



Expanding private universities to solve the problems of university education in Egypt: a critical reading of the official state narrative

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Introduction

In May 2025, Egypt's Minister of Higher Education announced the establishment of 12 new private universities within a record time frame, with classes scheduled to begin in the 2025-2026 academic year.¹ This brought the number of private universities in Egypt from 20 before the announcement to 32, with the new universities set to begin operating just five months after the announcement.² This expansion comes within the framework of an unprecedented boom in this sector since August 2020, with the number of private universities increasing from just three established during the first decade of the new millennium.³

The uniqueness of this ministerial announcement lies in the surprising speed of its implementation, especially compared to the journey of private universities in Egypt, which took decades to reach launch, operation, and student enrollment. Its importance is also highlighted by the fact that President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has embraced this project from its inception and has keenly and repeatedly promoted it, as will become clear in the analysis of the narrative.⁴ Therefore, it was not surprising that the prime minister stated that “all credit for the rapid establishment of private universities goes to President Sisi's directives”.⁵

From this perspective, studying the state's narrative on the rapid promotion of this policy is particularly important, as it provides a clear example of one of the radical changes pursued by

the state in the field of university education and shows how these policies are constructed at the narrative level. The importance of this analysis is compounded when we consider that the Egyptian president, in one of his statements on the policy of establishing private universities, concluded by saying: “What I hope to see achieved will be the roadmap for the country”.⁶ This demonstrates that this policy is not isolated from other current public policy sectors, but rather reflects a broader approach adopted by the president in dealing with public issues he considers to be priorities that must be addressed.

In light of this, this study seeks to analyze this narrative using the narrative framework of policies, which is based on the assumption that humans are “storytelling animals” (*homo narrans*), and that stories play a fundamental role in how individuals and groups understand public issues and in the design, processes, and outcomes of policies.⁷ This approach focuses on deconstructing the tactical construction of the narrative and how its elements are used to influence political processes and outcomes, based on the premise that changing public opinion requires telling a good story rather than relying on the details of the policy itself.⁸

The narrative framework is based on four basic structural elements. I will use these to analyze the state’s private university narrative in order to deconstruct the symbolic conflict around educational justice, which is now occurring more than 65 years after the adoption of the principle of semifree public universities.⁹ The structural elements are:

1. **Setting:** This is the context in which the public policy issue is raised, including facts that are taken for granted, legal and constitutional constraints, geographical and demographic characteristics, as well as rules agreed upon by most of the parties concerned. It is the stage on which the events of the political story unfold.
2. **Characters:** These are central to every political narrative; the framework classifies these characters into three main types: heroes, who have the ability to solve the problem; villains, who are blamed for causing it; and victims, who bear the consequences. These characters do not have to be specific individuals; they can be abstract entities such as the environment or freedom, or broad social groups such as students.
3. **Plot:** This link connects the different characters and the general framework of the policy “story”, and often has a beginning, middle, and end. The narrative framework does not provide a strict procedural definition of the plot, which opens the context to accommodate multiple forms.
4. **Moral of the Story:** This is the outcome that the narrative usually presents as the optimal solution to the problem at hand. It may take the form of a new direction for the state or simply a call to maintain the status quo. However, some narratives may

lack a clear solution and instead aim to highlight the magnitude of the problem or focus on the uncertainty surrounding it.

The framework

The state's narrative regarding university education falls within a broader framework called "comprehensive economic development", which justifies recent economic and social policies as necessary to address severe economic crises that threaten the state's stability. According to its argument, the state has been forced to implement a comprehensive economic reform that requires abandoning the model of free services on the grounds that the state can no longer afford them.¹⁰ This vision is embodied in President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's famous statement: "You will pay, and I will show you something you have never seen before. Nothing is free anymore."¹¹

This general framework gives rise to subframeworks; related to the crisis in university education, President Sisi addresses two discrete levels:¹²

1. First, he presents the reason for the crisis as a shortage of universities, arguing that the number of universities is not commensurate with the growing number of students. He notes that "there should be one university for every million citizens", which means that Egypt needs at least 100 universities.¹³
2. Second, he focuses on the poor alignment between education outcomes and the labor market as an urgent problem, and he accuses current universities of focusing on specializations that are not needed by the job market. The president calls for a focus-shift towards new specializations that are in line with current market requirements.¹⁴

Characters

The narrative framework of public policy, as mentioned above, posits that every effective and convincing narrative must include three main roles: the hero, the villain, and the victim. Based on this conception, the characters in the policy under discussion can be framed as follows.

The villain

According to the president's vision, the villain is the overcrowded government universities that are unable to align their output with the requirements of the labor market and continue to graduate large numbers of students who are not qualified for employment.¹⁵ The president blames these universities for the high youth unemployment rates that are due to the "poor education"; in an interview, he cites the results of a test he conducted in which he found only

111 of 300,000 tested graduates to be “fit for work”. He commented sarcastically on what he sees as the main cause of unemployment: “because our education is weak... Egyptians, wake up.”¹⁶

The victims

They are portrayed among university students as “our children”; those who receive low-quality education in public universities, which weakens their chances of securing jobs after graduation. This is further compounded by overcrowding and limited university capacity, failing to provide good education capable of preparing them for the labor market. According to the annual bulletin of enrolled higher education students for the 2018/2019 academic year – the year preceding the expansion in establishing private national universities – 3.1 million students were enrolled in higher education. Of these, 2.26 million students (72%) were in public universities and Al-Azhar university (28 universities in total).¹⁷

The hero

The hero is embodied in the political system represented by the government and the president, who seeks – according to his narrative promoting private universities – to protect these students from exploitation at foreign universities that charge exorbitant fees for low-quality education. The proposed solution is to provide excellent education within Egypt through private universities, emphasizing that “the goal is educational, not financial”.¹⁸

The plot

The president’s story is that structural failure characterizes public universities, which are also resistant to radical reform, especially in contrast to new private universities that are developing and improving education. This justifies the need to bypass attempts to reform public universities by creating alternative educational entities; continuing to rely on public universities will, according to this argument, continue to lead to large numbers of graduates who are unqualified for the job market, increasing unemployment through no fault of the state. In this context, the president also points out that there is another category of affluent students who resort to studying abroad, where they are attracted by foreign universities that charge high fees even though some of them are, in his words, academically modest. This is portrayed as a double loss: huge sums of money going abroad, and students receiving a suboptimal education.¹⁹

Faced with this reality, the president appears as the decisive actor proposing the solution of “private universities” as a parallel educational path, offering high-quality educational programs without placing new financial burdens on the state, as tuition fees would only go to covering operating costs. These universities will be of high quality and “unparalleled except in Egypt”, thereby solving the problems of both quantity and quality of education.²⁰

His proposed solution was later refined in response to criticism that this policy only serves the wealthy classes: “I have the bad [referring to the weakness of public universities] and I have the good [the new private universities]. Should I eliminate the bad and not do the good? My opinion is to do the good and reduce the bad.”²¹ The president went on to emphasize that this is the guiding principle “for any need in the country”: creating new, “high-quality” alternatives rather than trying to reform existing institutions, which are implicitly described as failures or “the bad”. According to this vision, private universities are presented as a realistic, practical solution that achieves high educational quality and addresses existing shortcomings without straining the state budget by attempting to reform the old system. To reinforce this narrative and promote the proposed solution, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research published a report in 2024 describing the current phase as one that has witnessed an “unprecedented boom” in higher education and scientific research under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; it went on to explain that this “bold” policy has led to quantitative and qualitative development in this vital sector within the framework of the “New Republic”.²² The following year, the ministry noted that the total number of universities in Egypt had risen to 128, compared to only 50 in 2014, which it considered evidence of the significant investments directed towards higher education and the significant expansion in establishing universities.²³

The other side: Whose problem does the new policy solve?

The above is the state’s official narrative on this public policy, which has been promoted over the past few years as the solution to the higher education crisis in Egypt. However, a closer look at the biases of this policy reveals that it is primarily aimed at a specific social group. In a meeting with the Minister of Higher Education to discuss the difference between private and public universities, the minister explained that public universities “exist for those who cannot afford it”, while private universities were established to meet the needs of the middle class who can afford to pay for their children’s education. These universities target a specific class of citizens.²⁴

Although the minister also pointed out that there are significant investments in public universities aimed at the vast majority of students, the figures, as we mentioned earlier, show a different reality. In the last five years, only three new public universities have been established, compared to 29 new private universities in the same period.²⁵

At the same time, the official narrative ignores one of the fundamental roots of the university education crisis, which is the state's failure to meet its constitutional commitment to allocate 2% of GDP to university education. In reality, the state allocates only about 1.54% for university and preuniversity education combined, compared to 3.78% before Sisi came to power.²⁶ The president himself admitted in a press conference that he would not commit to this percentage, justifying this by citing limited available resources:

*Do you have that amount? How are you going to make education a constitutional right? Isn't that what you're saying? Are you trying to make me laugh? You're telling me that health and education are constitutional rights? Does the Egyptian state have the money to educate 100 million people? The required funds are not available, folks, and we all need to be realistic.*²⁷

Thus, unable to fulfill its constitutional obligations to spend on education, the state has chosen to shift the financial burden to citizens through a new policy of establishing private universities defined as “nonprofit”. However, the tuition fees at these universities raise serious questions about the accuracy of this description. For example, the cost of studying economics and political science at Cairo University's private branch is 60,000 Egyptian pounds (about US\$1,260), which is exactly the same as the tuition fees for the same major at 6 October University, a private institution.²⁸ This raises a fundamental question about the justification for these high costs, which are similar – and sometimes identical – to those of for-profit private universities, even though the “nonprofit” private universities are supposed to operate on a different logic without seeking financial gain.

Equal opportunities are not achieved

One of the main pillars of this policy is the focus on increasing the number of universities regardless of their classification or nature. As the president said: “We need to have 100 universities in Egypt, regardless of their classification or ranking, whether they are public, private, or independent.”²⁹ However, available figures indicate that the higher education crisis relates not only to the number of universities but also to the unequal opportunities for enrollment. This policy, which is based on expanding access to high-cost educational opportunities, is likely to deepen this imbalance rather than overcome it. According to the UN's

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization data from 2014 (the latest detailed data on wealth), 6% of those enrolled in higher education are from wealthy families, compared to 40% from middle- and low-income families.³⁰

World Bank data also indicates that government spending on higher education is the least equitable of all levels of education, with the lowest consumption segment (the poorest) benefiting from only about 10% of this public spending, while the highest consumption segment (the wealthiest) accounts for approximately 31% of it.³¹

Furthermore, fair and equal admission opportunities to higher education programs have been further threatened by this policy due to the variations in admission criteria that are based on applicants' grades after completing secondary school. While the minimum admission grade for the (public) Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University is 93%, students can enroll in the same faculty at Cairo University's private branch with a score starting at 68%, a difference of up to 25%.³²

Quality of education under the new policy

In addition to questions on the fairness of access to opportunities under the new policy, there are concerns about its effectiveness in improving educational quality. This policy is not entirely new to Egyptian higher education. It is reminiscent of an older policy implemented by the state in the 1990s known as “cost-sharing” in higher education, which transferred the costs of education to beneficiaries through the creation of private foreign language instructed programs (FLIP) – programs taught in a foreign language – within Egyptian public universities.³³ This policy was widely implemented, to the point that almost every public university offered private programs with high fees to cover education costs.

However, an evaluation of this experiment decades after its implementation revealed its limited effectiveness in achieving educational goals. A 2010 doctoral thesis, based on two case studies of such programs, indicated that student satisfaction with the level of education did not increase in proportion to the fees paid, and that these programs threatened the principle of educational equity.³⁴ The clearest result was shown in a master's thesis published in 2014, which focused on foreign language programs at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. The study concluded that the introduction of a “cost-sharing” policy in the form of fee-based foreign language programs had no significant impact on the quality of education in terms of its suitability for the purpose.³⁵ The researcher argued that increased

public and private investment in higher education did not translate into real benefits for the government, given the neglect of the need for a transparent and accountable system.

These findings should have prompted decision-makers to rethink the current project, as previous experience has shown this policy is not particularly successful in improving the quality of education, which is the stated goal of private universities according to the president's narrative. However, the government has moved forward with establishing more private universities, adopting the same vision but on a larger scale, without implementing the recommendations for institutional reform and good governance.

The rush to establish these universities also raises serious concerns about the decline in the quality of the educational programs offered there. As one example, the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University indicated on its official Facebook page that the preparation of its six new educational programs, which will be taught for the first time, was completed in just one year.³⁶ In addition, this policy poses structural risks to the quality of education in public universities; salaries are up to three times higher at private universities, and are expected to encourage the transfer of academic talent from public to private institutions.³⁷ The change in the lecture format at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University is a telling example of these concerns. The old lecture system, which required two lectures per week for each subject – each lasting an hour and a half – has been replaced by a single three-hour lecture.³⁸ Analysis suggests that this change was most likely made to free up days for faculty members to teach at private universities.

Conclusion: The crisis is not in universities but in politics

This paper sought to analyze the narrative adopted by the state to justify the expansion of private universities by deconstructing the way in which the crisis in higher education in Egypt was reframed as a quantitative problem related to the number of universities. The analysis shows how the new policy was formulated within the framework of public interest discourse, while concealing clear social and economic biases that reproduce class disparities in educational opportunities rather than reducing them. Through this analysis, the paper aims not to challenge the importance of expanding university education, but rather to draw attention to the need to review the conditions under which this policy is implemented to ensure greater justice and equity. Reconsidering how the expansion policy is designed and implemented in these universities could be a starting point for a deeper discussion on the distribution of educational resources and equal opportunity standards, making higher education development policies in Egypt more balanced between efficiency and equity.

¹ Private universities, as defined by the Egyptian government, are universities established and administered by the government but with high fees that cover their operating costs. They differ from public universities in that they do not offer education services free of charge, as public universities do.

² State Information Service, "Minister of Higher Education announces republic decisions to establish 12 new private universities", available at <https://mediadr.sis.gov.eg/bitstream/handle/123456789/102850/...pdf>

³ These three private universities are: the French University in Egypt (2002), Nile University (created in 2006, and officially converted to a private university in 2014), and the Egyptian Private University for E-Learning (2008). For more information, see the Supreme Council of Universities, available at <https://scu.eg/en/>

⁴ Presidency of the Republic, "President El-Sisi Follows-up on Work Progress in the Grand Egyptian Museum", available at <https://www.presidency.eg/EN/.../news-1042023/>

⁵ رئيس الوزراء: "يجب أن ننسب الفضل كله في إنشاء الجامعات الأهلية بأسرع وقت وبأعلى جودة ممكنة لفخامة الرئيس"، الأهرام، متاح على <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/Massai/News/4987278.aspx>

⁶ Sixth Bulletin, "President Sisi: The establishment of private universities aims to provide a lower-cost educational environment" (Arabic), 25 October 2022, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k3aIH1DJIE>

⁷ Michael D. Jones, Elizabeth A. Shanahan, and Mark K. McBeth, eds., "Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework", in *The Science of Stories: Applications of the Narrative Policy Framework in Public Policy Analysis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 1 (Jones et al, "Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework").

⁸ Jones et al, "Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework", p. 9; Jones et al, "Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework", p. 2.

⁹ Jones et al, "Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework", pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ Yazid Sayigh, "The Second Republic: Reshaping Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Malcolm Kerr–Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, 2025.

¹¹ "Sisi to citizens: I will do everything for you, but not for free... Pay up" (Arabic), 15 August 2018, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2A4UjDB30k>

¹² Sabahna Masri, "President Sisi: Private universities were established as an alternative to universities outside Egypt", 22 December 2024, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-bOIqyhTKw>

¹³ CBC Egypt, "President Sisi: There are 72 universities in Egypt... Every million people in Egypt need a university" (Arabic), 31 October 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIZ3qBETkFu> (CBC Egypt, "President El-Sisi: There are 72 universities").

¹⁴ TenTV, "President El-Sisi: Private universities, with their range of fields, contribute to linking education to the job market", 29 August 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0huyAMnto0> (TenTV, "President El-Sisi: Private universities").

¹⁵ TenTV, "President El-Sisi: Private universities".

¹⁶ CBC Egypt, "Sisi: The state announced job opportunities with a salary of \$20,000, for which 300,000 people applied and only 111 were successful", 28 February 2022, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uINLSijB5hQ>

¹⁷ Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, *Annual Bulletin of Students Enrolled – Teaching Staff Higher Education 2018/2019*, available at <https://censusinfo.capmas.gov.eg/Metadata-ar-v4.2/index.php/catalog/1547>

¹⁸ TenTV, "President El-Sisi: Private universities".

¹⁹ TenTV, "President El-Sisi: Private universities".

²⁰ Sada El Balad, "President El-Sisi promises Egyptians: 'There is no other university like Horika except in Egypt,'" (Arabic), 15 January 2018, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwLJp25JUrK>

²¹ Al-Sada, "President Sisi: The establishment of private universities aims to provide a lower-cost education environment" (Arabic), 25 October 2022, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k3aIH1DJIE>

²² State Information Service, "Higher education and scientific research system witnesses unprecedented boom under Sisi" (Arabic), available at <https://mediadr.sis.gov.eg/handle/123456789/63549> (State Information Service, "High Education and scientific research system")

²³ "Minister of Higher Education announces republican decrees establishing 12 new private universities" (Arabic), available at <https://mediadr.sis.gov.eg/handle/123456789/102850>

²⁴ eXtra news, "Minister of Higher Education explains the difference between private and public universities" (Arabic), 23 August 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwQA4iCkwrQ>

²⁵ State Information Service, "High Education and scientific research system".

²⁶ May Qabil, "2025-2026 Budget: Egypt in the Grip of Debt" (Arabic), Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 27 May 2025, available at <https://eipr.org/publications/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9-2025-2026-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86>

²⁷ "لأول مرة: الرئيس يعترف بتجاهل الحكومة لنسب التعليم والصحة الدستورية" - تعليق المبادرة المصرية للحقوق الشخصية، متاح على <https://eipr.org/press/2023/06/...>

²⁸ List of expenses for Cairo University from the official website (Arabic), available at <https://cnu.cu.edu.eg/images/7-13-2025%202-07-15%20PM.png>; List of university expenses from the official website (Arabic), <https://o6u.edu.eg/dpagesuni.aspx?FactId=0&id=7813>

²⁹ CBC Egypt, "President Sisi: There are 72 universities in Egypt".

³⁰ UNESCO, "Wealth disparities in Higher education attendance in Egypt", available at https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/higher_1822/egypt/wealth_quintiles#year=%222014%22

³¹ "Egypt Public Expenditure Review for the Human Development", World Bank Group, September 2022, p. 59, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/egypt/publication/egypt-public-expenditure-review-for-human-development-sectors>

³² موقع التنسيق الحكومي، <https://tansik.digital.gov.eg/application/Certificates/Thanwy/Limits/LimitA2025.htm>، واليوم السابع، "نتيجة تنسيق جامعة القاهرة الأهلية.. 68.75% سياسة واقتصاد و55% للقانون أدب"، 7 سبتمبر/أيلول 2025، متاح على <https://www.youm7.com/story/2025/9/7/.../7113652>.

³³ Engi Mohammed Mostafa Gamal Eldin, "The Impact of Cost-Sharing on Quality of Education in Egypt Public Universities", Master's thesis for KDI School of Public Policy and Management, 2014, p. 23, available at <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-0024-7.ch003> (Gamal Eldin, "The Impact of Cost-Sharing").

³⁴ Manar Sabry, "Foreign Language Instructed Programs in Public Universities in Egypt: Implications for Resource Diversification, Quality and Equity in Higher Education", Ph.D. dissertation for SUNY Buffalo, 2010, available at <https://www.proquest.com/docview/577073600?fromunauthdoc=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>

³⁵ Gamal Eldin, "The Impact of Cost-Sharing", pp. 5-6.

³⁶ Response to a comment on this post, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15yKczjtjx/>

³⁷ Conversations between the researcher and his professor at Egyptian universities.

³⁸ Researcher's access to faculty's internal schedules.