

The Question of University Admissions

Al-Ahram, 6 October 1940.

The academic year began yesterday in the faculties of Fuad the First University in Cairo and its Alexandria branch; a modest number of successful candidates — those who had obtained an aggregate of passing marks exceeding 55% — were admitted to the University, while many others wishing to enroll in the various faculties, but lacking the required aggregate, remained in confusion, not knowing what to do.

We should note here that the University's director, certain faculty deans, and the University's secretary-general are inclined not to depart from the earlier decision, while many professors — particularly in the theoretical faculties — favor removing the obstacles now standing in the students' way this year.

The students' guardians are now turning to the University's supreme president, hoping this matter will be resolved in the coming days, for fear that their children's time will drag on while they remain outside their studies.

Yesterday, many of the students' guardians contacted our correspondent, telling him they had resolved to make their way to the Royal Court, to bring the matter before His Majesty himself.

A word from Dr. Taha Hussein Bey. One of al-Ahram's editors asked Professor Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, professor of Arabic literature at the University and director of the General Culture Bureau at the Ministry of Education, his opinion on the problem of the students the University had refused to admit this year, and he offered the following remarks: "I have always been among those most firmly opposed to restricting higher education, whatever arguments the advocates of such restriction may put forward; for I believe Egypt remains very far indeed from the point at which the question of higher education could rightly be put up for debate. I have believed, and still believe, that the Egyptian state has not yet traveled the distance it ought to travel in spreading secondary and higher education, and that it is truly laughable for people to debate this question in a country where the educated do not reach twenty percent of the population, and which possesses so vast a budget and so broad a wealth.

I have believed, and still believe, that those who wish to restrict education are either people who go by mere appearances, speaking of a 'crisis of education' in Egypt exactly as people speak of one in Europe and America, nothing more — or else people who wish an elite distinguished by culture to form in Egypt, just as an elite distinguished by wealth has already formed there. But those who look upon these matters with a sincere, purely democratic view, for the good of the homeland, ought not to contemplate restricting education before education has in fact expanded. So I have believed, and still believe — but this year we face a new problem, one we must view in a special light, and address with the firmness and speed with which the emergencies that arise in wartime are addressed. It has become impossible for our sons to travel to Europe, and extremely difficult for them to reside there, and yet they must still be educated. Just as the government is concerned to find within Egypt the necessary goods we once imported from Europe, and whose importation has now become difficult, so too must the government educate the young men we once educated in Europe, and whose education there has now become impossible. I had believed the University would postpone its Platonic debates over raising or lowering the standard of higher education, or keeping it as it is, until the present emergency had passed. But I am sorry to find these debates continuing this year exactly as in years past, as though our connection with Europe remained swift and orderly. And it seems to me — now that a full year has passed since the war began, and we have entered its second year — that the time has come for us to recognize that the world is at war, that war has its own harsh circumstances requiring systems suited to them, circumstances which have indeed driven the government and parliament to declare martial law. There is nothing strange in the University's ignoring all of this, for it is in the nature of scholars to live in their 'ivory tower' and to be slow to feel the events unfolding around them; but what is truly strange is that the government has not informed the University that there is a war upon the earth, that there are students who must be educated, and that leaving them to wander idly in the streets, however tolerable in peacetime, is not tolerable in time of war. I think it is the Ministry of Education's own right to defend its own secondary-school certificate; the University's doors ought not to be closed in the face of a student holding that certificate, when that very certificate opens to him the doors of every European university. There may be excuses available to the University, particularly with respect to faculties that require laboratories, but it is the government's duty to help the University overcome these obstacles. I recall that the present Minister of Education took a certain stand, in his

previous term at the Ministry, which I do not think the University has forgotten; let him take that same stand once again. It is truly a curious thing that the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Arts should admit holders of the secondary certificate from the science and mathematics sections in time of peace, only to refuse these same students once war and its crises arrive. The matter, I believe, admits neither delay nor procrastination, any more than it admits levity or jest; let the University and the government take it up with earnestness and resolve. The parents of these students already have enough to bear from the war's financial and economic crises; let us spare them this educational crisis as well — that is the very least owed to them from us."