Abstract

In recent years, the Saudi Arabian higher education system has taken major actions to improve itself and maintain international standards. These actions are in response to the perceived low quality of the system which has affected its graduates. Among these actions were the establishment of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment, support for research and development, and creation of a large study abroad program. This paper discusses how these actions have addressed some of the shortcoming of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Scholarship, Higher education, Saudi Arabia;

1. Introduction

Higher education is necessary for national development. Because of this, governments need to improve higher education and keep it at a high level. This paper will review three efforts to improve higher education in Saudi Arabia.

2. Background

The first college in Saudi Arabia was established in 1950. Eight years later, in 1958 the first university was established. In the last decade, public universities increased from eight in 2003 to 26 in 2010. In addition, more than 20 private universities and colleges were approved. That shows how higher education in Saudi Arabia is modern and rapidly developing ("Universities Statistics", n.d.)

3. Reform efforts

3.1. Standards.

The government of Saudi Arabia established the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) to contribute to the continuing improvement of the quality of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Darandari, et al, 2009). The NCAAA has created standards for 11 areas of operation in higher education which are divided into 5 domains. Each standard has a set of sub-standards (Onsman, 2010)

The areas of these standards are:

- Mission and objectives
Governance and Administration

Management of Quality Assurance and Improvement

Learning and Teaching

Student Administration and Support Services

Learning Resources

Facilities and Equipment

Financial Planning and Management

Employment Processes

Research

Institutional Relationships with the Community (NCAAA, 2008)

3.2. Research

Research and development is one of the most influential factors that increases the quality of education. The Saudi Arabia Ministry of Economy and Planning estimated spending on research and development about 0.3% of GDP, which is modest in comparison with developed countries and rapid growth. Its National Policy for Science and Technology aims to increase this rate to 2% by 2025. The policy was started in S.A.’s eighth development plan from 2005 to 2009. At first, the increase will be low, but it will reach the goal by 2025 (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2009).

Saudi Arabia has many companies that support research and development, such as SABIC and ARAMCO. For example, these two companies invested between 0.4% and 1.7% of their budgets for research and development. Because of this, SABIC has more than 200 patents, and ARAMCO has 17 patents with more than 90 patent applications pending. In addition, it is estimated the ratio of R&D workers to be 23 per 100,000 persons in the population, which is modest, compared with 500 per 100,000 in typical advanced countries (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2009).

3.3. Scholarships

Another factor for improving the quality of higher education is study abroad scholarships.

The number of students on scholarships increased from 11,917 in 2003 to more than 140,000 in 2011. Note also that of all students, 23.5% are MA students and 5.0% are PhD students. Fellowship students constitute 1.7%, which is the smallest percentage of all. Most students study in the United States and Britain. Also, in the final stages of the scholarship program, the Ministry of Higher Education made a plan for development needs limited to only MAs and PhDs in medicine and engineering (Deputyship for Planning and Information, 2010).

4. Results so far

Higher education in Saudi Arabia suffers many challenges, such as low-test scores of students admitted. For example, students in 8th grade in Saudi Arabia were ranked 43rd in mathematics and 39th in science out of 50 countries, according to a report by McKinsey & Company (2007).

Moreover, the major challenge for higher education is raising internal efficiency and promoting partnerships between higher education programs and the community. Spending more years at university than required for graduation, and the low ratio of graduates to entrants, overload the system, damaging its ability to meet growing demand. Furthermore, competence of faculty and administrative staff, and quality of academic programs are major factors of the system’s internal efficiency (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2009).

In fact, none of the Saudi universities are listed within the 392 leading education institutions in the world, according to a report by Mine Paristech (2011). However, King Saud University ranks 199th in Webometrics, and King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals ranks 404th. Likewise, in the Times Higher Education-Quacquarelli
Symonds survey (THE-QS), King Saud University ranks 247 and King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals ranks 266. This performance is too low compared with other of the developing countries world (Abouammoh, 2010).

In fact, Saudi Arabia has begun to reform education according to a report by The World Bank (2008) Saudi Arabia has exceeded average scores for education and for the number of reforms required by developing countries, but has scored unsatisfactorily on public accountability. (Figure 1)

![Educational Outcomes and Political Accountability](image)


5. **Recommendations**

The government should support more research and development, especially in universities. It needs to plan for scholarships and focus on higher education, because the current percentage of graduate students is unsatisfactory for the country’s growth. As a result, Saudi Arabian universities have relatively low achievement. Doing more research and having more study abroad scholarships may remedy these problems. Scholarships are good because they provide better teachers and create citizens who value education.

In conclusion, although Saudi Arabia’s higher education is not yet satisfactory, the country has made considerable efforts toward quality assurance. Although at the beginning, it was not well-planned, the Saudi higher education system will reach the designed goals because it has tools for success such as human capacity and resources.

**References**


