MIDDLE EAST: Are jobless graduates causing the protests?

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20 February 2011 University World News Global Edition Issue 159 In the Middle East it is not the lack of access to government jobs that has caused frustration, but lack of access to the general economy plus lack of freedom to attend a free university. Governments have expanded higher education, but have not allowed universities

to act as real universities, and the result has been a mentality of backwardness. In the Middle East it is not the lack of access to government jobs that has caused frustration, but lack of access to the general economy plus lack of freedom to attend a free university. Governments have expanded higher education, but have not allowed universities to act as real universities, and the result has been a mentality of backwardness.

Media articles have argued that Arab countries have invested heavily in their university systems, but have failed to make certain that graduates have jobs, and this has helped to stimulate the protests of youths in the streets. Is this the case? No.

The problem is not too many university places. The problem is that governments: (i) price the places so that they have little value; (ii) control universities so that their managers cannot modernise curricula or faculty; and (iii) try to guarantee jobs so that university graduates feel entitled to them whether or not they have the capability to perform their functions.

About 22% of the Egyptian labour force was employed by the Egyptian government in 1990; 10 years later it was around 30%. In spite of this welfare expansion, 80% of the unemployed had secondary education or above.

This contributes to frustration, but it is the regulations underpinning employment that create frustrations, not the increase in university places.

The problem is that governments in the Middle East have expanded higher education quantity but not quality. Heavy investments have been made in student places. Enrollment rates rose in Egypt from 5% in 1970 to 30% in 2003 and in Tunisia from 3% to 28%.

But student-teacher ratios are the same in tertiary as in primary education. Salaries are so low that faculty must have several part-time jobs to make ends meet, and although academics differ by skill and productivity, faculty salaries do not.

Governments claim that universities are autonomous. They are not.

In terms of financial authority, universities are not allowed to charge tuition fees; hence the poor pay for the rich to attend and universities cannot invest in their own future.

Governments determine salaries, not universities. If Egyptian university presidents need to reallocate budgets, first they must receive permission from the Ministry of Planning. For

tenure track positions, Egyptian universities hire undergraduates from their own institutions.

A system of high quality would ensure that faculty are appointed from the best and the brightest among a wide spectrum of candidates. A university is of poor quality if faculty are 'inbred'. Hence the normal hiring policy in Egypt ensures an absence of faculty quality.

In terms of equity, universities perform poorly.

Entry is obtained by passing an examination; but with the exception of Jordan and Lebanon, entry to the examinations can only be obtained if students can avoid being segregated into secondary vocational schools. Thus about half of the population is already frustrated about their terminal life prospects prior to leaving secondary school.

For those who can attempt the examinations, university entry is associated with access to private tutoring. Over half of Egyptian students from low-income families take private tutoring but can spend significantly less on it than the richest. The richest quintile of the secondary school population in Egypt spends seven times more on private tutoring than the poorest quintile.

In terms of governance, public university presidents are appointed by the government, are responsible to the government, and generally have no boards of trust. In terms of curriculum, both public and private universities in Egypt are required to have curricula approved by the Supreme Council of Universities.

In terms of the legal environment, if an Egyptian university earns income, it is taxed as a business. This depresses university interest in generating income. Korean universities earn 42% of their income from non-government sources; Egyptian universities earn 15%.

In the Middle East and North Africa generally, 90% of funding for education comes from government; in East Asia and the Pacific and in Latin America it is 53%.

The problem is that public policy in higher education has not moved in any significant way since the economic assumptions of the 1950s. There is no legal distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit institutions.

Universities do not hold clear title to their land. An absence of clear title prevents them from using land as collateral when borrowing to finance capital construction. Without clear title to their land, university strategic planning is not possible and diversifying funding sources, a key driver of university quality, has yet to occur.

In terms of research, the Egyptian government distributes funding through the Ministry of State for Scientific Research, which commenced competitive funding only in February 2008. Resources are distributed through 300 research centres associated with sector ministries separate from universities, as in the former Soviet Union.

Individual faculty may participate in research projects, but universities do not. Without a

research function, universities stagnate.

But it is not as though research funds lead to research productivity. Arab states account for less than 1% of the world's scientific publications and less than 1% of the patents awarded in Europe or the United States, lower than Sub-Saharan Africa.

In essence, governments have expanded higher education, but have not allowed universities to act as real universities. The result has been a mentality of backwardness.

On the other hand, students and faculty are familiar with universities in Europe and North America.

They know that other students do not have old textbooks to memorise, but have instant access to an unlimited supply of bibliographic material. They know that other students are allowed to take courses in a language of scientific research. They know that other systems have flexibility so that students can shift fields, take electives and transfer course credit. They know that other students are encouraged to develop individual ideas and theories.

In the Middle East these are the students who have been in the streets shouting for freedom. It is not the freedom to attend university, but the freedom to attend a free university that is the issue. And it is not the lack of access to government employment; it is the lack of access to an economy that is its own engine of growth.

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