

Serial number 0142

Title Assessing the Effectiveness of Political Science Higher Education in Egypt

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Abstract

In an attempt to assess the effectiveness of political science education in Egypt, the quality of political science teaching, learning and critical thinking were investigated in four Egyptian universities selected purposefully, two public and two private. Using mixed methods, this paper highlights and analyzes the main findings related to one of the private universities among these four universities, which is the British University in Egypt (BUE). In assessing the quality of political science teaching and learning in the BUE, three particular dimensions were evaluated, which are 1) knowledge of political science core facts and theories, 2) reading comprehension skills and 3) critical thinking. Positive results were found with regards to students' reading comprehension skills. Unlike the rest of the assessed universities, the improvement in the levels of BUE students' reading comprehension from year two to year four was quite obvious with a 16% increase in the percentage of students who succeeded to spot all or big part of contradictions in written articles. Positive results were also found with regards to students' critical thinking. Unlike the rest of the assessed universities, the increase in the levels of students' critical thinking from year two to year four was also quite obvious as the levels of students with strong critical thinking in BUE increased massively from 0% in year two to 18% in year four. Variables such as the school GPA, non-Egyptian high school degree and not meeting professors during office hours despite their presence and accessibility were found significant to students' levels of critical thinking. In addition, variables such as students' participation in activities outside university and number of studying hours outside class were found significant to students' reading comprehension.

Outline

I. Introduction

In the 2016-2017 Global Competitiveness Report, Egypt ranked 112th of 148 countries in higher education system and training, which should best prepare students to meet the needs of economy. With the goal of improving higher education in Egypt to best serve the needs of the country and the economy, the effectiveness of political science higher education in Egypt was assessed to investigate students' knowledge of political science core facts and theories, reading comprehension and critical thinking were investigated in four Egyptian universities, two public and two private. This paper highlights and analyzes the main findings related to one of the private universities among these four universities, which is the British University in Egypt (BUE). The BUE was established in 2005 to provide a British-style education consistent with the UK academic standards. One of the faculties in the BUE is the Faculty of Business Administration, Economics and Political Science (BAEPS), whose 40%-60% of its academic staff are foreigners from UK, Germany and other foreign countries. BAEPS cooperates with two UK validating partners which are Loughborough and London South Bank universities.

II. Literature Review

Several studies examined service quality in higher education. Stewart and Felicetti (1991), Khatib (1996) and Tomovick, Jones and AI assessed students satisfaction towards business education either on the undergraduate or post graduate level. McElwee and Redman (1993) attempted to assess the quality of higher education in general with reference to intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability. Parasuraman, et al. (1985), on the other hand, emphasized consistency of behavior or uniform quality. Apparently, very limited literature attempted to assess the quality of political science education, which points out a gap that this study attempts to fill.

III. Methodology and Data Collection:

This study is based on mixed methods. Quantitative data were collected from students in the second and fourth years of political science to assess their understanding of core facts and theories in political science and reading comprehension. Qualitative data were also collected about students' critical thinking using the online California Critical Thinking Skills Test. Quantitative data were collected from a sample of 278 students from four universities, from

which 75 interviewed students were from BUE (39 students from second year and 36 students from fourth year). Finally, another set of quantitative data were collected from the teaching faculty in the political science department.

IV. Research Results and Findings

1. Knowledge of Political science Core Facts&Theories

Ten questions were asked to students to assess their knowledge of core concepts and theories in political science. Five basic questions were posed to both second and fourth year students and five other more advanced questions were posed only to the fourth year students. The results of the first five questions show the same average of correct answers for both second and fourth year students (19.5%). Both students did not answer well that group of questions which were basic but required memorization of definitions instead of analysis or understanding. Although the second group of questions -which were only posed to fourth year students- were more advanced, yet, many of the fourth year students answered these questions correctly and scored over 65%. In total, the average of the fourth year student's correct answers to the knowledge questions (42.3%) was higher than second year students (19.52%).

2. Reading Comprehension Skills

Despite that this part of the assessment is considered more sophisticated than the previous, the BUE Political Science students showed positive results and ability to read academic articles and identify contradictions in written articles. In overall, 42% of year two students succeeded to spot all or big part of contradictions in written articles. With a 16% increase, the reading comprehension results of year four students showed an improvement compared to year two. Around 58% of year four students succeeded to spot all or big part of the contradictions in written articles. The BUE was the only university among surveyed universities to show such improvement. This can be traced back to the reliance of the teaching faculty in BUE on peer-reviewed texts as their main reading materials, which highly increases from year two to year four students from 58.7% to 82.2%. Using various and peer-reviewed readings teaches the students to acknowledge differences among authors and sometimes contradictions instead of taking information for granted.

3. Critical Thinking

Among the four surveyed universities, the BUE was the only university that has experienced a leap in the students' levels of critical thinking. While the levels of critical thinking in most of the universities under study deteriorated or witnessed a slight improvement (no more than 2.5%), the levels of students with strong critical thinking in BUE increased massively from 0% in year two to 18% in year four. The levels of students in the BUE having moderate critical thinking also increased from 35% in year two to 41% in year four. This can be traced back to three reasons. First, the department realizes it does not only compete in offering the best education nationally, but also regionally and internationally; hence, it was necessary to prioritize critical and analytical thinking. Second, as a part of the British assessment criteria for written assignments and research papers, students had to demonstrate critical thinking in their writings. In the interviews with the students in BUE, it was evident they had obligatory written assignments in almost all courses. Third, about 75% or fewer of the teaching faculty in BUE received their highest degree from prestigious international universities that normally emphasize critical and analytical thinking.

IV. Conclusion

- a. Unlike the rest of the assessed universities, the improvement in the levels of students' reading comprehension from year two to year four was quite obvious with a 16% increase in the percentage of students who succeeded to spot all or big part of contradictions in written articles. The increase in the students' levels of reading comprehension in BUE can be traced back to the BUE and BAEPS vision in becoming a high quality educational institution that promotes analytical thinking and the staff reliance on combinations of peer-reviewed texts as their main reading materials which train the students to acknowledge differences and sometimes contradictions among authors.
- b. Unlike the rest of the assessed universities, the increase in the levels of students' critical thinking from year two to four (from 0% to 18%) was quite obvious. This is particularly important since increasing students' ability to think, analyze and investigate critically is expected to reduce extremism, boost original ideas and unleash creativity. The increase in the levels of critical thinking in BUE can be traced back to the high number of written assignments and research papers which students have to submit, the associated British assessment criteria for written assignments and research papers and the multi-cultural foreign staff engaged in teaching.

- c. Although the regression analysis did not reveal that many factors are significant to the assessment, some interesting results can still be drawn. Variables such as school GPA, non-Egyptian high school degree were found significant to students' levels of critical thinking. Furthermore, variables such as students' rare use of computer labs and not having personal cars were found significant to students' core knowledge. Finally, two variables were hardly significant to students' reading comprehension, which were students' participation in activities outside university and number of studying hours outside class.