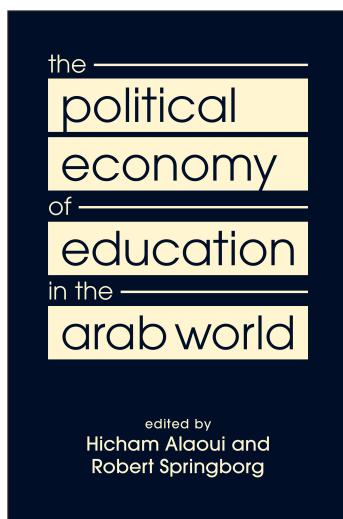


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# The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World

edited by  
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# 1

## The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World

*Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg*

**Why undertake yet another study of education in the Arab world?** The World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), various bilateral aid agencies, and countless independent analysts have already produced a substantial library devoted to documenting and accounting for Arab educational performance. Moreover, there is substantial agreement in this literature that Arab educational systems are underperforming and that they suffer from a list of ailments common to most if not all of them. It is further generally concurred that while various efforts at reform, most notably those supported by external actors, may have succeeded at local levels, none have had substantial and lasting national, systemic impacts. Finally, analysts of Arab education agree that its improvement is essential if Arab countries are to diversify economies, improve growth rates, and broaden the bases of citizenship upon which more stable and effective systems of governance can be built.

The agreed upon common characteristics of Arab education are generally negative. The major exceptions are the quantitative and proportional growth of primary, secondary, and tertiary educational systems, such that enrollment rates have expanded to become about as high as those predicted by levels of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita; and dramatically improved female participation rates at all educational levels have produced a reverse gender gap, whereby more females than males are enrolled in tertiary education in most Arab countries and, in some, even at the secondary level. These growth rates have not, however, been paralleled by improvements in quality, nor have they impacted power structures within society with respect to socioeconomic

status, gender, or other categories of privilege and marginalization. The extensive list of indicators of lagging performance includes test results as on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMSS); inadequate commitment to STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math); lagging literacy rates, especially among females; absence of Arab universities from lists of the world's top 300; poor preparation for and inadequate linkages with labor markets; negligible economic returns from education; and lack of preparation to exercise rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

A similarly lengthy list of causes of this underperformance is also to be found in the relevant literature. Most focus on implementation issues of an administrative, financial, curricular, or pedagogical nature. Arab educational systems are viewed as being underfinanced or suffering from misallocation of funding, or both, most notably away from primary and toward tertiary education and away from teachers and toward administrators; as having inadequate, overcrowded facilities; as being overly centralized and resistant to stakeholder participation, especially by teachers, parents, and potential private sector employers; as being insufficiently student-focused in methods of teaching and learning, partly as a result of poorly trained teachers; and as preferencing religion and social studies while devaluing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The systemic, contextual factor that has received the most attention in explaining underperformance is that of economic inequality, which appears to have more pernicious effects in the Arab world than in most other, if not all, emerging regions.<sup>1</sup>

One detects in this literature and within the development assistance community both analyst and donor fatigue due to agreed diagnostics and associated treatments having had so little impact on educational policies and practices. The “supertanker” of Arab education, long steered toward creating civil servants and acquiescent citizens disempowered politically and economically, with ever more students on board, has not managed even a small course correction, much less charting a radically new trajectory to fulfill the stated, grandiose ambitions of Arab rulers to create knowledge economies, to say nothing of realizing the long-frustrated hopes of Arab populations for improved economies and polities.

Pressures to reform Arab educational systems are intensifying from both the bottom up and the top down. Popular demands for such reforms contributed to the Arab uprisings and have persisted even where those uprisings have not. In Egypt, for example, those demands were reflected by Article 19 of the 2014 constitution, which mandated

the extension of free education from the primary through the secondary level, while rendering schooling compulsory through “the secondary stage or its equivalent.” It also obligated the state to allocate government spending on education equivalent to at least 4 percent of GDP. None of these constitutionally mandated thresholds has yet been met. Like other Arab rulers, those in Egypt have sought to appear to respond to popular demands, while simultaneously seeking to reshape the educational system better to serve their own priorities. In so doing they have confronted the dilemma inherent in reform of all authoritarian orders, which is how to stimulate economic growth without inducing demands for political openings.

Reconciling this dilemma has become ever more problematic, not just because of increased popular demands, but also because of structural changes to the underlying political economy. Most postcolonial Arab educational systems were geared to the needs of expanding states seeking to inculcate nationalist orthodoxy among their diverse populations. Their primary vocational focus was thus the civil service, the tangible manifestation of social contracts that have underpinned these authoritarian orders and that shield graduates from international competition. Population growth, deteriorating public finances, expanding privatization, and other policy changes associated with intensifying globalization began in the late 1980s in many Arab countries to undermine the viability of educational policies harnessed to outdated, deteriorating political economies. The 2011 Arab uprisings reflected this disjunction and provided an opportunity for it to be addressed. But effecting reform in conditions of rising political demands coupled with economic stagnation is notoriously difficult.<sup>2</sup> In many Arab countries the result has been a patchwork of educational policies, its components reflecting reconciliations of demands with capacities, as well as the interests of different actors, including preeminently those of rulers concerned primarily with resolving the dilemma of stimulating economic growth while not expanding political demands. The net outcome has been further diversification or, less kindly, fragmentation of the overall educational system, coupled with efforts to intensify central control over its various components.

Although overwhelmingly predominant, state executives are nevertheless cross-pressured by different constituencies. Teachers and their unions constitute the most concentrated such pressure, as Merilee Grindle in this volume (Chapter 9), supported by the World Bank’s recent study of Arab education and *The Economist*’s of global education, indicates.<sup>3</sup> Since overgrown educational ministries are staffed pri-

marily by teachers, bureaucratic dead weight is reinforced and added to that of teachers' vocational interests and associations. Interests of publishers of educational materials, typically generated by teachers, are threatened by innovations such as computer-based learning. Added to teacher-centered resistance to reform is the general inertia that long-established, large systems create. Those involved in them, whether as producers or consumers, tend to prefer the devil they know to the one they don't. And teachers are probably right in most cases to be suspicious of the motives of top-down reformers and resentful of efforts to exclude them from educational policymaking.

In much of the Arab world, an additional factor complicating reform efforts is that educational systems engender battles between regimes and Islamists. Most regimes have managed to fully occupy the institutional high ground in government, while conceding some, typically less, strategic space within educational sectors to Islamists, whether as teachers or as schools or universities affiliated with religious organizations and institutions, of which Egypt's Al-Azhar University is the leading example. Reform of educational policies and institutions thus necessarily involves managing not only pressures from the educational establishment, at the core of which are teachers, but also reconfigurations within educational institutions of politically sensitive curricular, personnel, and other matters, including gender relations.

Executives are also cross-pressured by newly arising, frequently conflicting objectives as the old formula of preparation for public employment and inculcation of nationalism has lost its relevance, while globalization, including the provision of comparative information on educational performance, has intensified pressure for reform. The shift of vocational focus from the civil service to the private sector—the omnibus, ambitious term describing this hoped-for change being the creation of a “knowledge economy”—implies that the economy in question should be globally competitive. This in turn requires that education meet global standards, an ambitious goal that gives rise to the political dilemma of how best publicly to reconcile it with actual performance. Over the past decade or so, empirical measures of educational attainment have proliferated in numbers, types, and countries of application, thereby standardizing national comparisons while making them more precise and widely available. Virtually all empirical evidence reveals serious deficiencies in Arab states' educational attainments, by implication casting doubt on regimes' proclaimed objective to create a knowledge economy.

*The Economist*, for example, citing the Global Innovation Index, which measures scientific, technological, and cultural innovation, notes that “Arab states are losing the race for technological development.” On the index’s key subindexes of investment in human capital and knowledge and technology outputs, rich and poor Arab countries score 22 percent and 36 percent, respectively, below the levels predicted by their GDPs per capita.<sup>4</sup> The World Bank’s 2019 study of Arab education highlighted various deficiencies that impede the creation of human capital essential to transformation to knowledge economies. Counterproductive memorization of rules, facts, and procedures in teaching mathematics and science, for example, is almost twice the international average.<sup>5</sup> Autonomy of teachers and indeed of secondary schools and even universities, strongly and positively correlated with performance, is according to the World Bank “very low” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>6</sup> Average time devoted to religious studies in MENA is more than twice the 5 percent average for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.<sup>7</sup> Learning-adjusted years of schooling reveal that “the poor quality of education in MENA is equivalent to approximately three lost years of education.”<sup>8</sup> On the most recent TIMSS and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)—two of the three most widespread international education assessments—“no MENA country came close to the international medians of the percentage of students reaching the low international benchmarks.” Less than half of Egypt’s eighth-grade students had a basic understanding of science. In Morocco just over a third of fourth-graders “reached minimum reading literacy levels.”<sup>9</sup> While some underperformance can be accounted for by inadequate access, as for example with pre-primary enrollments in MENA being the world’s lowest, most of it is due to other determinants of educational quality.<sup>10</sup>

Although awareness of these empirical indicators is no doubt limited within Arab publics, dissatisfaction with educational quality is widespread, as is the perception that the much-touted transformation to knowledge economies is occurring slowly, if at all. These gaps between words and deeds of rulers are likely perceived as reflecting hypocrisy, even disdain, for publics, so they entail political risks for incumbents. The shift from education as preparation for the civil service to that for private sector-led, technologically driven growth is, in sum, proving to be problematic and politically risky, to say nothing of having yet to be achieved.

Much the same can be said about difficulties of instilling national identity and political loyalty in students. It was one thing to do so when

the “imperialist” enemy of the nation was obvious to all, and so a useful foil against which to homogenize the politically relevant thoughts and identities of students. It is altogether another matter when the alleged enemies are less obvious, not so inherently evil, and changing frequently. Even the notion of Arab nationalism has become problematic, especially in those countries, such as Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq, with significant ethnic and linguistic minorities, or in Egypt, where Arabism has always competed with Egyptian identity. The combination of didactic teaching of national history and contemporary identity poses new challenges to which governments and educational systems are responding in a more diverse, if not necessarily more effective, fashion than previously. Egypt, for example, is now emphasizing the state and the nation-building roles of the military, while tribal histories assume an equivalent historiographical centrality in many Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. But none of these fallback attempts to teach students who they are is as black and white, and hence as compelling, as the anti-imperialist, nationalist fare dished out to preceding generations.

A related contextual factor of Arab educational reform is the shift from liberal to authoritarian educational models. Liberal-arts education reached its apogee in the United States with the expansion of the middle class in the wake of World War II and, as in the Arab world and elsewhere, was associated with the growth of public employment. Its obvious decline at the post-secondary level in recent years and less obviously but nevertheless also real at primary and secondary levels has traced the downward trend of public employment in the United States. The ongoing focus on STEM disciplines, computer-based learning further stimulated by the 2020 pandemic, imposition of ever greater “accountability” as measured by performance on standardized tests, the relatively high instructional costs and apparent low vocational rewards of liberal arts, and the rise of charter schools have all militated against traditional liberal education. Emphasis on STEM disciplines alone impacts methods of teaching and evaluation, tending to standardize and routinize them.

Paralleling the decline of Western liberal education has been improving educational performance in many Asian countries, including Singapore, China, South Korea, Vietnam, and others, where more “structured” methods of teaching and learning are widely assumed to be employed. Recently announced plans by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to introduce the study of Chinese language into their national educational curricula may reflect the appeal of that country, its political economy, and its educational methods.<sup>11</sup> The challenge to Western educational models can be viewed as yet another indicator of increasingly

widespread belief in the relative superiority not only of putative Asian models, but also of authoritarian ones more generally, whether in politics, economics, or society. The interpretation of liberal education as but one component of a comprehensive Western model now in decline may further undermine its appeal.

Associated with the diminishing attractiveness of liberal education is privatization of education at all levels. Since 2004, global enrollment in private primary schools has grown from 10 percent to 17 percent of total students and from 19 percent to 27 percent of students in secondary schools.<sup>12</sup> The UAE has the highest proportion in the world of students in private schools, some 70 percent. Saudi Arabia's proportion of privately educated students increased by some 50 percent between 2007 and 2017. Vietnam has the world's fastest-growing private sector alongside the best-performing state-school system among low-income countries. Ten percent of Chinese primary and secondary students are in private schools. Education everywhere is becoming a business and, in some cases, large and financially successful. GEMS Education, based in Dubai, operates forty-seven schools, most of them in the Middle East. In the United States about a third of graduate education is now online, of which a very substantial proportion of even that offered by public universities is in fact "designed, supplied and marketed" by private firms.<sup>13</sup> Private charter-school enrollments in the United States grew from 400,000 students in 2000 to 2.8 million in 2015.

Privatization's main appeal to Arab governments is as in other developing regions—financial. Most privatization programs mobilize investment capital to supplement public allocations, whether in the form of schools 100 percent privately funded or in some mixed public-private form imitative of public-private partnerships increasingly popular, including within the World Bank, for construction and operation of physical infrastructure. Privatization serves other purposes as well, including globalization of national education, which in turn holds out the promise of quality enhancement, foreign-language learning, and associated gains in prestige for the nation and its government. Privatization can also improve public education by modeling new methods and providing competition. In countries with high population growth rates, the comparatively brief startup times of private schools enable them to service markets to which the public sector is slow to respond.

While Arab governments are aware of these potential benefits, most of them are also apprehensive about privatization. Fearful of autonomous activities of any sort, they worry that indirect regulatory as opposed to direct, hands-on control of education will produce fewer of the types of

citizens they want and more of those they don't. This situation is analogous to that of the early stages of privatization of Arab economies as the effectiveness and appeal of socialism waned some two generations ago. Fearful of truly autonomous economic actors but keen to reap material rewards from liberalizing political economies, most Arab governments tilted economic playing fields in favor of regime insiders and their cronies. Presumably this strategy of "preferential privatization" that gave rise to crony capitalism will also be the one with which Arab governments try to square the circle of attracting private resources into education while maintaining tight control of the sector and its outputs. The regionwide growth, for example, of Dubai-based GEMS Education, might reflect the application of this strategy in various Arab countries.

Responses to the threats and opportunities associated with educational reform vary from country to country in the Arab world. In some, financial constraints are the primary concern, whereas in others, notably the oil-rich states, commitments to economic diversification are stronger drivers of educational policy. In still others, educational systems serve as battlegrounds between competing social forces, whether ethnic, linguistic, religious, or tribal, with calculations of how best to engender or preserve national coherence dominant. All Arab educational policymakers are cross-pressured by competing fears and desires as they struggle to achieve a mix of objectives that typically include cost-cutting, attracting private domestic and foreign investors, building knowledge economies, defusing popular discontent with educational services, instilling loyalty and patriotism, and bolstering the nation's image. Policy outcomes reveal the weighting of these priorities, serving as mirrors of "princes" (rulers) reflecting their interests, concerns, ambitions, and to some extent the internal divisions with which they must contend.

### **Causes of Arab Educational Inadequacies**

The primary purposes of this volume are to investigate the constraints imposed on reform of Arab education by the political economies in which they are enmeshed, and the consequences of these limitations. Its underlying assumption is that aspects of Arab political economies now recognized as having retarded economic diversification and growth have also impeded improvements in delivery of public goods, key of which is education. The World Bank's as well as independent researchers' recent investigations of the negative economic impacts of what Douglass North and his institutional economist colleagues have termed "limited-access

orders” provide a model that can also be applied to service delivery, including education.<sup>14</sup> Among the contributors to this volume, Ishac Diwan (Chapter 2) has played a key role in investigating the negative micro- and macroeconomic impacts of strong insider/outsider divides characteristic of limited-access orders that preference the former at the expense of the latter.<sup>15</sup> A key concern of this volume is thus to investigate the degree to which such divides also negatively impact educational policies.

Determining how and to what extent beneficiaries of Arab limited-access orders shape educational systems to serve their interests, both economic and political, must rely primarily on inference, as the policy process is too opaque for intentionality clearly to be discerned through public statements and positions. The profound discrepancy between the stated and actual intentions of decisionmakers characteristic of limited-access orders further shrouds their intents. Arab educational practices—whether at the broad level of favoring private over public education, or emphasizing didactic teaching of history and religion at the partial expense of citizenship and scientific/technical educations, or in the form of discrete policies, such as hosting of foreign universities, sending students abroad, or creating secondary and tertiary institutions under the direct auspices and control of ruling elites—provide indirect, if not absolutely conclusive, evidence of intentions. In this volume, Christopher Davidson (Chapter 7) explores the intentions of national decisionmakers in financing the establishment of US university branch campuses in the Gulf, while Roel Meijer (Chapter 3) reveals how the rulers of Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco have shaped curricular materials to impart conceptions of citizenship as duties and loyalties, rather than as rights.

Comparative experience is also relevant to infer decisionmakers’ intents. Merilee Grindle, another contributor to this volume (Chapter 9), has argued, for example, that innovations in Latin American education have resulted from both political reform mongering made possible by the semidemocratic nature of those political systems—hence the opportunities they provide for politicians to appeal to constituents with proposals for educational improvements—and by reasonably meritocratic civil services that generate both will and capacity for reform.<sup>16</sup> The Latin American example thus begs the question of educational “reform stifling” in Arab regimes and whether it is intentional and carefully managed by elites, or is more just a by-product of general authoritarianism, including the negative impacts of clientelistic rather than meritocratic civil services. It similarly raises the question of from whence reforms might come in the more closed, Arab authoritarian settings, with the most obvious possible direction being from the top down. The

emphasis on creating knowledge economies and the plethora of long-term “visions” for Arab countries as mandated by their rulers and drafted by international consulting firms suggest these rulers are contemplating how educational reforms might be accomplished without disempowering or possibly even displacing themselves. Other evidence suggests that Arab insiders are trying to reshape educational systems in a fashion informed by other authoritarian states, key of which may be China specifically and the countries of East Asia more generally. Creating selective recruitment channels into political and economic elites, as the Chinese Communist Party has done, may be an attractive alternative to the difficult and politically parlous task of a broad upgrading of mass public education, as it seems to be in Egypt under Sisi, as discussed in this volume by Robert Springborg (Chapter 5). Another of the contributors, Alisa Jones (Chapter 10), reviews East Asian educational models against the backdrop of their possible relevance to Arab ones.

Educational systems, in sum, provide evidence that can be drawn upon to investigate the intentions and behavior of Arab elites, the value of that evidence being enhanced in this volume by both Grindle and Jones through comparisons between countries within the region and to those outside it. In turn, the policies Arab elites propagate can be assessed from the perspectives of their pedagogical impacts as well as those impacts’ consequences for polities and economies. This inclusive approach makes it possible to better understand why Arab education continues to underperform, why it has been so resistant to reform, and what the prospects are for fulfilling proclaimed goals of reform or, conversely, for pressure from below generating irresistible demands for real change, possibly not only of education, but also of the political systems that bear heavy responsibility for its present inadequate state.

### **Evaluating State Performance**

Institutional economists and political economists believe that three factors determine state performance—capacity, policy, and society. Of these three factors, state capacity appears to be the easiest to conceptualize and measure. Michael Mann’s notion of infrastructural power—the state’s ability to penetrate and effectively regulate society and thereby benefit from that interaction—is particularly relevant to educational reform.<sup>17</sup> He juxtaposes infrastructural to so-called despotic power, the latter of which means the state’s recourse to repression to govern as opposed to reliance on broad,

deep, institutionalized state-society interactions. As regards education, since its effectiveness depends heavily on beneficial classroom interactions, infrastructural power, generated by intensive, rights-embedded interactions between citizens and governments, and so also between students and teachers, is especially vital to its success. By contrast, despotic power can be employed to structure educational policy at macro levels, including seeking to shape it to discourage outsiders to challenge the powers and privileges of insiders, but is largely irrelevant or even counterproductive to vital micro-level educational processes.

Limited-access orders rely more heavily on despotic than infrastructural power, thereby reducing their capacities to deliver human services, especially education. Capacity constraints impel these states to “import” educational services, including by sending students abroad, and to concentrate educational services on selected clienteles, thus reinforcing policy-driven preferences to privilege insiders. Moreover, capacity constraints reinforce path dependency, because innovation is particularly difficult when analysis, monitoring, and other elements of assessment are weak or lacking, a problem reinforced by fear of political repercussions of policy innovation. Authoritarian control of stakeholder organizations, including teachers’ unions and associations of parents, weakens state capacities to deliver educational services, because it militates against professionalism and effective, positive stakeholder contribution to policy-making and implementation.

Unfortunately, commonly used indicators of capacity and infrastructural power are primarily financial in nature, such as ratios between direct and indirect taxes, governmental revenue as a proportion of GDP, proportion of bank credit to the private sector, and so on. The indicators of capacity and infrastructural power closest to education are those that measure presence and performance of bureaucracies, the former of which are relatively easily quantified, the latter of which are not. This leaves the challenge of seeking to define, measure, and compare Arab countries among themselves and Arab to non-Arab ones along the capacity/infrastructural power dimensions without having clear, commonly accepted indicators for them. Instead of seeking to develop such indicators—an exercise in its own right—various of the following chapters assess in mainly qualitative fashion the capacities of respective states to foster coherent, effective educational systems.

The policy contribution to state performance is less clear than is the capacity dimension, probably because it is more subjective. It seems particularly relevant for education, however, and is reasonably well

researched in that field. Much of the material in this volume, drawing on a wide variety of sources, is focused more directly on the substance of educational policy than on capacity to implement it. Historical and cross-cultural models, including evolution of curricular materials, comparisons to Asia and Latin America, and the increasing Arab infatuation with authoritarian educational models, whether homegrown or imported, are examples of such educational policies. So too is consideration of educational outsourcing by the state, whether in the form of sending students abroad, privatizing primary and secondary education, or permitting or even subsidizing foreign universities to open branches, and in approaching citizenship through an emphasis on duties rather than rights. Lurking behind consideration of educational policies and linking them back to capacity for their implementation is the nature of their formation, most especially the degree to which they involve stakeholders. The greater, more institutionalized is stakeholder involvement, the stronger the state's capacity to implement resulting policies, as is evidenced in several of the country case studies, most especially that of Morocco by Florian Kohstall (Chapter 4).

Finally, some societies are easier to govern than others. Degree of societal homogeneity/fragmentation is one of the dimensions commonly measured and assessed, with somewhat mixed findings regarding the Arab world, depending on the social solidarity in question, such as whether it is ethnic, tribal, linguistic, or other.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of Arab education, the societal dimension assumes particular importance regarding such issues as language diversity; societal, class, and residential cleavages; and cultural attributes including orientation toward authority, participation, and democracy. All of these societal variables are dealt with in one or more chapters here, as for example that of the challenges posed by linguistic dualism to Algerian education, examined by Adel Hamaizia and Andrew Leber (Chapter 8).

Societal constraints in limited-access orders are particularly problematical because processes and institutions that facilitate intercommunity communications and conflict resolution are weak or absent. Control is maintained through despotic, not infrastructural, power. Societal divisions are thus likely to cut through educational systems, undermining their overall coherence, as evidence of the profound impacts of inequity in Arab countries on educational performance suggests and that is documented for Tunisia by Lindsay Benstead (Chapter 6). The gender gap also poses a particularly large barrier to young Arab women seeking successful transitions from classrooms to employment. Society-wide

expectations engendered by the authoritarian bargain entailed in social contracts and the broad context of rentier economies and its inherent clientelism seem also to impact educational performance, as may attitudes formed in authoritarian family and other cultural settings, topics addressed by Ishac Diwan (Chapter 2) by drawing upon data from the World Values Survey.

Assessing the impacts on educational systems of state performance resulting from their capacities, policies, and interactions with the societies they govern complements research on the impacts of limited-access orders on economies. How the divide between insiders and outsiders observed to obtain for economic actors and their performance can be applied to education is a principal concern of this volume. Unfortunately, there are as yet no established indicators that can easily measure educational insider/outsider divides and their consequences equivalent to those for economies, such as politician-businessperson connections, firm profitability, tariff protection, access to credit, and the like. Our hope is that this volume suggests dimensions for which indicators will be developed, thereby supporting improvement in the study of the political economy of reform of Arab education from being virtually entirely qualitative as at present, to at least partially quantitative.

## Notes

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