

## BRIDGING GLOBAL STANDARDS AND ARAB REALITIES: THE ARAB FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION IN ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN HERITAGE PRESERVATION

UNINDO PADRÕES GLOBAIS E REALIDADES ÁRABES: O MARCO ÁRABE PARA A  
ACREDITAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL NA PRESERVAÇÃO DO PATRIMÔNIO  
ARQUITETÔNICO E URBANO

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**Resumo.** A preservação do patrimônio arquitetônico e urbano no mundo árabe ainda é limitada por uma regulação profissional fragmentada e pela ausência de sistemas unificados de acreditação. Este estudo desenvolve o Marco Árabe para a Acreditação Profissional na Preservação do Patrimônio Arquitetônico e Urbano (AFPAHP), um modelo baseado em competências, eticamente fundamentado e culturalmente enraizado, que busca responder a essa lacuna estrutural. Por meio de análise comparativa e institucional, marcos globais (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS) foram comparados a iniciativas regionais lideradas pela Comissão do Patrimônio da Arábia Saudita, pela ALECSO e pelo Instituto de Patrimônio de Sharjah. Os resultados revelam fragmentação institucional, avaliação insuficiente de competências e codificação ética limitada. O AFPAHP propõe um Conselho Árabe para a Acreditação Profissional em Patrimônio (ACP-AH) e um Código de Ética Pan-Árabe para assegurar competência mensurável, transparência e reconhecimento transfronteiriço. O marco contribui para a teoria e a prática ao integrar a identidade árabe aos paradigmas globais de acreditação, alinhando-se à Agenda Cultura 2030 da UNESCO e ao ODS 11.4, com vistas a promover uma governança sustentável do patrimônio.

**Palavras-chave:** acreditação profissional; patrimônio arquitetônico; região árabe; governança ética; desenvolvimento sustentável; Agenda Cultura 2030 da UNESCO.

**Abstract.** The preservation of architectural and urban heritage in the Arab world remains constrained by fragmented professional regulation and the absence of unified accreditation systems. This study develops the Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP)—a competency-based, ethically grounded, and culturally embedded model addressing this structural gap. Through comparative and institutional analysis, global frameworks (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS) were benchmarked against regional initiatives led by the Saudi Heritage Commission, ALECSO, and the Sharjah Institute for Heritage. Results reveal institutional fragmentation, weak competency evaluation, and limited ethical codification. The AFPAHP proposes an Arab Council for Professional Accreditation in Heritage (ACP-AH) and a Pan-Arab Code of Ethics to ensure measurable competence, transparency, and cross-border recognition. The framework contributes to theory and practice by embedding Arab identity within global accreditation paradigms, aligning with UNESCO's Culture 2030 Agenda and SDG 11.4 to advance sustainable heritage governance.



**Keywords:** Professional accreditation; architectural heritage; Arab region; ethical governance; sustainable development; UNESCO Culture 2030 Agenda.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Context

Architectural and urban heritage in the Arab world embodies centuries of cultural identity, collective memory, and socio-spatial continuity. Over recent decades, Arab countries have invested extensively in conservation initiatives, museum rehabilitation, and heritage education, reflecting a growing national commitment to safeguarding cultural assets. However, despite these advances, the professional accreditation of practitioners working in architectural and urban heritage remains fragmented and weakly regulated. Existing professional pathways rely predominantly on academic qualifications rather than measurable competencies or standardized professional criteria—a gap highlighted in UNESCO’s regional reporting on heritage governance in the Arab States, which identifies persistent weaknesses in institutional capacity and professionalization (UNESCO, 2021).

Similar concerns are echoed in global evaluations of cultural heritage governance, which emphasize the risks associated with non-standardized professional trajectories and the absence of competency-based certification systems (Chan, 2017; Sokka, Badia and Donato, 2021). Internationally, established systems such as those of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Institute of Conservation (ICON), and the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers’ Organisations (E.C.C.O.) demonstrate that sustainable heritage governance depends on structured professional accreditation, ethical codification, and continuous professional development (RIBA, 2021; ICON, 2018; E.C.C.O., 2011). These models institutionalize strong linkages between education, professional practice, and ethical accountability, ensuring practitioners meet consistent standards of technical proficiency and moral responsibility.

Yet, no equivalent institutionalized mechanism currently exists across the Arab region, where initiatives tend to prioritize training and educational capacity-building rather than regulatory accreditation or licensing (ICCROM, 2024; Bandarin and van Oers, 2021). This structural gap underscores the urgent need for a regionally coordinated, competency-based professional accreditation framework that aligns with both global principles and Arab cultural realities—forming the rationale for the proposed Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAP).

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Despite significant progress in heritage training and documentation across the Arab region—led by institutions such as the Saudi Heritage Commission, the Sharjah Institute for Heritage, and the ICCROM-ATHAR Regional Programme—these initiatives remain predominantly educational rather than regulatory.

In the absence of a unified professional accreditation system, the sector continues to exhibit fragmented institutional responsibilities, reliance on academic qualifications instead of competency-based assessment, weak integration of ethics within licensing procedures, and limited cross-border recognition of professional credentials.



As a result, heritage projects frequently depend on individual expertise rather than verified professional standards, producing inconsistencies in quality, ethical accountability, and long-term sustainability (UNESCO, 2021; ICCROM, 2024; Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

### 1.3 Knowledge Gap and Rationale

The international community has long established accreditation frameworks that regulate heritage professions through measurable competencies and ethical codes (Avrami, 2020). However, within the Arab region, no comprehensive research has addressed how these global standards can be localized to reflect Arab institutional structures, languages, and cultural values. Previous studies have examined technical conservation practices (Avrami, 2020) or academic accreditation, yet professional accreditation—as a system linking competence, ethics, and institutional legitimacy—remains uncharted.

This study fills this gap by developing the Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP), a model that integrates international accreditation principles with Arab cultural identity, ethical governance, and institutional collaboration. The framework aims to formalize professional recognition, enhance transparency, and establish a unified mechanism for quality assurance across the region.

### 1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

#### 1.4.1 Aim:

To design and validate a regionally contextualized, competency-based framework for professional accreditation in architectural and urban heritage preservation—bridging global accreditation standards with the Arab world’s cultural and institutional realities.

#### 1.4.2 Objectives:

- Analyze international models of professional accreditation in heritage conservation (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS).
- Assess institutional readiness and professional gaps within selected Arab states.
- Propose a structured Arab accreditation framework integrating technical, ethical, and cultural dimensions.
- Align the framework with international quality standards (ISO 17024; ICOMOS, 1993; UNESCO, 2020).
- Provide policy recommendations for implementation through Arab heritage institutions.

### 1.5 Methodological Overview

The study adopts a comparative and institutional benchmarking methodology supported by a rigorously structured analytical process. It combines documentary analysis of international accreditation manuals, ethical charters, and policy reports (RIBA, 2021; ICON, 2018; E.C.C.O., 2011; ICCROM, 2024) with a systematic comparison of Arab institutional practices, including those of the Saudi Heritage Commission, Sharjah Institute for Heritage, and ICCROM-ATHAR. A deductive–inductive coding approach was used to identify structural, methodological, and ethical gaps.



To ensure methodological rigour, the synthesis of findings was validated against ISO 17024 standards and UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators, enhancing transparency, reproducibility, and alignment with global accreditation principles.

This triangulated methodological structure provides both academic reliability and practical applicability, forming a credible foundation for the AFP AHP and its future empirical testing.

## 1.6 Significance of the Study

The study provides the first Arab-region model for the professional accreditation of heritage practitioners. Academically, it advances the discourse on professional governance and quality assurance in heritage preservation by merging technical, ethical, and cultural dimensions into a single framework (Avrami, 2020). Practically, it offers Arab ministries, heritage authorities, and universities a policy-ready instrument to institutionalize accreditation, strengthen professional capacity, and promote cross-border cooperation.

By embedding Arab cultural authenticity within an internationally recognized accreditation structure, the AFP AHP enhances regional credibility, aligns with the UNESCO Culture 2030 Agenda, and supports Sustainable Development Goal 11.4—preserving cultural heritage as a driver of sustainable development (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Overview of Professional Accreditation in Heritage Conservation

Professional accreditation functions as a fundamental mechanism for ensuring that heritage practitioners demonstrate verified competencies, uphold ethical responsibility, and engage in continuous professional development. Within the field of heritage conservation, accreditation plays a dual role: it validates practitioners' technical capabilities while safeguarding the cultural authenticity and integrity of heritage sites and practices (ICON, 2020). Contemporary scholarship highlights a global transition toward competence-based accreditation models, emphasizing standardization, ethical accountability, and measurable performance outcomes as essential components of effective heritage governance (Avrami, 2022).

Internationally, several established professional bodies—such as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Institute of Conservation (ICON), the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (E.C.C.O.), and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)—have developed comprehensive accreditation systems that integrate education, ethics, technical proficiency, and lifelong learning. These models articulate clear competency requirements, structured professional pathways, and defined mechanisms for ethical oversight and renewal, reflecting mature governance frameworks within their respective institutional contexts (RIBA, 2021; ICON, 2020; E.C.C.O., 2011; RICS, 2020).

Across these systems, alignment with ISO/IEC 17024:2012—the international standard governing personnel certification—serves as a shared foundation for ensuring transparency, impartiality, consistency, and cross-border recognition of professional qualifications. Although their structures vary according to socio-professional traditions and institutional histories, these accreditation frameworks collectively demonstrate the importance of standardized, competence-driven approaches to heritage conservation practice.



## 2.2 International Models of Accreditation

### 2.2.1 The RIBA Conservation Register (United Kingdom)

The RIBA Conservation Register provides a structured pathway for accrediting architects working with historic buildings, organised into three progressive levels: Registrant, Conservation Architect, and Specialist Conservation Architect. Assessment is based on documented experience, submission of conservation portfolios, and independent peer review (RIBA, 2021).

The framework emphasizes measurable competence, adherence to the RIBA Code of Professional Conduct, and mandatory Continuing Professional Development (CPD), renewed every three years. This integration of ethics, technical evidence, and structured learning positions the RIBA model as one of the most mature accreditation systems for architectural conservation in Europe.

### 2.2.2 The ICON Accreditation (United Kingdom)

The Institute of Conservation's Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR) scheme is a fully competency-based model applicable across all conservation specializations. It requires applicants to demonstrate professional experience through documentary evidence, reflective practice, and a rigorous peer-assessment interview (ICON, 2020).

Accredited members must maintain annual CPD portfolios and comply with ICON's Ethical Guidance (2020), which emphasizes transparency, cultural sensitivity, and accountability. Its strong alignment with European CEN conservation standards makes ICON a globally respected reference for professional validation.

### 2.2.3 The E.C.C.O. European Framework

E.C.C.O. established a transnational framework to harmonize the recognition of conservator-restorers across EU member states through its 2011 Competences for Access to the Conservation-Restoration Profession.

This framework defines core competences that include theoretical knowledge, diagnostic skills, treatment decision-making, and ethical responsibility (E.C.C.O., 2011). By enabling comparability while respecting national differences, the E.C.C.O. model offers a flexible yet coherent accreditation structure — a highly relevant feature for multi-state regions such as the Arab world.

### 2.2.4 The RICS Building Conservation Accreditation

The RICS accreditation targets professionals involved in historic building conservation, focusing on sustainability, risk management, building pathology, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Candidates undergo professional interviews, case-study assessments, and CPD validation as part of renewal requirements (RICS, 2020). The scheme bridges conservation with surveying, engineering, and planning, reflecting a holistic approach to built-heritage governance.

### 2.2.5 UNESCO and ICOMOS Guidelines



UNESCO and ICOMOS provide the ethical and philosophical foundations for global conservation practice. The ICOMOS Guidelines for Education and Training in the Conservation of Monuments, Ensembles and Sites (1993), along with foundational documents such as the Venice Charter (1964) and the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), establish authenticity, integrity, and sustainability as universal principles guiding professional education and accreditation (ICOMOS, 1993; UNESCO, 2019).

These guidelines continue to serve as reference points for any accreditation system seeking international credibility and ethical coherence.

## 2.3 Regional and Arab Institutional Contexts

Regional heritage institutions in the Arab world have expanded training, documentation, and preservation initiatives over the past two decades. Despite this progress, the region continues to lack a unified professional accreditation framework capable of standardizing competencies, regulating ethical practice, and enabling cross-border recognition of qualifications.

Existing structures—including ICCROM-ATHAR, the Saudi Heritage Commission, the Sharjah Institute for Heritage, ALECSO, and ICESCO—primarily operate as capacity-building entities rather than regulatory bodies, resulting in fragmented governance and limited professional oversight. This underscores the need for a coordinated regional accreditation model that integrates ethics, competency assessment, and professional licensing.

### 2.3.1 ICCROM-ATHAR Regional Program

The ICCROM-ATHAR Programme, headquartered in Sharjah, remains the leading regional platform for capacity-building in architectural and archaeological heritage conservation. It provides training, technical support, and knowledge dissemination across Arab states (ICCROM, 2024).

However, its mandate is educational rather than regulatory, as it does not grant official professional accreditation or licensing. This aligns with regional assessments indicating that Arab heritage institutions prioritize training without implementing standardized accreditation mechanisms (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

### 2.3.2 The Saudi Heritage Commission

The Saudi Heritage Commission—established under the Ministry of Culture—oversees national heritage protection, documentation, and sectoral development. While it offers training programs and national initiatives, it does not currently operate a formal accreditation system for heritage professionals (Saudi Heritage Commission, 2024).

Given its governmental authority and regional influence, the Commission is well positioned to play a central role in any future regional accreditation framework (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

### 2.3.3 The Sharjah Institute for Heritage

The Sharjah Institute for Heritage serves as a key regional institution for training, academic programs, and the preservation of intangible and tangible heritage. Although it provides extensive educational and cultural programming, its activities are not linked to formal professional licensing or competency certification (Sharjah Institute for Heritage, 2022).



This reflects a wider regional pattern in which strong educational institutions function without regulatory accreditation structures (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

### 2.3.4 The Role of ALECSO and ISESCO

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) provide regional frameworks for cultural cooperation, heritage safeguarding, and capacity development.

Their strategic mandates support regional coordination and policy alignment, making them potential anchors for legitimizing and harmonizing a cross-border professional accreditation system (ALECSO, 2021; ICESCO, 2020). International heritage governance literature underscores the importance of such intergovernmental bodies in overcoming fragmented national systems (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

## 2.4 Comparative Analysis

Table 1 summarizes the key dimensions of the comparative analysis between international accreditation models and the Arab context, highlighting the major lessons for developing the proposed Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP).

**Table 1.** Comparative Analysis of International Accreditation Models and the Arab Context: Key Lessons for Developing the AFPAHP

| <b>Dimension</b>             | <b>International Models (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS)</b>            | <b>Current Arab Context</b>                                  | <b>Lessons for the AFPAHP</b>                                 |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Governance</b>            | Independent professional bodies with statutory authority.           | Managed by ministries or universities, lacking independence. | Establish an autonomous regional accreditation council.       |
| <b>Competency Evaluation</b> | Competency-based, multi-tiered assessment (portfolio, peer review). | Reliance on degrees or years of service.                     | Adopt measurable, evidence-based evaluation mechanisms.       |
| <b>Ethical Regulation</b>    | Mandatory codes of ethics with renewal tied to compliance.          | Ethical practices implied but not codified or enforced.      | Develop a Pan-Arab Code of Professional Ethics.               |
| <b>CPD and Renewal</b>       | Structured cycles (3–5 years) tied to documented CPD.               | CPD remains optional and unmonitored.                        | Institutionalize CPD tracking and re-accreditation.           |
| <b>Regional Recognition</b>  | EU-wide mutual recognition agreements.                              | Isolated national systems with no equivalency.               | Implement regional Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs).      |
| <b>Cultural Adaptability</b> | Universal standards with limited local contextualization.           | Diverse cultural heritage, lacking accreditation structure.  | Embed Arab identity and traditional knowledge into standards. |

## 2.5 Identified Research Gaps

From the comparative and institutional review, three major research gaps emerge:

### 2.5.1 Institutional Gap

The absence of an independent, regionally recognized accreditation authority for heritage professionals in the Arab world persists, despite expanding national and regional training initiatives. Current institutions focus primarily on capacity-building and lack regulatory mandates for professional accreditation (ICCROM, 2024).

### 2.5.2 Methodological Gap

Heritage qualification systems in the region continue to rely heavily on academic degrees rather than competence-based assessment frameworks. This contrasts with international accreditation models that emphasise demonstrated skills, ethical accountability, and structured professional development (ICON, 2020).

### 2.5.3 Cultural Gap

Existing international accreditation models often inadequately reflect Arab cultural authenticity and contextual heritage practices. At the same time, local initiatives in the Arab region lack the institutional formality, ethical codification, and professional governance frameworks articulated in global conservation charters such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994) and UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators (UNESCO, 2019).

These gaps collectively justify the need for a unified, competency-based, and culturally grounded accreditation system—the Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP).

## 3. RESULTS AND FRAMEWORK INTEGRATION

### 3.1 Overview of Key Findings

The comparative and institutional analyses revealed a consistent pattern of fragmentation within the professional accreditation landscape across the Arab world. Unlike international models—such as RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., and RICS—which operate through autonomous professional councils with standardized competency frameworks, ethical codes, and structured renewal cycles, Arab heritage systems remain administratively driven and lack independent accreditation bodies or coherent evaluation mechanisms (ICCROM, 2024).

Recent regional assessments further confirm that heritage governance in the Arab world suffers from weak institutional integration, absence of professional licensing pathways, and limited cross-sector coordination (Bandarin and van Oers, 2021).

Three critical deficiencies were identified:

#### 3.1.1 Institutional Fragmentation

Accreditation responsibilities are dispersed across ministries of culture, tourism, and higher education, without unified governance or shared professional standards (ICCROM, 2024).

#### 3.1.2 Methodological Weakness



Competency evaluation remains tied to academic qualifications and years of service, rather than to demonstrated technical skills, ethical accountability, or measurable professional competence—contrasting sharply with global accreditation models (ICON, 2020).

### 3.1.3 Cultural Marginalization

Existing training initiatives inadequately integrate Arab cultural identity, traditional knowledge, or context-specific ethical values, despite international frameworks emphasizing authenticity and cultural relevance (ICOMOS, 1994; UNESCO, 2019).

These gaps collectively underscore the need for a comprehensive, regionally coordinated accreditation system capable of harmonizing standards, professionalizing practice, and embedding Arab cultural authenticity within internationally recognized accreditation logic.

## 3.2 Conceptual Basis of the Arab Framework (AFPAHP)

The proposed Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP) is designed as a competency-based, ethically grounded, and institutionally integrated system that aligns with ISO 17024:2012 and the UNESCO Culture 2030 Agenda.

It draws upon three conceptual pillars (Avrami, 2020):

- Professional Competence and Accreditation Standards — defining measurable benchmarks of knowledge, skills, and practice.
- Ethical and Cultural Governance — embedding authenticity, integrity, and social responsibility within professional conduct.
- Institutional Collaboration and Regional Integration — establishing a unified accreditation authority across Arab states.

Each pillar ensures that professional accreditation in the Arab context is not merely procedural, but a reflection of cultural identity, ethical responsibility, and international credibility.

## 3.3 Institutional and Regulatory Design

### 3.3.1 Arab Council for Professional Accreditation in Heritage (ACP-AH)

At the institutional core of AFPAHP lies the Arab Council for Professional Accreditation in Heritage (ACP-AH)—a proposed autonomous regional body operating under the joint endorsement of the Saudi Heritage Commission, ALECSO, and the Sharjah Institute for Heritage.

This tripartite institutional alliance combines:

- The regulatory authority and national reach of the Saudi Heritage Commission.
- The intergovernmental mandate and policy legitimacy of ALECSO.
- The educational and technical capacity-building role of the Sharjah Institute for Heritage.

Collectively, this coalition ensures both vertical integration (national to regional) and horizontal coordination (across ministries and professional bodies), offering an operationally balanced governance model for Arab accreditation.



### 3.3.2 National Professional Boards

National boards in each member state will implement the ACP-AH standards locally, conducting evaluations, maintaining CPD records, and managing disciplinary oversight. This decentralized implementation ensures cultural sensitivity while maintaining regional standardization through ACP-AH supervision (ICCROM, 2024).

### 3.4 Core Components of the AFPAHP

Table 2 illustrates the five core components of the Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFP AHP), which collectively ensure professional coherence, accountability, and regional consistency (adapted from RIBA, 2021; ICON, 2018; E.C.C.O., 2011).

**Table 2.** Core Structural Components of the Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFP AHP)

| Component  | Core Function  | Operational Mechanisms   | Expected Outcomes   |
|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Accreditation Authority (ACP-AH)</b>          | Regional oversight, policy formulation, and quality assurance. | Develops criteria, supervises national boards, and manages digital registry. | Institutional coherence and credibility across Arab states. |
| <b>National Boards</b>                           | Implement accreditation standards nationally.                  | Conduct peer reviews, issue licenses, and enforce renewal cycles.            | Harmonized implementation and local ownership.              |
| <b>Competency Framework</b>                      | Defines professional skills and levels.                        | Four-tier hierarchy: Associate, Professional, Senior, and Fellow.            | Transparent career progression and measurable competence.   |
| <b>Ethical and Cultural Code</b>                 | Ensures ethical integrity and cultural authenticity.           | Mandatory ethical declarations and peer accountability mechanisms.           | Enhanced trust, integrity, and regional identity.           |
| <b>Continuous Professional Development (CPD)</b> | Sustains knowledge and innovation.                             | Minimum annual CPD hours, verified through ACP-AH platform.                  | Lifelong learning and sustainable excellence.               |

### 3.5 Accreditation and Assessment Mechanism

The AFP AHP accreditation process follows a five-stage cycle consistent with ISO 17024 and ICOMOS training principles (ICOMOS, 1993; UNESCO, 2020):

- **Application and Eligibility Verification:** Submission of academic credentials, project experience, and portfolio evidence.
- **Competency Evaluation:** Peer-reviewed assessment through interviews, case analyses, and reflective documentation.
- **Accreditation Decision:** Certification by the national board, validated by the ACP-AH.



- **Digital Registration and Disclosure:** Inclusion of certified professionals in an online public registry for transparency.
- **Re-accreditation and Renewal:** Renewal every five years based on CPD records, ethical compliance, and updated professional performance.

This process ensures that accreditation remains dynamic, transparent, and reflective of evolving conservation practices.

### 3.6 Integration with Global and Regional Policies

The AFPAHP aligns its framework with international and regional standards to ensure both global legitimacy and local adaptability:

- **International Alignment:** Compliant with ISO 17024:2012 and UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators, ensuring comparability with international accreditation systems (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Regional Synergy:** Supports existing national efforts such as Saudi Arabia's Heritage Professional Development Strategy, ICCROM-ATHAR's regional training programs, and ALECSO's cultural cooperation initiatives.
- **Policy Coherence:** Reinforces Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.4 by institutionalizing professional accountability as a pillar of heritage sustainability.

### 3.7 Implementation Roadmap

A phased strategy is proposed for gradual institutionalization:

- **Phase 1 (Years 1–2):** Policy formation and council establishment under ALECSO endorsement; drafting of standards and bylaws.
- **Phase 2 (Years 3–4):** Pilot accreditation in selected countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Morocco); assessor training and initial licensing cycles.
- **Phase 3 (Years 5–6):** Regional expansion and full digitalization through the Arab Heritage Accreditation Platform—integrating CPD tracking, cross-border verification, and open-access professional registries.

### 3.8 Expected Outcomes and Impact

Table 3 summarizes the expected outcomes and long-term impacts of the proposed Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP) across professional, institutional, cultural, economic, and international dimensions.

**Table 3.** Projected Institutional, Cultural, and Economic Impacts of the AFPAHP

| Impact Area              | Description  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Professional Development | Enhances competence, credibility, and mobility of heritage practitioners.                  |
| Institutional Governance | Promotes transparency, accountability, and standardized quality assurance.                 |
| Cultural Sustainability  | Integrates Arab identity, traditional knowledge, and ethical authenticity within practice. |
| Economic Growth          | Creates employment in restoration, consultancy, and heritage tourism                       |



|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
|                                  | sectors.  |
| <b>International Recognition</b> | Strengthens Arab representation in global heritage networks through credential equivalency. |

### 3.9 Scientific Added Value of the AFP AHP Compared to Global Accreditation Models

The Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFP AHP) introduces a paradigm shift in heritage governance by transcending traditional accreditation models and embedding Arab cultural authenticity, ethical responsibility, and institutional collaboration within a unified system.

Unlike existing Western frameworks such as RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., and RICS, which primarily emphasize technical validation and regulatory independence, the AFP AHP redefines accreditation as a culturally grounded and ethically conscious ecosystem.

The framework transforms professional accreditation from a procedural assessment into a regional governance model that:

- Institutionalizes Arab professional sovereignty and self-determination,
- Reconfigures competence as both a technical and moral–cultural construct, and
- Pioneers transnational Arab cooperation in heritage preservation.

Thus, the AFP AHP represents a scientific and conceptual advancement that moves beyond adaptation to achieve genuine innovation. It offers a replicable model for culturally embedded accreditation systems worldwide, bridging global standards with regional identity and setting a new benchmark for sustainable, ethical, and inclusive heritage governance.



**Table 4.** Scientific Added Value of the AFPAHP Compared to Global Accreditation Models

| <b>Framework Component</b>                          | <b>Function in Global Models (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS)</b>   | <b>AFPAHP Feature / Innovation</b>  | <b>Scientific and Practical Contribution</b>   |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>1. Governance Structure</b>                      | Centralized national professional bodies (e.g., RIBA Council, ICON Board) operating independently within single states. | Establishes a Tri-Institutional Arab Council (ACP-AH) uniting the Saudi Heritage Commission, ALECSO, and Sharjah Institute for Heritage under a regional charter. | Introduces a multi-level transnational governance model balancing professional autonomy with intergovernmental legitimacy — unprecedented in heritage accreditation. |
| <b>2. Competency Framework</b>                      | Focuses on technical expertise, portfolio review, and CPD renewal (3–5 years).  | Expands to a four-tier competency hierarchy (Associate–Professional–Senior–Fellow) integrating technical, managerial, ethical, and cultural competencies.         | Redefines competence as multi-dimensional—combining measurable skill with ethical and cultural literacy, a new paradigm in heritage professionalization.             |
| <b>3. Ethical and Cultural Governance</b>           | Applies standardized codes of conduct emphasizing procedural ethics and personal integrity.                             | Introduces a Pan-Arab Code of Professional Ethics linking ethics to authenticity, social responsibility, and community participation.                             | Shifts ethics from compliance-based regulation to cultural moral legitimacy, embedding identity and values into professional practice.                               |
| <b>4. Cultural Integration</b>                      | Cultural context treated as secondary; universal conservation ethics (Venice Charter).                                  | Embeds Arab architectural identity, traditional materials, and indigenous knowledge systems within accreditation standards.                                       | Creates the world’s first “Culturalized Accreditation Model” where heritage identity becomes a measurable criterion of professional qualification.                   |
| <b>5. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)</b> | Mandatory in all Western models, focusing on technical updating and reflective practice.                                | Digital Arab CPD Platform managed by ACP-AH, integrating cross-border training, peer review, and open access credential registry.                                 | Merges lifelong learning with regional collaboration and transparency, reinforcing a culture of continuous excellence.   |
| <b>6. Legal and Institutional Recognition</b>       | Backed by national laws or royal charters in single jurisdictions (UK, EU).   | Advocates for regional legislative harmonization under ALECSO’s intergovernmental framework to ensure mutual recognition (MRAs).                                  | Transforms fragmented national systems into a unified Arab legal framework for professional mobility—a unique regional innovation.                                   |
| <b>7. Assessment and</b>                            | Based on individual interviews,   | Adopts a five-stage process integrating   | Institutionalizes transparent and evidence-based   |



|  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Re-Accreditation Process</b>              | portfolio evidence, and peer validation.                          | eligibility verification, competency evaluation, accreditation, digital registration, and five-year renewal with ethical audit. | validation while embedding accountability mechanisms at both national and regional levels.  |
| <b>8. Epistemic and Theoretical Paradigm</b> | Knowledge flows from the Global North; standardization dominates. | Positions Arab institutions as knowledge producers through contextual adaptation, cultural embedding, and ethical localization. | Establishes a decolonized epistemology — shifting accreditation from Western standardization to Arab epistemic localization.              |
| <b>9. Alignment with Global Agendas</b>      | Linked to ISO 17024 and ICOMOS ethical guidelines.                | Aligns with UNESCO Culture 2030 Agenda and SDG 11.4, integrating heritage accreditation into sustainable development policy.    | Connects professional accreditation with global sustainability frameworks, reinforcing heritage as a driver of socio-economic resilience. |



### 3.10 Framework Validation

To ensure the robustness, feasibility, and international compatibility of the proposed AFPAHP, a structured validation process was conducted using four complementary lenses: documentary validation against global standards (ISO 17024, ICOMOS, UNESCO), expert analytical review, alignment with leading accreditation models (RIBA, ICON, E.C.C.O., RICS), and assessment of regional institutional readiness (Saudi Heritage Commission, ALECSO, Sharjah Institute for Heritage).

Table 5 summarizes the validation matrix, confirming that the AFPAHP is theoretically sound, institutionally feasible, and culturally grounded, while introducing innovations do not present in Western accreditation systems.

Table 5. Validation Matrix of the AFPAHP Framework

| Validation Type                     | Reference Standards / Sources  | What Was Evaluated   | Validation Result  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Documentary Validation</b>       | ISO 17024:2012; ICOMOS (1993); UNESCO Culture 2030 (2020); RIBA (2021); ICON (2018); E.C.C.O. (2011) | Alignment of AFPAHP components with global accreditation requirements              | Fully aligned with all major international norms; gap identified in cultural contextualization → AFPAHP provides innovative solution |
| <b>Expert Analytical Validation</b> | Analytical review by 3 domain experts (accreditation, heritage policy, cultural governance)          | Coherence, institutional feasibility, cultural integration, regional applicability | Strong consensus on feasibility and novelty; minor refinements incorporated  |
| <b>Standards-Based Alignment</b>    | RIBA, ICON PACR, E.C.C.O., RICS, SDG 11.4  | Compatibility with global accreditation mechanisms                                 | AFPAHP fully compatible; offers added value in ethics, culture, and regional legal harmonization                                     |
| <b>Conceptual Robustness</b>        | Avrami (2020)  | Theoretical grounding, ethical integration, localization of global norms           | Strong conceptual foundation; introduces “culturalized accreditation model” unique to Arab context                                   |
| <b>Regional Institutional Match</b> | Saudi Heritage Commission; ALECSO; Sharjah Institute for Heritage; ICCROM-ATHAR                      | Practical implementability within Arab governance systems                          | High readiness across leading regional institutions; AFPAHP implementation is feasible with minimal structural adjustments           |

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Significance

The Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFPAHP) offers a significant theoretical advancement by reframing accreditation not merely as a technical or administrative procedure but as a culturally embedded governance system. Whereas international models—such as RIBA, ICON, and E.C.C.O.—primarily emphasize technical competence, regulatory independence, and standardized ethics, the AFPAHP introduces a deeper epistemic shift that incorporates cultural authenticity, ethical pluralism, and regional institutional collaboration as core elements of accreditation.

This reconceptualization aligns with contemporary theoretical debates in heritage studies that advocate moving beyond Eurocentric technical criteria toward more culturally situated and socially engaged frameworks (Avrami, 2020). The AFPAHP operationalizes epistemic localization, adapting global professional standards to Arab institutional structures and cultural values. In doing so, it positions accreditation as a mechanism for safeguarding collective memory, identity continuity, and context-sensitive conservation, consistent with the Venice Charter (1964) and the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) (ICOMOS, 1993; UNESCO, 2020).

Thus, the AFPAHP contributes conceptually by establishing a culturally grounded paradigm for accreditation that goes beyond the functional limits of Western competency-based models.

### 4.2 Institutional Implications: Governance, Policy, and Quality Assurance

The institutional design of the AFPAHP directly responds to the fragmentation documented in Arab heritage sectors. By proposing the Arab Council for Professional Accreditation in Heritage (ACP-AH)—rooted in collaboration between the Saudi Heritage Commission, ALECSO, and the Sharjah Institute for Heritage—the framework establishes a multi-level governance model that balances:

- Professional autonomy (through national boards),
- Intergovernmental legitimacy (through ALECSO),
- Technical capacity-building (through Sharjah Institute),
- Regulatory authority (via national heritage commissions).

This hybrid structure reflects global best practices seen in E.C.C.O.'s European federation model while adapting them to the political and administrative diversity of Arab states (E.C.C.O., 2011; ICCROM, 2024).

The AFPAHP thereby strengthens:

- Standardization, through unified regional criteria.
- Transparency, via digital public registries.
- Quality assurance, through continuous monitoring and CPD cycles.



It transforms heritage governance from a fragmented bureaucratic landscape into a coherent, accountable, and regionally integrated professional ecosystem.

### 4.3 Ethical and Cultural Implications

One of the most distinctive contributions of the AFP AHP lies in its ethical and cultural orientation. Unlike Western accreditation systems that frame ethics as procedural compliance, the AFP AHP positions ethics as a reflection of cultural authenticity, community responsibility, and traditional knowledge preservation.

The Pan-Arab Code of Professional Ethics introduced in the framework:

- Incorporates indigenous building wisdom and vernacular craftsmanship
- Links ethical conduct to the collective responsibility of safeguarding heritage,
- Positions practitioners as custodians of architectural and cultural continuity.

Through this ethical–cultural integration, accreditation becomes a form of moral legitimation as well as technical validation—anchoring professional excellence in the protection of Arab identity and values.

### 4.4 Socio-Economic and Professional Implications

The implementation of the AFP AHP has the potential to reposition the heritage sector as a strategic contributor to socio-economic development across the Arab region. By establishing formalized professional pathways:

- Employment in restoration, conservation consultancy, cultural management, and heritage tourism is expected to expand.
- Skilled practitioners gain career mobility through regionally harmonized accreditation and potential Mutual Recognition Agreements.
- Alignment with ISO 17024 enhances the international credibility and competitiveness of Arab heritage professionals.

Recent policy research demonstrates that effective accreditation systems, digital transformation, and structured cultural governance significantly improve national development indicators and stimulate cultural economies (OECD, 2020). Embedding mandatory Continuing Professional Development (CPD) within the AFP AHP further promotes innovation in digital documentation, BIM-based conservation workflow, and AI-assisted diagnostic tools—reflecting global shifts toward technologically enabled heritage practices (UNESCO, 2019; Avrami, 2022).

This transition repositions heritage conservation from a traditional craft-based activity into a knowledge-driven, innovation-oriented sector aligned with national transformation initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030.

### 4.5 Application Scenario: Implementing AFP AHP in a Real Regional Context

To illustrate the practical viability of the AFP AHP, a realistic implementation scenario across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Morocco is presented:

#### Phase 1: Institutional Activation



ACP-AH is established under ALECSO, with the Saudi Heritage Commission leading regulatory oversight and the Sharjah Institute for Heritage coordinating capacity-building.

#### Phase 2: National Integration

Each state forms National Professional Boards to harmonize local licensing with regional competency standards.

#### Phase 3: Professional Assessment

A pilot cohort undergoes portfolio review, competency interviews, and ethical evaluation through a unified cross-border assessment system.

#### Phase 4: Digital Accreditation Platform

A regional platform centralizes:

- 1) CPD tracking,
- 2) Credential verification,
- 3) Training exchange programs,
- 4) Public disclosure of accredited professionals.

#### Phase 5: Mutual Recognition Agreements

Cross-border work mobility is enabled through formal MRAs, strengthening the regional heritage labor market. Outcome: This scenario demonstrates that the AFPAHP is operationally feasible, policy-aligned, and regionally scalable, providing a clear blueprint for adoption across the Arab world.

### 4.6 Academic and Global Contributions

The AFPAHP enhances global and academic discourse in several ways:

- **Bridging Global and Local Epistemologies.** It demonstrates how international accreditation models can be adapted to preserve cultural identity without compromising scientific rigor.
- **Introducing Ethical–Cultural Competence as a Measurable Standard.** This constitutes an expansion of accreditation theory beyond the purely technical.
- **Providing a Replicable Framework for Other Culturally Diverse Regions.** The model offers a foundation for developing culturally grounded accreditation systems in regions across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In this sense, the AFPAHP positions the Arab world as a producer of heritage governance models, rather than a passive adopter of Western paradigms—advancing the global movement toward decolonized and culturally embedded accreditation systems.

### 4.6 Academic and Global Contributions

The AFPAHP makes a significant scholarly contribution by advancing the theory and practice of heritage governance in several fundamental ways.

First, it introduces a regionally grounded yet globally aligned accreditation paradigm, demonstrating how international standards can be systematically localized without



compromising cultural integrity. This positions the framework as an innovative model of globalization in professional accreditation.

Second, the framework expands existing accreditation theory by operationalizing ethical and cultural competence as measurable professional criteria, a dimension largely absent from Western models. By formalizing cultural authenticity, social responsibility, and traditional knowledge within accreditation standards, the AFPAHP establishes a new evaluative domain that enriches global discourse on decolonized conservation practice.

Third, the AFPAHP provides a structurally replicable governance architecture that can be applied to other regions with complex cultural identities—such as Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—offering a transferable template for culturally embedded accreditation systems.

Finally, the research elevates the Arab region from a passive recipient of international accreditation norms to an active producer of theoretical innovation, contributing an original framework that redefines quality assurance through cultural legitimacy, multi-level regional coordination, and ethical contextualization. This positions the AFPAHP as a meaningful global contribution to the emerging field of heritage professionalization and sustainable cultural governance.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Arab Framework for Professional Accreditation in Architectural and Urban Heritage Preservation (AFP AHP) offers a transformative roadmap for the institutional, ethical, and cultural consolidation of heritage professionalism in the Arab world. It provides a unified mechanism to standardize competence, strengthen governance, and embed authenticity at the core of accreditation processes.

By harmonizing technical standards with Arab cultural identity, the framework enhances regional credibility and global recognition—aligning with UNESCO’s Culture 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 11.4, which emphasize the role of culture in sustainable urban development. Ultimately, the AFP AHP transcends its procedural role to embody a cultural mission: preserving heritage through professional legitimacy and moral accountability.

Its implementation would mark a decisive transition from fragmented efforts to an integrated, ethical, and globally respected Arab heritage system—anchoring the region as a leading voice in the future of architectural and urban heritage preservation.

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