Introducing CREATING, a plan for dental higher education in Saudi Arabia

“Throughout history, power has attached itself, after God, to science. And the Islamic nation knows too well that it will not be powerful unless it depends on, after God, science.” These words from a 2009 speech by King Abdullah at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology best exemplify the ideas of the authors of the CREATING (Communication, Research governance, Education planning, Accreditation, Translational practice, Implementation, Networking, Growth) plan for dental higher education in Saudi Arabia. Science, and therefore research, is indissolubly linked to all aspects of society. The ability to resolve the dualism between teaching and research and the promotion of a modern model of higher education will be the key determinants of international recognition of Saudi universities as academic institutions de facto, especially in the biomedical field.

Higher education, including that in the dental and biomedical fields, is acquiring increasing importance worldwide, including in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). In line with its pioneering role, the national government of the KSA has set rising expectations for higher education. The vision has been supported by strategic measures, including the establishment of new universities, colleges, and centers of excellence (Telmesani et al., 2011). A central element of the new national plan is to stimulate quality and performance in higher education through the agency of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) in self-studies, strategic planning, and accreditation (NCAAA, 2008, 2011). Responses of Saudi universities to these demands have been mixed, and most higher education institutions (HEIs) are still in the process of finding ways to meet the criteria set by the government.

We recently set up a collaborative working group of executives and academics from across the world, including Abdulmonem Al-Hayani and Emad Al-Shwaimi from Saudi Arabia (King Abdul Aziz University and University of Dammam, respectively), Stephen Prime from the UK (Queen Mary University of London), and myself from Australia (University of Melbourne). This group has analyzed the crucial issues faced by HEIs and developed a sustainable plan for Saudi universities, especially in the dental and biomedical fields, that was named CREATING. The first phase of this plan is being published (Cirillo et al., 2014), and we feel that we should achieve widespread consensus among academics and policy makers on phase II. The aim of the group is thus to broaden the current network to involve executives and academics from as many universities in Gulf countries as possible.

The plan elaborated in this collaborative document represents an attempt to share some common practices of modern higher education among dental and medical colleges in Saudi Arabia. Phase I principally involves reorganization of universities’ on-going activities in a well-structured manner and reinforcement of the fundamental principles of modern higher education. We suggest that these goals are not necessarily to be achieved by major investments, but, rather, by implementation of a more imaginative and organized work plan. This solid grounding will lay the foundation for the next step, phase II (Translational practice, Implementation, Networking, Growth), in which dental and biomedical HEIs will be expected to invest in new strategic resources to establish strong reciprocal links with industry and fair international academic partnerships, and to shift their attention to hot topics and current academic challenges, thereby ultimately becoming truly world-leading universities.

We propose that the following key aspects are crucial to succeed:

C: Communication

The increasingly transnational character of higher education has brought tremendous dynamism to the advancement of science and technology. This trend also provides opportunities for the improvement of higher education through collaboration, competition, exchange of ideas, and increased exposure to the international community – all aspects in which commu-
communication is the common denominator. University and staff profiles, indexing, presence on the Internet, and sharing of information in general are the key points that should be targeted in HEIs’ efforts to improve communication.

R: Research governance

Faculty members in the KSA perceive that lack of time and support, as well as massive teaching loads, are major obstacles impeding research productivity (Alghanim and Alhamali, 2011). Factors underlying this disappointing performance in research include: (1) lack of clear organizational and academic structure, planning, and assessment in research; (2) limited investment – most Arab universities are largely state owned and spend only around 1% of their budgets on research, compared with an international average of 35% (Chouchane et al., 2011); and (3) lack of cross-faculty, multidisciplinary interaction and collaboration. Measures that address these issues are proposed in the plan.

E: Education planning

An education system based on outcomes (outcome-based curriculum) has become central at biomedical universities. CREATING phase I outlines the major actions to be taken, such as establishing clear profiles, graduate competencies, and benchmark statements (see, for example, GMC, 2005; GDC, 2008); integrating research and teaching; introducing codes of practice for teaching and learning; curriculum development strategies; and implementation of policies and practices regulating access to undergraduate and post-graduate study. The proposed tentative medical and dental curriculum is based on student-centered, competency-based learning using hybrid problem-based learning and e-learning as an educational method, with strong emphasis on community-oriented practice and encouragement of students to become self-directed and lifelong learners.

A: Accreditation

The desire to be among the best schools on the world stage entails acceptance that this aim will be furthered by the challenges of external (international) evaluation, in addition to national assessment. The NCAAA has set criteria for gaining formal national certification by the Saudi Minister of Higher Education, meaning that a program meets minimum required standards; these criteria are discussed in the plan. In one example, we suggest that an ad hoc Committee for Accreditation is put in place in each college/faculty to facilitate this task.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has begun an irreversible process of internationalization that is bringing major changes to higher education in the whole Arab world. Drawing on an analysis of the Saudi university system, we are working collaboratively toward a sustainable model that will be implemented according to international practices.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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