Exploring The Impact of Governance on Improving Transparency, Combatting Corruption and Enhancing Sustainable Development Plans in The Saudi Universities

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Abstract

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, substantial changes and reforms in several sectors, including health and education, have taken place in recent years. These changes and reforms are aligned with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 in terms of creating a diverse economy which is not solely based on oil as used to be beforehand. New policies have been developed in universities and higher education institutions to enhance Saudi universities' standing in academic and research activities, as well as community service at the regional and worldwide levels. In response to these new regulations, universities and higher education institutions have developed their strategic plans in a way that supports the Kingdom's Vision 2030 of achieving smart, sustainable, and globally competitive universities. For the successful implementation of these plans, 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 on improving sustainable development plans and combating corruption, improving transparency, and enhancing sustainable development plans in the Saudi universities. In response to this limitation, this study is concerned with exploring the impact of governance policies and practices on the performance of the Saudi universities within the domestic and global changes that are taking place. In so doing, an interview survey is conducted with a selected number of executives, stakeholders, employees, and faculty members in four Saudi universities. Results indicate that the contributions of the universities to sustainable development plans and strategies is still under expectations. In this regard, the Saudi universities should replace the traditional academic model with the corporate model. This should be coincided with and supported by reliable and effective governance policies and practices for improving sustainable development plans and combating corruption, improving transparency, and enhancing sustainable development plans in the Saudi universities. For the better performance of the universities and higher education institutions, financial accountability for university management should be enforced.

Keywords: corporate model, corruption, financial accountability, governance, Saudi universities, sustainable development, transparency.

Introduction

With growing rates of fraud and corruption in many institutions and organizations, accountability and transparency procedures and rules have to be implemented to ensure that universities and institutions work effectively and successfully. In other words, the implementation of accountability and transparency measures mitigates the difficulties created by corruption, which is seen as the most severe danger to universities and higher education institutions. In education, corruption breaking and violating professional standards and codes, which is a major violation of the professional and moral system that governs all other community institutions, given that educational institutions produce graduates who work as leaders, employees, and faculty members (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020; Hallak & Poisson, 2007).

Although there is a general belief that universities are institutions known for transparency and integrity, in reality corruption is one of the serious problems and challenges for universities and higher education

institutions in many world countries. To put it into context, corruption and lack of transparency and integrity has serious problems on the good performance of universities in academic and research aspects as well as community service activities, especially in developing countries (Wraith & Simpkins, 2010). In recent years, numerous reports have highlighted different examples of corruption in different developing countries including Morocco, Syria, and Iraq which had adverse impacts on the performance of the universities in these countries (Poisson, 2014).

In this regard, every university and institution should develop working and reliable corporate governance policies based on its convenience. Universities should work within an integrated legal framework for preventing corruption and ensuring good business practices. Furthermore, Duerrenberger & Warning (2018) suggest 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 (Harber, 2014).

The implication is that transparency and integrity have to be enforced in higher education institutions and universities. Lack of considering integrity and reducing corruption risks will undoubtedly have grave consequences on the capabilities, potentials, performance and even survival of the universities Campos & Pradhan, 2007). One major problem, however, is that there are few systematic and integrated frameworks for maintaining integrity in universities and higher education institutions. In light of this limitation, four Saudi universities were chosen as sample organizations with the objective to explore the impact of corporate governance on reducing corruption levels, and improving sustainable development plans and accountability in the Saudi Higher Education institutions and universities.

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 Saudi universities with reliable strategies for 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 the Kingdom's institutions and sectors.

As thus, this study asks the following research questions:

1- What is the impact of governance practices on improving accountability, transparency and sustainability development in the Saudi universities?
2- What are the corporate governance practices and policies adopted by Saudi Higher Education institutions and universities to combat corruption?
3- Are the corporate governance practices and policies in Saudi Higher Education institutions and universities effective and reliable for reducing and preventing corruption?

To answer the research questions, the study is based on a case-study design. For data representativeness purposes, generalizability, and reliability of the results, four universities in Saudi Arabia were selected. The results of the study are expected to provide reliable strategies for Saudi universities in terms of the adoption of effective corporate governance practices and policies that can be used to reduce the levels and risks of corruption on one hand while improving the implementation of sustainable development plans and growth rates on the other. Saudi universities and higher education institutions on the finest and most appropriate corporate governance standards for preventing fraud and corruption.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 is a brief survey of the role of governance policies and practices in combatting corruption, improving transparency, and supporting sustainable development planning in general and in universities in particular. Part 3 is a methodological framework. It describes the methods and procedures of the study. Part 4 is a qualitative analysis of the data. Part 5 is discussion and interpretation of the results. Part 6 is conclusion.

Literature review

Over the recent years, numerous studies have been concerned with defining effective mechanisms for improving transparency and reducing 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 which has serious and grave consequences for all world countries. In this regard, governance has emerged as a subdiscipline in legal and business studies. To put it into effect, governance has been proposed as an effective solution to many of the problems brought by corruption and the lack of effective accountability and transparency measures. Corporate governance was developed as an effective mechanism for addressing the challenges and threats caused by corruption in both developed and developing countries (Reed, 2002).

In recent years, numerous studies have been concerned with addressing the relationship between governance on the one hand, and corruption on the other hand. Researchers have been interested in investigating how governance practices and policies can be usefully used for effectively reducing corruption risks and levels as well as improving transparency and sustainable development in firms and organizations. According to Salihu (2021), governance studies have been focused on addressing different issues regarding the best governance policies and practices for combatting and reducing corruption levels in corporations, organizations, and government institutions.

Powell, Wafa, & Mau (2019) argue that the core premise in governance is that institutions and organizations should design and implement adequate governance regulations as a critical success factor for growth and even survival. Mosca, Gianecchini, & Campagnolo (2021) agree that governance practices should be successfully implemented for supporting development plans, combatting corruption, and enhancing transparency and accountability in both public and private institutions. In this regard, governance has always been linked with the financial scandals either in developed and developing countries over the recent years.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the effects of corruption on the performance and expansion of higher education institutions (Hallak & Poisson, 2001, 2007; Segal, 2005). It is almost agreed that poor governance practices and policies are among the most serious challenges in education. In different countries including Romania and Ukraine, different crimes in admission procedures and enrollment policies due to the lack of transparency and corruption have been revealed (Andrei, Teodorescu, & Oancea, 2010; Borcan, Lindahl, & Mitrut, 2017; Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018; Heyneman, 2004). It is agreed that corruption and lack of transparency have adverse and negative impacts on the performance of universities and institutions and on the educational process in general (Dridi, 2014; Hallak & Poisson, 2001).

In response to these problems, numerous strategies were proposed for suggesting effective and reliable strategies that can be adopted by universities and higher education institution. Nevertheless, so far, there is no integrated governance approach for higher education institutions. The impact of corporate governance on the performance of universities and educational universities has not been fully explored yet (Brown, 2000; Goedegebuure & Hayden, 2007; Shattock, 2006; Shin, 2018; Trakman, 2008).

In Saudi Arabia, very little has been done on the implications of governance to the higher education institutions. Previous studies have been mainly concerned with the role of governance in the development process of the Saudi economy in general (Bremer & Elias, 2007), the improvement of domestic and foreign investments, maintenance of capital markets (Samaha & Dahawy, 2011), and enhancing the performance financial performance of public and private institutions. So far, no studies have been concerned with providing empirical evidence of the impact of governance practices on improving sustainable development plans on one side and reducing corruption and fraud in the Saudi universities that are often associated with different operations and transactions in these institutions on the other side. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature through evaluating the effectiveness of governance policies and practices and their impact on the Saudi universities' operations and on improving the sustainable development plans in these universities.

Methodological framework

Context

In recent years, numerous regulations and policies have been developed in the Saudi higher education sector that support the Kingdom's vision of achieving smart, sustainable, and globally competitive universities. To

put it into effect, the Saudi Ministry of Education has recently approved of the new regulations governing the practice and performance of both public and private universities in Saudi Arabia. These new regulations give universities greater autonomy, allowing them to use their resources with no need to get the approval from the Ministry of Education, and opening branches of foreign universities within the country. It also empowers universities to approve their academic and professional programs according to the development needs and labor market needs in the region they serve. These regulations are thought to reduce the operating cost of universities and push them to find new funding sources which will have their implications to reducing their dependence on the budget of the Ministry of Education. Within this new system, the budget of each university will be approved through an innovative financing system presented to the Cabinet, so that the government contributes only partially whereas the university should work to provide additional funding opportunities to cover its financial needs. In this regard, universities are allowed to impose financial fees on graduate programs as well as on scientific and research services provided by the universities.

The new reforms coincide with the economic reforms and changes that are taking place in almost all the government sectors in Saudi Arabia including the Ministry of Education. The Saudi government has proposed different initiatives to move the public institutions from the traditional model to the corporate model. For a successful implementation of these new policies, good governance practices should be developed. This study investigates whether the universities and Higher Education institutions have good governance practices that address the corruption risks associated with these new policies.

Participants

This study is based on an open-ended interview with a selected number of executives, stakeholders, employees, and faculty members in four Saudi universities. The researchers attempted to include all the job and leadership levels as much as possible. The sample thus included top management and leadership executives as well as employees and faculty members. It also included different categories of stakeholders. In other words, the sample was selected on the basis of representation. The underlying principle is that a typical sample can be appropriate in order to generalize the findings to the community because it is typically challenging to include the full population.

Data & Procedures

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 in order to explore the concept of governance from a higher level and to obtain a true picture of the extent to which governance policies and practices are implemented at the selected universities for its various operations.

The interviewed is one of the most common methods of data collection used in qualitative research. According to Stuckey (2013), interviews are classified into three types: structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews. In the case of the present study, structured or standardized interview design was used. The rationale is that it is appropriate for reducing biased opinions. Participants were asked the same set of questions in the same exact order. Pre-established questions with limited response categories were used with all the participants.

There are a few limitations. However, to this technique, such as the fact that the interviewee is also one of the stakeholders, but 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 gave 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 (1) governance & accountability and transparency, (2) governance & sustainable development plans and strategies, and (3) the best governance policies and practices for universities.

Results

Governance & Accountability and transparency

Concerning accountability and transparency measures, the participants indicated that the Saudi universities and higher education institutions are governed by a set of legislations in the penal code criminalizing corruption and violations of the public order. They stressed that the accountability and transparency measures and policies have to be enforced for the effective and successful performance of the universities and institutions.

The participants outlined that the enforcement of accountability and transparency measures can reduce the problems caused by corruption which is considered by the majority of the participants as the most serious threat for the universities and higher education institutions. They also added 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.

In response to questions regarding governance policies and practices in the Saudi universities, the majority of the participants indicated that their institutions adopt zero-tolerance policies against corruption. They stressed that their universities are facing all aspects and forms of administrative and financial corruption. However, they almost agree that clear-cut and defined policies should be set for combatting corruption. In this regard, they suggested that the universities should adopt and enforce clear strategies for administrative accountability. They also believed that universities should believe in the right of local communities to monitor their performance. That is. The universities should have disclosure policies that enable the local communities to monitor its activities and operations. They indicated that universities are required to adopt a policy of openness and clarity in dealing with internal and external parts and stakeholders. Most importantly, they stressed that the university administration has to involve all employees and faculty members in decision-making and conflict management.

Governance & sustainable development plans and strategies

In response to the relationship between governance on the one hand and sustainable development plans and strategies on the other, the participants agreed that universities are a fundamental and essential means for development and welfare of both individuals and societies. The majority stressed that there is a close relationship between governance and sustainable development. For this, it is necessary to implement an open system, use democratic decision-making, organize using the scientific method, account for job specialization, and address both the problems of the individual work and the concerns of society. In this regard, they indicated that universities must be free of impurities of corruption because of its negative and adverse impacts on development plans.

On their evaluation of sustainable development in the Saudi universities, the participants indicated there is still a gap between labor market requirements and the outcomes of the educational systems in the universities and institutions. This can be clearly reflected on the increasing unemployment rates of university graduates. Furthermore, the contributions of the universities to sustainable development plans and strategies is 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. For the better performance of the universities and higher education institutions, financial accountability for university management should be enforced.

The participants also referred to the importance of adopting flexible strategies that enable universities and higher education universities to compete globally. They need to replace the traditional academic model with a 'corporate model' that can support the sustainable development plans. They highlighted the role of universities and higher education institutions in community service and the dimensions of sustainable development to meet the needs of the society today and those of future generations. They also linked between sustainable development and the importance of digital transformation. They indicated that digital transformation is an essential feature of university life, as it is a complete holistic program that touches the

institution and its way of working in order to provide its services to the beneficiaries of students, faculty, administrators and civil society faster. They also stressed the importance of adopting reliable governance policies for the success of digital transformation processes. For them, digital transformation requires changing the basic components in the work environment and enhances the values of transparency, accountability and control of all businesses through interaction and participation between the various elements of society through electronic solutions, which contributes to raising growth rates, facilitating the business environment and attracting foreign investments.

They suggested that it is imperative for universities to prepare well-trained graduates who have the potentials to undertake compete in the changing labor market and to achieve the sustainable development goals. It is important therefore to invest in higher education through the establishment of universities and making higher education accessible to more people. Governance is inevitable for achieving a smart, sustainable, and globally competitive university.

Best governance policies and practices for universities

In response to questions policies in their own institutions, the majority indicated that they were not completely satisfied with the governance performance in their universities. They indicated that governance as a concept is not usually a topic for discussions in different meetings within the university. They also outlined that many employees are not even aware with the corporate policies and practices adopted by the universities. They also explained that governance procedures are in many ways complicated and difficult to apply. Some also complained that universities do not have defined policies for protecting the rights of their employees if they are faced by accusations from external investigation bodies. In other words, the university governance policies do not provide full protection for the rights of employees. They also indicated that university do not normally have a clear strategic plan regarding the implementation of projects and operations according to priority. Likewise, they outlined that their universities do not usually involve all employees in formulating the university vision, mission, and strategic goals and objectives.

The majority of the participants agreed that students are not generally introduced to the threats and serious problems of corruption. They stressed that students should be taught about the threats and consequences of corruption. They should realize that the university resources are allocated and distributed in a way that best addresses his learning and training needs. In this, corruption has adverse impacts on the educational goals of all the students.

At the final stage, the participants were asked about the best governance policies and practices that can be adopted by the university to reduce corruption risks, improve transparency, and enhance sustainable development plans. The participants indicated that in order for the universities and higher education institutions to achieve their strategic positions and improve accountability and transparency principles, governance policies and regulations have to be developed and enforced. They indicated that there is a close relationship between best governance policies and practices 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 working and reliable corporate governance policies based on its convenience. Some suggested that rewarding 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 suggested that the academic/promotion system should be based on the performance of all employees and faculty members.

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate clearly that corruption is a serious challenge that has negative impacts on the performance of the universities and higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. The responses of the participants agree in general with the reports of the International Transparency of education on the dangers and threats of corruption on the performance of the universities and the quality of education. The International Transparency Report on education corruption in 2013 stressed that education is considered to be more vulnerable to corruption, as the great importance of education makes it a target of those who provide educational services with their strong powers that enable them, if they wish, to blackmail services and achieve personal interests. In this regard, corruption in education is a serious obstacle to the quality of education. , which makes the quality of education an obstacle to it. The report also warned that academic advantages in higher education institutions are more at risk, and corruption in these institutions may lead to

the collapse of the reputation of the higher education system in an entire country (Transparency_International, 2013).

The findings of the study also agree with previous studies in the sense that the lack of effective, working, and reliable policies of accountability and transparency policies accounts for the poor performance and effectiveness of both public and private institutions (Gangi, Meles, D'Angelo, & Daniele, 2019; Salvioni & Astori, 2013; Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020). Given the negative impacts of poor governance practices on economic growth and sustainable development plans, 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).

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.

In this regard, the universities should develop effective and reliable governance policies for growth and development. Reed (2002) argues that corporate governance policies can be usefully used in supporting development plans and initiatives in general and in the developing countries in particular. Similarly, Levy, Szejnwald Brown, and De Jong (2010) places governance as one of the key factors for the success of development plans and economic outcomes of institutions and organizations.

In response to the limitations within the governance policies and practices in the Saudi universities as highlighted by the participants, this study proposes the following. The Saudi universities should make the necessary policies to ensure the flow of information at all levels. They should be committed to providing social services to preserve the rights of employees and faculty members. Furthermore, they should abide by the laws that seek to provide equality among their members. The Saudi universities should cooperate and coordinate with investigation bodies and institutions to uncover and combat corruption. They also should consider combatting corruption as a social responsibility issue. In this way, they should conduct governance training programs for employees and students. They also should support research projects related to fighting and combatting corruption. Finally, the university should have a charter of work ethics that is clear and known to all.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore the impact of governance policies and practices on improving transparency, combatting corruption and enhancing sustainable development plans in light of the reforms and new policies adopted by the Saudi universities. It can be concluded that corruption remains one of the most serious challenges in the universities and higher education institutions that needs to be addressed at all levels. The academic community as a whole must comprehend that there cannot be a true university without integrity and transparency, and the reality of corruption in higher education must be acknowledged as a social problem impeding the development of the state and the higher education system, as well as a primary issue that must be examined, understood, and eliminated from its roots.

In light of the recent global challenges, the universities and higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia should replace the traditional academic model with the corporate model to be able to grow, compete globally, and even survive. Within the challenges of switching into a corporate model, especially on financial issues, financial accountability for university management should be enforced. The board of trustees should represent all stakeholders, including employees, faculty, students, graduates, partner companies, government and civil society stakeholders. Complaints submitted by the students and stakeholders regarding financial or any other violations have to be seriously considered.

Finally, there exists a wider possibility of extending this research to organizations of different sectors. The findings of this study are expected to offer a good reference source for policymakers and regulators. It will also act as a pioneer study for all other future research since its results would serve as a useful reference to those institutions that plan to introduce corporate governance practices in their operations to curb and combat corruption. Although the study is limited to the Saudi universities, results and implications of this

study can be a useful reference to choose effective corporate governance practices that can be successfully adopted and implemented in curbing and combatting corruption.

Acknowledgments

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