



Digital outreach

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Egypt's universities should invest in community outreach and online education, argues Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, head of the Arab Organisation for Quality Assurance in Education, in an interview with Niveen Wahish

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, chairman of the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organisation, a professional services firm with over 80 branches around the world, recently surprised his audience at the University of Mansoura when he said universities “did not need fences.”

Universities are not sacred spaces, he later commented to Al-Ahram Weekly. So why are they often isolated from their surroundings? Abu-Ghazaleh believes that the gates should be removed and the state should be responsible for securing a university in the same way as it is for any other public space. Universities should provide education, he said. They shouldn't be turned into security institutions.

Universities like Harvard and MIT in the US are not cut off from their surroundings, he said. But in Egypt “removing the fences will need a bold decision to be taken.”

Abu-Ghazaleh's criticism of Arab and Egyptian universities does not end there. In his capacity as head of the Arab Organisation for Quality Assurance in Education, an international non-profit association aiming to raise the quality of education in the Arab world, he believes that Arab universities are not producing enough graduates with the skills needed for the labour market.

The focus should be on the quality and quantity of graduates needed by the labour market and not just on providing an education, he said. In order to do

this, universities should partner with the business community. Consultative committees should be set up at each university including representatives of the private sector to help the university develop courses catering to the needs of the labour market.

Moreover, for Abu-Ghazaleh the physical existence of a university will in future become less and less important. Egypt's universities must provide their services digitally, he says, the only way for them to provide a quality education to a growing population. Online education will also make higher education accessible to all. "It is not fair that only the children of people who can afford it are at present able to get a good education," he commented.

He called on the universities to expand their role beyond their immediate boundaries and to reach out to surrounding communities, by so doing expanding access. While Abu-Ghazaleh is not against what he calls traditional education, he believes there should be at least a parallel system to cater for today's young people, many of whom learn to use electronic devices before they learn to hold a pen.

This will require increasing people's awareness of the credibility of online education. "I know there is a mental and cultural gap at the moment, but these young people are going to force change upon us," he said.

Today's job market requires knowledge workers, people who know their way around technology, even for mundane jobs. For Abu-Ghazaleh, knowledge is the future, and future wealth will come through knowledge creation. "We cannot fight the new technology. On the contrary, we must adopt it and be at the forefront of it," he says.

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