

Egypt's Vision 2030 and Higher Education: Equity, Quality, and Governance from a Public Good Perspective

Selim Abdellatif ¹

¹ *Erasmus Mundus Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE), University of Continuing Education Krems, Austria and Tampere University, Finland, selim.abdellatif98@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0002-8011-1407*

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Abstract

Higher education has increasingly been positioned as a central instrument for national development, social mobility, and knowledge-based economic transformation. Across different world regions, governments have articulated comprehensive development strategies that assign universities a key role in advancing innovation, improving human capital, and addressing social inequalities. At the same time, these strategies often reflect tensions between viewing higher education as a public good that serves collective societal interests and treating it as a private investment oriented toward labour market outcomes and economic competitiveness.

Egypt's Vision 2030 strategy identifies higher education as a key instrument for national development, with stated priorities related to access, quality, and governance. While the strategy has attracted growing scholarly and policy attention, its higher education agenda has received less attention through a public good framework that brings equity, quality, and governance together. This paper analyzes Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education strategy through the lenses of equity, quality, and governance, drawing on a public good perspective. The study examines how the objectives of Vision 2030 are framed and operationalized and how these choices shape the reform agenda using a qualitative approach based on policy analysis and secondary literature.

The analysis argues that while Vision 2030 frames higher education through public good-oriented commitments to inclusion, quality, and social development, its operational tools emphasize access expansion, accreditation, benchmarking, and centralized performance steering. This creates tensions between the strategy's broad public good aspirations and the instruments used to pursue higher education reform.

Keywords: Egypt Vision 2030, Higher Education Policy, Public Good, Equity, Quality, Governance.

Introduction

In Egypt, Vision 2030 constitutes the country's overarching national development framework, outlining long-term priorities across economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions (Government of Egypt, 2016). Within this framework, higher education is explicitly positioned as a driver of sustainable development, innovation, and

social justice. Vision 2030 emphasizes expanding access to education, improving quality, strengthening research and innovation capacity, and modernizing governance and institutional performance. Given its comprehensive scope and political centrality, Vision 2030 represents a significant policy document for understanding how higher education is conceptualized within Egypt's development agenda.

As the country's overarching national development framework, Vision 2030 does not merely outline sectoral reforms but articulates broader assumptions about the role of higher education in society, including who should have access, what counts as quality, and how institutions should be governed. Therefore, examining Vision 2030 provides a unique opportunity to assess how higher education is conceptualized at the highest policy level, where social objectives, economic priorities, and governance choices intersect.

Since the launch of Vision 2030, the higher education sector has also been the subject of more targeted reform initiatives, most notably the National Strategy for Higher Education and Scientific Research introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in 2023. This strategy seeks to operationalize the broader objectives of Vision 2030 through sector-specific principles, including integration with economic needs, interdisciplinarity, innovation, and internationalization (Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, 2023). Together, these policy documents suggest a strong commitment to reform, while also raising important questions about how ambitious goals are translated into governance mechanisms and institutional practice.

Despite the important representation of higher education within Vision 2030, existing research has tended to focus either on system-level challenges in Egyptian higher education, such as access, quality, and governance constraints, or on specific reforms and sub-sectors, often without situating these analyses within a coherent theoretical framework of higher education as a public good (Haq, 2020; Embaby, 2025). While this literature addresses various aspects of higher education reform in Egypt and discusses Vision 2030 in relation to specific challenges, fewer studies adopt an explicitly integrated, theory-driven analytical framework that systematically examines equity, quality, and governance together through a public good perspective.

International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD have developed frameworks and analytical tools for assessing higher education systems, including approaches that emphasize equity, quality, governance, and the public good role of higher education (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). While these frameworks have informed broader discussions of higher education reform in Egypt, their application to the analysis of Vision 2030 as an integrated higher education strategy has been less systematically developed. This study contributes to this body of literature by offering an integrative, theory-informed analysis of Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education agenda through equity, quality, and governance lenses from a public good perspective.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the following research question: *To what extent does Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education strategy reflect a public good approach to higher education, when assessed through equity, quality, and governance lenses?*

Framing this analysis through a public good perspective is particularly important in the Egyptian context, where rapid system expansion, fiscal constraints, and increasing differentiation between public and private provision raise fundamental questions about equity, quality, and state responsibility. The choice of equity, quality, and governance reflects their centrality in both theoretical discussions of higher education as a public good and in international policy frameworks used to evaluate higher education systems (Stiglitz, 1999; McMahon, 2009; OECD, 2019). Rather than assessing policy impact or implementation outcomes, the paper adopts a qualitative, document-based policy analysis approach, focusing on how higher education is framed, prioritized, and steered within Vision 2030 and related strategies.

The paper argues that Vision 2030 frames higher education through public good-oriented commitments to inclusion, quality, and social development, but operationalizes these ambitions largely through access expansion, accreditation, benchmarking, and centralized performance steering.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the conceptual foundations of higher education as a public good and introduces the analytical and methodological

framework. This is followed by a discussion of Vision 2030 and the broader higher education policy architecture in Egypt. The core of the paper consists of three analytical sections examining equity, quality, and governance in turn, drawing on national policy documents, empirical studies, and international benchmarks. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for understanding higher education as a public good in the Egyptian context.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in the understanding of higher education as a public good and adopts a qualitative, theory-informed analytical framework to analyze Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education agenda. Rather than relying on a single theoretical tradition, the framework integrates insights from economic theory, higher education governance literature, and international policy discourse. Public good theory provides the main conceptual foundation, while equity, quality, and governance are used as the three analytical lenses.

This approach allows for an examination of how higher education is conceptualized, prioritized, and steered within national development strategies, while remaining sensitive to contextual and institutional factors..

Higher Education and the Public Good

The notion of higher education as a public good has been articulated across multiple disciplinary traditions. From an economic perspective, knowledge exhibits key public good characteristics: it is largely non-rivalrous, meaning that one individual's use does not diminish its availability to others, and it is often non-excludable, making it difficult and inefficient to restrict access only to paying users (Stiglitz, 1999). Because private actors tend to invest according to private returns rather than broader social benefits, markets alone are likely to underprovide knowledge and education, particularly in areas such as basic research and higher education. This results in systematic underinvestment unless public intervention is present (Stiglitz, 1999).

Importantly, Stiglitz conceptualizes knowledge not only as a public good but also as a global public good, whose benefits extend across national borders and are especially

significant for developing countries that rely on access to global knowledge flows. Higher education plays a central role in producing new knowledge, adapting global knowledge to local contexts, and disseminating knowledge throughout society. Excessive reliance on market mechanisms, such as privatization or strong commodification of knowledge, risks reducing efficiency, slowing innovation, and increasing inequality, which highlights the need for a balance between market incentives and public support (Stiglitz, 1999).

Complementing this economic perspective, higher education generates substantial social returns that extend beyond individual graduates, including improved public health, civic participation, social cohesion, and democratic stability (McMahon, 2009). Many of these benefits are non-market in nature and are not fully visible to individuals when making educational decisions. As a result, private investment alone is insufficient to sustain socially optimal levels of higher education provision. From this perspective, public funding and state involvement are justified not only on equity grounds, but also on efficiency grounds, as investment in higher education can simultaneously enhance social outcomes and long-term economic performance.

This broader understanding of higher education has also been developed in recent work on the common good by emphasizing that higher education contributes to collective social outcomes that are often under-recognized in market-oriented policy frameworks (Marginson, 2026). Marginson argues that the language of the common good may help move beyond a narrow opposition between public and private benefits, since higher education can generate individual, national, local, and global benefits simultaneously. This perspective is useful for the present study because Vision 2030 similarly combines social, economic, and developmental expectations of higher education.

International policy frameworks further reinforce the public good framing of higher education. UNESCO conceptualizes education as a common good that emphasizes shared responsibility, collective governance, and social justice rather than narrow economic returns (UNESCO, 2015). UNESCO's more recent work calls for a renewed social contract for education, positioning higher education institutions as public institutions with responsibilities that extend beyond labor market alignment toward broader societal transformation (UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, the public good perspective is used to

examine whether higher education is framed primarily as a collective social responsibility or as an instrument of individual and economic returns.

Public Good, Governance, and System Design

While public good arguments are often framed in terms of outcomes, governance literature highlights that the realization of higher education's public mission is inseparable from how institutions and systems are governed. The public good in higher education is not only an economic concept but a political and normative one, shaped by governance arrangements, funding structures, and accountability mechanisms (Pusser, 2006). Shifts in governance, such as declining public funding, increased privatization, and growing accountability pressures, implicitly reshape how higher education is defined and valued.

This governance perspective highlights key tensions central to contemporary higher education reforms: the public good versus private benefit, state steering versus institutional autonomy, and accountability versus academic freedom (Pusser, 2006). Governance reforms often proceed without explicit agreement on what constitutes the public good, resulting in policy arrangements that prioritize efficiency and performance while leaving equity and social responsibility underdefined. Recent comparative work on higher education system governance similarly emphasizes that governance objectives increasingly include public values such as accessibility, equality of opportunity, and sustainability, rather than only efficiency or institutional performance (Unger, 2026). This reinforces the need to assess governance not only as a mechanism for steering institutions, but also as a means through which public value is defined and protected.

The rise of New Public Management (NPM) provides an influential framework for understanding these dynamics. NPM refers to a set of administrative doctrines emphasizing performance indicators, output control, managerial autonomy, competition, and efficiency in the use of public resources (Hood, 1991). While NPM approaches are frequently presented as politically neutral and universally applicable, Hood highlights that they tend to prioritize efficiency-oriented “sigma” values at the expense of fairness, procedural justice, and institutional resilience (Hood, 1991). In the context of higher education, NPM-inspired reforms can reshape institutional behavior by privileging

measurable outputs, benchmarking, and performance-based steering, with significant implications for equity and academic quality. This paper uses governance as a lens to examine how Vision 2030 balances state steering, accountability, institutional autonomy, and performance-based reform.

Equity and Stratification in Higher Education

Within a public good framework, equity extends beyond formal access to higher education and incorporates meaningful participation, institutional differentiation, and outcomes across social groups. Comparative research demonstrates that higher education systems can expand while simultaneously reproducing or contributing to social stratification, depending on how access is distributed across institutional types and socio-economic groups (Shavit et al., 2007). High participation rates alone do not guarantee equitable systems.

In the Egyptian context, empirical research highlights the importance of examining equity through a sectoral lens. Analysis of access to higher education in Egypt demonstrates that expansion has been accompanied by differentiation between public and private institutions, with implications for affordability, quality, and social stratification (Buckner, 2013). These findings underscore the need to assess equity not only in terms of enrolment growth, but also in relation to governance, financing, and institutional hierarchies.

For this reason, this paper assesses equity not only in terms of enrolment growth, but also in relation to institutional stratification, financing, learning conditions, and the distribution of opportunities across social groups.

Quality as a Contested Concept

Quality in higher education is similarly contested and cannot be reduced to a single indicator or outcome. International policy discourse increasingly emphasizes accreditation, performance measurement, employability, and innovation as markers of quality. However, UNESCO cautions against narrowly instrumental definitions of quality that prioritize measurable outcomes over relevance, social purpose, and contribution to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO, 2021).

OECD frameworks reinforce this caution by emphasizing that quality is a system-level phenomenon shaped by learning environments, staff capacity, and resources per student, rather than solely by completion rates or labor market outcomes (OECD, 2019). Comparative research on quality assurance systems further highlights how governance arrangements, autonomy, and accountability shape quality outcomes, as demonstrated in analyses of quality assurance reforms in Egypt relative to international practice (El-Nashar, 2022).

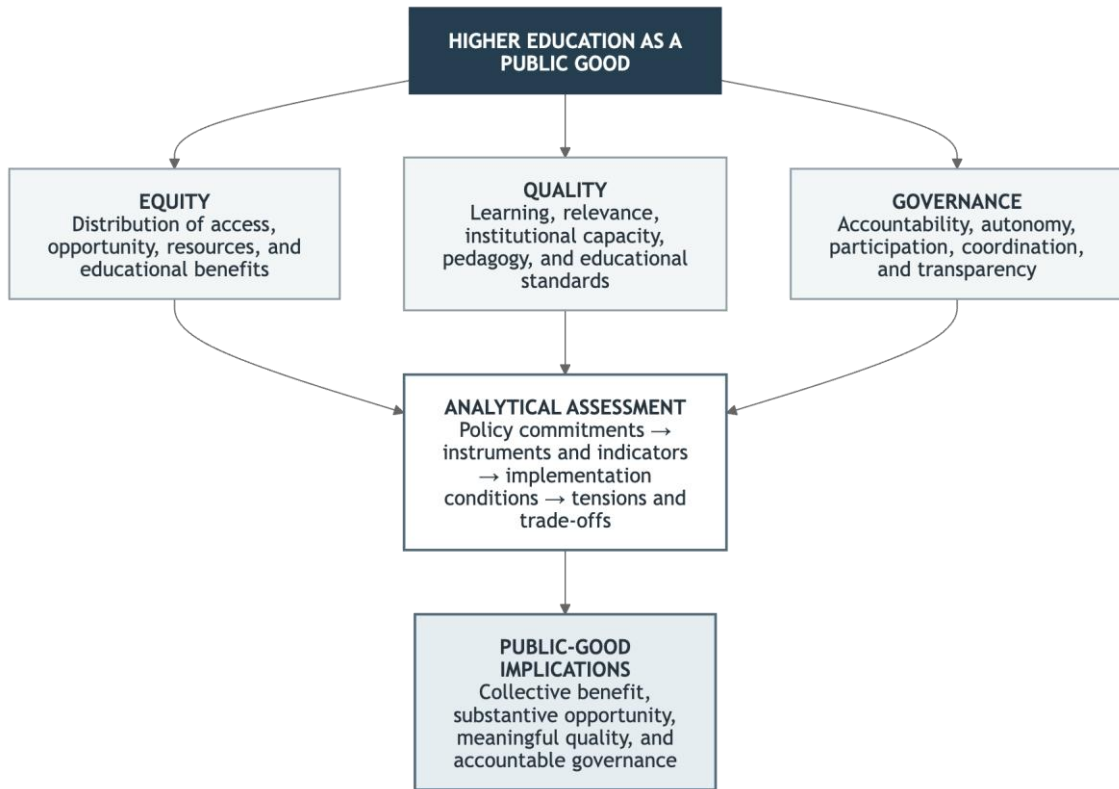
Analytical Approach and Use of Benchmarks

Equity, quality, and governance are used as analytical lenses because they capture how access, educational value, and system steering shape higher education's public good role. Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, document-based policy analysis approach. Vision 2030 and related higher education policy documents are analyzed as policy texts that articulate priorities, assumptions, and governance logics, rather than as instruments whose impacts are directly measured. International benchmarks and indicators are used contextually, not normatively, to situate Egypt's policy ambitions within broader global and regional patterns.

To support a balanced analysis, the paper draws on the distinction between positional and trans-positional objectivity. This distinction is useful because indicators, rankings, and performance metrics are not treated as neutral measures of reform success, but as tools that reflect particular institutional and policy perspectives (Sen, 1992). The analysis therefore interprets these measures cautiously, recognizing both their analytical value and their limitations, and reads them alongside broader evidence on equity, quality, and governance in Egyptian higher education.

Overall, this approach positions equity, quality, and governance as interdependent dimensions through which higher education's public good role can be analyzed. By integrating economic theory, governance analysis, and international policy frameworks, the study provides a structured basis for examining how Vision 2030 frames higher education and how these framings align or conflict with public good principles. Figure 1 summarizes this analytical framework.

Figure 1: Analytical framework for assessing higher education under Vision 2030



Using this framework, the analysis begins by examining the policy architecture through which Vision 2030 translates these commitments into objectives, indicators, and reform instruments.

Policy Architecture of Higher Education under Egypt Vision 2030

The Vision frames higher education as a foundational public responsibility essential to improving citizens' quality of life, reducing inequality, and sustaining long-term national development (Government of Egypt, 2016). Within the structure of Vision 2030, higher education is primarily embedded in the Social Pillar, particularly under the objective of establishing a Quality Education System, while also contributing to other strategic goals such as Social Justice and Equality, Governance and Partnerships, and the development of a Diversified, Knowledge-Based, and Competitive Economy. This cross-cutting positioning reflects an understanding of higher education as simultaneously serving social inclusion, economic productivity, and institutional modernization.

At the level of stated objectives, Vision 2030 articulates several higher education-relevant commitments that can be grouped into three broad domains. First, in terms of equity and access, Vision 2030 emphasizes equitable access to quality education across geographic regions and social groups, the reduction of regional and socio-economic disparities, and the promotion of social justice and equal opportunities. These commitments are closely linked to the Vision's broader human-centered development principle, which defines development success in terms of inclusive and equitable benefits for all citizens (Government of Egypt, 2023).

Selected Equity, Access, and Inclusion Goals Relevant to Higher Education in Egypt's Vision 2030:

- Strengthening the capacity of educational facilities (pre-university, university, and technical education) to provide adequate classrooms for all social groups, with particular consideration for the needs of individuals with disabilities.
- Ensuring equitable access to quality education services without discrimination based on gender, income level, or geographical location.
- Improving citizen satisfaction with education services.

This shows that equity is framed mainly through access, service availability, non-discrimination, and citizen satisfaction.

Second, regarding quality, Vision 2030 defines educational quality in substantive terms that go beyond enrollment expansion. It calls for improving learning outcomes, developing critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship skills, and aligning curricula with 21st-century competencies and sustainable development needs. It also emphasizes the establishment of a national qualifications framework and achieving international standards in curricula and educational resources that reflect an aspiration toward global comparability and competitiveness.

Selected Quality of Higher Education Goals in Egypt's Vision 2030:

- Aligning local quality and accreditation standards with international benchmarks for teaching and learning systems.

- Improving learning outcomes through curricula that promote critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and sustainable development values.
- Designing curricula and educational materials within the framework of the ‘Education 2.0’ system.

This indicates that quality is framed both substantively, through learning outcomes and skills, and instrumentally, through standards, accreditation, and international comparability.

Third, in the domain of governance, Vision 2030 places strong emphasis on accountability, transparency, participation, and institutional performance. Governance reform is treated as a strategic goal in its own right, with higher education institutions expected to operate within performance-oriented frameworks supported by monitoring, evaluation, and coordination mechanisms. The Vision stresses stakeholder participation, improved regulatory quality, and the use of performance indicators as tools to enhance effectiveness and public trust in state institutions, including universities.

Selected Governance, performance, and steering Goals in Egypt’s Vision 2030:

- Aligning local quality and accreditation standards with international benchmarks.
- Enhancing institutional performance through performance measurement and monitoring mechanisms.
- Improving accountability, transparency, and participation in public institutions.

Therefore, governance is framed through a combination of public accountability, regulatory improvement, institutional performance, and indicator-based steering.

Importantly, Vision 2030 translates these objectives into explicit indicators and targets relevant to higher education. Among the most significant are the requirements that all higher education institutions undergo accreditation by the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) at least twice before 2030, efforts to improve the international ranking positions of Egyptian universities, the stated objective of increasing public funding for higher education, and the systematic assessment of citizen satisfaction with the quality of educational services. These indicators illustrate how the Vision operationalizes quality and governance through

measurable performance criteria, while also pointing the increasing role of evaluation and benchmarking in higher education policy.

Examples of the Indicators Related to Higher Education in Egypt's Vision 2030:

- Gross enrollment ratio in higher education (age group 18–23).
- Annual growth rate of scientific publications in international journals.
- Aligning accreditation standards with international benchmarks.

The National Strategy for Higher Education and Scientific Research, launched in 2023 by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, represents the primary mechanism for translating Vision 2030's broad development objectives into sector-specific higher education reform (Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, 2023). The strategy explicitly aligns itself with Vision 2030 and adopts the concept of "fourth-generation universities", which emphasizes the integration of education, scientific research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This reflects a policy orientation that links higher education more closely to economic development, labor market needs, and regional development priorities.

The 2023 strategy is structured around a set of guiding principles, including integration with production sectors, interdisciplinarity, communication with industry and government, active societal participation, sustainability, international reference, and innovation and entrepreneurship. These principles reinforce the Vision's emphasis on relevance, performance, and connectivity, and provide a more operational framework for institutional reform.

At the implementation level, regulatory instruments such as the New Guide for Academic Programs further operationalize this policy architecture by standardizing curriculum design, emphasizing learning outcomes, alignment with labor market demands, interdisciplinarity, and quality assurance requirements across higher education institutions. Together with existing legal frameworks governing university organization and accreditation, these instruments form a layered policy architecture in which national development goals, sectoral strategies, and institutional practices are closely interconnected.

Overall, the policy architecture of higher education under Egypt Vision 2030 combines normative commitments to equity and human-centered development with performance-oriented approaches to quality and governance. By embedding higher education reform within a broader development strategy and translating objectives into indicators and regulatory mechanisms, Vision 2030 establishes the framework within which higher education's public role is defined, steered, and evaluated. The implications of this architecture for equity, quality, and governance are examined in the following sections.

Despite the coherence and ambition of this policy architecture, Vision 2030 raises important analytical questions about how higher education's public role is defined and steered in practice. The Vision combines equity-oriented language centered on inclusion, social justice, and citizen satisfaction with performance-oriented instruments such as accreditation, benchmarking, and international ranking targets. This creates potential tensions between public good commitments and managerial steering logics. These tensions provide the basis for the following analysis of equity, quality, and governance.

The Egyptian Higher Education System: Structure and Reform Context

Before turning to the analysis section of Vision 2030 through equity, quality, and governance lenses, it is essential to situate these policy objectives within the broader landscape of the Egyptian higher education system. System size, institutional differentiation, governance arrangements, and resource constraints shape both the opportunities and limits of policy implementation. Understanding these structural conditions allows the subsequent analysis to distinguish between challenges arising from policy design and those rooted in long-standing system characteristics.

System size and institutional structure

Egypt's higher education system is one of the largest and most complex in the Arab region and North Africa, shaped by long-standing state steering, rapid demographic expansion, and increasing institutional differentiation. The system serves over 3 million students, reflecting population growth and rising demand for tertiary education (World Bank, 2023). The system is characterized by a dominant public sector, as public institutions remain the primary providers of higher education, enrolling the majority of students, estimated at more than 80% of total tertiary enrolment, while private

universities, private higher institutes, and newly established non-profit (Ahlya) universities account for a smaller but expanding share of enrolment (Embaby, 2025).

Legal and governance foundations

Governance of higher education in Egypt is strongly shaped by the University Organization Law and its executive regulations, which establish the legal basis for institutional authority, state oversight, and academic structures within public universities (Bakry, 2006). While reforms over time have introduced elements of managerial autonomy and performance orientation, the system remains characterized by centralized state steering, particularly in areas such as budget allocation, staffing frameworks, and regulatory oversight (Bakry, 2006; Haq, 2020).

This governance model has enabled coordinated system expansion, but it has also limited institutional flexibility and responsiveness. Studies highlight persistent tensions between centralized control and the need for institutional autonomy to innovate in teaching, research, and program design (Haq, 2020). These tensions form an important backdrop for understanding governance reforms under Vision 2030.

Funding context and resource constraints

A defining structural constraint of the Egyptian higher education system is low public expenditure per tertiary student relative to international benchmarks. International comparisons suggest that Egypt operates with substantially lower per-student tertiary expenditure than OECD systems, although exact figures vary by year and accounting method (OECD, 2025).

The World Bank's Public Expenditure Review emphasizes that limited fiscal space constrains the state's ability to simultaneously expand access, improve quality, and invest in research infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). As a result, expansion has often occurred without proportional increases in academic staff, facilities, or per-student spending, creating pressure on teaching quality and learning conditions. These structural funding constraints are central to understanding the feasibility of Vision 2030's ambitious higher education goals.

Reform trajectory prior to and under Vision 2030

Prior to Vision 2030, higher education reform in Egypt focused largely on expansion, access, and incremental quality assurance measures. More recent reforms, particularly those articulated under Vision 2030 and the 2023 National Strategy for Higher Education and Scientific Research, reflect a shift toward performance, relevance, and innovation-oriented reform, including accreditation, benchmarking, and alignment with labor market needs (Embaby, 2025).

However, multiple studies caution that reform implementation is uneven and constrained by institutional capacity, governance structures, and funding limitations (Haq, 2020; World Bank, 2023). These constraints do not negate the ambitions of Vision 2030, but they shape how its goals are translated into practice across different segments of the higher education system.

Implications for subsequent analysis

Taken together, the Egyptian higher education system is defined by large-scale enrolment (over 3 million students), dominant public provision (over 80% of enrolment), centralized governance, and low per-student public spending. These structural characteristics shape the conditions under which Vision 2030's equity, quality, and governance objectives are pursued. Understanding this system-level landscape is therefore essential for interpreting the subsequent analysis, which examines how policy ambitions interact with institutional realities and what this means for higher education's public good role.

Analysis I: Equity and Access

Equity has a strategic position in Egypt's Vision 2030, which frames education as a core instrument for social justice, inclusion, and equal opportunity (Government of Egypt, 2016). In the context of higher education, the Vision emphasizes equitable access to quality education services across geographic regions and social groups, alongside efforts to improve citizen satisfaction and expand participation. At the level of policy discourse, these commitments align closely with public good principles that view higher education as a societal investment rather than a purely private benefit (Stiglitz, 1999; McMahon, 2009). Thus the central question is whether equity is operationalized mainly as expanded access or as access to comparable and meaningful educational opportunities.

However, a critical assessment of equity requires moving beyond stated intentions to examine how access is structured and experienced within the existing higher education system. Empirical research indicates that while Egypt has achieved large-scale expansion, this expansion has not translated into uniform equity of opportunity across institutional sectors (World Bank, 2023). Public universities continue to enroll more than 80% of students, offering low-cost access, yet they often operate under conditions of overcrowding, high student–staff ratios, and limited resources, which directly affect learning conditions (Buckner, 2013).

Buckner’s sectoral analysis demonstrates that socio-economic stratification in Egypt’s higher education system increasingly occurs within the system rather than solely through exclusion from access. Students from higher-income backgrounds are disproportionately represented in private universities and higher-status programs, while students from lower-income households are more likely to enroll in public universities and lower-resourced institutions (Buckner, 2013). This pattern reflects a form of “differentiated access,” where formal participation expands, but the quality and status of educational experiences vary systematically by socio-economic background.

From a public good perspective, this raises a critical question: to what extent does expanded access under Vision 2030 constitute equitable participation rather than nominal inclusion? While Vision 2030 emphasizes access and satisfaction indicators, it gives less explicit attention to how disparities in institutional resources and learning environments may undermine substantive equity. International research on higher education stratification shows that mass expansion without proportional investment often reproduces inequality by channeling disadvantaged students into lower-status institutions and fields of study (Shavit et al., 2007).

Resource constraints further complicate the equity agenda. As mentioned, limited fiscal space constrains the state’s ability to expand access while also improving quality and institutional capacity. From an equity perspective, this means that expanded participation may not translate into comparable learning conditions across institutional sectors. In this

context, equity-oriented goals risk being evaluated primarily through enrolment indicators rather than through measures of educational experience and outcomes.

A central tension in Vision 2030's equity agenda emerges when stated commitments are contrasted with actual patterns of public spending on higher education. While the Vision frames higher education as a cornerstone of social justice and explicitly aspires to expand equitable access to quality provision, recent fiscal evidence suggests that public investment has not kept pace with either system expansion or policy ambition. Despite constitutional and strategic commitments to increase education spending, including a target of allocating at least 2% of GDP to higher education, overall education expenditure has declined in relative terms, reaching approximately 1.7% of GDP in 2024/25 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Although Egypt's FY 2023/24 budget increased education allocations by 24.3%, OECD notes that education spending remains below the constitutional target and comparatively low by international standards (OECD, 2024). This suggests that nominal increases do not necessarily resolve the resource constraints affecting equity and quality in higher education. This divergence between nominal allocations and real spending capacity raises critical questions about the state's ability to translate equity-oriented policy goals into substantive improvements in learning conditions. From an equity perspective, this gap between policy aspiration and fiscal implementation suggests that access expansion under Vision 2030 may be achieved without the level of public investment necessary to ensure genuinely equitable educational opportunities across institutional sectors.

Vision 2030's reliance on system-level indicators such as gross enrollment ratios and citizen satisfaction surveys further invites scrutiny. While these indicators provide useful information about participation and perceptions, they offer limited insight into horizontal and vertical inequalities within the higher education system. As Sen argues, aggregate indicators may obscure positional differences and normalize inequality by failing to capture how educational opportunities are distributed across social groups and institutional contexts (Sen, 1992). Without disaggregated analysis, improvements in overall access may coexist with persistent or deepening stratification.

Overall, the analysis of equity under Vision 2030 reveals a significant gap between policy commitment and substantive equity. While the Vision articulates equity in higher education as a central public objective emphasizing access, inclusion, and social justice, differentiated institutional pathways, and constrained public investment limits the depth of equity achieved in practice. Empirical evidence suggests that access has expanded largely in quantitative terms, while socio-economic stratification persists within the system through unequal learning conditions and institutional hierarchies. Moreover, the reliance on aggregate indicators such as enrollment rates and satisfaction measures risks obscuring these internal inequalities, allowing improvements in participation to coexist with enduring disparities in educational experience. From a public good perspective, this raises a fundamental question about how equity is defined and operationalized: whether it is understood primarily as broad access to higher education, or as access to comparable and meaningful educational opportunities across social groups and institutional contexts. This unresolved tension underscores the need to examine equity in close relation to quality and governance, which shape the conditions under which higher education can fulfill its public role.

Analysis II: Quality

Quality is also presented as a central objective in Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education agenda. The Vision emphasizes improving learning outcomes, aligning curricula with international standards, strengthening accreditation processes, and enhancing universities' international standing (Government of Egypt, 2016). These priorities reflect a widespread global policy orientation in which quality is associated with measurable outcomes, external benchmarks, and formal assurance mechanisms. At the level of stated goals, Vision 2030 aligns with international reform narratives that link quality to competitiveness, innovation, and global integration. The key analytical issue is whether this framing captures quality as meaningful learning and social relevance, or primarily as measurable institutional performance.

A critical analysis of quality, however, requires closer attention to how quality is defined and operationalized within the Vision. Vision 2030 primarily frames quality through formal instruments, such as accreditation, alignment with international benchmarks, and improvements in university rankings. While these instruments provide visibility and

comparability, they represent a particular understanding of quality, one that prioritizes compliance, standardization, and external validation. This framing risks privileging what can be measured and monitored over the less visible dimensions of teaching, learning, and educational purpose.

International policy literature cautions against narrow, indicator-driven approaches to quality. UNESCO argues that quality in higher education should be understood in relation to educational purpose, relevance, inclusiveness, and contribution to social and sustainable development, rather than being reduced to performance metrics or institutional status (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO, 2021). From this perspective, quality is not only a technical attribute, but also a normative one, shaped by values, social priorities, and educational missions. Similarly, the OECD emphasizes that quality is a system-level outcome influenced by learning environments, pedagogical practices, and staff capacity, and warns that performance indicators should be treated as tools for reflection rather than as objectives in themselves (OECD, 2019).

Within the Egyptian context, quality assurance has become a key mechanism through which quality is governed. The expansion of accreditation processes under the NAQAAE reflects a strong policy commitment to formal quality control. Empirical studies comparing accredited and non-accredited institutions suggest that accreditation can contribute to improved organizational practices and clearer internal procedures (Salah & Shafee, 2020). However, these studies also indicate that accreditation status does not automatically translate into comparable teaching quality or learning experiences across institutions, particularly in the presence of wide variation in institutional capacity and resources (Salah & Shafee, 2020; El-Nashar, 2022).

This gap between formal quality assurance and lived educational experience highlights a central tension in Vision 2030's quality agenda. When quality is primarily assessed through accreditation cycles and benchmark alignment, institutions may prioritize meeting formal requirements over engaging in deeper pedagogical transformation. OECD analyses note that such environments can encourage strategic compliance, where institutions focus on documentation and procedural conformity rather than on sustained improvements in teaching and learning (OECD, 2019). In this sense, the risk is not the

presence of quality assurance mechanisms, but their overextension as proxies for educational quality itself.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the policy rationale behind Vision 2030's approach. In a large and diverse higher education system, standardized quality assurance mechanisms provide a means of oversight, transparency, and minimum quality protection. International alignment can also support recognition, mobility, and global engagement. The challenge, therefore, lies not in rejecting accreditation or benchmarking, but in acknowledging their limits and ensuring that they do not narrow the meaning of quality to what is most visible or easily quantified.

Overall, the analysis suggests that Vision 2030 adopts a quality framework that is coherent with international policy trends, yet selective in what it emphasizes. Its focus on accreditation, indicators, and external benchmarks supports comparability and oversight, yet risks narrowing quality to measurable institutional performance. From a public good perspective, this may underrepresent less visible but essential dimensions of quality, including pedagogy, learning environments, social relevance, and educational purpose. This raises a critical issue: whether quality is understood primarily as institutional performance within a competitive framework, or as the provision of meaningful learning experiences that serve broader societal goals. This tension shows that quality cannot be understood only through formal assurance mechanisms; it also depends on the governance arrangements through which quality priorities are interpreted, implemented, and monitored.

Analysis III: Governance

While the Vision articulates ambitious goals related to equity and quality, the extent to which these goals can be realized depends fundamentally on how authority, decision-making, accountability, and resource allocation are organized within the higher education system. From a public good perspective, governance is not merely a technical matter, but a reflection of how the state defines the role of higher education in society and how responsibilities are distributed among public actors, institutions, and stakeholders (Pusser, 2006).

Vision 2030 reflects a governance approach that combines strong state steering with selected managerial and performance-oriented mechanisms (Government of Egypt, 2016). The state retains a central role in setting strategic priorities, regulatory frameworks, and system-level objectives, while universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate performance through indicators, accreditation outcomes, and alignment with national development goals (Embaby, 2025). This hybrid governance model is not unusual in international terms; however, its internal coherence and capacity to balance competing objectives require closer examination. The key analytical issue is whether this model supports public accountability and institutional improvement, or whether it primarily leads institutions to focus on meeting centrally imposed performance requirements.

A useful lens for analyzing this governance configuration is provided by New Public Management (NPM) theory. Hood characterizes NPM as a reform logic that emphasizes performance measurement, output control, managerial discretion, and efficiency, often through the use of indicators and benchmarking tools (Hood, 1991). Similar concerns have been discussed in higher education governance research, where NPM-oriented reforms are associated with stronger emphasis on efficiency, accountability, quality assurance, and measurable performance (Maes, 2015). Elements of this logic are evident in Vision 2030's emphasis on performance indicators, accreditation cycles, international benchmarking, and efficiency-oriented reform narratives. These instruments aim to improve transparency and accountability, particularly in a large and complex system.

At the same time, governance research cautions that NPM-inspired reforms tend to privilege certain administrative values over others. Hood distinguishes between efficiency-oriented "sigma" values, fairness-oriented "theta" values, and resilience-oriented "lambda" values, noting that governance systems rarely optimize all three simultaneously (Hood, 1991). In the Egyptian context, the emphasis on measurable performance and efficiency may come at the expense of institutional autonomy, procedural fairness, and long-term system resilience dimensions that are central to higher education's public good role.

Legal and institutional arrangements further shape governance outcomes. Egypt's higher education system remains highly centralized, with significant state control over budgets, staffing regulations, and leadership appointments, as established under the University Organization Law and subsequent amendments (Bakry, 2006). While centralized governance has facilitated coordinated system expansion and policy alignment, it has also limited universities' capacity to adapt flexibly to local needs, innovate pedagogically, or reallocate resources strategically (Haq, 2020). This creates a structural tension between centralized steering and decentralized autonomy often associated with academic quality and innovation.

International comparative literature underscores that effective governance in higher education depends not only on the presence of accountability mechanisms, but also on the balance between autonomy and control. OECD analyses emphasize that steering at a distance through broad objectives and incentive structures can be effective when institutions possess sufficient autonomy and capacity to respond (OECD, 2019). In systems where autonomy is constrained, and resources are limited, however, performance-based governance risks becoming compliance-oriented rather than improvement-oriented.

From a public good perspective, governance reforms also raise normative questions about whose interests are prioritized. Pusser argues that governance arrangements shape whether higher education serves primarily private, market-oriented objectives or broader societal purposes, such as democratic participation, social cohesion, and knowledge dissemination (Pusser, 2006). In Vision 2030, governance is closely linked to economic development goals, labor market alignment, and competitiveness. While these priorities are legitimate, their dominance may marginalize other public good functions of higher education that are less easily measured or monetized.

Importantly, Vision 2030 does not ignore governance challenges, but its approach remains largely instrumental. Governance is treated as a means to deliver policy objectives rather than as a domain of contestation and public deliberation. UNESCO's conception of education as a common good emphasizes participatory governance, shared responsibility, and societal engagement, extending beyond state–market dichotomies

(UNESCO, 2021). From this perspective, governance should involve not only performance oversight, but also inclusive dialogue about educational purpose and public value.

Overall, the governance framework underpinning Vision 2030 reflects a pragmatic attempt to manage a large and expanding higher education system through centralized steering and performance-oriented instruments. While this model offers coordination and oversight, it also generates tensions related to autonomy, accountability, and the narrowing of institutional missions. From a public good perspective, the key governance challenge lies in balancing efficiency and control with trust, institutional capacity, and societal engagement. How this balance is negotiated shapes not only the effectiveness of equity and quality reforms, but also the extent to which higher education under Vision 2030 can fulfill its broader public role.

Discussion & Conclusion

From Policy Ambition to Policy Practice

At the level of intent, Vision 2030 presents higher education as a strategic public investment aimed at social justice, human development, and national competitiveness. Its emphasis on expanding access, improving quality through international standards, and strengthening system governance reflects widely shared global reform narratives. In this sense, Vision 2030 succeeds in articulating a coherent and forward-looking policy framework that aligns with international discourses promoted by organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD.

However, the analysis also shows that Vision 2030's public good orientation is shaped by the instruments through which reform is pursued. The strategy presents higher education as serving broad social purposes, yet its operational logic relies heavily on access expansion, accreditation, benchmarking, performance indicators, and centralized steering. Therefore, the central tension is not simply between ambition and implementation, but between a broad public good vision and a narrower set of managerial instruments used to translate that vision into practice. This tension emerges not as a simple

failure of design, but as the outcome of policy choices made under conditions of fiscal constraint, system scale, institutional differentiation, and centralized governance.

Rethinking Equity in Vision 2030: Beyond Access Expansion

Equity in higher education is often interpreted in policy discourse as the expansion of access, measured through participation rates and enrollment growth. As mentioned, Vision 2030 largely adopts this understanding, framing equity as the widening of opportunities to enter higher education across geographic regions and social groups. From a public policy perspective, this emphasis on access is both understandable and necessary in a system facing demographic pressure and high social demand.

However, from a public good perspective, equity also concerns the conditions under which students study, the quality of educational experiences they receive, and the value of the credentials they obtain. When access expands without comparable attention to learning environments and institutional capacity, equity risks becoming formal rather than substantive. This distinction is important because a higher education system can become more inclusive in terms of entry while remaining unequal in terms of experience, institutional status, and outcomes.

Applied to Vision 2030, this distinction reveals a central limitation. While the strategy emphasizes participation and access, it gives less systematic attention to the internal differentiation of the higher education system, where students from different socio-economic backgrounds are channeled into institutions with unequal resources and status. Such differentiation can reproduce inequality within mass systems, even as access improves overall. Vision 2030's reliance on aggregate indicators further obscures these internal disparities, making it difficult to assess whether expanded access translates into equitable opportunity.

Thus, the equity agenda under Vision 2030 reflects a partial public good approach. It prioritizes system inclusion and widened access, but gives less attention to redistribution, institutional parity, and equality of educational experience. This does not invalidate the strategy's achievements, but it limits its capacity to function as a fully equity-enhancing public good. Equity, as operationalized, remains primarily quantitative, leaving

unresolved questions about social mobility, institutional stratification, and the equalizing role of public higher education.

Rethinking Quality in Vision 2030: Beyond Standards and Compliance

Quality in Vision 2030 is framed largely through alignment with international standards, accreditation processes, and performance benchmarks. This reflects a dominant global reform logic in which quality is associated with measurable outcomes and formal assurance mechanisms. Such an approach offers visibility, comparability, and oversight, particularly in large and complex systems. On the other hand, the perspective of quality in Vision 2030 lacks the linkage with pedagogical depth, relevance to societal needs, learning environments, and the capacity of institutions to support meaningful intellectual development. When quality is defined primarily through what can be measured, aspects of education that are less visible but equally important risk being marginalized.

In the case of Vision 2030, quality assurance functions more as a governance tool than as a pedagogical strategy. Accreditation and benchmarking help monitor institutions, but they do not necessarily address differences in teaching capacity, staff development, or student learning conditions. Studies of quality assurance in Egypt suggest that while accreditation improves formal procedures, it does not automatically produce comparable educational quality across institutions.

The critical issue, therefore, is not whether quality assurance is necessary, but whether it is sufficient. Vision 2030's quality framework prioritizes compliance and visibility, but underplays the material and pedagogical foundations of quality. From a public good perspective, this narrows the meaning of quality to institutional performance, rather than educational purpose and social contribution.

Rethinking Governance in Vision 2030: Beyond Centralized Steering

Vision 2030 reflects a governance model characterized by strong state steering combined with performance-oriented instruments, such as indicators, accreditation cycles, and benchmarking. This hybrid model aims to maintain coordination and control while improving system efficiency.

From a governance theory perspective, however, effective higher education governance requires balancing steering with autonomy. In Egypt, centralized governance has facilitated expansion and coordination, but it has also limited universities' capacity to adapt, innovate, and respond to local needs.

Vision 2030 largely treats governance as an instrumental means to deliver policy objectives, rather than as a domain of shared responsibility and deliberation. The absence of such participatory dimensions in Vision 2030 constrains the public good potential of higher education and reinforces a managerial understanding of governance.

Critically, governance choices under Vision 2030 shape what kinds of equity and quality outcomes are possible. Centralized steering supports manageability, but it also reinforces indicator-driven reform and limits institutional discretion. As a result, governance does not merely implement Vision 2030; it actively structures its limits.

Bringing the Lenses Together: What Vision 2030 Delivers

A key contribution of this study lies in showing that the challenges identified across equity, quality, and governance are not independent but deeply interconnected. Policies that expand access under conditions of limited public funding place pressure on learning environments, which in turn complicates efforts to improve educational quality. Similarly, quality assurance mechanisms designed to standardize and monitor performance often require strong central coordination, reinforcing governance arrangements that constrain institutional flexibility.

These dynamics illustrate a set of trade-offs rather than isolated limitations. Equity-oriented expansion increases system inclusiveness but risks deepening stratification when institutional differentiation is not matched by adequate resource redistribution. Quality reforms based on accreditation and benchmarking improve transparency and oversight, yet may incentivize compliance and surface-level change rather than meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. Governance arrangements that prioritize efficiency and control support policy coherence in a large system, but limit the autonomy and trust often associated with innovation and academic quality.

Taken together, these findings show that Vision 2030 delivers a managed and performance-oriented version of higher education as a public good. It does not abandon public responsibility; rather, it defines public responsibility through instruments that emphasize expansion, monitoring, standardization, and alignment with national development goals. The result is a reform agenda that is coherent and ambitious, but one that risks narrowing equity, quality, and governance into measurable performance categories.

Vision 2030 does not resolve these trade-offs; rather, it manages them by prioritizing system expansion, performance monitoring, and centralized coordination. This approach is understandable given Egypt's demographic pressures and fiscal constraints, but it has important implications for how higher education functions as a public good.

Successes, Limits, and Contradictions

Based on the analysis, it can be argued that Vision 2030 succeeds in providing a coherent strategic narrative for higher education reform and in aligning national objectives with international policy frameworks. It also succeeds in placing higher education within a broader national development agenda, linking universities to social justice, economic modernization, innovation, and institutional reform. These are important strengths, particularly because they affirm that higher education has a public role beyond private individual returns.

At the same time, Vision 2030 falls short in translating these ambitions into substantively equitable and high-quality educational experiences across institutional sectors. This shortfall is not primarily the result of weak policy intent, but of an implementation logic that relies on expansion, indicators, accreditation, benchmarking, and centralized control under constrained public investment. These choices limit the capacity of higher education to fulfill its broader public good role, particularly in relation to equity of experience, pedagogical quality, institutional autonomy, and participatory governance.

Thus, the main contradiction is that Vision 2030 speaks the language of the public good, while many of its operational tools reflect a narrower logic of performance management. This contradiction does not mean that the strategy is ineffective or incoherent. Rather, it

shows that its strengths and limits come from the same reform logic: using measurable, centrally steered instruments to pursue broad public good ambitions.

Reconsidering the public good role of higher education

In response to the research question, Vision 2030 reflects a partial public good approach to higher education. It strongly affirms the public importance of higher education at the level of policy vision, linking universities to social justice, human development, innovation, sustainable development, and national progress. However, its operational framework tends to privilege the dimensions of higher education that are most visible to policy measurement: access rates, accreditation, rankings, performance indicators, and institutional alignment with national priorities.

This does not imply that Vision 2030 neglects the public good entirely, but rather that it defines the public good in relatively narrow and managerial terms. Equity is framed primarily as access; quality as compliance with standards; and governance as performance oversight. This is significant because higher education's common good role cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between public and private benefits; it also involves the interaction of individual, institutional, national, and societal outcomes (Marginson, 2026). Dimensions of the public good that are harder to measure, such as meaningful participation, educational purpose, pedagogical transformation, institutional trust, and the societal role of universities, receive less systematic attention. As a result, higher education under Vision 2030 appears more as a managed public service than as a shared social institution shaped through collective deliberation.

From a public good perspective, Vision 2030 therefore delivers a managed form of public provision, rather than a transformative reimagining of higher education's societal role. This does not render the strategy ineffective, but it explains why core tensions persist across equity, quality, and governance.

The broader implication is that strengthening higher education as a public good in Egypt requires more than expanding participation, increasing accreditation, or improving rankings. It requires closer attention to the distribution of learning conditions, the

pedagogical and social meaning of quality, and governance arrangements that balance coordination with autonomy, trust, and participation.

Limitations of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative, policy-oriented approach to examining Egypt's Vision 2030 higher education agenda through the lenses of equity, quality, and governance. As such, several limitations should be acknowledged in order to clarify the scope and boundaries of the analysis.

First, the study is primarily based on official policy documents, international reports, and secondary academic literature. While these sources provide valuable insights into policy intent, reform instruments, and system-level trends, they do not capture the full range of institutional practices or stakeholder experiences. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the design and framing of Vision 2030 and its implementation logic, rather than on micro-level outcomes within individual universities or programs.

Second, the discussion of implementation logic is constrained by the limited availability of systematic, publicly accessible government evaluation reports on the progress and outcomes of Vision 2030 in the higher education sector. Although strategic targets and indicators are articulated in official documents, comprehensive ex-post evaluations detailing how these targets have been achieved, adjusted, or revised over time remain scarce. This limits the ability to assess implementation outcomes beyond what can be inferred from aggregate indicators and external assessments.

Third, the study relies in part on aggregate national and international data, which restricts the analysis of intra-system variation and socio-economic differentiation. Disaggregated data on student background, institutional resources, and learning outcomes would allow for a more fine-grained assessment of equity and quality across different segments of the higher education system.

Fourth, the time scope of the study should be noted. Vision 2030 represents an ongoing and evolving reform framework, and some policy effects, particularly those related to quality enhancement and governance change, may only become visible over a longer time

horizon. The analysis, therefore, captures a snapshot of reform dynamics, rather than a definitive evaluation of long-term outcomes.

Finally, the analytical framework adopted in this paper focuses explicitly on equity, quality, and governance as core dimensions of higher education as a public good. While this framework allows for an integrated and focused analysis, it does not address other important aspects of higher education reform, such as research funding, academic labor conditions, or international mobility, which merit further investigation.

These limitations do not undermine the core findings of the study, but rather define its analytical scope. They also point to the need for greater transparency, systematic evaluation, and publicly available monitoring of higher education reform under Vision 2030, as well as for future research that combines policy analysis with institutional-level and stakeholder-based evidence.

Selim Abdellatif is a higher education policy researcher currently pursuing the Erasmus Mundus Master's in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE). His work focuses on higher education governance, equity, and university-society engagement. Since 2024, he has served as a Monitoring and Evaluation Consultant for university third mission activities at the American University in Cairo (AUC), supporting the assessment of university-society engagement initiatives and their contribution to institutional learning and improvement. He has also contributed to evaluation and applied research activities at Zewail University and education-focused NGOs, alongside international experience through the German Commission for UNESCO and IIEP-UNESCO.

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