TOWARDS A QUALITY ASSURANCE
OF THE PRIVATE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN EGYPT

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Abstract

The private universities in Egypt were initiated based on a presidential decree in 1996. Since then, a number of universities were open, with two different opposing perspectives for two different parties of stakeholders. The first was the hope of the educators and of many parents to achieve quality education away from the typical bureaucratic governmental university education that has been long deteriorated according to several factors out of scope of this paper. On the other hand, was the dream of a number of investors and other parents of less able and less qualified students to acquire a paid-for university graduation certificate with the least effort.

The paper at hand tackles this issue. Aiming at evaluating the experiment of quality assurance of private education in Egypt. The paper dissects the concept of the private education in Egypt through reviewing an experiment of a quality assurance project of the architectural programs in one of the renowned private universities in Egypt. The methodology is based on a review of the private education system, and the national quality assurance project set criteria. Then, an analysis of the response of the department and the university to the project and its requirement between the practices and the paper work is criticized. Some lights are then shed on the challenges confronting the success of the process, including society and its misconception, together with the conflict of interests between the educators, investors and students. The discussion and conclusion shed light on the strategic planning as the only hope towards the quality assurance of private university education in Egypt.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Architectural Education, Private Universities.

1   THE PRIVATE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN EGYPT … AND ITS (QUALITY)

When the presidential decree of launching a number of four private universities was declared in Egypt in 1996, high hopes and expectations lighted in the hearts and minds of many concerned educators. Seeing the world around us changing, while standing still, paralyzed, unable to take our universities as a result of an extreme bureaucratic atmosphere. The hope visualized a new beginning with the turn of the millennium and the intention was to start where others had already reached and accomplished. Local and international efforts collaborated, the society was examined in terms of our profession's credibility, problems of practice, the requirements of the entire sectors that touch our discipline in the business, labor and practice market was investigated. For that, programs were designed and the private universities were the hope.

For us -a department of architecture of one of those universities, aimed at providing students with a multi, and interdisciplinary base of practical knowledge base of their society and environment, as well as basis for developing design methodologies and techniques required to respond to global challenges of the profession. The program was designed to investigate social, technological, and historical paradigms relevant to the making of interior space, architecture, and urbanism. Courses work focused on the synthesis of culture, history, environmental conditions, and social aspiration into a distinguished program for architecture. The focal areas of studies were Environmental Design, Preservation of Historic Buildings and Urban Settings, Appropriate Building Technology and Community Design. On top of the department was a leading team, which joined efforts with the Union of International Architects together with the UNESCO, as well as developed an affiliation with North-Carolina State University. In addition, there was a collaboration with the Aga khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). This resulted in hosting the "archnet.org project" and we were a corner stone in its foundation We also held three international conferences; the first with the UIA/UNESCO 1997, the second with a

number of Mediterranean school of architecture in 2003 and the third with the AKAA on the occasion of 8th award cycle in the year 2004.

1.1   The concept of "Quality" (1996-2006):

Quality then, from our perspective as a department of architecture was developing a philosophy that implies a mission and a vision derived from the 1996 UNESCO/UIA CHARTER for Architectural Education. The devised goals were:

- The promotion of a decent quality of life for all the inhabitants of human settlements**.**

- The application of appropriate technological application, which respects the social, cultural and aesthetic, needs of people and is aware of the appropriate use of materials in architecture and their initial and future maintenance costs.

- Balancing the ecological intervention, thus leading a sustainable development of the built and natural environment including the rational utilization of available resources.

- Valuing architecture as the property and responsibility of everyone.

Special objectives were developed reflecting **who is *the* architect that we want to claim as our graduate** in the turn of the millennium - as Intended Learning Outcomes, as follows:

- Conserve our tangible and intangible heritage in the built environment

- Research-based design

- Methodize social and behavioral aspects in the design and development of built environments

- Community development through participatory design

- Technological advancement in the realm of the building field

- Applying the latest information technology in architecture and design

- Internationalization of education through distance learning and virtual design studios, international joint workshops and competitions, symposia and conferences, and hosting renown global instructors as visiting professors

Internationalization of architecture education and **long distance learning** were two aspects that distinguished the department from the entire Egyptian schools of architecture. The first students' exposure to international competitions was the 1999 UIA Urban Housing for the XI Century students' competition. Our third year students ranked second and fifth positions. Through ArchNet, an online design competition using distance education software to facilitate online desk crits and presentations took place in 2003. The competition involved five schools of architecture from around the world. Those were: American University of Sharjah; Istanbul Technical University; Misr International University; University of Liverpool; and, University of Mexico. Each of the sessions was recorded on ArchNet site. The Group Workspaces on ArchNet was set-up to facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous engagement and was a good starting point for the students to work with people around the world. The continuous online disk crits were lead by Charles Correa. During this Competition students demonstrated a remarkable competence and made a significant progress in understanding and using available media. Moreover, the PowerPoint presentation from the Jury Deliberation Session was a great example of an efficient, direct and clear communication of results of a complex jury process.

Faculty selection as well as the selection of the assisting team relied on several parameters. From which were the specialization, expertise, teaching experience, and the personal qualifications. The **instructor: student ratio** was 1:15 and the total number of students in class was a maximum of 30. **Regular evaluation** was conducted among the system, either in terms of the comprehensive university system or independent measures in-departmental. Through the jury system, student evaluation of course and instructor, the course report, etc. **Students' work exhibition** was a ritual for every end of academic year/semester. Served as another method of evaluation as well as a marketing opportunity. For exposure and apprentice ship, practical field and students competitions and conferences were an indispensible part of students' extra curricular learning practices.

As a department, we had **affiliations** with Nottingham University, England and the university of Lichtenstein. Through such affiliations, there were **students' exchange programs** and **joint workshop**s in Europe, while at the same time, the department organized workshops all over Egypt that hosted international students as well. We dealt with those schools as our **benchmarks**. Like wise,

many visionary educational practices were then designed, with a break down of teaching methodologies and learning types, together with their underlying sets of assessment and measurement.

1.2   The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Project (QAAP)

In 2007, most of the Egyptian higher education institutions have joined the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Project (QAAP) developed by the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education, Egypt (NAQAAE). According to the young age of universities and the existence of a strong documentation system, there were no apparent obstacles that would hinder the involvement in such a project. However, there were some requirements that the universities had to fulfill in order to cope with the project, such as community service and postgraduate studies.

Parallel to the launching of the QAAP, were some new rules imposed by the supreme council for private universities, controlling the students' quota in relation to the university campus capacities in terms of areas, classrooms, labs, etc. And to be honest, the ratio of staff: student was not clear for us. We found more than one announced ratio, and we believe the universities "made use of the benefit of the doubt" and applied what allows the minimum staff: maximum students. This in turn, has resulted in the tripling of the number of students in the year 2007, and 4-5 times 2008 and 6 times 2009. With the same number of staff members- both full timers and part-timers.

However, the phases of the accreditation project were:

1. The Project Introduction And The Objectives Design

2. Evaluative Framework Development

3. Peer Review Preparation

4. Devising An Internal Assurance System Within The University

5. Participatory Development of Program and its review

6. Planning For The Visit of Peer Review

7. Outcomes Reporting

8. The Transitional Phase – correcting what went wrong

9. The Accreditation

The NAQAEE has identified some criteria for the application of any school for accreditation in three main parameters:

1. **The Mission** (university mission, faculty mission, and the department mission) Laying hands on the mission, this criterion is then divided into: objectives with respect to: learning, research, and society

2. **The Educational Credibility**, which includes:

-   Students and graduates (enrolment and transfer policies / academic advising and support/ student activities/ alumni)

-   Academic standards

-   Program and syllabi (program description and courses), advancement in the program, review and evaluation and development (feedback)

-   **Teaching And Learning** and the physical facilities (strategies of teaching and learning/ actual practices of self learning, department strategies in response to the educational problems/ situations/ field training, student evaluation / sources and facilities and options / students satisfaction of institutional polices as per teaching and learning and facilities).

-   **The Staff**: Or, the number and the professionalism of the staff / the rules of hiring the staff and the assistants/ capability and skills development of both the staff and the assistants/evaluating the performance/ the satisfaction of the staff and the assistants

-   The scientific research and the scientific activities

-   The post graduate studies

3. **The Continuous Evaluation of The Educational Credibility**: Or, the institutional capacities/ the strategic planning and the mission / the organizational structure / the governance and management/ credibility and ethics/ the managerial body/system / the financial and human resources / the social participation and environmental development / the institutional evaluation and the management of quality

In response, we- departments of architecture were confident that the project will shed the light on our progressive efforts, and will take us- both as departments and as individuals, further to higher level of international accreditation, believing that we already surpassed the National Academic Reference Standards (NARS).

2.   THE ASSURANCE CRITERIA … BETWEEN PAPER WORK AND PRACTICES

Joining the QAAP required organizing efforts and assigning some of the instructors and the assisting staff to get the job done. The project can be bisected into two main pivots: paper work and practices.

2.1.   The Paper Work

For accreditation, there definitely can never be a true accurate examination to all the previous measures. Hence, some measures are valued through revising their documentations of paper work. The problem with paper documents is that they do not reveal the ugly truth in many hidden aspects that hinder or oppose the quality standards. We will not examine each of the preceding points independently; we will only criticize some paper work activities that are directly influenced/in relationship with the quality assurance of architectural education as the ultimate objective of the project. From which are the program description, which includes:

- The vision of the university

- The vision of the faculty

- The internal curriculum of the department

- The curriculum vitae of the staff, employees, and technicians

- The election of the program coordinator, and the quality assurance coordinator.

- The student manual

- The program catalogue/manual (that includes the ILOS)

- The course description

- Students' lists

- The staff and assistants' lists and workloads and job descriptions

- The design of the exam committees

- The assignment criteria and assessment plans

- The exam and questions sample

- The students' evaluation and its analysis

- The staff evaluation and its analysis

- The course reports

- The program report

- The unit of educational development in the faculty

- Data about any project the department gets involved in related to quality assurance an educational development

- Department council minutes of meetings

- Equipment and maintenance

- The department correspondence

- The scientific research and its relationship to department activities and the developmental ways

- The non academic activities that the department is involved in or engaged with

- The involvement of the department in the societal development

- The website of the department

From the surface, it seems an optimistic configuration for a perfect system. Alas, from below, the perspective is different. All the previous paper work is the duty of the instructors, with a very little help from the assistants. With the stuffed workdays, the papers have to be submitted on precise due dates, because any delay in any of the requirements will cause a delay in the sequential chain parts that follows. So **paperwork submission is prior to quality.**

Factually, how can the same instructors that teach an overloaded contact hours schedule (20 contact hours a week), to an exaggerated number of students 1:50 (reaching 1:70 in the fall 2010), and without a teaching assistants' team be able of fulfilling the requirements of the enormous paperwork, on both the quantitative and qualitative levels? So **quantity of students in class is prior to teaching and learning quality.**

How can those instructors find the time to correct the students' work, or meet the office hours scheduled, or do their own research or practice work, or do any entertainment along their work days, or at home, or during the weekends? What quality is expected out of such staff? So, in order to compromise between the tasks required and the responsibilities to be fulfilled, **the only efficient quality perceived is time management**.

2.2. The Practices

On the other hand, the practices we have been holding onto fall on a totally different perspective of the paper work. In departmental, we have devised our own standards of *Realism*, *Inter-disciplinarity* and *Transparency* as measures we found more suitable for our 14 years efforts of materializing our educational dream.

1. *Realism*:

To achieve the realism of our program, several practices were designated which included:

- Identifying a benchmark; achieved through adopting the *Intended Learning Outcomes* of the department of architecture of Liechtenstein University.

- True applications of studied material, through the scientific, structured field trips, field research, international joint workshops, real case studies, competitions and summer training

- Implementing the jury system and the external examiners.

- Applying the international affiliations and the students' exchange programs.

- Appling the online courses and the virtual studios and desk crits with regional and international schools.

2. *Inter-Desciplinarity:*

Working within the scope and regulations of the QAAP and NAQAAE criteria, what we meant by interdesciplinarity was the collaboration between the different disciplines and professionals involved in the design and the constant review and evaluation of the program and its intended learning outcomes. This included:

- Electing a program coordinator, courses coordinator and courses groups' coordinators working together.

- Founding a testing and measurement committee and an assignments committee to review and assess the criteria of the students' evaluations practices. A method that guarantee the supervision and follow up of the practices and their outcome quality.

- Courses and program development, revision of intended learning outcomes, teaching methods and evaluation methods, were achieved through the orientation and continuous meeting and discussion among all part-time and full-time instructors together with the teaching assistants.

3. *Transparency*:

Based on special devised questionnaires, regular investigations were excellent indicators to develop our practices. These included: students' feedback of course and instructor questionnaire, instructors' feedback through course report, etc. More over, a further collaboration between the program coordinator, the departments quality assurance unit coordinator, exam committee, external examiners, and stake holders of employers, graduates, and parents result in a comprehensive feedback that positively adds to correcting the path of the program development.

2.3. The Challenges

Viciously, the main challenge that confronts the quality of architectural education is primarily the systems of the universities that do not accept the individuality of the department of architecture. Shamefully, the stories of the departments are inverted all upside down. Starting big, and deteriorating gradually till each became "just another department" of architecture. The school of thought that were sought of as new promising trends for architectural education in the third millennium became a prey of the bureaucracy system.

Honestly, we cannot attempt at affirming which of the three origin precede and what comes next. Is it the Society's misconception of the private universities to blame, or is it the top management's conflict of interests? Or is it the departments' self-vision/image?

2.3.1 The Society

The society includes the stakeholders of parents, employers, part-timers faculty and the architectural society (supreme council for culture, architectural media, …etc). It is evident that some of those parties still mistrust the private education, disbelieving that they are serious institutions with serious ambitions and high achieving goals- while residing to the idea of "private=buying the bachelor certificate). For us, educators, they are the sole chance for any development of our profession, especially that the governmental universities are drowning in aging routines and bureaucracy.

The rules of both the supreme council for private universities collective rules interfere with the individuality of the nature of the study of architecture. Such rules do not only affect the departments of architecture, but corners the entire universities to abide to the rules. From the consequences is he raise in the number of enrolled students in the department of architecture from an average of 30 students between the years 1996-2006, to 200 in the year 2009-2010 – for example. **A real threat to any quality measures, especially when the faculties resources are designated for 1/5 of the capacity they are required to serve**.

2.3.2 The Top Management

As for the top management, it includes the owners (investors) and the higher academic ranks, and the council. In the early years of the universities, the decision-making followed the bottom-up approach. While the in recent years, the decision making pattern followed the typical centralized dictatorial approach. For that, there were enrolment criteria of filtration of English language placement exam, computer literacy placement exam, personal profile, interview and the special architectural aptitude test. Despite the facts that those procedures still take place, however, the criteria of acceptance became softer and easier. Indeed, **there is an urge to reconsider the applicants' filtration procedures**.

The conflict of interests is one major concern we would like to shed light. In the early days of the universities, there was no conflict of interest. There were no hidden agendas for any of the involved parties. The objectives were clearly stated and worked on and achieved. Recently, the conflict of interest has reached the peek during the EMIS project in one of the universities, when it was required to prepare a SWOT analysis of the departments' access, and some of the information were missing because of lack of information bank or documentation department. To initiate such departments, the top management (only the owners- not the academic high ranks neither the board of trustees) interfered, dictating which information is to be documented and which not. While this conflicted with the EMIS requirements.

One more thing we would also like to accentuate on; the practices of the various councils that are supposed to act as think tanks and decide-or at east suggest and recommend decisions to the higher councils. Ironically, no council is independently decisive. The departments have to abide to the entire systems which are managed, as previously mentioned, in a centralized decision making approach.

More concerns relate to the hiring and training criteria of faculty and teaching assistants. The fact now is **meeting the hiring faculty: students' quota is the most important on the expenses of personal qualification or specialization.**

Last thing but not least is the administrative work assigned for faculty and teaching assistants. The overload schedules with teaching hours together with the endless meetings with their accompanying enormous paperwork imposes supremacy over class time and quality. They accumulate till they become a burden, without the slightest chance to reconsider their intensity or timing. **The administrative tasks are favored over academics.**

2.3.3 The Department of Architecture

In to the old days, the deans and the heads were carefully selected from the international renowned figures that are famous for their visions and expertise in the architectural education development worldwide. Regretfully, in the current situation, there is no particular vision or significant identity, and consequentially, everything goes. Despite the fact that the universities are keen on developing the QA expertise among the faculty, yet, what we learn is not necessarily applicable, because the departments' leaders have other things to work on, of administrative tasks ad paperwork. As if the QAAP is a parallel endeavor, not a goal in itself.

3. THE HOPE: THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROJECT

The previous fourteen years left have marked the private architectural education in Egypt with various ups and downs, and naturally, we can now judge what should be done. The strategic planning project is part of the QAAP, and a criterion for accreditation. We consider it as the hope for assuring the quality for private architectural education because of many reasons. Evidently, the previous procedures of the QAAP that took place belong to where we are. But the strategic planning draws the future. The self-evaluation of the departments, programs and courses has much to imply as indicators for an immediate action plan and long-term strategies. The departments will have a control over their own through each of the following measures:

- Drawing the VISION AND MISSION come on top, developed through goal settings according to the realism of the market needs, stakeholders and the internationalization perspective.

- The ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE and LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE will be sought of in terms of professionalism.

- CREDIBILITY AND ETHICS will be envisioned as the key to competence.

- ADMINISTRATIVE BODY, HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES will serve the verification of the vision.

- SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND ENVIRNONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT will be the condition for self-monitoring and self-development.

- INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION AND QUALITY CONTROL will ensure we are on the right track.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have discussed the dilemma of private architectural education from several perspectives. The concepts of quality versus the practices of the QAAP were the most controversial and juxtaposed issues. Which in turn shed lights on the conception of quality assurance criteria between paper works and practices. Accordingly, several challenges were evoked, from which are: the conflict of interest between investment opportunities and academic qualities. Meeting the hiring quota in favor of the hiring qualifications. The administrative tasks are favored over academics. The significance and individuality and competence sacrificed for the supreme council for private university control. Quality Assurance, in that sense, is belittled to a hectic journey between papers, templates,

forms and documents. Despite the success on the paperwork side/level of the project, yet, **quality as concept is threatened**.

From the preceding, it is quite evident that **good intentions do not survive on their own.** Our private schools of architecture that were the hope for a rejuvenation of the profession are in crisis. The system is a mere reflection of the cultural paradigm that is in crisis. Although we seek appropriate solutions from outside and try to adopt them. However, **nothing will radically change unless we work on an inside-out approach**. From our humble point of view, it is our roles, efforts and influences as professors of architecture that will sustain as the corner stone for *the* quality of architecture education and the guarantee to its assurance and credibility. *Education-Society-System* is a trilogy of state and process that have to be sought of in a participatory approach, in collaboration of all involved stakeholders of different disciplines and professions. For that, we urge all parties involved in the private architectural education issue to reconsider what can such institutions offer as a quality of education, and qualifications of graduates. One final reminder: **PAPER WORK AND QUALITY PRACTICES DO NOT NECESSARILY MEET!**

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