Assessment of the Governance Quality of the Departments of English in Saudi Universities: Implications for Sustainable Development

Abdulfattah Omar[1], Waheed Altohami[1,2], & Muhammad Afzaal[3]

[1] Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

[2] Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Mansoura University, Egypt

[3] Shanghai International Studies University, China

Correspondence: Abdulfattah Omar, Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Recently, numerous regulations and policies have been initiated in Saudi universities that support the Kingdom's Vision 2030 of achieving smart, sustainable, and globally competitive universities. For the successful implementation of these regulations and policies, however, critical success factors including corporate governance have to be considered. Despite the extensive research on the importance of developing effective and reliable governance policies and practices for the overall growth of organizations including universities, no sufficient studies on the role of corporate governance in improving sustainable development plans and combating corruption, improving transparency, and enhancing sustainable development plans in the Saudi universities. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the impact of CG on improving accountability and sustainable development plans in Departments of English in Saudi universities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 48 participants, including the head of the English departments in four Saudi universities. Results indicate that the contributions of the universities to sustainable development plans and strategies are still under expectations. In this regard, the universities and higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia should replace the traditional academic model with the corporate model. The departments of English should address the changing needs of their candidates and students in this global world, and this has to be reflected in their sustainable development plans. Governance, however, should be enforced in all their operations as a critical success factor for sustainable development planning.

Keywords: critical success factors, corporate governance, digital transformation, Saudi universities, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Corporate governance has been the focus of development plans and studies over recent years. Different questions are always raised concerning the best corporate governance practices in developing the growth of organizations on one side and combatting corruption in institutions (Hatchard, 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Powell, Wafa, & Mau, 2019; Salihu, 2021). In other words, researchers have been concerned with answering some controversial questions, e.g., are corporate governance practices effective enough in combatting and reducing corruption levels in corporations, organizations, and government institutions? Would it make any difference for corporations, organizations, and government institutions to have effective corporate governance policies, regulations, and practices?

The underlying principle in corporate governance is that appropriate corporate governance policies should be developed and enforced by institutions and organizations as a key element for successful growth and even survival (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018; Mosca, Gianecchini, & Campagnolo, 2021). Corporate governance practices should be successfully implemented for supporting development plans, combatting corruption, and enhancing transparency and accountability in both public and private institutions (Huppi, 2006; Wahyuni-TD, Haron, & Fernando, 2021). In this regard, corporate governance has always been linked with financial scandals either in developed or developing countries over recent years.

With the increasing global economic changes, universities are facing real challenges in terms of growth, competition, and even survival. In response to these global changes, Saudi universities have been recently functioning within a new system that aims to further enhance university autonomy and reduce universities' excessive reliance on government spending. The system provides complete and entire autonomy over academic and financial operations. In other words, universities will be able to accredit their areas of specialization and programs according to development needs and career opportunities in the areas they serve. In addition, they can also charge fees for the graduate programs they offer. This new system is considered by many observers and analysts as a transformative and historic step for higher education in Saudi Arabia. Previously, free education was seen as the norm, and tuition fees were the exception. With the implementation of the new system, universities can charge fees for graduate programs, diplomas, or other academic services. The main objectives of the new system can be summarized as follows:

- To achieve the autonomy of universities, whereby academic and financial regulations can be built in by the general policies approved by the country.

- To reflect the Kingdom's vision 2030 in the administrative organization of universities, including organizational structures, powers, and performance indicators in the research, educational and administrative fields.

- To empower universities to approve their specializations and programs according to job opportunities and the region's human resource needs.

- To reduce the operating costs of universities, finding new sources of funding and reducing dependence on the state budget, through endowment programs and approving the establishment of investment companies to develop the financial resources of universities.

- To connect universities to the labor market.

- To give access to non-Saudi students to be enrolled in paid-programs in the Saudi universities

- To achieve governance by establishing a board of trustees for each university.

- To permit universities to establish branches outside the Kingdom.

One main advantage of the new university system is that it opens the way for universities to transform the university into an investment institution, or what can be referred to as the 'corporate model'. As for the departments of English in Saudi universities, they need to develop effective channels with the private sector and the local economies and communities they serve. To grow and survive, they have to consider sustainable development requirements, including corporate governance policies and practices.

In light of this argument, this study seeks to investigate the governance quality in the departments of English in Saudi universities as a requirement for the success of sustainable development planning in educational institutions. The study seeks to address the questions regarding the impact and contribution of corporate governance in combating corruption, which can be thus usefully used as evidence by the Saudi universities in identifying what good corporate governance practices ideally suit Higher Education institutions. In other words, the study seeks to provide the departments of English in Saudi universities with reliable strategies regarding the adoption of effective corporate governance practices and policies that may be usefully used in reducing the levels and risks of corruption from one side and improving the implementation of sustainable development plans and growth rates in the Saudi universities. The study aligns with the objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 which stresses the importance of achieving sustainable development in all Kingdom's institutions and sectors.

The study is limited to the Departments of English in Saudi universities. The rationale is that these departments have recently expanded their operations and what even can be described as a business by developing different units for providing services to different individuals and even companies. In Saudi Arabia, departments of English provide English language courses, continuous learning programs, and translation services. Throughout these activities and operations, the departments of English seek to add value to their original business for survival in this globally competitive world.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 is a brief survey of the literature on the impact of governance on improving transparency, reducing corruption risks, and enhancing sustainable development plans in universities and higher education institutions. Part 3 describes the methods and procedures. Part 4 reports the results and findings of the study. Part 5 discusses the findings and offers recommendations for further research.

2. Literature Review

Numerous research studies have been conducted recently to identify effective techniques for promoting transparency and minimizing corruption. This can be attributed to the increase in corruption crimes which are believed to have negative impacts on individuals, organizations, and even development plans. Corruption is even described as a global problem that has grave consequences for all world countries.

Given the negative impacts of poor governance practices on economic growth and sustainable development plans, corporate governance is always suggested as an effective solution to many of the problems brought by corruption and the lack of effective accountability and transparency measures (Addink, 2019; Bawley, Porter, & Porter, 1999; Hatchard, 2014). It is argued that the lack of effective, working, and reliable policies of accountability and transparency policies account for the poor performance and effectiveness of both public and private institutions (Gangi, Meles, D'Angelo, & Daniele, 2019; Salvioni & Astori, 2013; Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020).

Brenkert (2004) argues that lack of accountability and transparency policies and corruption are serious challenges that hinder the economic development and growth of corporations, organizations, and governmental institutions. In this regard, it is imperative to generate and develop working and reliable strategies that can combat corruption, improve transparency and accountability, and enhance sustainable development plans and initiatives. He adds that governance was developed. Maundeni (2008) agrees that governance tools, policies, and procedures were developed as auditing, follow-up devices, and effective, fast and transparent accountability systems and procedures. Likewise, Reed (2002) agrees that corporate governance was developed as an effective mechanism for addressing the challenges and threats caused by corruption in both developed and developing countries.

In this regard, firms and institutions should, accordingly, should develop effective and reliable corporate governance policies for growth and development. Likewise, Reed (2002) argues that corporate governance policies can be usefully used in supporting development plans and

initiatives in general and in developing countries in particular. Similarly, Levy, Szejnwald Brown, and De Jong (2010) define corporate governance as one of the key factors for the success of development plans and economic outcomes of countries.

Given the context of higher education institutions, several studies addressed the repercussions of corruption on the performance, progress, and growth of universities (Hallak & Poisson, 2001, 2007; Segal, 2005). There is a common consensus that unethical and poor governance policies and practices represent a real challenge in educational institutions. For instance, in European countries (e.g., Ukraine and Romania, among others), many studies reported many malpractices and crimes in students' enrollment and admission procedures owing to corruption and lack of transparency (Andrei, Teodorescu, & Oancea, 2010; Borcan, Lindahl, & Mitrut, 2017; Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018; Heyneman, 2004). Hallak and Poisson (2001) and Dridi (2014) went further as they affirmed that such malpractices and corrupted systems affect the whole educational process in general, thereby causing the educational system to fall (Dridi, 2014; Hallak & Poisson, 2001).

Though there is no integrative governance system for higher education institutions, some studies reported diverse efficacious, and well-tested strategies to be adopted by higher education institutions including universities and institutes to overcome many of the previous problems. Further to this, a plethora of studies explored the influence of corporate governance on the performance of universities (Brown, 2000; Goedegebuure & Hayden, 2007; Shattock, 2006; Shin, 2018; Trakman, 2008; among others). Yet, in the Saudi context, there is a dearth of studies that investigated the implications of corporate governance to the institutions of higher education. Available studies are concerned with the pivotal role of corporate governance in developing the Saudi economy in general (e.g., Bremer & Elias, 2007), improving both domestic and foreign investments, maintaining capital markets (Samaha & Dahawy, 2011), and improving the financial performance of public and private sectors. Still, none of these studies was geared toward providing empirical evidence on the influence of the practices of corporate governance on providing and enhancing sustainable development plans. Likewise, none of these studies explored how corporate governance could reduce the levels of corruption marking the diverse administrative operations and financial transactions in Saudi universities. Given this research niche, the present study seeks to assess the efficacy of governance policies, strategies, and practices in the performance of the departments of English in Saudi universities with the main objective of improving their sustainable development plans.

3. Methods & Procedures

This study is based on in-depth, open-ended interviews with a selected number of executives, stakeholders, employees, and faculty members in four Saudi universities including the heads of the departments of English. Because it is usually difficult to include the entire population, a typical sample is simply chosen to generalize the results to the population. As a qualitative research data-gathering approach, an in-depth interview is often an intense individual interview with a limited number of respondents to investigate their opinions on a certain topic, program, or issue. These interviews were performed with senior executives of top management to explore corporate governance from a higher level and to obtain a true picture of the extent to which corporate governance policies and practices are implemented at the selected universities for its various activities. In-depth interviews have the significant benefit of providing far more specific information than other data-gathering methods.

There are a few limitations associated with this technique. One limitation is that the interviewee is also one of the stakeholders. However, efforts were taken to avoid bias through the design of the instrument and the conduct of the interview. Second, it was a time-consuming procedure, as transcribing and processing took time; moreover, it is not generalizable due to the limited sample size. However, the current study's in-depth interview offered vital information about corporate governance and its role in combating corruption.

Interviews were conducted with 48 participants who represent different leading positions in the four universities and higher education institutions. The interviews also included male and female participants. To maintain the study's goals and objectives, the researcher adhered to ethical standards at all times. As a consequence, protocols were developed and implemented. If the case study approach was used, for example, the protocol required the researcher to create a mechanism for building a functioning relationship between the participants and the researcher. The interview process also served as a guide for all interviews done during the study. To ensure the reliability and validity of the research instruments, all semi-structured interviews used the same interview approach. Furthermore, the interview style allowed the researcher and participants to widen or narrow the interview question/response.

All interviews were then scripted and coded. As a final step, the main themes in the data were identified. These included the following

- Accountability and transparency measures
- Sustainable development plans and strategies
- Corporate governance practices and policies

The researchers used analytical coding to create categories based on frequently repeated keywords, which were then converted to themes and sub-themes of this study, since they were also related to the study's topics. The researchers employed simple coding steps: first, the researchers carefully analysed the transcripts of interviews and focus groups to become acquainted with the data; second, the data were manually grouped into categories and themes while reading the transcripts. Notes were also taken in the margins of the transcripts and on additional blank sheets. Third, as the data sources were saturated and the categories became more defined, it provided a signal for the researcher to begin studying the coded data in terms of emerging broad patterns and linkages. It should be highlighted that the researcher kept close to the transcripts throughout the study and engaged in grounded theory construction.

4. Analysis and Discussions

Given the scope of the current research, we recorded participants' responses regarding three mega themes: (1) transparency and accountability, (2) sustainable development plans, and (3) corporate governance. Regarding the efficacy of transparency and accountability measures for reducing the margin of malpractices and enhancing the performance of Saudi universities and institutions. Further to this, they affirmed that the legislative system and the penal code in Saudi Arabia criminalize any violative and corruptive practices for better organizational efficiency. One practical realization of this tendency is the formation of committees at the university level to ensure meeting and fulfilling the substantive balance between duties and rights. In so doing, universities would be able to achieve their strategic objectives and enact organizational regulations for improving academic research and community service activities and guaranteeing consistency in all departments in one educational institution. Furthermore, participants assured that enforcing transparency and accountability measures would help to address diverse legal and administrative irregularities impeding the progress of all higher education institutions. Toward this objective, universities should set a list of key performance indicators, establish an internal auditing system, and publicize and update policies and decisions for the convenience of beneficiaries. This can be explained in the sense that corruption in education involves breaking and violating professional standards and codes, which constitutes a major violation of the professional and moral system that governs all other community institutions, given that educational institutions provide all other institutions with graduates who work as leaders, employees, etc. (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020; Hallak & Poisson, 2007).

Concerning the second mega theme of sustainable development plans, participants stressed that the adoption of flexible and smart strategies for enacting strategies and policies would help Saudi universities and their departments to compete regionally and internationally. To them, the current administrative model in Saudi universities should be replaced with a corporate model that is entitled to support current plans for sustainable development. The participants deposited that by offering highly qualified education, providing lifelong learning opportunities, negotiating with other stakeholders, and benefiting from the governmental reports on administrative and educational performances, Saudi universities are likely to succeed in mapping their sustainable development plans. Given the central themes of the Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizing the significance of establishing educational and administrative systems that offer opportunities for sustainable economic development in a highly competitive world, the participants showed that digital transformation is necessary towards achieving these plans. In the context of higher education, digital transformation refers to a change realized at the organizational level through the implementation of digital technologies to enhance the operational performance of institutions.

In this regard, the participants mentioned that all Saudi universities offer most of their services to the university and public communities through diverse websites and applications to guarantee the quick and accurate delivery of such services. However, to maintain the perfect functioning of digital transformation procedures and processes, universities are required to adopt reliable governance policies. This is best performed through the reconfiguration of the workplace, and the engagement of the external community in assessing the current policies for emphasizing the values of responsibility, accountability, transparency, and commitment. Accordingly, universities would help in raising growth rates and attracting regional and international investments. Relatedly, Leal Filho (2015) argues that to achieve sustainable development goals, universities must prepare well-trained graduates who have the potentials to undertake compete in the changing labor market. It is important therefore to invest in higher education through the establishment of universities and making higher education accessible to more people. Corporate governance is inevitable for achieving a smart, sustainable, and globally competitive university.

Finally, the participants indicated that for the universities and higher education institutions to achieve their strategic positions and improve accountability and transparency principles, corporate governance policies and regulations have to be developed and enforced. They indicate that there is a close relationship between corporate governance on one side and improving accountability, transparency, and sustainable development on the other side. In this regard, they suggested that every university and institution should develop reliable corporate governance policies based on its convenience. They mentioned that reward systems have to be linked with the performance of all faculty and employees. Some suggested that faculty members who are not committed to quality assurance tasks should not in any way hold any leading positions. They also assured that the academic/promotion system should be based on the performance of all employees and faculty members.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The findings of this study have proved that corporate governance should be embedded into the business strategies of institutions. Good corporate governance practices cannot be imposed or adopted by mere boardroom decisions or enactment of laws nor can it regarded as a panacea for all corporate ills. It has to come from the top levels of leadership and readiness for acceptance by their followers. Also, it cannot exist in a vacuum; organizations need to develop a corporate will to follow and act upon corporate governance regulations. Initiatives need to be taken at all levels to build a legal and regulatory climate.

Awareness should be developed among employees and faculty to participate and sustain an environment that is instilled with corporate governance practices. It is also necessary that top management should provide ample support in establishing corporate governance principles across all verticals and functions of the organization. Efforts should be made to introduce corporate governance in the business culture of the organization.

The findings of this study reflect that the selected universities work within an integrated legal framework for preventing corruption and ensuring good business practices. However, it is recommended that an ethical culture is built and adopted within the universities so that all employees, faculty members, and stakeholders understand only legal practices lead to profits. All employees and stakeholders should

understand that they should not deviate from the legal routes for profitability purposes and/or market opportunities. Building an ethical culture should be emphasized by the university leadership and should be given priority just like making the laws and regulations. The rationale is that an ethical culture should be reflected in all daily operations and at all levels. Building an ethical culture within the organization is no less important than crafting preventive and punitive measures for corruption. Employees as well as internal and external stakeholders should be involved in this process and should always be consulted on the university's ethical performance.

To improve and strengthen the role of corporate governance in preventing corruption, it is also recommended that corporate governance training is regularly provided for employees and managers. Training programs should emphasize the fundamental importance of behaving with integrity and demonstrating a strong commitment to ethical values and considerations.

The findings of the study are consistent with the corporate governance literature in terms of the positive role that corporate governance may play in the prevention of corruption and fraud. (Aluchna & Idowu, 2017; de Villiers & Dimes, 2021; Kyere & Ausloos, 2021; Mallin, 2018). Successful organizations have to adopt an anti-corruption culture by setting and enforcing the ethical foundations that characterize the work for all employees and leaders. For growth and progress purposes, organizations and businesses have to firmly believe in clean business and management. The premise here is that companies that lack a governance plan suffer severe dangers, but those that function inside a governance framework perform noticeably better. (Naciti, Cesaroni, & Pulejo, 2021). The findings coincide with the literature in that good corporate governance ensures the concept of transparency and protects stakeholders' rights (Shaikh & Randhawa, 2022). There is also a good understanding that corruption has a destructive impact on the business climate (Fernando, 2011; Olsen & Tamm, 2017). The majority of the respondents confirmed that no deviant or corrupt practices should be used for market opportunities.

The findings also agree with the corporate governance literature in the sense that effective corporate governance for reducing corruption opportunities should involve several key mechanisms which include transparency and accountability; stakeholders' rights and treating them equally; and appropriate auditing standards (Shacklock, Galtung, & Sampford, 2016). Although the findings reflect clearly that the selected universities work within the principles of a corporate governance code that considers the interest of all stakeholders, transparency, and accountability, there is one problem that needs to be addressed. According to the questionnaire survey results, only 33% indicated that they received training in corporate governance and anti-corruption practices. It is always argued that corporate governance training is key to organizational success since governance training programs provide managers, executives, and employees with the skills, tools, and frameworks that help them improve organizational performance (Naciri, 2009; Zinkin, 2011). The universities are thus encouraged to conduct governance training programs and workshops that provide their employees and leaders with an understanding of the main principles and approaches of corporate governance that help them in practical terms concerning addressing the needs and expectations of all stakeholders equally and organizing the relationship between the university on one side and the stakeholders on the other side (Prasad, 2014; Solomon, 2007).

To conclude, the departments of English in the universities and higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia should replace the traditional academic model with the corporate model. The corporate model should be reflected in all the operations of these departments. For their growth and survival, the departments of English should address the changing needs of their candidates and students in this global world and this has to be reflected in their sustainable development plans. Governance, however, should be enforced in all their operations as a critical success factor for sustainable development planning.

Acknowledgments

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