



**THE CLASSICAL UNIVERSITY AND ITS TRANSITION:
THE CASE OF THE ARAB WORLD**

by

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to evaluate the process of the transition of Arab Universities from the classical model of universities to some "modern" models. Its major aims are to identify basic problems which hinder the process of transition and to suggest strategies by which to overcome them. To achieve these aims, the paper has dealt first with quantitative development, the position of professional schools, and autonomy, social involvement and academic freedom in Arab universities.

The quantitative development in Arab universities within the last few decades has proved to be tremendous by measures of the number of universities, the number of students, the number of teachers as well as the percentage of assimilation in higher education in the Arab world. These quantitative developments have changed the "elitism" position of university graduates in most of the Arab countries.

Universities in the Arab world have become the natural premises for higher education, though there are some higher professional institutes in some Arab countries. Arab universities are almost under control by Arab governments through some systems of the appointment of the university administrators at the top level. There is an obvious lack in both social involvement and academic freedom in Arab universities.

Basic problems of universities in the Arab world were identified as: the inefficiency to meet the requirements of development, the shortage of faculty members, methods of teaching, the lack of students' educational services as well as the lack of academic freedom. Appropriate strategies were suggested to overcome these problems. It was noted that the implementation of some of these strategies is beyond the technical aspects of university education, particularly, achieving democracy in the Arab states, the matter which is hoped to be realized through the new world system.

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I. Introduction

The classical university is characterized by elitism of both faculty members and students, autonomy and unity of its community in terms of searching for truth¹. The function of the classical university has two manifolds; searching for truth and transmitting it to others. Some of major consequences of the concept of the classical university are: a) The highly selective process of both students and faculty members in terms of mental abilities and moral values, b) The university traditions of academic freedom, c) The "ivory tower" position of the university and d) The exclusion of professional education from university programmes.

Some elements of the concept of the classical university, and -therefore-some of relevant consequences, have been changed to produce-at the global level-many "modern" university models which are different from the classical one.

Arab universities are no exception. They were established within the premises of the classical university. They are being transferred to other "modern" models. Keeping in mind that

university education is a sub-system of the educational system, which-in its turn-is a sub-system of the national, regional and human cultures, it is worthwhile to have some insights into the establishment of universities in the Arab World and their transition from the classical model in order to identify some of their basic problems and suggest strategies for their development.

The next parts of this paper discuss the following aspects of Arab Universities:

1. Quantitative development and elitism
2. The position of professional schools
3. Autonomy, social involvement and academic freedom
4. Basic problems and strategies by which to overcome them

II. Quantitative Development and Elitism

The quantitative development in Arab universities within the last few decades has been tremendous. The following information explains the size of increase:

1. By 1950, there were only six universities throughout the Arab World in addition to the three religious Islamic universities.² Out of these six universities, there were only three national universities.³ By 1986, there were 83 universities in the Arab World.⁴

2. The number of university students increased from 166 thousand students in 1960 to reach 1,972 thousand students in 1986 (increased by 1188%).
3. The percentage of assimilation at higher education in the Arab countries was about 2% in 1960 (3.2 % males and 0.7 % females) and about 9.7% in 1985 (12.5% males and 6.9% females).⁵
4. The number of teachers in higher education in the Arab countries increased from 9 thousand teachers in 1960 to reach 107 thousand teachers in 1985 (increased by 1189 %)⁶.
5. The number of students enrolled for Masters and Doctoral degrees was 78,321 students in the academic year 1984/1985, of which 18062 were studying abroad⁷.

From the above presentation, it is evident that university education in the Arab world has become rather a mass education and is no more characterized by elitism. Nevertheless, elitism of university graduates can be observed in relative terms, that is, Arab countries with small numbers of university graduates preserve prestigious positions for these graduates. Furthermore, university staff used to enjoy special appreciation in most of the Arab countries regardless of their income, which is normally relatively

low.

III. The Position of Professional Schools

Keeping in mind that about 30% of the Arab universities were established in the period of 1950-1970 and that about 60% of the Arab universities were established after 1970⁸, the problem of diversification of higher education into universities and higher institutes does not exist in practice in the Arab world institutes having the same duration of study as universities. The following remarks put the above conclusion in perspective:

1. As for old Arab universities, these have gone through the world developments in this respect. For example, the National University of Egypt, which was established in 1908, provided only the study of arts and science. In 1920, there were higher-professional schools⁹ of medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, education, agriculture, veterinary sciences, commerce, "Dar El Eloom"¹⁰ and legislative law. When the National University had become an official university in 1925, it included a faculty of law and a faculty of medicine--with a branch for pharmacy¹¹. In 1935, most of the other higher schools were affiliated to the university.¹²

By the end of the second world war some higher professional institutes were established concentrating on practical aspects of

education¹³. This trend was extended after the 1952 Revolution in Egypt¹⁴ , but most of these higher institutes developed their programmes and gathered to constitute another Egyptian university¹⁵.

Although we have considered the position of professional schools in the country of the oldest-non-religious- university in the Arab world, it seems that some comparable developments are applicable in some Arab countries which have established fairly recent universities. An example can be given from Bahrain. The Gulf Industrial College, known later as Gulf Polytechnic, was established in the academic year 1968/1969 including departments of engineering, commerce and administration, to be combined together in 1986 with the University College of Science, Arts and Education¹⁶, to formulate the University of Bahrain.

2. Teacher training institutes have been subjected to fluctuation between being affiliated to either ministries of education (or higher education) or to universities. Although teacher training institutes have been almost a part of universities, there are still some colleges of education--which have been recently established--outside the premises of universities¹⁷. However, it could be predicted that most of these colleges will be affiliated to universities, being considered the natural premises for teacher education in future.

3. There have been some attempts to establish open systems of education at university level in some Arab countries, but most of these attempts have not yet been matured enough¹⁸. On the other hand, it is allowed for the graduates of some higher institutes of "Community Junior Colleges" to join universities under certain conditions, almost relevant to the total score obtained by the student and /or passing certain examination(s).¹⁹

IV. **Autonomy, Social Involvement and Academic Freedom**

By university autonomy we mean the systems of administration and finance of universities which allow a university to be independent of any other authority in taking its decisions.

It can be safely said that at least the highest level administration in Arab universities is under the control of Arab governments in general. Such a control takes some common forms, among which the most important are: appointing university presidents (chancellors) by a Royal, Presidential or Amiri decree, or appointing university boards of trustees by decrees at the same level. In some cases, university presidents in an Arab country constitute a "supreme council for universities" which plans for university policies and suggests relevant legislations²⁰. At the level of "faculty deans", some systems allow the appointment of deans by higher authorities and others allow the election of deans, but mostly with some restrictions²¹. In most cases in Arab universities, university departments are considered the basic administrative unit of the university. Nevertheless, the practice

shows that university departments may be effective in running daily matters rather than policy issues²². In terms of finance, most Arab-national universities are free, sponsored entirely by the government²³. There is no evidence-in general-that Arab governments have used "financial pressure" to achieve their own goals²⁴.

Apart from the training of manpower-at the professional level-social involvement of Arab universities in societal problems and development in general, can be summed up by research work, contribution of specialized centres and institutes, and participation of faculty members in relevant projects or committees. As usual, research work takes the form of theses presented by students to obtain higher degrees and research work conducted by faculty members. Many attempts have been made to link research work with societal problems, but there is still a lack of channels by which community institutions can orient and benefit from research work.

The number of specialized centres and institutes in Arab universities is increasing. Some of these centres and institutes award university higher degrees and others do not²⁵. Non-degree centres have a much greater opportunity to deal with problems at the national level in their own fields of specialization, but-from our own experience²⁶-unless there is one-or more-decision makers in relevant areas who are convinced with-and are enthusiastic enough-about the recommendations taken by these centres, the

centre's contribution may be just to add reports and pieces of research to library shelves.

It is an old practice to invite individual faculty members to participate in both governmental and private committees and consultancy work. Rather recently, there have been research projects conducted to deal with certain issues or problems, very often at the national level, and funded by foreign agencies²⁷. In most cases, the subject of the funded research is initiated either by the fund agencies or universities, not by consumers' institutions. Therefore, we tend to reach the conclusion-in general terms-that Arab universities are still almost closer to the position of "ivory tower" universities.

As for the concept of academic freedom, it seems that it is rather a complex concept. Some of the dimensions of academic freedom are²⁸: a) it takes into account scientific traditions and university values on the one hand and social change on the other, b) it helps university institutions-and individual faculty members and students-to reach the optimum investment of their capacities, as being protected from interference in their academic and university practices, c) it is very much connected with commitment and implies serving the community, and d) it implies liberty in research and teaching, university decision making and participation in it, and the right to learn.

Needless to say, academic freedom in a society is very much influenced by the political system in society. Keeping in mind the complexity of the concept of academic freedom, cultural taboos in the Arab world²⁹, and the prevailing non-democratic political systems in the Arab countries, most universities in the Arab world have suffered the lack of academic freedom, especially in terms of the lack of liberty of research and teaching and the actual participation in decision making. Many examples can be given as cases of dismissal, and even arresting and imprisoning faculty members and university students in many Arab universities³⁰. However, some deep changes are taking place-or have to take place--in many Arab countries with regards to democratic practices within the new world system, to be reflected in academic freedom.

A reference should be made to the establishment of the Union of Arab Universities and the existence of societies or associations of faculty members of some universities in some Arab countries. But it seems that these organizations-in general-have nothing much to do with the issue of academic freedom. The same situation is applicable to students' unions.

V Basic Problems and Strategies by which to Overcome them

There are some basic problems which hinder Arab universities from achieving their functions and, therefore, the transition of Arab universities from the "classical type". The most important of these problems and the suggested strategies by which to overcome them are as follows³¹.

1. The inefficiency of universities in the Arab world to meet the requirements of development. This inefficiency manifests itself in terms of the acute shortage in some specializations or the imbalance in supply and demand with reference to these requirements and the weak contribution in providing solutions to societal problems, whether at the local, national or Arab level³². Some features of this issue can be identified as follows:

a. About two thirds of Arab university students are studying humanities, while only one third are studying basic and applied sciences. Needs of development requires the exact opposite.

b. Arab university departments lack-in general-some basic contemporary specializations, e.g. futurology and environmental sciences.

Suggested Strategies to overcome this problem are:

- Extension of pre-university technical education, while allowing graduates of this education to join universities.

- Extension of basic and applied sciences departments of study at the university level, while paying attention to encouraging students-by different means-to join these branches³³.

- Conducting transfer training programmes on a wide scale to help achieving balance between supply and demand in different areas.
 - Establishing new departments in Arab universities in contemporary and future fields of sciences.
 - Building up channels between Arab universities and the consumer institutions in different fields. University faculties and departments are requested to prove their competence in solving problems of institutions relevant to their specializations, in interdisciplinary manner or alone as appropriate, in order to help practice their social function, to establish traditions of mutual cooperation and research funding.
2. The shortage of faculty members³⁴ and their low scientific productivity in some Arab universities. This shortage is evident in most Arab countries, but faculty members should be increased as their annual percentage of increase is 8.7% while the corresponding percentage of increase in students is 11.4%³⁵. The average of scientific productivity of faculty members in Arab universities is one researcher per 2.5 years³⁶. The involvement of junior faculty members of newly established universities in the Arab world in administrative work can be partly responsible for such low scientific productivity³⁷.

In the present context, a reference should be made to the marginal role of the academic societies and associations in research work in general. Further, little attention has been given to exchanging experiences with foreign faculty members through joining well-established societies, contributing to scientific conferences, and the practice and the good use of the sabbatical year system.

Major strategies to forward the development of faculty members are: to use the full capacity of the existing universities in the Arab world to produce new faculty members, to expand scholarships abroad to read for higher degrees, encouraging the establishment of strong relationships among Arab universities and between them and other universities, extending programmes for exchanging faculty members and offering-as well as facilitating-the good investment of sabbatical years, funding-or contributing to-conference attendance as well as to scientific journals, and encouraging the establishment of academic societies and associations.

3. The prevalence of the lecture as the major teaching method. Apart from some laboratory work-in some scientific departments, there is almost one method of teaching which is employed in Arab universities, that is the lecture method. In most of these universities, it is rare to use methods of teaching such as discussions, workshops, brainstorming, self education etc, which highlight the participation and involvement of students. In connection to this phenomenon, a great portion of students in Arab

universities suffer from the belief that there is only one source of knowledge (i.e. the required text-book). Further, there is a lack of up-to-date modern libraries in many Arab universities.

The major strategy to deal with this problem is to convince faculty members to change their method of teaching. There are some Arab universities which have followed this strategy by providing training sessions on teaching to their candidate and/or faculty members³⁸. In addition, some attempts have been made to change the type of examinations within the framework of using examinations for the promotion of education³⁹.

4. The lack of students' educational services. These services include university accommodation, student activities, entertainment and social welfare, which can be carried out by both students unions and university authorities.

There are many reasons for the lack of students' educational services. Some of them are related to the conceptions of the university student and the functions of educational services, others to lack of financial resources, avoiding political student movements-especially the recent fundamental movements in many Arab states and/or the limitation of university activities to formal ones, e.g. university competitions.

The suggested strategies to deal with this problem have many

components, some of which are beyond the reach of university faculty members and administrators⁴⁰. However, to start with, there must be organized efforts in Arab universities to convince the whole university faculty members and administrators of the importance of students' educational services as an integrated part of university education and to train specialists in different relevant areas.

It seems that the above mentioned issues along with the lack of academic freedom, are the major problems facing the transition of Arab universities into "modern" universities. The suggested strategies, though very complicated and need cooperative efforts at all levels, seem to be the only way to promote university education in the Arab world in the sense of modernization.

VI. A Concluding Word

In conclusion, we may point out that Arab universities are generally- in the process of transition from the classical type of university towards some types of modern universities. Nevertheless, the process of transition differs among Arab countries and are subjected to many complicated interacting factors, some of which, are out of university control. It seems, according to our way of thinking, that Arab political systems--in

general--will witness some basic changes, particularly in terms of democracy and unity, which will facilitate and support the process of transition of Arab universities.

SUMMARY

To begin with, the paper was concerned with presenting the characteristics of the classical university, their consequences especially as to identify basic problems which hinder the process of transition of Arab universities from this type to some "modern" types and to suggest strategies by which to overcome these problems.

The following is a summary of each of the sections included in the paper concerning Arab universities:

1. Quantitative development and elitism: The tremendous increase of the number of Arab universities was pointed out with corresponding increase in number of students, number of teachers as well as the increase of the percentage of assimilation at higher education. It was concluded that university education in the Arab world has become mass education rather than elite education.

2. The position of professional schools: This position has been discussed in both historical and practical perspectives, and it has been concluded that universities are supposed to be the natural premises for higher education in the Arab world, though some new

professional higher institutes have been established.

3. Autonomy, social involvement and academic freedom: The study of these aspects have shown that-in practical terms-university autonomy of Arab universities-in general-is restricted by systems of appointing the top level of university administrators. It has been revealed that there is an obvious lack in both social involvement and academic freedom in these universities.

4. Basic problems and strategies by which to overcome them: These problems have been identified as; the inefficiency to meet the requirements of development, the shortage of faculty members, methods of teaching, the lack of students' educational services as well as the lack of academic freedom. Appropriate strategies have been suggested to overcome these problems. It has been pointed out that some of these strategies are out of the hands of universities, particularly, achieving democracy in the Arab states, the matter which is hoped to be realized in the framework of the New World System.

Notes

1. See:

Ross, M.C. (1976). **The University: The Anatomy of Academe.**
New York: McGraw Hill. PP. 141-142.

2. These Islamic universities are: Al-Azhar, Al-Qarawieen and Al-Zaitoon. Note that Al-Azhar university has included-since 1961-some non-religious faculties.
3. The national universities are: Fouad the First University (Cairo University now), Syrian University (Damascus University now) and Alexandria University. The foreign universities are: The American University in Beirut, Saint Joseph University in Beirut and the American University in Cairo.
4. See:
Al-Qassem, Soubhy (1988). **Higher Education in the Arab Home**, A study submitted to the Arab Thought Forum, Amman. p. 5 (Stencil- in Arabic). These universities include 13 universities in Egypt and 8 universities in Saudi Arabia.
5. The source:
UNESCO (1988). **Statistical Yearbook: 1987**. Paris: UNESCO. Note that the statistics given here include other institutes of higher education (than universities).
6. See: UNESCO, Op cit
and UNESCO (1971). **Statistical Yearbook: 1970**. Paris: UNESCO.
Statistics given here include other institutes of higher education.

7. Al-Qassem, Op cit, pp 56-57.
8. Al-Qassem, Soubhy (1990). **Higher Education in the Arab Home**, A paper presented at the annual meeting of the General Council of the Arab Thought Forum on "The Future of Education in the Arab Home", Amman, 12-14 May, 1990. P. 2 (in Arabic).
9. Soliman, M.A., Labib, R. and Shafshak, M.A. (1968). **The History and System of Education in the United Arab Republic**. Cairo: Egyptian Anglo Bookshop. P. 109 (in Arabic).
10. Dar El-Eloom was a higher school specialized in Arab language and is a faculty of Cairo University now.
11. Ibid, p. 137.
12. Ibid.
Note that the Official University changed its name to Fouad the First University in 1940 and has now become Cairo University.
13. Al-Gumai'e, A.A. (1983). **The Egyptian University and Society: 1908-1940**. Cairo: Al-Ahram (Centre for Political and Strategical Studies). P. 59 (in Arabic).

14. See:
Soliman et al, Op cit, p 205.
15. Helwan University, which was established in 1975.
16. Which was established in 1979.
See:
Hamoud, R.S. (1987). Education in Bahrain. Riyadh: Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States. PP 83-84 (in Arabic)
17. Examples of these colleges are the newly established so-called "Specific Colleges of Education" in Egypt in order to meet the shortage in teachers or specialists in some areas such as music, fine arts, home economics, baby sitting, educational technology and educational information. These colleges are affiliated to the Ministry of Education (Higher Education) and award B.A. or B.Sc. degrees in their areas of specialization.
18. Actually, there are "external/non-campus students" rather than open university education, e.g. students of Beirut University (established by Alexandria University) and Khartoum University (established by Cairo University) as well as external students in some Arab universities.

For attempts to establish open universities in the Arab world, it seems that the most mature plan-out of them- is the

Palestinian project of establishing "the open university of Jerusalem" in order to meet the procedures of closing down the Palestinian universities in the occupied land by the Israeli authorities.

In the academic year 1990-1991 an open university was established in Egypt. In our own judgement, it has no relevance to open education, simply because it also requires the General Certificate of Secondary Education (in the immediate previous academic year of admission). In practice, it is some form of private education at the tertiary level.

There was an attempt of the Arab Gulf States in the mid-eighties to establish an open university in the Arab Gulf States, but it seems that this attempt was given up.

See:

Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States jointly with UNIDBAS (1986), Papers presented to the symposium on "Higher Distance Education with Focus on the Project of the Open University for Gulf States", Bahrain, 2-6 November, 1986.

19. The same is applicable in the case of obtaining the Certificate of Technical Secondary Education in some Arab states.

20. E.g. The Supreme Council for Egyptian Universities which include all the Egyptian Universities with the exception of Al-Azhar University. In practice, Al-Azhar University is almost-following the same general policies and systems of other Egyptian Universities.
21. An example of these restrictions can be given from the Egyptian universities. Professors and other members of a Faculty Council participate in the process of electing the dean of the faculty. The dean is appointed-by a decree from the university president-among the three professors having the highest votes, but not necessary the one who got the highest votes.
22. This situation is due to many reasons, the most important of which seems to be that university legislation give the authority of policy decisions to higher levels of administration.
23. In some Arab universities students are subsidised. In some other Arab universities students of particular faculties-sometimes in some particular sections, and/or students with higher grades are subsidised. However, there is a growing trend among some Arab governments to limit "free university education" except for some talented students and to raise the existing "symbolic" fees of study.

24. Simply because such a pressure may upset great sectors of the public in their countries. However, there are few cases of attempts of financial pressure. May be the most famous example among them is the attempt of some members of the Egyptian House of Commons on its meetings on September 13, 1926 to call for cutting down the budget of the university because it "allows graduating the likes of Taha Hussein who questioned the Islamic religion" (in the context of attacking his book on Pre-Islamic Poetry).
- See: Imbaby, M.M.S. (1983). **Academic Freedom in the Light of Functions of University Education in Egypt**, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University, Cairo. PP 128-129 (in Arabic).
25. In Egypt only there are about 22 centres which are affiliated to universities. The non-degree centres and institutions constitute about a fourth of them. These centres are different from national centres for research in different areas (which are not affiliated to universities).
26. As an expert in the Science Education Centre-Ain Shams University and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Centre for Developing English Language Teaching at the same university.

27. E.g. The World Bank, the World Centre for Research Development (Canada) and the USAID. It must be referred in this context that there is some limited research work conducted in the Arab world-in the above mentioned sense-and funded by UNESCO, ALESCO, and some regional Arab organizations (e.g. ABEGS).
28. See:
Imbaby, Op cit, pp 260-263.
29. These taboos can be stated as: religion, sex, and politics (in terms of changing the existing rule). However, there is almost no problem in dealing with any of these issues, provided they have the same line-and traditions-as allowed by officials and/or the prevailing "pressure groups".
30. For example, see:
Imbaby, Op cit, pp 154-158.
31. General resources are:
 - a. Al-Qassem, Op cit.
 - b. Ibrahim, Saad Edin (1990). Draft of the Summing Report on the Project of the Future of Education in the Arab Home "Disaster or Hope". Amman: Arab Thought Forum. PP 36-37. (in Arabic)

- c. Morsi, M.M. (1977). **Contemporary University Education; Its Issues and Trends.** Cairo: Dar El Nahda El-Arabia. PP 102-117 (in Arabic).
32. See: Our discussion in this concern in the last section.
33. Such an extension requires-as well as some of our other suggestions-a significant increase in expenditure on universities in the Arab world.
34. It must be referred to-in the present context-that the teacher/students ratio varies significantly among Arab universities.
35. See:
Ibrahim, Op cit, p 36.
36. Compared with 2 researches annually in American Universities and one research annually in Indian universities.
Ibid, p. 37.
37. For further details concerning the case of Arab Gulf universities, see:
Touq, M.S. and Zaher, D. (1988). **Scientific Productivity of Faculty Members in the Arab Gulf States.** Riyadh: Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (in Arabic).

38. Bylaws in Egypt forbid the appointment of a faculty member unless he/she has passed a training session on education (with the exception of faculty members specialized in education). This training session usually lasts 2-4 weeks. It seems that the training model introduced by Ain Shams University is the most advanced in this field in Egypt. This University is very concerned with university education. It has established the Centre of Medical Education about 15 years ago and established-in 1991-The Centre for Developing University Education to serve the whole university.

39. See:

National Centre for Educational Research jointly with Science Education Centre-Ain Shams University (1979). **Evaluation as an Approach to Develop Education.** Cairo: NCER (in Arabic).

40. See:

Our discussion in the previous section concerning academic freedom.

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