

Education system needs its own revolution to succeed

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Ahmed Zewail

The process of transformation begins with democracy. But it does not end there. The first uprising brings political change; a second is now needed to transform Arab learning. The failure of Arab education is one of the underlying causes of youth discontent in the region and has serious cultural, economic, and political consequences. Reform is urgently needed.

Today, the Arab world's contribution to international scientific research is negligible. No Arab university regularly ranks among the world's 500 best institutions. The Arab media are not equipped to perform their responsibility to illuminate education and scientific matters. This is evident despite the growing number of newspapers, magazines and Internet sites, and over 500 satellite television channels, which are mostly concerned with music and soap operas. A major national project to eliminate illiteracy must become a top priority of Arab governments. Basic education is a human right. I find it hard to believe, in an age of ever greater scientific knowledge, how between 25 and 50 per cent of the Arab population of 350 million remains illiterate. Egypt's higher education system puts hundreds of thousands of students through a university education that is not sufficient for our modern world. A hierarchy of universities must be created. The very best should represent the pinnacle of education, research, and development and operate as non-profit making organizations.

Technical and vocational education must be upgraded to increase the levels of skill nationwide. This type of education empowers large parts of society and improves the national infrastructure.

Finally, enhancing scientific research is essential for future development. Developing nations can now achieve progress on an international level in a relatively short time. Proof of this has come in a number of countries including China, India, South Korea, Malaysia, and more recently in Turkey and Iran. Research and development is not a luxury, reserved for rich countries. Those nations that develop their research will cross the chasm to the developed world. Arab nations should allocate substantial resources to establish Research and Development centres of excellence. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics—the STEM disciplines as they are known—are fundamental to the creation of a vibrant economy.

Arab and Muslim civilizations reached their zenith when their leaders believed in the value of original thinking and in human rights and freedom of thought—the necessary tools for social and economic progress. Even with limited resources in the 1960s, I received a fine education in Egypt. It was education that made Egypt the cultural centre of the Arab world. The current education system had unfortunately suffered, like every other area of Egyptian life, from corruption. It is time for meritocracy to replace nepotism and favoritism. Creative works and innovations cannot flourish when security police are involved in hiring university faculty and administrators. Foreign aid to Egypt and the region should be directed to education over armaments.

Important changes in education and progress in the Arab world will only occur if there is a political vision and will from the highest levels of the state. It is imperative that learning be elevated to a much higher national priority and this is possible with the available rich human capacity and capital.

The choice is ours: either become 350 million people of the cave, *ahl al-kahf*, or 350 million people of the cosmos, *ahl al-kawn*.

Ahmed Zewail won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1999 and is the US science envoy to the Middle East.

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