

Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance in Saudi Private Higher Education Institutions*

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Abstract

This paper reviews the most prominent measures adopted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in support of private higher education and quality assurance and improvement. The paper presents the measures taken to lease government land at nominal prices and provide soft loans, and the impact of these measures on the growth of the private higher education sector. The paper also deals with the quality assurance and improvement methods contained in the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques scholarship and academic accreditation project, which makes quality results a precondition for receiving grants. Finally, the paper presents the proposed solutions and future perspectives.

I. Introduction

In the era of knowledge and of understanding the economy in communities, both public and non-public education play an increasingly important role in promoting economic solidarity, social cohesion, individual development, sustainable development and the spread of the culture of peace and global citizenship. Our views about the way we live, the way we learn, and the way we work and think about work have changed. In addition the acquisition of knowledge is no longer compatible with the skills that were provided by traditional formal education. Thus, a new model based on an all-inclusive and environmentally sound human development must be established in order to train students to contribute to knowledge rather than just receive it. This model has actually led to new challenges and opportunities for Higher Education Institutions, whether they are governmental, private or mixed institutions (Gupta, 2005).

The concept of private (Ahli)³ higher education (HE) is not new. In Asia, private higher education institutions (HEIs) represent an essential part of HE as a whole. Indeed, private HE has played a major role in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan (Taipei), Indonesia, and the Philippines. In these countries, the proportion of students enrolled in private HE exceeds 80%. In addition, private HE is growing rapidly in China, Vietnam, Cambodia and other republics of Central Asia. However, it is to be noticed that private HEIs at the post-secondary stage are, in general, in the lower ranks

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³ In Saudi Arabia the private higher education is called "Ahli" since it is a not-for-profit. All terms "private" in this paper refer to this concept.



regarding status, despite the existence of some private universities of great distinction such as Waseda University and Keio University in Japan, De La Salle University and Ateneo De Manila University in the Philippines, Yonsei University in South Korea and Sanata Dharma University in Indonesia. These universities are prestigious in their respective countries and provide elite degree training. (Altbach, 2002).

There is also another category of new private HEIs that are specialized in such fields as Business, Technology and Education with the sole aim of providing employable graduates and high-quality academic degrees. The Asian Institute of Technology in the Philippines and the National Institute of Information Technology in India fall under this category (Gupta, 2005).

As for China, the non-governmental HE sector is comprised of more than 1200 institutions, even if not all of them are licensed by the government. By late 2002, 4 private colleges were authorized to grant Bachelor Degrees, whereas 129 private colleges were allowed to grant degrees lower than Bachelor level. In China, the private sector represents 10% of the overall enrollment in post-secondary education (Yan and Levy, 2003). Private educational institutions in Shanghai and Beijing have a reasonably good reputation while the colleges in Shenyang do not share this.

Unlike China, private HE in post-communist Russia emerged only a decade ago, along with a significant increase in the contribution of the private sector to the establishment of private HEIs. In Russia, there are more than 500 private educational institutions representing 10% of the overall students enrolled in HE in market-oriented majors such as Economics, Law, Psychology, Sociology, Social Services, Business Administration as well as other fields that do not require huge investments, equipment and research facilities. Similarly in Vietnam, private HEIs account for 12% of all students.

Private HE has witnessed a rapid growth in Malaysia where there are 691 private institutes and universities as well as 4 foreign universities. Malaysia is one of the few countries that allowed private HE to operate a long time ago, but without fully recognizing these institutions. Recently, the Malaysian government imposed some restrictions on the funding of programs for studying abroad and then went on to work on attracting foreign students from neighboring countries by transforming Malaysia into an international learning center. Indeed, the proportion of foreign students enrolled in Malaysia reached 60% between 1997 and 2000. Malaysia depends on the private sector to meet the high demand for HE and technical skills and to increase revenues from abroad (Lee and Levy, 2003).

The private sector is achieving success in HE in the Middle East as well. In Afghanistan, for example, in addition to the political and economic changes, there are a number of changes in the education sector as well. The Afghan government is effectively planning to establish their first private university: The American University in Afghanistan which will follow the American model. In this university, English will be the language of instruction and instructors will become from the United States.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the number of private HEIs has reached a total of 24 universities and colleges granting Bachelor & Masters degrees in majors closely related to labor market needs. As part of the policy of private sector encouragement, the government granted licenses to private sector institutions authorizing them to establish 2 new universities and 36 new colleges. The colleges will be established in 9 cities, in addition to the 6 colleges that are already in place and licensed by the Ministry of HE.

In Latin America, it was the Catholic Church that founded the oldest private universities and institutions, but the trend is now for the establishment of private for-profit universities. For example, The University of the Americas garnered huge profits despite the criticism of the



academic community in Chili regarding the low quality of teaching and high fees. However, this private university is proud of its access to the international scene and of the international relations it has built (Bollag, 2003).

In most Western European countries, public universities are still dominant over private ones whereas private HE is becoming more successful in Eastern Europe. In the United Kingdom and many other countries, the distinction between public and private colleges is becoming increasingly blurred. One of the reasons behind this is the competition from private educational institutions at the post-secondary stage, as they are more accessible to the general population and are market-oriented. Another reason is the change in the general policies concerning the initiative of private HEIs. Moreover, a number of new institutions are financed by a combination of public and private resources. In conclusion, it is worth noting that governments in most countries pay little attention to the private sector and are no longer hostile to it (Levy, 2002).

With great interest, KSA is expanding the basis of HE, in terms of private sector participation, opening private universities and colleges to contribute to meeting development requirements in a way that complements public HE. In 1997, the Council of Ministers issued a decree authorizing the establishment of private educational institutions, and then the HE Council issued a number of decisions providing for regulations and procedures. The sixth Development Plan (1994 - 1999) included among its objectives, the expansion of the HE base through participation of the private sector in the opening of private colleges. Indeed, Decree 33 of 1997 that was issued by the Council of Ministers authorized the private sector to establish non-profit educational institutions on sound administrative, scientific and financial bases in order to contribute to meeting development requirements and therefore complementing the role of public universities. (General Directorate for private HE, 2009).

II. Regulations related to private universities and colleges: An historical overview

In 1991, the Ministry of HE started to prepare studies on private (Ahli) HE. Then, the Council of Ministers issued on 18 /2 /1997 AD Decree No. 33 which entrusted the Ministry of HE with preparing a new vision for the establishment of private colleges. This decree also enabled the private sector to establish non-profit educational institutions. Thereafter, the HE Council issued Decision No. 3 /10/ 1998 of 6 /2 /1998 , which approved the regulations relating to non-profit private colleges, enabling charity foundations to establish non-profit private colleges. Then, the Council of Ministers Decree No. 127 of 8 /6 /1998 entrusted the Ministry of HE with the establishment of charity foundations.

On 4 /1 /1999, the Minister of Higher Education issued Decree No. 334 which approved the executive rules for the establishment and licensing of educational charity foundations at the post-secondary level.

The Council of Ministers Decree No. 212 of 1 /9 /2000 stipulated the approval of the regulations related to private colleges, which enabled the private sector and charity foundations to establish private colleges. Then, the Decree of the Minister of HE No. 3 5 /1/ 1398 of 15 /1/ 2001 stipulated the approval of the executive rules and the administrative and technical procedures for the regulations related to private colleges. As for land leasing, the Council of Ministers issued on 6 /4 /2002 Decree No. 78 that approved the leasing of government land at low prices and the provision of soft loans for private educational institution projects.

On 9 /2/ 2003, the Royal Decree No. 7/B/6024 was issued approving regulations regarding private

universities. Finally, the Royal Decree No. 6304/MB of 18 /8/ 2006 approved the scholarship scheme for private HE students of both sexes.

III. The relationship between private colleges and the Ministry of HE in KSA

The Ministry of HE in KSA has set the standards, rules and foundations underlying the relation between this Ministry and the private colleges in KSA. The major part of this relation is based on a sound educational approach regarding the application of the academic administration functions. The major principles of this relation are defined in the following points:

1. Joint planning

The planning proceeds through two phases:

- a. 1st phase: it is the initial phase of the private college project requiring the development of a clear vision of the objectives of the college, the extent of its contribution to the development in KSA through the proposed specializations, and the existence of demand for these specializations so that the private college would not face problems in the future. To this end, the founders submit a feasibility study which is assessed by experts before granting them a preliminary license.
- b. 2nd phase: it is the phase of planning during the operation of the college through forming a Board of Trustees in the college, consisting of:
 - Five members among the founders or nominated by them.
 - An academic representative designated by the Ministry of HE.
 - Two faculty members specialized in Saudi universities, designated by the Ministry of HE.

The purpose of establishing the Board of Trustees is to form a working team composed of both of investors and academics so that the educational level at the college is continuously developed, and investors can participate in such strategic decisions related to the college as: the expansion in student numbers, the different majors, scientific research, the selection of faculty members, as well as the methods of financing this expansion.

2. Joint organization

The Ministry of HE laid the necessary foundations to set the relationship between the Ministry and the private colleges from an organizational perspective. This is approved by both parties for the smooth flow of information between them. This is achieved as follows:

- a. The General Accreditation Committee in the Ministry evaluates the college based on the extent of the college's compliance with accreditation standards. It also orients the college toward redressing any shortcomings in order to maintain the reputation of the college and that of HE in the Kingdom.
- b. The Ministry evaluates the curriculum of each major through:
 - Asking an accredited governmental university or an accredited research and consultation institute (in the same majors) to evaluate the educational plan of the institution.
 - The final approval of the programme is granted by the General Licensing and Accreditation Committee.
- c. Joint Supervision

It is done in two ways:

- 1) Self-supervision: its source is the college, and it is done through reports prepared and submitted by the college. These could be academic, financial or administrative reports, or those required by the Ministry.
- 2) Field Supervision: it is done through specialized committees that conduct periodical visits agreed upon by the Ministry and the private college. The purpose of these visits is to evaluate the relationship between students and faculty members, as well as the administrative staff, in order to identify the extent of academic and personal satisfaction of all parties, which is necessary for the success of the college. This ensures the following to the Ministry of HE and the private colleges in the Kingdom:
 - The private colleges continue to operate.
 - A good revenue is achieved, which helps the college to expand in scientific research, and develop academic, technical, administrative programs and facilities.
 - The objectives of the development plan are attained through the training of graduates required by the labor market.

IV. Support and incentives offered to the private HE sector:

Based on the generous support and exceptional care provided by the government to education in general, and on the honorable support provided by the government to encourage the private sector to practice different economic activities, many decrees favorable to private HE, and encouraging the investors to expand their activities in the private sector were issued. Some examples of this support are listed below:

1. The Council of Ministers Decree No. 87 of 6 /4 /2002 approved the leasing at low prices of sound government land owned by the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and other government authorities. This was in order to establish licensed private colleges, through a rent contract between the private college and the relevant government authority. The contract term extends over the duration of the license period delivered for the establishment of the college. In addition, this contract should be concluded in coordination with the Ministry of Finance and National Economy, the Ministry of HE, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs as well as the relevant government authority.
2. The Ministry of Finance and National Economy coordinates with the Ministry of HE in granting soft loans to licensed private colleges, as was the case with private hospitals, for which the Council of Ministers Decree No. 1832 of 27 /9/ 1973 was issued.
3. The Royal Decree No. 6304/MB of 18 /8/ 2006 approved the HE Council decrees regarding a scholarship scheme for private HE students of both sexes.

The Ministry of HE strives to identify other incentives that can be directly provided to private universities and colleges in order to support their cause in serving the nation, as they provide the labor market with qualified male and female graduates in different specializations. The scholarship scheme will be extensively examined in other sections of this paper.



V. Steps towards licensing private colleges in KSA

The Ministry of HE in KSA is the authority that grants licenses for private universities and colleges. The General Licensing and Accreditation Committee for private colleges has been formed, headed by the president of one of the universities. The executive and procedural rules organizing private colleges suggested by the Committee provide for the criteria to be used by the Ministry of HE to license university colleges. Some of the aspects of the regulations of private colleges and the rules organizing them are:

1. Abiding by the rules regarding the relation between the Ministry of HE and university colleges.
2. Achieving the major objective set for private sector investment in private HE.
3. Following the sequence of procedures needed to acquire the final license for university colleges. The four stages are:
 - a. Preliminary License: it aims at clarifying the objective of establishing the college, what it will add to HE in the Kingdom through the specializations it will provide, and how serious the license applicants are.
 - b. General Accreditation: it addresses the provision of the minimum number of buildings (teaching halls; laboratories; library; offices of faculty members, other teachers, lecturers and administrative staff; extra-curricular activities; sports activities, etc.)
 - c. Special Accreditation: it addresses the availability of equipment for laboratories, workshops and libraries; as well as the qualification of the faculty members, and other teachers and lecturers. It also checks whether the qualifications of the administrators comply with the posts suggested in the college organizational structure. Moreover, it evaluates the study programs by specialized committees in accredited universities; and the determination of the Board of Trustees in the college.
 - d. Final License: its procedures focus on the review of all the previous stages, ensuring the necessary guarantees for the continuation of the college. To ensure the desired output of such university colleges, specialized committees accomplish periodical follow-ups in which they meet faculty members, students, and administrators and review the academic courses taught in the college. And finally, after the students graduate, these committees evaluate their performance in the labor market.

VI. Quality assurance and improvement

Student scholarships are one of the most important instruments used by the ministry for quality assurance and improvement. In fact, the King has approved the scholarships project for private higher education students through the decree No. 6304 dated 12 /9 /2006 within the Higher Education Council's decisions adopted in the 43rd meeting. The project's most important features and achievements, the results, and the continuous studies and observations based proposals during the application, will be explored hereunder.

1. Important features

One of the most important features of the project is its duration - five years - with a maximum of 10,000 scholarships granted; the percentage of scholarship beneficiaries should not exceed 30% of the total number of university and college students.

The Ministry of Higher Education provides two types of scholarship: The full scholarship to



students having obtained a high school “very good” rating and more, and the semi scholarship for students with a “good” rating. The applicant should satisfy the following criteria to obtain a scholarship:

- a. Saudi national
- b. good reputation and conduct
- c. study one of the specified disciplines (according to the labor market needs)
- d. have obtained the required average specified for the full or semi-scholarship
- e. Not to exceed the usual period given to get his degree
- f. To attend universities and colleges at a regular basis.

2. Achievements

The Ministry has immediately started planning and organizing for the implementation of the scholarship project according to the king’s guidance. It has done the following:

- a. Formation of committees and specialized teams with the beneficiaries and the National Commission for Assessment & Academic Accreditation, in order to define conditions and implementation mechanisms.
- b. Preparation of a scholarship guide to be distributed to private universities and colleges students.
- c. The communication campaign:
 - 1) A circular was sent to all universities and colleges, including a reference to the king’s approval of the scholarships project, with an appendix containing the project’s most important features.
 - 2) An advertisement was published in local newspapers concerning the governmental scholarship project describing the project’s main features.
 - 3) The features and conditions of the scholarship project were added to the private university education page on the Ministry’s website.
- d. The private university and college scholarship program website (www.fap.edu.sa) was set up in cooperation with the Ministry’s computer department and in coordination with one of the companies specialized in this field. This was done in order to register male and female students wishing to obtain a scholarship according to a well-defined mechanism and meeting the scholarships’ conditions. The website began operation from the second semester of the 2007/2008 school year, so that the scholarship acceptance and renewal process could be achieved online. Several workshops related to this process were organized for scholarship managers in private universities and colleges.
- e. Procedures concerning 8,160 scholarships between the 2006/2007 academic year and the 2009/2010 academic year were finalized and then the disbursement of scholarship amounts was done to the concerned students.
- f. Scholarship for the children of diplomats: According to the Royal decree No. 8626, dated 9/10/2007, the children of Saudi diplomats, employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or other governmental entities, are covered for those enrolled in Saudi private universities and colleges. This is according to the scholarship provisions and in coordination with the director general of academic affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A circular is sent to all the Kingdom’s diplomatic representations abroad stating this change, as previously the envoys’ children were not covered by the scholarship program terms and regulations. This will lead to an increase in the number of scholarships granted by up to 160, therefore exceeding the number of 8,000 scholarships dedicated to the four phases.

- g. The National Commission for Assessment & Academic Accreditation (NCAAA) was mandated to visit new private universities and colleges to build their capacities in scholarship management.

3. The stages

The scholarship program provides for five stages; four of which have been completed between the 2006-2007 academic years and the 2009/2010 academic year. 8,160 scholarships were granted amounting to a total of 326,571,000 SAR.

a. The first stage for year 2006 /2007:

The National Commission for Assessment & Academic Accreditation was mandated to visit all private universities and colleges and to prepare a detailed report concerning the eligibility of each university or college for the academic scholarships project. The Commission has actually created specialized work groups to visit every private university or college, and prepared detailed reports on visit results. Then, the registration phase for both male and female students began on the ministry's website – private higher education - followed by the nomination phase elaborated by private universities and colleges. Upon receipt of the lists of applicants, the Ministry carried out the following:

- 1) Verification of the candidates' names and the compatibility of grades with scholarship terms and conditions, especially for the disciplines approved by the high council and the disciplines eligible for scholarships according to the report by the National Commission for Assessment & Academic Accreditation.
- 2) Verification of the compatibility between the student's discipline and his/her cumulative average and what is indicated in his/her academic record for the last semester.
- 3) Verification of the names of students and the classification accuracy in each college according to the highest cumulative average.
- 4) Verification of numbers of candidates in the university or college, which should not exceed the number set by the ministry.
- 5) Exclusion of some students who do not meet scholarship requirements such as discipline and the cumulative average.
- 6) Allocation of money for each scholarship according to the formula set in the scholarship project, after approval by the Royal Court students selected for scholarships.

This stage concerned students in the following private universities and colleges: Prince Sultan University, Prince Mohammad Ben Fahed University, Dar Al Hekma College, Effat College, Al Baha Private College of Science, Jedda College of Business Administration, Suleiman Faqih College of Nursing and Medical Sciences, Ryad Dentistry and Pharmacy college, Ibn Sina National College, and Al Yamamah College. Accordingly, students from two private universities and eight colleges have benefited from the scholarship project at this stage.

b. The second stage for the 2007 / 2008 academic year:

At this stage, it was important to make sure that all necessary measures which guarantee good conduct were performed according to the first stage. For this purpose, the scholarship program was presented to the students who meet the conditions and in the following private universities and colleges: Prince Sultan University, Prince Mohammad Ben Fahed University, Al-Faisal University, Dar Al Hekma College, Effat College, Al Baha Private College of Science, Business Administration College, Suleiman Faqih College of Nursing and Medical Sciences, Ryad Dentistry and Pharmacy College, Ibn Sina National College, Al Yamamah College, and Abha's Prince Sultan

College for Tourism and Management. Accordingly, students of three private universities and nine colleges have benefited from the scholarship project at this stage.

c. The third stage for the 2008/ 2009 academic year:

At this stage, it was important to make sure that all necessary measures guaranteeing good conduct were performed according to the first stage. For this purpose, the scholarship program was presented to the students who meet the conditions and in the following private universities and colleges: Prince Sultan University, Prince Mohammad Ben Fahed Civil University, Al-Faisal Community University, Al Yamama Community University, Dar Al Hikmat Community Faculty, Effat Community College, Al- Baha Community College for Sciences, Community Business Administration College, Suleiman Faqih Nursing and Medical Sciences Faculty, Ryadh Dentistry and Pharmacy Faculty, Avicenna Private College, and Abha's Prince Sultan College for Tourism and Management. Accordingly, students of four private universities and ten colleges have benefited from the scholarship project at this stage.

d. The fourth stage for the 2009 / 2010 academic year:

2,000 scholarships were granted to male and female students in five private universities and nine private colleges amounting to 80 million SAR. These scholarships will come into force starting from September 2009.

A total of 8,160 scholarships were granted during the four stages, amounting to 326,571,000 SAR.

Table 1 shows the number of scholarships and the sum disbursed between 2006 and 2009. Figures 1 and 2 summarize student numbers and sums disbursed between 2006 and 2009 respectively

Table 1: The numbers of scholarships and the amount disbursed between 2006 and 2009

University / College	First stage 2006/2007		Second stage 2007/2008		Third stage 2008/2009		Fourth stage 2009/2010	
	No.	Amount (SAR)	No.	Amount (SAR)	No.	Amount (SAR)	No.	Amount (SAR)
Prince Sultan University	438	5,705,000	539	18,470,000	252	8,840,000	422	14,960,000
Prince Mohammad Ben Fahed University	162	2,335,000	220	6,520,000	160	5,040,000	315	10,600,000
Al Faisal University	-	-	20	940,000	15	720,000	49	2,380,000
Dar AL Hekma College	38	665,000	218	7,730,000	200	7,140,000	189	6,650,000
Effat College	28	450,000	60	2,120,000	30	880,000	76	2,680,000
Al Baha Private College of Science	29	325,000	57	2,280,000	17	425,000	87	3,215,000
College of Business Administration	135	1,075,000	288	5,760,000	193	4,210,000	214	6,480,000
Suleiman Faqih College of Nursing and Medical Sciences	46	380,000	50	880,000	45	670,000	1	20,000
Riyadh College of Dentistry	378	8,555,000	378	21,380,000	319	18,230,000	167	9,415,000

Ibn Sina National College	181	4,005,000	206	10,395,000	116	6,080,000	200	10,050,000
Al Yamamah College	177	1,250,000	243	4,860,000	108	2,560,000	242	5,390,000
Abha's Prince Sultan College for Tourism	-	-	16	276,000	13	244,000	55	1,016,000
Saad College	-	-	-	-	-	-	32	1,600,000
Batterjee College	-	-	-	-	-	-	187	10,720,000
TOTAL	1612	24,745,000	2295	81,611,000	1468	55,039,000	2236	85,176,000

Source: The Public Administration for private of Higher Education, 2009

Figure 1: Number of students benefiting from scholarships between 2006 and 2009

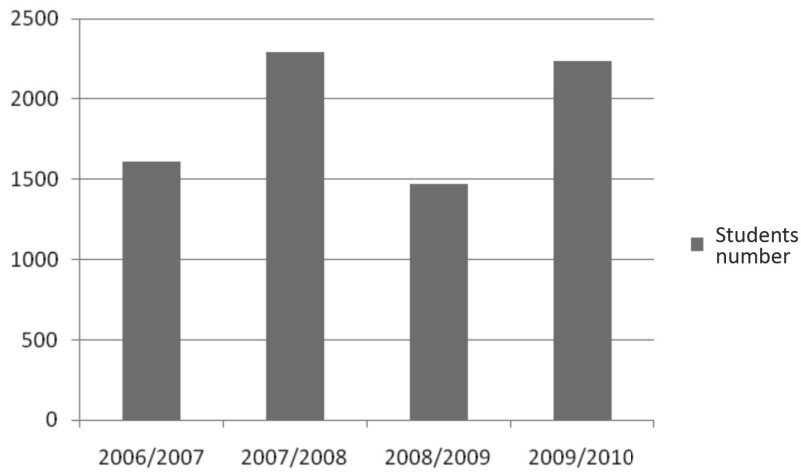
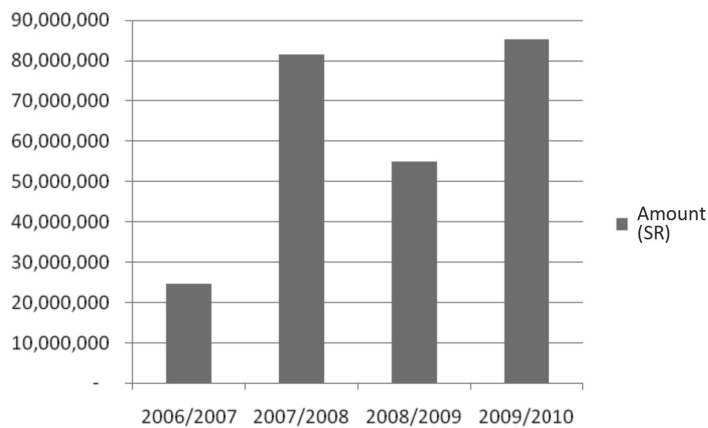


Figure 2: Amounts disbursed under the scholarship program between 2006 and 2009





4. The results

The results of the scholarship program since its implementation are as follows:

- a. 8,160 scholarships were granted to private universities and colleges for both male and female students during the four stages of project implementation, amounting to 326,571,000 SAR.
- b. The children of Saudi expatriates were granted scholarships according to scholarship program provisions, but they do not enter the trade-offs.
- c. A number of students from private universities and college were covered in order to reduce pressure on public universities and colleges.
- d. Private universities and colleges were supported in increasing their student populations.
- e. Saudi students in other Arab states were encouraged to study in private Saudi universities and colleges.
- f. The private sector was encouraged to invest in opening new universities and colleges with specializations meeting the needs of the labor market.

5. Recommendations:

The ministry was keen to improve the scholarship project through continuous follow-up of its implementation and taking into consideration the viewpoints of the beneficiaries (students and private HEIs). The ministry has also conducted continuous studies during project implementation. Major recommendations were as follows:

- a. Continuing the scholarship project for male and female students in private universities and colleges on a yearly basis.
- b. Increasing in the number of scholarships granted from 2,000 to 4,000 annually, and raising scholarship ceiling to 50% of all students in private universities and colleges. This is because of the increase in the number of private universities and colleges compared with their number at the time of the project's adoption in 2006 and of the increase in the number of students (both male and female) in private universities and colleges.
- c. Increasing scholarship amount for the majors of Management, Accounting and Law from 20,000 to 40,000 SAR in order to cover 50% of current university and college fees. It was observed the sum indicated in the project for these majors adversely affected the choice of these majors by students.

VII. Conclusion

The Ministry of HE strives to guarantee a powerful and credible start for private HE in the labor market, to ensure the quality of its output and the continuation of its role side by side with public universities. In addition, it seeks to ensure that the various programs it provides are compatible with labor market requirements. Furthermore, it strives to make sure that the most up-to-date scientific and technical developments in the world enable these colleges to effectively contribute to the education and training of the Saudi labor force, in order to meet labor market requirements. The main content of the licensing process is to define the acceptable standards to ensure a high quality in the performance of private HEIs and in the level of their programs, and to guarantee that these institutions are able to maintain the required level now and in the future. The Ministry plays a considerable role in the follow-up of these establishments and the operation of private colleges in KSA, in all fields. This is through licensing, the assessment of their programs and their academic and administrative staff, as well as the assessment of the performance of their graduates in both governmental and private sectors.



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