To Move or Not to Move: Pilot Study on AUCians’ Perceptions of Relocating to the New Campus

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In March 2008, a pilot study was conducted on 61 participants at AUC to assess their concerns and prospects regarding the move of the AUC campus from downtown Cairo to the fifth district, New Cairo. The pilot study was intended to gather data that could inform the CAMPUS group on issues that should be addressed in further research projects. Data was collected by convenience sampling. Interviews were conducted by undergraduate students Sherin Kamel and Sarah El-Kalla, and supervised by Dr. Anne Justus.

The participants consisted of 50 undergraduate students, 4 graduate students, 9 staff members, and 2 faculty members. Their ages ranged from 17-63, with an average age of 24. They consisted of 32 males and 29 females. A total of 62% of the participants were Egyptians, 20% were non-Egyptians and 18% had dual nationalities.

The study was basically an interview asking what concerns participants have about moving to New Cairo, what they are looking forward to, and why or why not the move should take place. A total of 41% of the participants were in support of moving to the new campus while 38% of the participants did not want the move to take place and preferred to stay at the old AUC campus in Tahrir.

Those participants who wanted the move to take place gave arguments that could be grouped under the following three main reasons: 1) closeness to their home residence, 2) more space and less crowdedness and 3) better facilities. For example, an undergraduate student stated that “the new campus is closer to residence,” while another mentioned that “it’s a 5 minute drive from my house.” Furthermore, another undergraduate student argued that “it’s crowded here [downtown], it’ll be less polluted out there and there’ll be more space for students.” Another reason for wanting the move to take place, which was mentioned by some participants, was that it will be a better campus. One staff member mentioned that “It is better to be one big campus rather than separate [buildings].”

On the other hand, the 23 participants who did not want the move to take place argued that the location of the new campus was too far from the city. Illustrating this argument is a graduate student, who stated that she doesn’t want to move “because it takes away from the beauty of AUC. It’s in the heart of Cairo. You can mingle with Egyptians as
soon as you leave the doors. You can see art exhibitions, museums, galleries... We're going from being a bubble to a fort. No one will be able to get in. The students will have no interaction with anyone.” Another graduate student mentioned that because the campus is far from the city, it is “impossible to recreate the Tahrir experience / impossible to recreate the "American" university experience in this context.”

A total of 5 participants had mixed feelings as they saw positive and negative aspects to the move. An undergraduate student shared that the new campus will be “closer [and there will be] lack of traffic, yet it’ll be too big.” Another undergraduate student stated “the move will come with many difficulties, yet a lot of privileges.” In addition, 8 other participants didn’t care about the move; for some it was because they would have graduated prior to it.

All 61 respondents were asked about their concerns about the new campus, regardless of whether or not they wanted to move. Participants were primarily worried about getting to campus. For example, 24 participants were concerned about the distance and commute. One staff expressed this by saying that the new campus is “far away from everything; I live downtown so it’s going to be a pain for me to go everyday. It’s even far away from Heliopolis and Nasr City.” Another 11 participants were concerned about transportation. Illustrating this was an undergraduate student who was worried about “getting to campus because there's not much transportation.” Another main concern the participants had was that the new campus is isolated and thus will separate AUC from the rest of the Cairo community. One undergraduate student feared “being stranded out in the middle of nowhere” and another undergraduate student expressed his concern saying that we are “being disconnected from the community.” Another concern expressed by 13 participants was the lack of facilities because it will be far away from the city. One undergraduate female expressed her concern asking “are there enough bathrooms to account for 5000 students?” The 2 other main concerns were campus size and expenses. A total of 12 participants were concerned that the campus is too big; one undergraduate student illustrated this by saying that “the new campus is too big so it will take a lot of time to get from one class to the other.” Moreover, a graduate student was concerned about the rising expenses saying “instead of paying 2 pounds a day for the subway, now I have to pay 3000 a year to park my car.” Other concerns that were mentioned were about parking, food services, personal detachment and difficulty finding friends (as a consequence of the big size of the new campus), and the dangerous road.

With regards to what the 61 pilot study respondents were looking forward to, it was evident that almost all of them were anticipating better facilities. These included the improved library, labs (including computer labs), sports equipment, buildings, and
classrooms. A better library was something a lot of participants were excited about; for example, a staff member mentioned “There will be a new system in the library functions so I’m really excited about the change.” A majority of the undergraduate students emphasized that having better sports facilities is definitely something they are looking forward to. After facilities, the next most mentioned benefits were space & privacy, better parking, and shorter distance to campus (for those who live closer to the new campus. Eighteen of the participants reported that they were looking forward to wider spaces on campus, meaning that the campus will be less crowded since students will be more spaced out, and quoting an undergraduate there will be “more places to chill”; concerning space & privacy, one undergraduate student said “You’ll be able to talk without hearing everyone’s conversation”.

In the end, opinions about the move varied as there was no one clear opinion regarding it. Some embraced it, some opposed it, and others were completely indifferent. But it is very important to note that these opinions were merely forecasts and surely feelings would change post the actual move…or would they?