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Public, Private and Nonprofit Universities and Everything in Between

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Public, Private and Nonprofit Universities and Everything in Between

In August 2020, the establishment of four new nongovernmental universities in Egypt was announced. Citizens were happy to know that their buildings were already finalized, that their campuses were located outside Cairo in different remote governorates and that they would start accepting students within weeks. Less than a month later, the newspaper headlines covered the decision to establish an additional ten nongovernmental universities. The new trend in Egypt then seems to be in favor of more nongovernmental nonprofit universities and having them dispersed all over Egypt. This is a very good thing and much called for. The interesting thing, however, regarding the last batch of planned nongovernmental universities is that they will be affiliated with public universities! President Sisi directed the government to make available the needed financial resources to establish those universities. Yes, we are in Egypt, and yes, we do things differently. However, it sounds a bit like the Chinese GONGOS, or Governmental Organized Non-Governmental Organizations; a blatant oxymoron that may defy logic—or does it?

In Egypt we have all three types of universities in operation: public, private and nonprofit. Aside from the newly established and the planned nonprofit universities of 2020, there are 24 public governmental universities, which together with *Al-Azhar* University that teaches religious subjects besides the regular curricula, serve nearly 2.2 million undergraduate students. Additionally, there are around 23 private universities and one nonprofit university (AUC) that together have a total undergraduate student body of 78 thousand. The choice between different modes of operation seems to be linked with the political and economic ideologies prevalent at different historical times. **The question is: What difference does it make? And does the university status affect the quality of educational service offered?**

When growing up in the sixties, all universities in Egypt were public universities, with the exception of the American University in Cairo, established in 1919, which had a nonprofit status and a special agreement with the government of Egypt. Cairo University, established in 1908 as a nonprofit university, had been nationalized and turned into a public university during the sixties' socialist era. It was only in the nineties-decade, with Egypt moving towards a more market-based economy, that private universities were allowed to operate. When they first started, the majority of private universities had a reputation that they were focusing only on profit maximization and therefore were sacrificing quality and rigor in the process. With competition, with better and enhanced relations and agreements with international universities, with improved accreditation and quality assurance requirements, the quality of private universities started improving. In several cases, not all, private universities bypassed the quality standards of some public universities. The latter continue to be hurdled with the increasing number of students they are obliged to accept beyond their capacity. This is in parallel with the bureaucratic rigidity of their operations, and the limited financial resources. The repercussions of that trilogy are manifested in low faculty and staff compensation, poor motivation and faculty practicing moonlighting, or having to work multiple jobs simultaneously to earn a decent living.

On a global level, the distinction between private, public and nonprofit universities, at first glance, seems to be a bit blurry. The discussion centers mostly on tuition costs, and how enrolling in private universities is usually much more expensive. Public universities are mainly those funded totally or partially by the state, while private universities are funded mostly through tuition fees and through having endowment funds. Interestingly, in the United States, there are some private for-profit universities run like a business, and other private nonprofit universities. From here arises the confusion with what is the case in Egypt, where all the private universities are for profit, while the public and the nongovernmental universities, managed by civil society, are not profit seeking.

Registration status, whether public or private, is not usually correlated with the quality of the educational service offered. Examples of top-ranking public universities include Oxford and Cambridge, the two oldest universities in the U.K. They are designated as public universities because

they receive some government funding. Meanwhile, United States based universities, such as California Institute of Technology (Caltech), Stanford University, MIT, Princeton and Harvard are all recognized as private universities and simultaneously not-for-profit. The problem lies with the private for-profit universities accused sometimes of accepting mediocre students, and prioritizing students' satisfaction and retention over educational quality.

What matters most in determining the quality of higher education institutes? It seems it is not always the registration papers, although profit seeking universities are sometimes questionable. It is a lot of other things. On top of which is good management, resource availability, accreditation by top quality assurance and accreditation bodies, freedom of expression and research, reputation and societal impact.

Back in Egypt, public universities offering their educational service mostly for free, are facing problems. Perhaps the new model of having nongovernmental universities affiliated with existing public universities will help ensure a greater degree of flexibility in resource generation without having to change the laws, or violate the constitution; a short-term functional oxymoron, if there is any such thing. We remain hopeful, yet it is not only about financial resources!