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15. TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

Action and Prospects in the Case of King Abdulaziz University

INTRODUCTION

According to UNESCO, higher education has given ample proof of its viability over the centuries and of its ability to change and to induce change and progress in society. Society has become increasingly knowledge-based so that higher learning and research now act as essential components in the cultural, socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations. Higher education itself is confronted therefore with formidable challenges and must achieve radical change and renewal in the future (UNESCO, 2010).

In the era of knowledge, information and communication technologies (ICTs), prolific developments, globalization, and a focus on total quality, it has become imperative that traditional universities have to face transformation, become more responsive, and accentuate their capacities if they are to meet the increasing expectations with regards to their roles in knowledge societies. Universities are the homeland of knowledge, the main engines for its development and enhancement in all areas of scientific creativity and innovation, and the agents of societal development and progress. Accordingly, universities cannot become static or indolent organizations and to the contrary, they should always endeavour to adopt development initiatives and seek to achieve continuous improvements in the quality of their internal and external efficiencies. Moreover, to succeed in their missions they need to have clear visions in terms of their goals and strategies.

This chapter illustrates the experience of building a world-class university from an Arabic country's perspective, by considering the experience of King Abdulaziz University (KAU) and its envisaged hybrid identity.

KING ABDULAZIZ UNIVERSITY (KAU)

KAU is named after the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and it is currently a dynamic and expanding higher education institution that is aspiring to be a more active agent of change, a value adding institution, a committed citizen to better serve society, a beacon of knowledge through its educational and innovative research activities and a quality higher education institution oriented towards being competitive and international. In 1964 the idea of establishing the university was initiated by a group of dedicated citizens and in 1967 the aim was fulfilled when

it was founded as a private higher education institution. Finally, in 1973 KAU became a public institution owing to its need for expansion and to attract funding from the state. Presently, it is the largest university in Saudi Arabia with approximately 50,000 full-time students, 4,500 teaching and 15,000 administrative and technical staff. Moreover, it has hundreds of departments and programmes of tertiary education in various disciplines (KAU, 2006 and 2010).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Five years ago, KAU began its challenge of changing its old practices, by developing a new identity, recalibrating its roles, building capacities, reversing the pattern of wastage and underachievement, following effective management techniques, meeting quality standards, and adapting identified best practices. To fulfill this goal it charted its first strategic plan, which set out the dramatic functional, structural and cultural institutional changes that would be required (Damanhour, 2007; Tayeb and Damanhour, 2008). In particular, this came in response to a number of exploratory studies and workshops that had investigated KAU outputs, from which it had become abundantly clear that its educational system, quality, and ability to innovate were inadequate for meeting the challenges that it face if it were in the future to become an internationally ranked world-class university delivering high quality. Subsequently, members of KAU faculty drew on the experiences and practices of highly reputed universities through a series of visits, searches of the Internet, and reviewing appropriate publications. However, although we undertook the endeavour of investigating other institutions' practices from all corners of the globe, we are of the opinion that what best suits other universities would not necessarily fit KAU, because of its unique culture and assets and there we need customize our development in accordance with this.

As a consequence, it has been decided that KAU should re-focus its vision and mission so as to become a multi-faceted hybrid university. In this regard, its traditional identity as a comprehensive large university will be maintained, whilst a new emphasis will be placed on facets such as electronics, research, thinking and entrepreneurship. In accordance with these proposed future changes a wave of initiatives has been launched (Damanhour, 2007; Tayeb and Damanhour, 2008) and in particular a post of Vice-Presidency for Development (VPD) has been created so as to strengthen the university's capability and thereby match the international standards of quality in the advanced world.

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

At KAU we have abstracted and absorbed the lessons of best practice and have reached the conclusion that long lasting performance in HE rests in high quality human resources. As a consequence, our human resource development (HRD) strategy is aimed at substantial improvement in all staff categories: teaching, research, administrative and technical. However, as students are our most valued output, we have kept their needs at the top of the list. In sum, we believe that maintaining an effective balance between all these entities by having sufficient and

efficient HRD activities will form a solid platform for quality university education and synergistic performance.

HR represents the main pillar for any nation's progress in terms of its real wealth. In particular, at the university level it is the resource of highest value in terms of the achievement of its objectives of improved performance and competitiveness. Moreover, by adopting the human intellectual capital (IC) perspective, the intention is to pursue the goal of creating elite human resources with excellent intellectual skills, abilities, and experiences that will thus allow them to contribute intellectually in all milieux and perform at the highest levels. Furthermore, continuous development needs to be seen as a priority at both the micro and macro levels and in the modern university environment internal and external considerations must be incorporated in to HRD strategies. With regard to the internal environment, this refers to academic staff, administrative and technical staff, and students, whereas the external environment partially relates to students undertaking distance learning programmes as well as the administrative and academic support networks for these. In other words, each category should be provided with an effective agenda in terms of its future developmental activities.

In sum, HRD lies at the core of providing dynamic solutions that will enhance educators' competencies towards producing world-class education. Moreover, imaginative forward looking programmes should be devised on a continual basis so that teaching staff keep their knowledge up to date and abreast of best practice, both internally and externally. By so doing, we can ensure that our students' learning experiences are of the highest value, creativity and innovativeness across the university curriculum. As a result, when our students leave KAU they will be equipped to play a full part as modern citizens by taking up opportunities which will allow them to substantially contribute to the nation's social and economic success.

To serve such developments, universities rely on a number of key actors to optimize their operational capacity, most important of which are their faculty members. We at KAU concur strongly with this perspective and have set in train a range of staff development measures for our teaching staff. In this regard, training programmes are organized all the year around under the aegis of the Center for Teaching and Learning Development (CTLTD). At the external level, an "Initiative for Innovation and Excellence Development Programmes" was launched by the Ministry of Higher Education which is now in its third year of delivery.

ICT DEVELOPMENT AND ITS APPLICATIONS IN KAU MANAGEMENT

KAU is embarking on open and distance learning based mainly on multimedia-rich e-learning, with the goal of reaching across Saudi Arabia. It will provide high quality education, training and development, from a lifelong learning perspective. Moreover, in the near future the system will be backed up by a satellite interactive TV channel. With regards to face-to-face learning on campus, steps are being taken to enrich the teaching process by supplementing these experiences with blended learning. Furthermore, there are plans to utilize e-learning to provide distance learning graduate studies programmes, for which a recent pilot study has indicated that there is substantial demand.

In addition, KAU is utilizing the concepts of electronic management with regards to all of its administrative, service, and information dissemination functions. With respect to this, ICT has been embedded throughout the university in terms of the administrative, teaching and learning structures and is a core element of staff and students' day to day practice. Nearly all university classes have been equipped with multimedia technology and a big initiative in relation to a comprehensive electronic course portfolio is near to completion and this will provide both staff and students at KAU a valuable tool able to deliver interactive teaching and learning. By adopting a two-pronged approach of on the one hand developing a positive and viable organizational culture through extensive staff development, and on the other aligning this with effective implementation of ICT infrastructure, the university is in the process of greatly enriching the experience for both staff and students.

KAU can expect a continuing rapid pace of development in information technology instruction, as the incoming students will increasingly be more technologically literate and therefore demand more sophisticated applications of technology when undertaking university courses. This inevitably will require us to maintain ongoing improvement in our ICT infrastructure and continual updating of the skills of the users. That is, with regards to the latter point, rolling training programmes will need to become an embedded feature of the institution for any individual crossing its threshold. Moreover, these programmes will need to be delivered on an external basis so as to facilitate the distance learning programmes across the nation, as discussed above. To date, our ICT system has gained KAU rewards and benefits which have resulted in our rank of excellence and our being cited as the leading university among all Saudi universities.

OTHER STRATEGIES AND ROUTES FOR TRANSFORMING KAU

Benchmarking Exercise

One important concern related to the implementation of the ICT strategy at KAU has been the need to enhance the quality of the university's data handling, information, and metrics so as to make decision-making more effective. Recently, in a quality drive, key performance indicators (KPI) have been put into place, but as yet these are only in the early application stage. In the longer run, the plan is to use these indicators for benchmarking KAU's year-on-year performance. Moreover, the aim is to use the data collected in these exercises to compile online institutional repositories and data warehouses, as KAU is committed to ensuring that this data is sensitively handled as well as being correctly stored, on a long term basis.

Building University Culture

KAU views every student as an internal customer of great potential value to his/her university and country. Being committed to each student's learning and subsequent academic success, the university is dedicated to having a positive and a strongly grounded culture, providing the appropriate learning conditions and having a balanced

environment that stimulates the student to achieve their highest potential. Moreover, through creating such a learning environment the intention is to instil in the student high levels of motivation, clear purpose and effective communication, critical thinking and problem solving skills, so that they get the best possible experience during their course of study. Furthermore, the aim is to foster in the student the development of virtues of a mature, self-aware and responsible citizen, thereby enabling him/her to be a worthy member of society capable of great achievements.

KAU has been mobilizing its strengths in terms of its resources to maximize its capabilities and performance across all sectors. In this regard, one of the main routes has been an initiative in the sphere of teaching with regards to critical thinking, encouraging creativity and ideas generation, all of which being aimed at transforming KAU into a thinking university able to have an impact in the 21st century. Moreover, plans are afoot to develop curricula based on ideas generation coupled with student thinking clubs which will involve staff members having to take onboard new techniques that will provide them with the necessary skills for them to act as catalysts in the promotion of ideas and initiatives. With respect to this, one of the main strategies to be employed is the establishment of Think Tank Groups (TTGs) that will soon be expanded across the KAU campus and beyond. These TTGs are expected to generate plans to operationalize the results of thinking in the form of ideas produced by staff members of both an academic and administrative hue. In other words, maximum efforts are being placed on galvanizing the human intellectual capital inherent in the faculty and other employees of KAU.

One further goal of KAU at this present time is to imbue the notion of being an entrepreneurship university across the institution. The two main aspects regarding this endeavour are educational and business entrepreneurship. Regarding the former, curricula throughout the university need to be updated so as to highlight this prerogative and there is also a need to ensure that these are continually modified from now on, in accordance with practice gleaned from both the national and international levels. By so doing this will help to foster students' business orientations and consequently lead to their being able to make a valuable contribution to the private sector. In relation to business entrepreneurship, KAU has recently established incubator enterprises of both a business and scientific nature.

Accreditation and Quality

Another major route in our strategic development is the focus on accreditation and quality, where we are heading towards full academic accreditation of our programmes within the next five years. In this regard, at present 36 programmes have got international accreditation and institutional accreditation is to start this academic year, both through local and international accrediting bodies. Non academic accreditation has been gained for both the Blood Bank and recently, the 800 bed Hospital in the Medical Centre. In relation to the importance of the quality of KAU's administration, as discussed above, approximately 25 quality certificates of ISO 9001-2000 have been granted to the different units across the campus. In sum,

the route of accreditation and quality at the university is a continuously improving story of success.

International Dimension

KAU values the efforts that have been made towards promoting and expanding its international presence and overseas cooperation. A number of strategies have been employed to this end, which include exchange visits, cooperation and twinning agreements, joint research, and the establishment of the International Advisory Board of KAU.

Focusing on Research Capacity

One further essential route being followed by the university relates to its becoming recognized as a research university. Given this is an enormous undertaking, we briefly summarize here our current achievements and areas for further development, these being: increasing the amount of public funds allocated for research; soliciting endowed scientific research chairs; endowment funds for research; establishing six research centres of excellence; promoting the conduct of research and its publication; investing in laboratory and research capabilities; winning research prizes; and establishing a research science park.

From the above it can be seen that improving research capacity is at the heart of KAU's current strategic mission and although to date some success has been achieved, this endeavour necessitates increased capacity, operational balance and continual maintenance. Further, it is not just a matter of creating research laboratories and other infrastructure, but it also involves the availability of capable human resources, sufficient funding, a responsive and tolerant culture and effective administration. In this regard, we are working to increase the numbers of research assistants, the numbers of Ph.D. research students, and the levels of research funding and therefore, we expect to achieve some significant research breakthroughs in the coming few years.

Finally, we are striving to be more consistent and focused in our efforts to foster and nurture public engagement by encouraging our faculty and students to bring their knowledge and skills to bear on pressing contemporary problems and, through communication, to encourage widespread public understanding and subsequent civil society involvement in our institution's future.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS TO SHARE

By meeting the objectives in terms of building a strategic planning culture, set out in the First Five Year Strategic Plan, we believe that we have established a solid platform to proceed in setting our Second Five Year Strategic Plan (2010–2014) which is at present being carefully crafted. That is, KAU's achievements under the first plan have reassured us that we are moving in the right direction. However, there is some way to go before sufficient transformation will have taken place

for KAU to become a world-class university. Nevertheless, we trust that our collaborative efforts during the Second Five Year Strategic Plan will ensure the veracity of our current motto, that being “KAU Takes-Off”.

To conclude this chapter, we share a summary of the lessons learnt from KAU’s experience. First, in the endeavour to follow a successful route of university capacity building resulting in the transformation into a world-class university, a viable culture and appropriate values need to be institutionalized at its inception. Second, to make the transformation to being a world-class university, it is necessary to develop human capacities in balanced and conscientious manner across the institution for all types of staff so as to take advantage of all potential intellectual human capital. Third, good management practices should be followed in the transformation process, in terms of, for instance quality assurance, strategic planning, and business process re-engineering (BPR). Fourth, a good starting point for the world-class university journey is to review best practice of current world-class universities and that of professional associations and organizations relating to higher education. Fifth, priority should be given to implementing fit-for-purpose ICT strategies across all areas of the institution, including administration, faculty, students and other stakeholders and ensuring that all those involved are kept abreast of new developments as well as continually buying in equipment of the highest standard. Sixth, during the transformation process, the university should seek to build a community involving the bringing together of all stakeholders who can then apply their thinking capabilities and creativity to achieve the vision set by the university leaders. Seventh, and last but certainly not least, through focusing on the ongoing enhancement of research capacity, university ranking status will be enhanced and the ultimate goal of becoming a world-class university will be that much nearer.

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