

## Laggards trying to catch up

*One reason that too many Arabs are poor is rotten education.*



*Reuters*

A recent issue of *Science*, the weekly journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, was devoted to research into "Ardi" or *Ardipithecus ramidus*, a 4.4m-year-old hominid species whose discovery deepens the understanding of human evolution. These latest studies suggest, among other things, that rather than descending from a closely related species such as the chimpanzee, the hominid branch parted earlier than previously thought from the common ancestral tree.

In much of the Arab world, coverage of the research took a different spin. "American Scientists Debunk Darwin", exclaimed the headline in *al-Masry al-Youm*, Egypt's leading independent daily. "Ardi Refutes Darwin's Theory", chimed the website of *al-Jazeera*, the region's most-watched television channel. Scores of comments from readers celebrated this news as a blow to Western materialism and a triumph for Islam. Two or three lonely readers wrote in to complain that the report had inaccurately presented the findings of the research.

The response to Ardi's unearthing was not surprising. According to surveys, barely a third of Egyptian adults have ever heard of Charles Darwin and just 8% think there is any evidence to back his famous theory. Teachers, who might be expected to know better, seem equally sceptical. In a survey of nine Egyptian state schools, where Darwin's ideas do form part of the curriculum for 15-year-olds, not one of more than 30 science teachers interviewed believed them to be true. At a private university in the United Arab Emirates, only 15% of the faculty thought there was good evidence to support evolution.

The strength of religious belief among Arabs partly explains their reluctance to accept the facts of evolution. Until recent reforms, state primary schools in Saudi Arabia devoted 31% of classroom time to religion, compared with just 20% for mathematics and science. A quarter of the kingdom's university students devote the main part of their degree course to Islamic studies, more than in engineering, medicine and science put together. And despite changes to Saudi curriculums, religious study remains obligatory every year from primary school through to university.

Such choices carry a cost that goes beyond ignorance of Darwin. Arab countries now spend as much or more on education, as a share of GDP, than the world average. They have made great strides in eradicating illiteracy, boosting university enrolment and reducing gaps in education between the sexes.

But the gap in the quality of education between Arabs and other people at a similar level of development is still frightening. It is one reason why Arab countries suffer unusually high rates of youth unemployment. According to a recent study by a team of Egyptian economists, the lack of skills in the workforce largely explains why a decade of fast economic growth has failed to lift more people out of poverty.

The most rigorous comparative study of education systems, a survey called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) that comes out every four years, revealed in its latest report, in 2007, that out of 48 countries tested, all 12 participating Arab countries fell below the average. More disturbingly, less than 1% of students aged 12-13 in ten Arab countries reached an advanced benchmark in science, compared with 32% in Singapore and 10% in the United States. Only one Arab country, Jordan, scored above the international average, with 5% of its 13-year-olds reaching the advanced category.

Other comparative measures are equally alarming. A listing of the world's top 500 universities, compiled annually by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, includes three South African and six Israeli universities, but not a single Arab one. The Swiss-based World Economic Forum ranks Egypt a modest 70th out of 133 countries in competitiveness, but in terms of the quality of its primary education system and its mathematics-and-science teaching, it slumps to 124th. Libya, despite an income of \$16,000 a head, ranks an even more dismal 128th in the quality of its higher education, lower than dirt-poor Burkina Faso, with an average income of \$577.

Well aware that their school systems are doing badly, Arab governments have been scrambling to improve. In an attempt to leapfrog the slow process of curriculum reform and teacher training, many have taken the easy route of encouraging private schools. In Qatar, for instance, the share of students in private education leapt from 30% to more than 60% between 1999 and 2006, according to the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Syria has licensed some 20 private universities since 2001; 14 are up and running. Yet their total enrolment is dwarfed by the 200,000 at state-run Damascus University alone. Oil-rich monarchies in the Gulf have spent lavishly to lure Western academies to their shores, but these branch universities are struggling to find qualified students to fill their splendidly equipped classrooms.

Not to be outdone, Saudi Arabia has launched King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), a city-sized institution with an endowment of \$20 billion. Intended as an oasis of academic excellence, it enjoys an independent board and is the kingdom's only co-educational institution. This augurs well for the Saudi elite, but one fancy new university will do little to lift the overall standard of Saudi education. And it has been attacked by religious conservatives. A senior cleric who decried the mixing of sexes at KAUST, declaring that its textbooks should be reviewed by religious scholars, was forced to resign from government office.

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