Quality Assurance and Accreditation

“Future Needs and Priorities”

Education in general and higher education in particular is considered as one of the most influential tool for human communities' development. It is meant to empower humans with knowledge, skills and disposition so as to enable them to improve their lives, and to assist their communities to achieve socio-economic progress, while striving to follow up the globally unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, taking into consideration making use of them in favor of their communities.

Due to the fact that humans are the center of development and the most important tool in such process, and being the aim and mean of development, it became essential for those responsible for educational institutions to organize, develop and upgrade their programs, as its role is not only providing education and transferring knowledge, but its role has expanded to include building humans capacities by enabling them to learn and work; to be adapted and present in their environment. In addition, we cannot also ignore the main role of scientific research undertaken in these institutions, mainly in innovating knowledge, employing sciences for purpose of achieving sustainable development in its various forms, and serving all humankind communities.

Indeed, these two functions complement each other. Higher education institutions are to reflect the thought and activities of their societies, in its economical, social, cultural and development contexts. These institutions have the force to guide the society and change it, because they are the most capable to analyze with methodology the actual needs for change , and provide a future framework that focuses on sustainable development using research, plans and programs , as well as efficient specialties while adopting a scientific methodology.

Quantitative changes that occurred to university educational system are being exposed. Most importantly are the increase of enrollment capacity at Arab universities, expansion of buildings and infrastructure, and increase of students' numbers. On the other hand, this growth is not accompanied with better quality of outcomes. Many universities are still living in isolation in their ivory towers, and many of their activities, research and studies are not employed to serve Arab development issues, not to mention other reasons concerning universities themselves. Some tend to use ready made programs and curricula, depending on instructing knowledge rather than sharing. This passive process hinders building the student's personality and does not help him to be creative or dependent, incapable to analyze or criticize. Now, this method is no longer appropriate. Students must be prepared to be proactive to adapt with their surrounding and be part of the implementation of social and economical plans. Thus the lack of coordination policies of university educational systems to policies and plans of public and private marketing sectors results in substantial unemployment among graduates in the region.

It is for many reasons that policies of higher education should be reconsidered and reshaped in order to face all present constraints. Of such challenges, we realize the typical-oriented planning procedures at universities and the traditional study programs; the admission systems and the academic faculty staff promotion and recruitment system; the financial system and the absence of assessment; the emergence of new forms of education in response to technological development present in this era, and the social need for learning through new forms such as e-learning , virtual learning, open learning, entrepreneurial learning and finally distant learning. Nowadays and with impacts of new technologies, the world became a small village , where all barriers are collapsing and classrooms are to be opened to outer world. With globalization , those who survive are not merely the stronger, but rather the more knowledgeable.

I would like to highlight some of the most important challenges facing the Arab region:

1. The need to establish new universities to meet this ever-increasing demand or to increase the number of students in the available universities, which is not a practical solution. The option of establishing new universities will require substantial financial allocations.

2. The need for large numbers of qualified faculty members and staff to meet the needs of this growth. Unfortunately, in many cases there were no programs for faculty development, which led to a critical shortage of qualified faculty. It is estimated that almost double the number of the currently available faculty is required in order to have a reasonable student faculty ratio.

3. The growing amounts of required funding to cover the cost of university education. The financial outlays required are increasing rapidly and governments are beginning to feel the heavy burden of meeting these demands.

4. A number of economic, social and political challenges resulted from globalization and new information technologies. They also resulted in the appearance of new patterns and methods of education such as open and distance education in addition to education through the Internet and other new technologies. Such developments and changes require a continuous re-evaluation of the educational system and methodologies. Also, a redefinition of priorities needs to be made, whereby education becomes of primary importance. These new types provide a partial solution. For Example, Some socio-cultural factors have been identified as being responsible for low female enrolment in some parts of the Arab countries as well as the difficulties facing some males living in remote villages to access education due to poverty and mobility factors. These new technologies offer education for the sake of education rather than education that is related to labor market or to social and human development. In addition. most new patterns in education tend to focus on humanities rather that scientific fields.

As the financial crisis started, experts throughout the world found out that one of the solutions would be to increase the general governmental expenditures on launching new schools, universities, hospitals and infrastructure projects. This solution would have a noticeable effect in decreasing unemployment by labor –intensive investment and at the same time providing society with needed services. Therefore, this adopted solution has benefited people in particular rather than the states themselves.

Challenges facing the Arab World increased after the crisis. The rapid population growth, the growing demand on education, and the need for employment opportunities are major challenges. Countries in the Middle East and Africa have large proportions of young adults and children as per statistics 60% of Arab population are under 20, whereas in most developed countries the majority have old or “aging” populations. The population’s age structure affects how that population lives.

The public sector was traditionally the main source of financial support for universities in the Arab world until the latter part of the 1980's when the private sector was allowed to finance and administer higher education institutions. This trend was accelerated in the 1990's and by the year 1996 private universities constituted 28% of the total number of universities in the Arab world. It is expected that the trend will continue and a greater percentage of universities will be privately financed and administered. Previously, some Arab countries did not even allow private investments in this field. After the crisis, it became vital that private provision in education should intensify in future.

Arab countries vary greatly in the level of expenditures on higher education. The percentage of the national income allocated for higher education in 1996 ranged from 0.3 in some of the Arab countries to 3.4 in others, and the overall percentage for all Arab countries in the same year was 1.25. The range in industrialized countries is from 0.7% to 2.1%. However, the average cost per student in Arab universities for the same year was $2444, which is significantly below that in the industrialized countries where the number may reach about $40,000. Thus substantial allocations must be made in a number of Arab countries to support higher education and to upgrade its quality.

There is an increasing awareness in the Arab region of the need to invest in higher education, and in the training of personnel and of staff. .During the last decade, some Arab states, that previously did not allow the establishment of private universities, such as Libya, Syria and some Gulf states, opened the door to private stakeholders in a step to broaden access to higher education. The increase in numbers of private universities is expected to further go up. The private enrollment share reaches the highest value in Lebanon which is more that 49%, then Jordan (25%), and Egypt (around 17%). It is worth mentioning that Private universities give the students the chance to pursue their own interests freely, whereas in public universities, admission is based on their grade point average. However, the expansion of private provision is expected to create negative impact on equity of higher education opportunities.

It is worth mentioning that after the September 11 attacks, numbers of Arab students traveling abroad for education has dropped. New providers appeared on the scene in the form of private institutions financed by local market or in partnership with American or European institutions. There was a need to transmit foreign universities to the Arab region to facilitate the provision of education services for students in their homes. Undoubtedly, foreign investments in Arab countries will grow up during the coming years.

Programs of study currently offered by private institutions tend to be concentrated on new subjects that are not available at government universities and at the same time tend to meet global market. Having diverse choices, quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its accessibility to the wider economy is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness. Such choices have advantages such as increasing access to higher and adult education programs, developing higher education and research, increasing mobility of students and competitiveness which will positively affect quality of education. At the same time there will be a fear of losing control over higher education through foreign dominance and, inability of national systems to compete in global systems and foreign providers.

This coupled with the reduction of the public sector needs for university graduates, either as a result of saturation or due to privatization of some of the functions that were traditionally handled by the public sector. This led in many countries to serious unemployment conditions among university graduates.

New forms of learning appeared in the world and in order to make such new forms reasonably applicable in the Arab World, many requirements need to be fulfilled such as providing sustainable institutions to ﬁnance education; adopting certain curriculum that focuses on developing students skill to be creative and innovative and at the same time to try to link education to market; concentrating on employer involvement; guaranteeing quality assurance through systems of external accountability; developing business incubators and technology parks and other infrastructure taking into account the importance of continuously renewing and modifying all these requirements to meet the needs of the market. Strategies should be set up to bring education together with the business sector and to have close relations between the public and private sectors. All this of course would need funding and financial resources!

Due to emerging of new trends and the availability of various options for students, it has become imperative to monitor the quality of these options. It is vital to set up national mechanisms which can address accreditation and quality assessment procedures for the academic programs of new and foreign providers. Indeed, the upgrading and reforming higher education system is costly and this is another challenge. That is why international and regional quality assurance agencies are being established all over the world. The focus on new concepts such as institutional autonomy, governance, accountability and academic freedom is being a priority concern for Arab countries in order to respond to labor market needs and to launch reform projects.

These concepts are implemented in a positive way in Arab countries as a mean of improving the quality and efficiency of higher education through competitive development. Higher education will be judged in terms of outputs and the contributions it makes to national development.

This development is beginning to reflect in a positive direction in the region. Taking into consideration the admiration of the Western model of education in the U.S, newly emerging private universities began to work in accordance with these new concepts and are precisely being taken into effect in private universities because they seek to prove themselves, especially that public universities are more or less stable. But at present, public universities are looking forward to achieve university autonomy and more academic freedom.

To succeed, many changes and amendments should be undertaken to regulations and laws in Arab countries. As a government service unit, a public university has limited autonomy and has to comply with all prevailing regulations applied for a government service unit. On the other hand, private universities have more freedom and autonomy as they are financially independent.

Arab countries need to face these challenges. Sooner or later they will be forced to commence reform plans to ensure equity, quality and efficiency to both public and private institutions within a regulatory framework that introduces incentive mechanisms and grant some degree of autonomy.

Finally, the current crisis may be a good opportunity for Arab countries to restructure their economies, to upgrade, adjust, and improve the efficiency of resource allocation. It is the suitable time to invest in infrastructure and achieve a long-term and sustainable development at a higher level.