

**An Egyptian Partnership Initiative to Enhance Youth Opportunities  
The LEAD Experiment  
The American University, Cairo**

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**ملخص**

اتخذت الجامعة الامريكية بالقاهرة مبادرة من أجل تعزيز فرص الشباب، وذلك بتبني برنامج رائد يهدف إلي إعداد شباب للقرن الواحد والعشرين، ويعرف ببرنامج "التعليم والتنمية لإعداد القادة". ويوفر هذا البرنامج الفرصة للشباب لكي يكتسبوا المعرفة والمهارات، التي تمكنهم من ان يشاركوا مشاركة فاعلة في خدمة الطني.

جاء هذا البرنامج لسد النقص في النظام التعليمي، وليلبي احتياجات سوق العمل، من خلال عمالة مدربة، ذات كفاءة عالية. ويعتمد البرنامج علي اختيار دقيق للطلبة، بناء علي معايير محددة، مع مراعاة تكافؤ الفرص للجميع، و من ثم فإن اختيار الطلبة تم من بين تلاميذ المدارس الحكومية، الذين قد لا تسمح ظروفهم الاقتصادية بالالتحاق بالجامعة الامريكية، حيث التعليم المتميز. وبناء علي مبدأ تكافؤ الفرص، جاء اختيار طالب وطالبة من كل محافظة بعد تطبيق عملية الفرز النهائي، من بين المتفوقين علمياً. ولذلك أصبح من حق هؤلاء الطلاب الحصول علي مجانية كاملة للتعليم، مع اقامة كاملة في بيت الطلبة والاستفادة من كل المرافق به، وكذلك التأمين الصحي.

ويشمل البرنامج ، إضافة الي النظام التعليمي، تدريباً علي مهارات مختلفة وأنشطة للمشاركة المجتمعية. وتتمثل الشراكة في هذا البرنامج من خلال التمويل المقدم من هيئة التنمية الامريكية، ووزارة التعاون الدولي، والجامعة الامريكية بالقاهرة، بينما يقع الاشراف علي وزارة التعليم. ولقد التحق ١٠٤ طلاب بالبرنامج خلال عامين من بدأ تطبيقه. وتتناول هذه الدراسة البرنامج من منطلق الدور الذي يقدمه في نظام التعليم، مع التعرض لاتجاهات الطلبة المستفيدين منه وتوقعاتهم من البرنامج.

**Abstract**

In the pursuit of enhancing youth opportunities, the American University in Cairo has initiated a pioneer program under the title "Leadership for Education and Development Program" (LEAD). The program has the objective of preparing Egyptian youth for the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through equipping them with the necessary qualifications to lead change in society, basically the knowledge and skills that enable them to be active participants in the development of their country. Underlying the program mission is the realization that the educational system is unable to provide the youth with the quality of skill training suited to the needs of the labor market. In this context, the program aims to build in them commitment to life-long community service, with special emphasis on leadership skills. Consequently, selection of the candidates follows strict screening procedures.

The program emphasizes equal opportunity, therefore guaranteeing an equal gender representation—i.e., one male and one female from each governorate. Candidates are graduates of the state school system, and as such they belong to middle, lower middle, and even lower socio-economic classes. The program allows them access to the American University in Cairo, which is an elitist institution not only far beyond their financial means, but is also one which offers a higher quality of education when compared to the state system. In addition, the students are exposed to cultural/social activities to help widen their experiential scope.

Once selected, the student is given a full tuition scholarship, full-board accommodation in the university hostel, access to all facilities, food and even health insurance by the Ministry of Health. The program is funded jointly by the U.S. Agency for International Development, The Egyptian Ministry of International Cooperation, and the American University in Cairo, while it falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education.

The experiment as such is a good example of a partnership between the national government and foreign organizations, aiming to help address the current youth issues in education with its lack of proper skill training; the needs of the labor market; and the disparity in educational opportunities. Over the period of two years 104 students have been recruited to form the nucleus of a segment well equipped to face the challenges of the changing world.

The paper will present this pioneer experiment and highlight its impact on youth issues in particular and society in general.

### **What Is LEAD? A Pioneer Experiment:**

On September 15, 2004, the American University in Cairo inaugurated officially a pioneer program under the title “Leadership for Education and Development Program” (LEAD). This is a program with a plan separate from the regular university admission procedures, occupying a special status, yet affiliated with the system in terms of curricula/ disciplines. It has its own selection requirements, training program, and evaluation criteria (to be presented later in this paper), but is hosted in the university with its facilities.

The program’s vision is “to prepare Egyptian students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and qualify them with the vision of Egypt’s future.” This objective is planned to take place through equipping them with the necessary qualifications to lead changes in society as potential participants in future programs of development.

The output of LEAD is a student who, after the required years of schooling/training, has acquired knowledge and skills that enable him/her to be an active performer in his/her society at the different levels of the pursuits for development. Moreover, the program aims to build in the students a commitment to community service through an affiliation with this community.

Basic qualities to be acquired by the target beneficiaries, as explicitly stated in the mission of LEAD, include leadership skills, a respect for work, transparency, respect for the other and tolerance of differences, in addition to communication, presentation and negotiation skills. The objective extends to include the broader scope of the global arena. In this respect, the plan is to equip students with those abilities that allow them to compete internationally and integrate in the global world.

The program provides full accommodation for the students in the university hostel on a full-board basis, enjoying access to all available facilities—i.e., laundry, gym, computer laboratories, dining areas, and entertainment space. They also receive vouchers for three meals seven days a week. Advantages include health insurance, in addition. The objective here is to place him/her in an environment conducive to the acquisition of the targeted skills, rather than subject him/her to factors that might interfere negatively with the program goals if his/her environment does not provide the right atmosphere.

During the years of schooling, the student is expected to maintain good academic standing, as represented by a minimum of B average. Personality development activities cover seminars, conferences, and workshops tailored to the acquisition of leadership skills. Training for these functions is based on the delegation of their responsibility to the students themselves, planning, covering, organization, as well as management tasks. Community participation is to be achieved through the involvement of students in the community service clubs already offered by the university.

Throughout the program, values of honesty, work ethic, non-discrimination, commitment and responsibility are emphasized, practiced and evaluated.

An additional bonus is granted to the top three of the students as evaluated on the above criteria. They are allowed a semester study abroad in universities in the U.S.A., this year being Harvard and Portland Universities.

Since the program is a pioneer experiment at the American University, there arises the need to guarantee the proper procedure of the intended plan. Consequently, a committee is formed to monitor the program and review monthly the steps taken “in light of the vision and mission of the program”. The total cost of the program is 100 million Egyptian pounds. The cost of each student per year is 144,000 L.E., amounting to a total cost of 500,000 L.E. for the four years.

This paper is an attempt to present the LEAD experiment as one that aims to enhance youth opportunities, as well as expand their economic prospects as a consequence. The paper will investigate the relevance of the experiment to both the educational system and the existing socioeconomic conditions in Egyptian society. An analysis of the impact of the program on the students will follow, through a survey conducted by the author on a small number of the target beneficiaries, with the objective of understanding their *a priori* expectations; the actual experience in relation to these expectations; their adjustment to the environment, both socially and academically; positive and negative aspects of the program; and problems they face, if any. It is hoped that this survey will reveal lessons to be learned from the experience, if it is to be repeated at any point in time and in other communities.

#### **Recruitment of Students: Advertising and Selection Procedures:**

Since the program is a pioneer one, it was necessary to assure that it properly reached the target population. Consequently, advertisements were placed in the more-commonly read newspapers before the results of the Thanawya Amma (high school certificate) were announced. Later advertisements followed after the results were publicized. Parallel information was sent to the Ministry of Education to distribute to the educational authorities in the different governorates. In addition, information was likewise announced on a radio station, which is known to target young people.

The received applications were screened based on the criteria of selection. It was necessary to develop a database for the program in order to facilitate procedures. The highest seven male and female students in each governorate were then selected. They were then given written tests, namely the English language ELPET, and essay writing. A fifteen-minute interview followed to determine the final recruitment.

Once the student was accepted, he/she was to follow the regular admissions procedures for the American University.

It is important to mention that the mandatory gender factor of equality in the program is a major component, since the initiation of the whole experiment has been through the Office of Equality of Opportunity and Affirmative Action in the university.

Applicants for the first year were 1000 students. The number increased for the second year, to reach 1145. In the third year, 598 students applied.

Over a period of two years, 102 students have been recruited, having been exposed to a strict selection procedure requiring high academic standard—a score of 85% minimum at the level of the secondary school certificate, as well as a 90% score in the English language. Quality participation in extracurricular activities is likewise required, to be documented by certificates. The idea is not to limit selection to academic performance alone—a mistake that befalls the current educational system, and that is highly criticized as inefficient to guarantee quality training for the needs of the work force.

Consequently, in order to ensure students' evaluation on a broad scale also covering personality traits, the above-mentioned interviews were held individually and included in the overall final selection.

### **The Relevance of LEAD: The Educational System in Context:**

The significance/importance of the LEAD program can best be understood in the light of the current status of the educational system in Egypt. One cannot deny the fact that the system is undergoing a crisis, since it undoubtedly suffers from a number of problems, the sum of which is definitely not conducive to its efficiency. Challenges facing the educational system cannot be underestimated. Features of this crisis can be summed as follows:

First: There is an obvious disparity in opportunities, where inequality tends to be the dominant feature. There is a dual system of education, one public system under state control, which serves the majority of the population; and another private one, which caters to the privileged few. Whereas the former is offered free the latter is not, the cost sometimes reaching exorbitant levels, far beyond the average Egyptian family's means. Needless to say, an obvious disparity in quality exists between the two systems. What aggravates the situation is the widely prevalent phenomenon of private tutorship, which drains the family budget, and which creates financial pressure on most segments in society, more so those with limited economic means.

The existing inequality in the system is not only reflected in the public/private distinctions. It extends to include social class disparities and regional gaps as seen in the rural-urban dichotomy, not to mention the gender bias.

Second: The share of education in the state budget is low. Public expenditure on education as percentage of total expenditure is only 14.7%, while its percentage of GDP is 5.1%. (*Egypt Human Development Report: 2005,p.206*)

The largest portion of this budget is absorbed by the teachers' salaries, hence the low share allocated to the system itself, not excluding the availability of resources, which is the area mostly hit by this deficiency. Public expenditure on education is clearly short of covering investments in educational infrastructure. The resulting situation is one where there is a shortage in equipment and training facilities, not to mention available space. The output is a student who has not been exposed to practical training as a consequence.

### **Socio-economic Background: Youth in Context:**

In addition to the situation of the Egyptian system of education as given above, the role of the program can be understood in the context of the existing socioeconomic conditions. Needless to say, Egyptian society is currently undergoing a number of problems, most significant of which is apparent on the economic level. Moreover, there exists an interrelationship between more than one variable that tend to interact to create major challenges. High inflation; unemployment; an unbalanced labor market; aggravated by a rapidly growing population in comparison to a low economic growth rate are but some of the factors that characterize this situation. It is the Egyptian youth in particular that are caught in the midst of this drama, since it is these challenges that affect their prospects for the future.

In an attempt to understand the repercussions of the above variables on the young segment, one needs to explore the underlying causes. In the first place, a major feature of the age structure in the population pyramid is its broad, steep base, which includes a large segment of young people, hence the predominant youthfulness of the population. A logical consequence here is a high dependency ratio, leading to great pressure on the national economy, mostly seen in the need to absorb the youth in the work force. National figures show that 51% of Egyptians fall within the working age bracket of 15-64. About 35% of these are aged 15-24, constituting the potential entrants to the labor market (*ibid.p.102*).

The current labor market is, however, unable to absorb this segment, which continues to grow because of the still high rate of natural increase, estimated at 2.2% (*ibid.* p.202). Youth unemployment is therefore one of Egypt's major challenges of today, although having declined from 11% in 2003 to 10% in 2005 (*ibid.* p.101).

The following table presents an illustration of the rising unemployment rate, as given between the years 1976 and 2002:

**Unemployment Rate between 1976-2002**  
(15 years and above)

Year	Rate
1976	4.8
1986	11.1
1996	9
1997	8.2
1998	8.2
1999	8
2000	8.8
2001	9.1
2002	9.9

Source: Population Census 2002

The above table shows the rising unemployment rate between 1976 and 2002, with some fluctuations that appear in the middle years. One possible explanation for these fluctuations may be related to the changing employment policies as well as measures taken in the economic reform structural adjustment programs, especially those related to privatization.

In the second place, national plans do not coordinate the educational system with the needs of the labor market, hence the resulting imbalance in the latter. This imbalance can be seen in the existence of surplus labor in some jobs, and a parallel shortage in others, mostly apparent in those areas highly needed for developmental pursuits.

There is further the difficult-to-overcome problem of the quality/quantity trade off. In addition, curricula are, for the most part, not consistent with employment opportunities, since they lack the proper training for the respective jobs.

Current curricula are not structured to accommodate activities outside the school syllabus because of reasons mentioned above, thus restricting the learning process to rote memory. The necessary training and personality development preparing the student for the later work force is therefore lacking.

It follows that Egyptian youth's prospects in education and employment opportunities are not without challenges, some of them can well be characterized as rather serious, and further still, having serious ramifications at both the social and economic levels.

**The Function of LEAD: Challenges to Overcome:**

The above sections are necessary as an introduction aiming to place the LEAD program in context, since it primarily serves an important function not only at the level of education, but more so, at the

broader level of society. This function, aiming to overcome a number of challenges, can be seen as follows:

First: the program aims to enhance youth opportunities, basically those whose opportunities are likely to be limited. In this respect, selection of students covers all governorates of Egypt from public schools where education is relatively of a lower quality. Here, once selected, the students are allowed access to the American University in Cairo. This institution is an elitist school, which is far beyond their financial means, since they belong to the middle and lower middle classes, for the most part. In addition, it offers a higher quality of education, when compared to the state system. Furthermore, the system in this university is based on liberal education, exposing the students to a broad range of subjects, thus widening his/her scope of learning. There is high probability that the selected students could not have enrolled in this university outside this privileged opportunity, since they fall in the less advantaged segment of society.

Second; LEAD is based on the principle of equality of opportunity, as has already been mentioned. Consequently, one male and one female are selected from each governorate. In this way, the program addresses the gender gap in education.

By granting public school graduates the right to education at a private institution, and at the same time guaranteeing equal gender representation, the program is basically addressing the challenge of inequality in the educational system, both in terms of social class disparities and gender bias. Significant here is the fact that selection extends to cover those governorates where students' chances for good education/ economic prospects are limited, as is more obvious in Upper Egypt and remote areas.

Third: The program is a good example of partnership for development, in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where Goal 8 calls to "develop a global partnership for development". The rationale here is that partnership is conducive to the concerns for development, especially with the existing challenges in the developing world. LEAD is a joint partnership of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Egyptian Ministry of International Cooperation, and the American University in Cairo. It falls under the supervision of the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education. As such, the program represents public/private partnership, highly advocated at present.

Fourth: Underlying the program mission is the realization that the current educational system is unable to provide the youth with the acquisition of skill and training suited to the needs of the labor market, as has already been mentioned. Public institutions of higher education depend basically on the theoretical nature of courses, and, for the most part, lack training on the practical side. In the situation of unemployment, competitive qualities are required, hence the broader perspective of skill training that is offered to students. One major problem in the public system is the lack of training, not only because of the shortage of facilities, but also because of the structure/ contents of the curricula.

#### **Response from the Beneficiaries: Students' Perceptions:**

It may be a bit early to evaluate the program, in line with its objectives, since it currently includes two groups of students, who have not gone beyond the second year of university. However, their current status can serve as a relatively reasonable indicator for evaluation through an attempt to explore the impact so far. Consequently, the author has engaged in a small study, using open-ended interviews in an informal setting, in an attempt to address the performance/adjustment of the students.

One basic variable in the research position was to investigate the expectations of the students, having come from backgrounds alien to the American University, not only in terms of its system of education, but more so, in the socio-economic environment on campus. They all affirmed that they joined the program aiming at a good quality education, proper training for the work force, and especially for the consequently better job opportunities they are allowed in the competitive market. They have found

their expectation for the quality of education, and feel that the kind of training they get is a positive means preparing them to compete in the labor market, even at the international level. Most of them have, consequently, joined those majors that are in demand in the more modern work force—namely, engineering, computer science and business administration.

A significantly obvious attitude among students of the LEAD program is that of an outgoing personality, critical thinking, and willingness to pursue learning. They admit that the fact that the university allows them to participate in extracurricular activities has contributed to the development of their personalities toward more maturity. They had already been involved in such, or similar, activities, albeit at a smaller scale. The atmosphere in their new environment, however, has been more conducive to the development of an all-rounded personality.

They blend with the student body on campus. Contrary to what would be expected because of the difference in background, the LEAD students reported clearly that they do not have problems of adjustment with the other students—i.e., the regular American University students of a more elitist socio-economic background with a different schooling history/environment. They are career-oriented, trying to develop proper skills to fit in the labor market, emphasizing the fact that it is not only academic performance that is the criterion for career success, an attitude, which reflects a totally different outlook when compared to the prevailing one at the broader level of society at large. What is also obvious is their great enthusiasm to benefit fully from the privilege they have been granted, trying to absorb the knowledge/experience from all dimensions.

The students organized two conferences, one each year in the last two years. These two conferences are a source of pride to them, since they have taken full responsibility for the task. Not only do these functions represent learning experiences to them, having gone through the whole procedure on their own, but the knowledge/information they gained was quite intensive. In addition, students learned to work as a team. The conferences covered two important topics, relevant to Egypt's current conditions—namely, the role of tourism in development, and civic society respectively. In addition, the students had a chance, through these activities, to meet with important political and top government executive figures—an opportunity which they could not have had outside the program. Their response to this special privilege was mainly based on its impact on their personalities, having given them self-confidence, maturity, and the ability to communicate efficiently.

They feel that the fact that seminars and workshops are spread over the countries' governorates has given them exposure to a broader field of vision as to their countries' problems/issues. In addition, they had the chance of meeting with some diplomats, who helped in discussing international affairs, thus widening their scope of information/knowledge.

Furthermore, the American university includes a number of community service groups that serve orphans, children with special needs, the elderly, poor segments, cancer patients, and similar marginalized/vulnerable groups. Through the LEAD students' participation in these activities they feel that they are doing good service to the community. They did not face any discriminatory attitude/behavior from the other students when joining these groups.

A common problem that was almost unanimously reported by the respondents is the overload that they are bearing because of the tight, busy schedule they have to cope with. To some, this is a source of psychological pressure. Others feel "it is really worth it". For most of them, as much as they are enjoying the program as a privileged working experience, they would prefer a more relaxed schedule. However, they themselves wonder: if it were different, would the benefit be the same?

## A Final Word:

The LEAD program as above presented is, in fact, a pioneer experiment. It is an example of an attempted solution to one of the many problems facing Egyptian youth. As such, one can observe that although it has been created at a local level and in consistence with local conditions/challenges, it nevertheless includes certain aspects that can serve as lessons to be learned for the benefit of other societies. Here the idea does not mean that the experiment be necessarily duplicated in the exact way, but that it be based on the specific conditions in the respective societies, each with its own particular circumstances.

A current evaluation, as attempted by the author, may help highlight its situation so far, albeit incomplete because the program is still in process. However, the fact remains that the actual evaluation should be made at a much later period, when the fruits of the experiment have been achieved. This can be seen in the future impact of the program on the target beneficiaries, first as competitors to the labor market, and second as actual participants in its ranks. How far has it helped expand their economic prospects?

It is clear that the program emphasizes those qualities which are very much in demand in the work force, and are consequently, very much highlighted in the competitive market. A future evaluation can test how well this training has helped in expanding the economic prospects of these students. Which sectors have they targeted, and more importantly, which sectors have absorbed them? As Egyptian economic policy is moving towards privatization, it is expected that the kind of training the LEAD students have will help them find positions in the private sector, if the government ranks are already congested.

What can be detected now is a positive trend in the program's impact as seen in the students' current situation. It suffices to say that positive aspects are already in sight. One interesting factor to be mentioned here in the obviously seen positive attitude of students is their refusal to talk about "problems, but rather, "challenges", because they feel that the program has no problems.

It is recommended that a follow-up study be made once they graduate and face the realities of the job market. An evaluation as such can help clarify the lessons learned from the experiment if it is to be repeated. Such an evaluation can help reveal both the positive and negative aspects in the program, once there is a deeper/broader investigation into it. One possible modification might be the tight, busy schedule that the students had to endure, not allowing them any breaks, let alone sufficient time to study. They had programs on most weekends. The question, however, remains: if the program is cut down, will it be as effective?

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