve.

Stages of Educational Development

In this age, due to the spread of use of modern communication systems, the poor nations of the world have been able to realize the extent of the achievements of the rich nations, and the size

of the gap that separates them from each other. Their knowledge and admiration of those achievements have led them to conceive their own developmental goals in terms of what the rich nations have already accomplished. In their attempts to catch up with the advanced countries of the West, they try to imitate their life-styles and often borrow some of the methods and techniques they have developed.

Traditional political, social and spiritual leadership, being a product of the society's educational institutions and its value system, tend to resist change and oppose whatever they perceive as contrary to their traditional belief system. In order for such leaders to agree upon a certain course of action, or to reach an understanding not to disrupt the process of gradual change, they have to share common attitudinal values with the nontraditional forces of change, which educational systems can and should provide. If educational institutions are to fulfill this promise, they will have to undergo a profound conceptual and organizational change.

The patterns of change followed by the educational institutions tend to be similar to those adopted by the societies where they exist and function. Changes that societies try to adopt are, in fact, products of the public's awareness of the need for change, an awareness motivated and deeply influenced by the climate for change which educational systems tend to create. Since borrowing a body of knowledge is easier and less expensive than going through the whole process of creating a new one, educational systems, such as Arab systems, move through a number of stages in their attempts to catch up with those of the advanced countries. These stages are discussed below.

Conventional Wisdom

Traditional societies view education as a tool to perpetuate the traditional value system and assure the continuation of the accustomed way of life. Preserving the religious values, the principle of tribal laws, and the traditional socioeconomic institutions are the main objectives of education at this stage. The glorious past is usually emphasized and allowed to overshadow people's interest in the future. Commonsense wisdom based upon people's past experience, religious teachings, wisdom, and well-known fictitious stories constitutes the bulk of the body of knowledge the society has at this stage and feels it can use.

Imitation and Memorization

The first efforts at modernization tend to produce educational systems that imitate those of the advanced countries and try to copy some of the educational techniques and programs they have adopted. Students are given thousands of facts to memorize instead of teaching them the skills that enable them to find the facts when needed. Teachers and professors tend to cling to specific innovations instead of applying the principles of innovation, thus rendering the system rigid and conservative. Memorization, together with the authoritarian method of instruction, serves to inhibit rather than encourage students to think and take the initiative. Educational material memorized will be regurgitated on paper during examinations. A hypothesis may go long untested and be accepted as a fact, causing students' ability to develop realistic and imaginative solutions to problems they may have to deal with to be very much limited.

Students' inability to perceive the potential utility and applicability of the knowledge they learn helps produce a high proportion of repeating and dropouts within the student body. Being unable to be more relevant and practical, educational systems at this stage are seldom able to respond to the pressing needs of students or the larger society.

While the potentials of this stage for creating profound changes are limited, they can and do bring the borrowers and imitators closer to the realities of life in the advanced countries.

Critical Thinking

Educational systems in this stage stop copying from those of the advanced countries, and start to be selective. Knowledge and experience imported will be evaluated according to its relevance to the society's developmental objectives and needs. Students will be asked to understand and comprehend whatever they may learn rather than memorize what they learn. They will be taught that two differing points of view may have equal validity, and that one question may have more than one correct answer or no satisfactory answers at all.

In order to maximize the benefits from the knowledge selected and deemed applicable, the educational institutions and their populations start to make certain adjustments and changes.

Changes adopted by the system and its population will be reflected in the students' behavior and attitudes. Education to them will become the means to improve the quality of life and understand how their societies and systems function. Questioning the validity and relevance of the society's old institutions and social values and systems is one way of expressing their interest in participating in shaping the future of their societies.

While universities in the previous stage tend to borrow and imitate, in this stage they tend to synthesize the best features of all cultural values and scientific methods represented in the system. They will seek to accomplish this task through a creative process of intellectual interchange among men and ideas.

Innovation and Creativity

The educational system's ability, developed in the previous stage, to make choices among different alternatives will enable it to initiate new changes as the need arises. The objectives and curricula of the system will be changed to become more relevant. Since the needs of different countries and regions tend to vary according to their potentialities and aspirations and stage of development, the system will design its programs to try to actualize the potentialities and meet the needs. Research institutions dealing with specific problems will be established and encouraged to go beyond the normal. The system's ability to deal with different problems at different times will enable it to make original contributions to solving problems.

The system, being innovative in its approach to dealing with different problems, will be motivated to establish institutions for higher education capable of training graduates to become creative thinkers, scientists and committed leaders. The university will emerge as a dynamic organization that acknowledges the perishable nature of its offerings. New knowledge will be sought to replace the obsolete and upgrade the old. Programs and curricula will change in response to changing developmental needs. The influence of its innovative educational systems will lead society to adopt creative thinking and positive attitudes as a mindset.

Shortcomings of Arab Education

The importance of the tasks educational systems undertake in shaping the future of societies put them at a serious disadvantage vis-à-vis the traditional establishment in the Arab World, Those in power, having realized the role that education can play in molding people's minds and changing their traditional attitudes, seek to keep the system and its population under tight control and continuous supervision.

National liberation movements used educational institutions effectively to rally students around them during the early stage of struggle for Arab independence. Educational institutions became the centers of activities that sought to revive traditional Arab cultural values and to revitalize the national spirit, while the nationalist forces attempted to undermine the cultural values and institutions of the colonial powers.

However, the national educational institutions, having acquired only limited experience in dealing with urgent life issues and problems, were unable to adjust fully to the new social and political realities that followed independence. In addition, due to the limited intellectual and financial resources of the newly established governments, institutions of higher education could not receive the financial and political support they had expected and badly needed. Later, governments became preoccupied with the idea of expanding education but did not give much thought to the social, political, or educational consequences of doing so.

The rapidity of the expansion of Arab education was due to a number of factors, including the low base from which it started, the demographic explosion, the recognition of everyone's right to education and the realization of its importance in meeting the countries' economic and military needs. The response to those needs lacked the necessary orientation toward precise social, economic, and political goals, and the imperative to seek quality education.

Today, there are between 55 and 60 million Arab university graduates in a population of some 360 million. More than 50 percent of all graduates are in humanities and law, thus leaving Arab societies in dire need of expertise in almost all technical fields. But unlike most other countries in the world, the unemployment rate among Arab college graduates is higher than among Arab illiterates; this is due to lack of jobs and the low level of education in general.

All Arab states suffer to a varying degree from the "brain drain" problem. Probably 10 percent of all Arab university graduates have left the Arab countries, and more than 25 percent of holders of postgraduate degrees have immigrated to the West. More than a quarter of all MDs and engineers and 50 to 70 percent of those holding PhDs in the sciences have taken up residence outside the Arab world. Of the 90 percent of graduates who remained in the Arab world, about 25 percent are working in countries other than their own under some of the most unsatisfactory living conditions.

The direct relationship between the state of a country's economy and the quantity and quality of its human resources provides hard evidence of the inefficiency and insufficiency of educational institutions in Arab countries. Though the Arab world is potentially one of the richest regions in the world, most Arabs are poor. Some 30 percent of the Arab population is still illiterate; only 75 percent of the children between the ages of 5 and 15 attend school; about 40 percent of the population still suffers from ill health or malnutrition; the population-doctor ratio is in excess of 2500 to 1; less than 60 percent of all families live in decent houses; and most of the area's natural, financial, and human resources are very much underutilized.

I believe that educational systems in the Arab world are, in general, ill-conceived and not adapted to the developmental needs of either Arab society or the global market. Educational institutions capable of providing the manpower training essential to the utilization of natural resources and service industries are hardly found anywhere in the Arab world. Those which do exist still lack the right orientation, the qualified staff, and the necessary facilities. In addition, they are forced to function in societies whose social attitudes, political systems and traditional values are hostile to most new and progressive ideas. Educational systems in several Arab states are little more than extensions of those of the former colonial powers, or copies of the Egyptian system, which is based on an earlier European model that for a long time has been considered obsolete in Europe itself.

The expansion of education in the last two decades succeeded in providing education for more people, but there was little change in the objectives of education. The failure to define precisely and realistically these objectives has been a principal source of waste and confusion.

While the shortcomings of the system are manifold, they are most obvious in the areas of manpower planning, curricula, teaching materials and methodology, and testing procedures.

Education at the elementary and secondary levels lacks what it takes to provide students with the knowledge they need and seek to acquire. Governments have made only limited attempts to adapt education in schools to the students' environment, and local authorities have almost nothing to do with the curricula of their schools. Urban and rural, agricultural and tribal students receive the same texts to memorize, which come from the capital and sometimes from outside the country. Policies to standardize textbooks ignore the diversity of the Arab population and provide students not only irrelevant facts but often the wrong values.

The teacher as the main purveyor of knowledge has authority over classroom discussions and students' behavior. But the economic position of teachers is difficult and conducive to poor performance. Regarding himself or herself as essentially a government employee, a teacher may hold a teaching position as an interim job while looking for something more attractive. Thus distracted, he often becomes insensitive to students' needs and thereby incurs their resentment and mistrust. From my experience, the questions that teachers ask are of a testing nature rather than an instructive one. Instead of leading students to alternative answers, only one answer is expected and accepted as being correct. As a result of this alienation between teachers and students, the proportion of dropouts remains high in elementary and secondary schools in some countries. Of the educational budget, probably some 20 percent is being spent on the dropouts who leave school without having received any lasting benefits from education.

Educational systems in most Arab countries practice discrimination in the process of locating, staffing and furnishing schools and determining students' future careers. They show an elitist bias, favoring urban dwellers and the upper and middle classes at the expense of the rural population, the poor, and women. While school enrollment might exceed 90 percent in most cities, it does not exceed 60 percent in most villages in Sudan, Mauritania, Yemen; Morocco and Egypt; and while the illiteracy rate among the Arab population as a whole is 30 percent, it is about 50 percent among women and the poor. In some parts of the Arab world

rapid population growth, together with the misallocation of educational institutions and the practice of discrimination, has led to an increase in the numbers and percentages of illiterates.

High schools in general have failed to prepare student for higher education. Arab students succeed at Arab universities not because they are well prepared for it, but because most universities are an extension of the high school system with more of the same work to be done. Those who have studied in the West and succeeded have managed to do so because they were highly motivated to succeed and overcome the deficiencies of their high school education.

The idea of quick development to catch up with the advance countries distracted the Arab leadership from modifying earlier models for managing Arab society and the educational systems. The earliest modern Arab universities were established under colonial rule or with the help and direct involvement of the former colonial powers. After independence, these universities assumed the responsibility for reviving Islamic culture and revitalizing its national character. In their attempts to create a new value system conducive to scientific and rational thinking and technological development they became caught between the duty to repudiate Western cultural values and institutions, and the need to emphasize Arab values and traditional institutions. Moreover, Arab universities established and supported by governments often tend to operate as instruments to implement government policies in the field of higher education. Universities are often prevented from challenging students to think for themselves instead of passively accepting the conventional wisdom; students are discouraged from attempting to change the traditional patterns of thought. Instead, students and universities are encouraged to accept the doctrine of the traditional and political establishments as being the truth and discouraged from deviating from it. Failing to find other things to motivate them to think creatively, and having no other way for seeking the truth, students are unable to learn how to perform the innovating function necessary for a developing society; some of them simply accept dogmas, either out of blind faith or because of cynicism, and many more spend their free time learning how to practice bad habits like smoking.

I believe that Arab universities have failed to meet the needs of Arab society and teach students the right values and attitudes. Since most of their programs are borrowed from

foreign lands, the content of their curricula is, to a large extent, irrelevant. Since they fail to interact positively with their communities, the public does not feel attached to them or eager to lend them its support. I also believe that Western-sponsored educational institutions cause problems; they tend to resist assimilation and concentrate on making money rather than educating students. They try to disseminate the values and traditions of a foreign culture, thus producing graduates who feel, behave, and think like the people whose culture is being taught. In so doing, foreign-sponsored universities are rendering their students vulnerable to alienation and the temptation of migration.

The Future of Education in the Arab World

Arab education, according to my assessment, is still in the Second stage of development, that of imitation and memorization. Because of the shortcomings of the system mentioned earlier, the problems facing those responsible for the future development of the educational systems and institutions are numerous and complicated. Therefore, assuming the continuation of the present political and economic conditions in the Arab world, it is my judgment that the future of Arab education is not nearly as bright as it could be. The best we can hope for at this time is that the system will stop imitating foreign models and become more relevant and responsive to the needs of Arab economic and social development. The change that I foresee in the coming 10 to 15 years will be mainly quantitative rather than qualitative.

1. The illiteracy rate will continue to decline gradually, but the absolute numbers of illiterates may actually increase.

- (a) Arab oil-exporting countries, having huge financial resources and relatively small populations have managed to lower the rates of illiteracy fairly quickly, and create jobs for the high school and college graduates.

- (b) Poor Arab countries, having limited financial resources and large populations, have not been able to expand education at a rate fast enough to keep pace with the rates of population growth.

2. Arab countries, especially the rich ones, will gain valuable experience in the field of adult education as they expand their programs in this area.

3. Responding to the changing and growing need of Arab economies, more technical schools and training centers at all levels will be established, but manpower shortages in technical fields will not disappear for decades to come because it is tied to a traditional Arab culture that looks down on menial work.

4. University education will become more commercialized and thus it will undermine the capacity of the system to nurture the right attitudes in its graduates.

(a) The need for schoolteachers and the desire to obtain a college degree will encourage students to study by correspondence, thus lowering the standards of university education.

(b) University graduates preparing themselves to be schoolteachers will tend to look at education as a means for making a living, or getting a better-paying job, and nothing else.

5. Discrimination against noncitizens in some Arab oil-exporting countries will intensify, and the level of education in those countries will continue to be weak. Noncitizen teachers, feeling that they are discriminated against by the same people they are trying to educate, will not be psychologically prepared to put in the efforts needed to improve their performance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Arab educational systems are not equipped to initiate creative changes or handle innovative programs to deal with complicated social issues and scientific challenges. At the same time, whatever change the system may try to introduce is more likely to face stiff resistance from the traditional social forces and institutions. Arab reformers therefore should be aware of the limitations of the existing educational institutions and their own capacity to reform them. Thus the short-term objectives of educational reform should be gradual, attainable, and acceptable to the political leadership, and consistent with the overall developmental objectives.

The following are some of the basic principles and improvements that I feel Arab educational systems should recognize and adopt:

1. ***Changing the attitudes of the public toward its human resources:*** Human beings in the Arab world should be considered assets, not liabilities. It is the current negative attitude, together with the lack of sufficient employment opportunities that has led more than 10 million Arabs of working age to emigrate to the West. Since less than 30 percent of the Arab population is in the labor pool, the magnitude of this outflow (10 percent of the

active labor force) is most remarkable. Raising public awareness can change present attitudes and initiate the conversion of a human liability into a human asset.

2. ***The elimination of illiteracy:*** The high rate of illiteracy in the Arab world is impeding the whole process of sociocultural transformation and economic development. Since the rich Arab states would gain the greatest immediate benefit from an increased population of qualified workers, and suffer most from the present shortage of manpower, it is in their interest to assume the costs of eliminating Arab illiteracy.

3. ***Ending discrimination against the poor and women:*** Discrimination against women reduces the potential Arab labor force by one-half, while the high rate of illiteracy and the backward state of technology reduce the productivity of the individual Arab worker to less than 30 percent of his potential.

a. Out of 360 million Arabs, fewer than 100 million are active in the labor force.

b. The present productivity of the total potential Arab labor force is equal to or less than that of 10 million workers in the labor force of any Western industrialized state.

c. The actual productivity of the Arab people is less than that of one quarter (20 million) of the German population.

4. ***Changing Arab attitudes toward work:*** most Arabs do not take pride in work; work to them is not a way of life to be enjoyed, but a means for earning a living, having no value in itself. Those close to the tribal way of life look down on almost all physical and mental work.

5. ***The development of a "teamwork" spirit:*** Arabs, being unused to coordinated creative effort, have yet to succeed in building serious research institutions capable of dealing with any set of social, political, economic, or technological problems. A team of 10 average Japanese scientists makes a genius; a team of 10 genius Arab scientists makes a big zero; Arabs tend to compete negatively with each other, rather than cooperate and coordinate with one another.

6. ***Creating a public awareness of the population explosion:*** The rate of population growth in the Arab world is very high. Manpower shortages in some parts of the Arab world should not be used as an excuse to encourage the increase of the rates of natural growth among their people. The high rate of illiteracy, the primitive state of technology, the status of women in

society, and other factors of cultural underdevelopment have all contributed to reducing the actual productivity of the Arab labor force to less than 30 percent of what it could be. The shortage of manpower in some parts of the Arab world is a symptom of cultural backwardness rather than a major factor contributing to lower productivity.

7. Institute planning principles and techniques at all levels: The Arabs' inability to act as a team, and plan for meeting the challenges of the future, have undermined their capacity to deal with the most important issues and problems of their times.

8. Special efforts should be made to transform traditional Arab culture: Cultures, being living organisms, cannot preserve their basic values and characteristics unless they change and become relevant to their times. Change will empower cultures and enable them to contribute positively to the development of their societies, without losing their core values.

9. Meeting the needs of Arab societies: While the rate of unemployment in most parts of the Arab world is very high, thousands of jobs in other parts are waiting to be filled because people with the right education and skills cannot be found. Manpower planning should be emphasized and more attention should be given to technical and vocational training.

10. Democratization of the learning process: individual freedom and academic freedom should be encouraged and respected. Students should be raised to have faith in democracy and practice it inside and outside the classrooms. Through such practices, students will gain self-confidence and learn how to use their minds and respect the views and opinions of others.

Awareness by the public of the need for change is the starting point for the development of a climate conducive to sociocultural transformation and economic progress. Public contribution to preparing citizens for useful lives and productive careers is very limited. Except for a small fraction of the Arab labor force, the life of the Arab worker is unproductive, insecure, and almost completely lacking in prospects for improvement.

Political determination and a favorable social climate are essential for the initiation and implementation of educational reforms. Success will depend on the governments' attitudes toward their human resources, and their willingness to render them healthier, more secure, and creative. Political and spiritual narrow-mindedness in the Arab world are limiting the

chances for meaningful change and thus reducing the prospects for developing a creative educational system capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of the Arab people.

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