

# EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL  
AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY  
LINDA HERRERA





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# 3. ‘An Orchestra Without a Conductor’: The Need for Strategic Management of Egypt’s Education System

*Tarek Shawki (Edited by Linda Herrera)*

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## Abstract

Dr. Tarek Shawki, Chair of the Specialized Presidential Council for Education and Scientific Research (September 2014-August 2022), participates in a panel organized by the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies on 21 November 2016. He laments the poor state of the nation’s education system as reflected in low global rankings, endemic problems of plagiarism, and the lack of coordination, rendering it like ‘an orchestra without a conductor’. He calls for a new education governance model managed by an authority that would oversee the entire education sector to facilitate long-term strategic planning, manage international cooperation, and allow for flexibility in hiring. He suggests the Alexandria Library or the Egyptian Knowledge Bank as possible models. This chapter includes a postscript with the 2024 draft law for the ‘National Council for Education, Research and Innovation’ (Appendix A) and the structure of the Alexandria Library (Appendix B). The original talk has been edited for flow, brevity, and clarity, staying true to the original content.

## Keywords

international education rankings, management, plagiarism, quality control, strategic planning, teacher education

## 1. Low Rankings in Education

We have been in the presidential councils for two years now (Fig. 3.1). We first spoke to the President in December 2014. We are trying to pinpoint initiatives from a massive panorama filled with problems. The bottom line is that we do not like to hear what the World Economic Forum rankings say, namely that today, Egypt's primary education ranks 139 out of the 140 countries.<sup>1</sup> Other rankings confirm this too. This is a catastrophe that no one likes. But this is a fact. Numbers do not lie. We are number 111 in higher education. In scientific research, we are number one in only one list, which is plagiarism, the theft of scientific research. Egypt is number one. It is not that we do not do any research. No, we actually steal it. This is very sad. Here, we have a moral issue *and* a scientific one. Where do we begin?



Fig. 3.1 Tarek Shawki (left) puts forward a proposal to reform Egypt's education system. Talk given at the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES) on 21 November 2016. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tarek\\_Shawki-2016-education\\_reform.png#/media/File:Tarek\\_Shawki-2016-education\\_reform.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tarek_Shawki-2016-education_reform.png#/media/File:Tarek_Shawki-2016-education_reform.png)

## 2. Who is Running the Show?

From the point of view of management of the system, if we take a helicopter and look down, we see a circus, a very big system with many distractions and numerous bodies. We do not know who is running

<sup>1</sup> See the Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016 (World Economic Forum 2015).

the show and who is making decisions. There is no honor and no accountability. Who does what? Who do the projects belong to? Who is responsible for monitoring? How do we judge when something is completed? These are just some questions. Add to this that people in different institutions do not speak to one another. For example, the president of the Academy of Scientific Research is appointed by the Prime Minister. He would tell you, 'I do not report to the Minister of Education'. The minister for [K-12] education and minister for higher education only speak to one another based on their mood, not because they have to. Technical education is sometimes on its own and sometimes combined with the Ministry of Education.

We have a big football team but without a coach. When children play football in the street, they fight. Who will be the goalie? Who will play right-back? They do not consider who would be best at a given position. You need a coach to give the players instructions so that the team wins. We do not have a coach. We have an ad-hoc team playing street football. A nicer metaphor might be, 'It is like an orchestra without a conductor'. There might be a phenomenal soloist in the orchestra, but these hundreds of musicians cannot play together. This leads to disharmony. We do not have any coordination.

And keep in mind that the different authorities we have are not independent. This old education system which we call '1.0', has chronic problems. The Ministry is the creator of this problem, and it is also on the frontline of defending this problem. This is a conflict of interest. The Ministry cannot be responsible for fixing this issue. You cannot ask someone to fix a problem which he himself created. The result will be zero. It will never work. This is a vicious loop. There are known strategies for solving these kinds of problems. We do not need to reinvent the wheel.

### 3. The Need for an Independent Education Authority

We have a managerial problem. We (in the Presidential Councils) have talked a lot about the need for a kind of commission (*mufawadiya*); we might call it a think tank, an authority, or a council. What we want is to make a new entity, whatever we call it. This authority would be directly under the office of the President of the Republic. It would have a board of trustees and an executive director, something like the Bibliotheca

Alexandrina (see Appendix B). It would have a dream team that is handpicked based on a person's qualifications and skills. We would separate the problem-solving and strategy from the implementation and monitoring. Like a think tank, this entity will be the place where there is competency, with the people who understand assessments, curriculum, and professional development of teachers. The Council of Scientists of Egypt have called for something similar. We presented this idea to the President, and I think it is on the path of implementation.

For this authority to work, it must be free from state bureaucracy, and therefore it needs its own laws. But there has to be bridging. The executive director must have a governmental status. The entity needs to be able to receive money, grants, and the ability to spend without daunting bureaucracy. To buy a pencil through the government takes six months. This is another catastrophe. Also, to be able to recruit and pay for a consultancy at an international rate requires a different law. The actions of this authority would be audited like the multinational companies. It would be very transparent, but free to move. This must be done by law, not with preferential treatment. In order to get things done these last two years, we have had to depend on personal relations, 'do this for my sake', etc. When there is a mandate with clear objectives in relation to the state and everything is in black and white, we will be empowered.

There are key concepts used in management like 'authority', 'mandate', and 'accountability'. We must be very clear about roles and responsibilities. Who is responsible for what? How will we ensure accountability? Like any job in the world, there should be job descriptions for ministerial positions. We cannot just select anyone as a minister and tell him or her to run things randomly. This is what is happening now. There is no job description and there is no way to make people in these positions accountable.

#### 4. The Dream of a Different Education System

In March of 2015, the President asked us (members of the Presidential Council): 'What about education? What will happen to education in a year and a half?' I told him, 'This primary education is like a car that has been sitting in the garage collecting dust. If you cleaned it, polished it, and changed its tires, it will not become a Ferrari. It has a threshold,

beyond which it can no longer work'. I told him, 'We want to dream. Get us out of this chaos to dream of something new'.

The Vision 2030 is beautiful.<sup>2</sup> What is written in the Egyptian constitution (of 2014) is beautiful. But I tell them, without changing the way we do things, nothing will happen. I would not even bother to spend time thinking about changing assessments, the Thanaweya Amma, and other things like scholarships for university because I know I will not be able to implement them unless there is an entity like this one. One idea is that if a student fails (in university), they must pay the cost of their college education. They wrote in the papers that we are against education. But the simple idea is that university education is a scholarship from taxpayers. Use it effectively or lose it. It is four years. If the person wants to spend eight years in college, okay, but the scholarship will not cover the four additional years. This idea received a lot of resistance.

## 5. Reimagining Teacher Education

There are overused terms in Egypt, like 'rehabilitating the teacher', 'capacity building', 'curriculum development'. These terms are abused. We must stop at curriculum development and ask, 'What do we mean exactly'? Define the words that you are using. Do not throw these terms at me. When the newspapers print articles about how our curriculum is better than Singapore's curriculum, and that we provide expertise to Africa, the message is that we are the best at something. This is a misconception. We must better define the terms we are using.

As an engineer, I say first things first. For the past two years we have been trying to understand the system and diagnose what is wrong with it. An integral part of education is the development of the personality. The teacher is the most important element, and we must start from there. But unlike the past, the teacher is no longer a role model. When those students who cheated on the Thanaweya Amma become teachers themselves, these behaviors perpetuate. Obviously, this does not apply to all teachers, but teachers today are not the same as the teachers of the

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2 Egypt Vision 2030 can be accessed at [https://web.archive.org/web/20250301084436/https://arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/sds\\_egypt\\_vision\\_2030.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20250301084436/https://arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/sds_egypt_vision_2030.pdf)

1960s, not at all. These days we hear stories about child abuse, beatings, and students beating their teachers. Parents also come and beat the teachers. There is a great moral corruption from both ends.

The teacher is a very important component of education from the point of view of knowledge, morals, and behavior. But we do not have the high caliber of teacher that we need. Why? Because colleges of education do not graduate the right product. They will be mad at me for saying this, but this is not important right now. The important thing is to fix it.

Colleges of education are not a good idea at all. Singapore has a completely different system of Institutes for Teacher Education (ITE). This is something amazing. It is number one in the world. These people would not mind coming here tomorrow and making something similar in Egypt under Singaporean management. This would stop the aimlessness that we have in the colleges of education and the Professional Academy of Teachers (PAT) which has lost its compass. Instead of licensing training for teachers, PAT became the trainers of teachers. These are the main ideas we are interested in right now. Instead of speaking about the details, we can talk about many dreams. But the implementation of these dreams needs the existence of a different management system. There needs to be accountability and a mandate.

The K-12 system has 1.8 million teachers who are not in agreement at all on the new goal of education. Rehabilitating them is not an easy feat. Not easy at all. And it costs a lot. We tried to create a license for professionals, which is a very simple idea. They almost sent us in front of a firing squad. The idea of a professional license is essential in countries across the world. No one practices medicine without a license or builds a building without a license. Every four years the license must be renewed. This provides guarantees, quality assurances that these people are up to date.<sup>3</sup>

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3 The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Teach for Tomorrow project addressed primary-grade teacher professional development and teacher certification by providing technical assistance to the ministry 'that will create and institutionalize a teacher certification system with clear standards and performance-based licensure renewal' (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20240304125317/https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/egypt/basic-education/teach-tomorrow>). That project was supposed to last from 2020-2025 but was discontinued early in 2025 when the Trump administration cut most funds to USAID.

The minister is supposed to implement the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that came from this council, the board of trustees, and all these people. The President of the Republic signed it (see Egypt Vision 2030).<sup>4</sup> The idea is to train a fixed number of teachers based on a certain method. The problem is that the government does not reward qualifications because it pays pennies. The qualified teachers go abroad or work for multinational companies. Who will fix this? The qualified people have left the country. They are not here. What are we going to do?

## 6. Coordinating International Cooperation

There is a lot of international cooperation in education. We work with organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank, but where do these things go? Who is doing the coordination? The ambassadors of foreign countries and the heads of UN agencies come to us (in the Presidential Councils) and tell us that they do not know who to speak to. They trust us because we are independent and do not belong to any authority. They all face the same problem. They do not know where to give their money. They do not know who is running things. All this money will not yield results because the system is very chaotic. Who coordinates between the international organizations and the donors? This is a problem. I want them to give resources to us based on what *we* want, not based on what *they* want. There should be someone who has all the pieces of the puzzle and tells them where to put their money.

For instance, what we want from Finland is only one part. But no one has a bird's-eye view because this education authority does not exist. The European Union says that it has forty million dollars, but they do not know who to give it to. All of this has to be centralized. If this authority existed, it would be able to see a complete picture of primary

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4 The Egypt Vision 2030 is based on ten pillars that focus on different areas of Egypt's development plan. The seventh pillar is devoted to education and training and specifies the KPIs that are supposed to be achieved by 2030. The overall goals are to achieve: 'A high quality education and training system available to all, without discrimination within an efficient, just, sustainable and flexible institutional framework. Providing the necessary skills to students and trainees to think creatively and empower them technically and technologically. Contributing to the development of a proud, creative, responsible, and competitive citizen who accepts diversity and differences, and is proud of his country's s history' (Arab Republic of Egypt 2016: 13)

education, the Azhar education, and higher education. It would know of any penny coming from outside and where it is going. The way things are now, the international partners and donors have to knock on doors at the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. They are the ones that come to us. Not the other way around. It will force us to do things in a specific way.

## 7. The Knowledge Bank as a Model of National Coordination

The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) did exactly this. We made the Knowledge Bank, which was a very big and beautiful project that will impact scientific research, rankings, publishing, and intellectual property. Before, the publishers used to go to the Armed Forces, to each university, public and private, or to the Higher Council of Universities. Each entity gave them a rate. The group who did the Knowledge Bank told the publishers that we will only make contracts with one entity. We became the ones with the power, and we started to have leverage. With the Knowledge Bank, we were able to negotiate rates of 99% less than what we used to pay. The way we designed the Knowledge Bank is important.

We need an authority in education with multiple objectives: problem solving, coordination, and monitoring. The implementation is in the ministry, but the strategizing happens outside of it and should have nothing to do with changing ministers, at all. This system can be replicated in health care and medicine, as Dr. Okasha<sup>5</sup> has suggested, and we can do it in the economy. We need to cluster these things together so that someone sees the big picture. The President will do a big conference, 'a social forum on education' in December (2016). This topic will be the focal point. How do we manage the solution, not the

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5 Dr. Ahmed Okasha is an internationally known psychiatrist from Ain Shams University, Faculty of Medicine (MB, MSc, M.D., and Ph.D). He was the founder and honorary chairman of the Institute of Psychiatry at Ain Shams University, Professor and Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Center for Training and Research in Mental Health, Institute of Psychiatry, Ain Shams University, Member of the Expert Advisory Panel in Mental Health – WHO – Geneva, President of the Egyptian Psychiatric Association, President Arab Federation of Psychiatrists, Honorary President World Psychiatric Association, Honorary Fellow of World Psychiatric Association (2005), among many other prestigious positions.

details. The experts are concerned with the details. We need to put forward this solution.

## 8. Epilogue: A National Council for Education

On 22 October 2024, the Egyptian House of Representatives eventually approved a draft law submitted by the government to establish the National Council for Education, Research and Innovation. The Law, divided into eight articles, differs significantly from the ideas proposed in 2016 by the members of the President's advisory councils. This council is composed of ten ministers, including from the military and state security apparatus (Ministers of Defense and Military Production and Interior), and other ministers with no discernible education expertise. Rather, they oversee national budgets, work, and economic growth, and include the Minister of Industry, Minister of Planning, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Labor. The council includes twelve 'specialized experts' and businesspeople for renewable two-year terms, nominated by the Prime Minister and decided by the President of the Republic. For a full text of the draft law, see Appendix A.

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## 10. Appendix A: Draft Law on National Council for Education, Research and Innovation, 2024

### Article (1)

A council called the 'National Council for Education, Research and Innovation' shall be established, reporting to the President of the Republic, and its headquarters shall be in Cairo Governorate. It shall be referred to in this law as 'the Council.'

### Article (2)

The Council shall be formed under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, and the membership of each of the following:

- 1- Minister of Defense and Military Production.
- 2- Minister of Industry.
- 3- Minister of Planning, Economic Development and International Cooperation.
- 4- Minister of Interior.
- 5- Minister of Communications and Information Technology.
- 6- Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research.
- 7- Minister of Finance.
- 8- Minister of Labor.
- 9- Minister of Culture.
- 10- Minister of Education and Technical Education.
- 11- Deputy of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif.
- 12- Chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education.
- 13- Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Egyptian Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Itqan).
- 14- Executive Director of the National Training Academy.
- 15- Eight experts specialized in the Council's field of work, and four businessmen, to be selected by a decision issued by the President of the Republic based on the nomination of the Prime Minister for a period of two years, renewable for another similar period.

### Article (3)

The Council shall meet at the invitation of its Chairman at least once every three months or whenever necessary. Its meeting shall be valid

if attended by the majority of its members, provided that half of the number of experts and businessmen are among them. It shall issue its decisions by an absolute majority of the votes of those present. In the event of a tie, the side of the Chairman shall prevail. The Council may invite to attend its meetings those whose expertise it deems necessary, without them having a counted vote.

#### **Article (4)**

The Council aims to set the state's higher policies in the field of education in all its types and all its stages, and to achieve integration between them, and to supervise their implementation, with the aim of advancing education and developing its outcomes in a manner consistent with the state's national goals and the requirements of the local and international labor market. It also aims to set the state's higher policies in the field of research and innovation.

The Council shall exercise all powers necessary to achieve its objectives, and in particular it shall have the following:

1- Developing the national strategy, plans and programmes for developing education, research and innovation, and mechanisms for monitoring their implementation, in coordination with the relevant ministries, departments and agencies.

2- Reviewing and updating national priorities in the field of education, research and innovation in various sectors, preparing recommendations related to the technical, administrative and legal frameworks necessary to develop the educational process, and proposing ways to develop and advance it, taking into account the integration of its outputs with the requirements of the local and international labor market.

3- Developing a national plan to develop the infrastructure of schools of all types and stages and Al-Azhar institutes in a manner consistent with the distribution of universities, technological institutes, industrial zones and national projects, and following up on the implementation of this plan with the ministries and relevant authorities.

4- Developing an executive plan for training policies at all educational stages and beyond, raising awareness of the importance of technical education, training and new specializations in this field, and its role in supporting the national economy, as well as developing a marketing plan for the outcomes of education, research and innovation locally and internationally.

5- Proposing ways to develop the institutions responsible for implementing the educational process, their operating systems, and the necessary coordination mechanisms with the relevant ministries, departments, and agencies to ensure the achievement of the planned objectives.

6- Proposing criteria and conditions for selecting those responsible for the education, research and innovation system, in light of considerations of scientific and administrative efficiency, in a manner that ensures the improvement of its performance.

7- Proposing ways and mechanisms to develop the organizational structure of research and innovation to achieve the target in various fields of science within the framework of a vision that is consistent with the scientific and material capabilities available to the state.

8- Developing a comprehensive vision for caring for the gifted, talented and geniuses during the various stages (the discovery stage—the balanced scientific, psychological and physical rehabilitation stage—the stage of benefiting from the fields of research and innovation) in a way that ensures the optimal utilization of the currently existing institutions and energies.

9- Issuing a comprehensive periodic report on the development of the education system in all its types and all its stages, every two years in cooperation with the bodies concerned with quality assurance and accreditation, to be submitted to the Council of Ministers and the House of Representatives.

#### **Article (5)**

The Council shall have a technical secretariat that shall follow up on the executive procedures of the policies and plans issued by the Council in coordination with all ministries and relevant authorities and present appropriate recommendations in light of the results of the follow-up and coordination.

The Technical Secretariat shall be headed by a person with scientific and practical experience in the Council's field of work, and shall include representatives from relevant ministries and bodies, and a number of scientists and experts in the fields of education, research and innovation.

The formation of the Technical Secretariat, the determination of its other powers and its work system, and the financial treatment of

its chairman and members shall be issued by a decision of the Prime Minister.

**Article (6)**

The Supreme Council of Al-Azhar, the Council of Private Higher Institutes Affairs, the Supreme Council of Universities, the Supreme Council of Pre-University Education, the Council of Private Universities, the Council of Foreign University Branches Affairs, the Supreme Council for Technological Education, and other councils concerned with developing plans for education, research, and innovation, as the case may be, when exercising their powers stipulated by the laws or decisions regulating them, are committed to taking into account the implementation of the higher policies set by the Council.

**Article (7)**

The Council shall submit a report on the results of its work and recommendations every six months to the President of the Republic.

**Article (8)**

This law shall be published in the Official Gazette and shall come into effect on the day following the date of its publication.

## II. Appendix B: Decision No. 76 of 2001 of the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt on the Alexandria Library

Regarding the organization of supervision of the Library of Alexandria, the method of its management, and the conduct of its financial and administrative affairs, the President of the Republic, after reviewing the Constitution; and Law No. 1 of 2001 regarding the Library of Alexandria; and after the approval of the Council of Ministers, decided:

**Article (1)**

The Library of Alexandria is a public legal entity, headquartered in Alexandria, and is subject to the President of the Republic.

**Article (2)****Alexandria Library Administration**

The Library of Alexandria is managed by:

1. Board of Patrons
2. Board of Trustees
3. Library Director

**Article (3)****Board of Patrons**

The Board of Patrons consists of a number of prominent figures from different countries of the world, not less than eight and not more than twenty-four members, who are selected at the invitation of the President of the Republic, provided that the President of UNESCO is among them. The President of the Republic or his choice for this purpose assumes the presidency of the Council, and the Minister of Higher Education assumes the Secretariat of the Council.

The Council is responsible for supporting and following up on the library's activities, and providing whatever guidance it deems appropriate in this regard. It holds a meeting every three years at the invitation of its President.

**Article (4)****Board of Trustees**

The Board of Trustees shall consist of a number of public figures of scientific standing or international experience, both Egyptians and non-Egyptians, not less than fifteen and not more than thirty members, including five members from the Egyptian government in their official capacities; they are the Minister of Higher Education, the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Governor of Alexandria, and the President of Alexandria University.

The Chairman of the Board of Sponsors shall chair the Board of Trustees and shall choose from among its members a person to replace him in the event of his absence.

The first Board of Trustees shall be appointed by a decision of the President of the Republic. The term of membership of the members of this Board who are not appointed in their official capacities shall be two years, after which the membership of one-third shall be renewed every year.

Members of the Board of Trustees who are not appointed in their capacities—other than the first board—are appointed by a decision of the Board of Trustees, based on a nomination by one of its members. The term of membership in this case is three years, renewable once.

The Board of Trustees is the governing authority over the Library's affairs. It is responsible for formulating the general policy for its management, planning its activities, and approving its financial and administrative regulations. The Board of Trustees meets once a year, and may hold extraordinary meetings at the invitation of its Chairman, or upon the request of at least half of the members.

The meeting of the Board of Trustees shall be valid if attended by at least a majority of the members, and decisions shall be issued by a majority vote of those present, and in the event of a tie, the side to which the President belongs shall prevail.

The Council may have among its members committees assigned to carry out a specific task or conduct specific research or studies.

The Library shall bear the expenses and allowances for attending meetings of the members of the Board of Trustees and its committees.

## **Article (5)**

### **Library Director**

The Board of Trustees shall appoint the Library Director for a renewable term of five years, and shall determine his financial allocations. A decision shall be issued by the Board by a two-thirds majority of its present members. The candidate shall be required to have a distinguished international standing and broad culture, and to have administrative competence and technical experience.

The Library Director shall be its CEO, and shall be entrusted with implementing the policy established by the Board of Trustees, preparing the agenda for the Board's meetings, and having the right to attend its sessions without having a vote in the deliberations.

The Library Director heads the staff and issues decisions regarding their appointment, promotion and termination of service, in accordance with the provisions of the legal system to which they are subject.

The library director shall be its legal representative before the courts and in its relations with others.

**Article (6)****Financial and Administrative Regulations and Library Staff Affairs Regulations**

The Library Director shall prepare its financial and administrative regulations and its staff regulations in a manner that is consistent with the nature of the Library's activity and enables it to achieve its mission without being bound by the management systems stipulated in other laws. These regulations shall be submitted to the Board of Trustees for approval.

The staff regulations, once approved, will be the legal system governing the relationship between staff and the library.

**Article (7)****Budget and Auditors**

The Library shall have an independent budget, and the budget surplus shall be carried over from one year to another. Without prejudice to the oversight of the Central Auditing Organization, the Board of Trustees shall appoint external auditors, and the Board shall receive their reports.

**Article (8)**

This decision shall be published in the Official Gazette and shall be effective from the date of its publication. Issued by the Presidency of the Republic on 25 Dhu al-Hijjah 1421 AH (corresponding to 20 March 2001 AD). Hosni Mubarak (Alexandria Library Website n.d.)

## 12. Companion Videos

Video 3.1 Tarek Shawki: 'A Proposal to Reform the Education System in Egypt', Egyptian Center for Economic Studies – ECES, 21 November 2016 (in Arabic), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNTJ6pbfLPQ>

Video 3.2 Tarek Shawki: 'A Proposal to Reform the Education System in Egypt', edited with English subtitles, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 16 February 2024, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G11yOcdSBLw>